

CETACEANS OF SOUTH-EAST ENGLAND

This region includes the coastline stretching from Thorney Island, West Sussex to Lowestoft, Suffolk. The cetacean fauna (whales, dolphins, and porpoises) of this region is low in species diversity and abundance. Along the eastern English Channel, only nine species of cetacean have been sighted since 1980, and only two of these (7% of the 28 UK species) are present throughout the year or are recorded annually as seasonal visitors. In the waters of the southernmost North Sea, fourteen species of cetacean have been recorded since 1980; two of these species are present throughout the year or are present annually as seasonal visitors.

Cetacean species are not abundant, but the most frequently sighted species in nearshore waters (within 60 km of the coastline) are harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin. Offshore, long-finned pilot whales are recorded annually and short-beaked common dolphins are recorded occasionally. The uniform and shallow seabed of the eastern English Channel probably largely accounts for the scarcity of cetaceans in the region.

The harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin are listed in Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive as species whose conservation requires the designation of Special Areas of Conservation.

Rarer cetacean species recorded in the area since 1980 include: Fin whale *Balaenoptera physalus*, Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*, Sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus*, Sowerby's beaked whale *Mesoplodon bidens*, Northern bottlenose whale *Hyperoodon ampullatus*, Killer whale *Orcinus orca*, Risso's dolphin *Grampus griseus*, White-beaked dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*, Atlantic white-sided dolphin *Lagenorhynchus acutus*, and Striped dolphin *Stenella coeruleoalba*.

CETACEAN SPECIES REGULARLY SIGHTED IN THE REGION

Long-finned pilot whale

Globicephala melas

Seasonal offshore visitor, mainly recorded between November and January in the eastern English Channel. In the southern North Sea, it is a rare seasonal offshore visitor, recorded mainly between April and November.



Harbour porpoise

Phocoena phocoena

Rare, occurring in small numbers in nearshore waters mainly between April and October in the eastern English Channel and southernmost North Sea with indications of a recent recovery in numbers. Sightings offshore come primarily from the north-east of the region.

Bottlenose dolphin

Tursiops truncatus

The most frequently observed cetacean in nearshore waters, although rarely in groups exceeding ten individuals. In the eastern English Channel, most sightings come from coastal waters near the towns of Littlehampton (W. Sussex), Shoreham (E. Sussex), Brighton (E. Sussex) and Eastbourne (E. Sussex). Peak numbers and frequency of sightings occur between April and August, but with some variation between years. In the southern North Sea, most sightings come from the Channel coast of Kent (e.g. Dungeness) or Essex between April and December, with a peak between August and September.



Short-beaked common dolphin

Delphinus delphis

Casual offshore visitor in the eastern English Channel, mainly recorded between August and December

REGIONAL MAP



- 9) Clacton-On-Sea (Essex)
- 10) West Mersea (Essex)
- 11) North Foreland (Kent)

Dunwich & Minsmere, Suffolk



Sightings hotspots:

- 1) Scolt Head (Norfolk)
- 2) Blakeney Point (Norfolk)
- 3) Great Yarmouth (Norfolk)
- 4) Lowestoft (Suffolk)
- 5) Dunwich & Minsmere (Suffolk)
- 6) Orford Ness (Suffolk)
- 7) Felixstowe (Suffolk)
- 8) Walton on the Naze (Essex)
- 12) Sandwich Bay (Kent)
- 13) South Foreland (Kent)
- 14) Dungeness (Kent) to Eastbourne (E. Sussex)

THREATS TO CETACEANS

Threats to cetaceans in the region come from three main areas: the first is conflicts with fisheries, either by competition for a common food resource or through accidental capture in fishing gear. Actual figures on catches are not available.

The second is habitat degradation due to pollutants, although contaminant levels in this region are poorly known. Mean PCB levels in nine harbour porpoises sampled from Sussex to Cornwall between 1988 and 1992 were moderately low.

The Straits of Dover represent one of the busiest waterways in the world, with over 150,000 vessel movements per year. Low frequency noise generated from the engines of large vessels overlap with frequencies used by baleen whales, whilst they also pose a danger to cetaceans, particularly slower moving species, from ship strikes. Recreational activities such as speedboats and jet skis are common around resort areas like Chichester harbour (W. Sussex). These vessels also pose threats of direct physical damage from collisions and propeller strikes, as well as disturbance from the high frequency noise they generate which overlaps with the hearing of small cetaceans and may produce a negative response - vessel avoidance and increased dive times.



THE FUTURE FOR CETACEANS

A code of conduct for boat users has been produced (Sea Watch Foundation, 1992) and distributed to sailing clubs and marinas.

ASCOBANS (Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Seas) is an international agreement between countries bordering the North and Baltic Seas, with the aim of promoting the conservation of small cetaceans. It was ratified by the UK in 1993. Participating states agree to cooperate on issues including national legislation and research into, for example, cetacean population sizes and the effects of fishing.