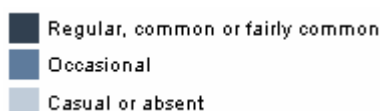




THE SHORT-BEAKED COMMON DOLPHIN IN UK WATERS

DESCRIPTION The short-beaked common dolphin *Delphinus delphis* is one of the smallest of the true dolphins, measuring 2.1 - 2.4 metres in length and weighing 75 - 85 kg. The body is long and slender, as is the beak, and the dorsal fin is tall and pointed. The species is often confused with the striped dolphin *Stenella coeruleoalba*, but the common dolphin's characteristic hourglass or criss-cross pattern on its flanks is a good distinguishing feature. This patch is tan or yellowish in colour before the dorsal fin, and pale grey behind. Compared to larger, more robust, animals such as Risso's or Atlantic white-sided dolphins, common dolphins are very agile and active. They commonly bow-ride, often accompanying boats for many miles, and are capable of swimming at great speed, as well as engaging in energetic aerial acrobatics.



STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION In Europe, this largely oceanic species occurs mainly in offshore, warm temperate waters from the Iberian Peninsula to the Faroe Islands. In the British Isles, it is common in the western approaches to the Channel and the southern Irish Sea (particularly around the Celtic Deep) and around the Inner Hebrides north to Skye. It is common west of Ireland, and off the edge of the continental shelf it can be found north to a latitude of about 65°N. In recent years, the species has occurred further north and east in shelf seas - around Shetland and Orkney, and in the northern North Sea, reflecting changes in the strength of the Gulf Stream. It is generally rare in the southern North Sea and eastern portion of the Channel. In the UK, there appears to be a seasonal movement onto the continental shelf between July and October.

It is one of the most widely distributed species of cetaceans worldwide, as well as one of the commonest. Recently, the taxonomy of common dolphins has been revised and three separate species have been named: the long-

beaked common dolphin which occurs in warm temperate and tropical coastal waters around the world, the short-beaked common dolphin in the temperate North Atlantic, and the Arabian common dolphin which is confined to waters around the Arabian Peninsula.

Although no overall population estimates exist for common dolphins in the eastern North Atlantic, the population around the Celtic Deep in July 1994 was estimated at a little over 75,000 animals (95% confidence limits ranging from 22,900-248,900). No evidence exists for any substantial change in status of common dolphins in the eastern North Atlantic.





SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR The common dolphin is a gregarious animal, often found in large, active schools. In British waters, most herds consist of less than 30 individuals, and animals often occur solitarily or in pairs, although occasional schools of more than one hundred dolphins can be seen. School size increases in mid-summer and mid-winter, possibly linked to the dolphins following prey moving inshore. They are highly vocal, emitting high-pitched squeals that can often be heard easily above the surface of the water. Common dolphins develop strong social bonds, particularly between mother and young, and males and females; if one animal is captured or injured, the other will remain in attendance, and frequently shows much distress at its companion's plight, squeaking and squealing.

REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY Common dolphins appear to have two calving peaks - spring and autumn - with a gestation period of 10 - 11 months. Other females may assist the mother with the birth and also take part in 'baby-sitting' while the mother feeds. Calves are 80 - 90 cm long at birth. They are weaned at the age of around 19 months, and the mother has a resting period of about four months before her next pregnancy so that calving intervals are generally 2-3 years or more. Males become sexually mature at 5-7 years of age, and females at around six years. Common dolphins can live to 30-35 years.



DIET Mainly opportunistic feeders, the common dolphin diet is very varied, consisting chiefly of small schooling fish such as cod, hake, mackerel, sardine, pilchard, horse mackerel, scad, sprat, sand eel, herring, whiting and blue whiting, as well as squid - the type of food taken depends on local availability. Groups of dolphins often use co-operative feeding techniques to herd schools of fish, panicking the fish through frenzied activity and taking them in the confusion.



THREATS The major threat facing common dolphins in British waters in recent years appears to be entanglement in trawl and purse seine nets in the Celtic Sea and Bay of Biscay. This has resulted in large numbers dying and subsequently being washed ashore, particularly in the southwest of Britain, due to the fact that they often prey on the same species as the fisheries, thus becoming a prime target for accidental capture.

Although there is no evidence of serious organochlorine contamination in eastern North Atlantic common dolphins, specimens from the Atlantic coast of France have been found with high levels of methyl mercury (max 631 $\mu\text{g/g}$ dry weight in the liver), with levels of total mercury increasing with age.

Some indication that common dolphins may react negatively to seismic sound has come from an acoustical study conducted in the southern Irish Sea during October - November 1994. However, a reduction in acoustic contacts could also have been explained by a seasonal southerly movement of the species at that time; further studies the following year without seismic sound, revealed a similar reduction in activity from September to December.

FURTHER READING

- Evans, P.G.H., Anderwald, P., and Baines, M.E. 2003. *UK Cetacean Status Review*. Report to English Nature & Countryside Council for Wales. 160pp.
- Evans, W.E. 1999. Common Dolphin, White-bellied Porpoise - *Delphinus delphis* Linnaeus 1758. Pp. 191-224. In: *Handbook of Marine Mammals. Volume 5: The First Book of Dolphins* (Eds. S.H. Ridgway and R. Harrison). Academic Press, San Diego. 416pp.
- Reid, J., Evans, P.G.H. and Northridge, S.P. 2003. *Cetacean Distribution Atlas*. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough. 68pp.