



## CETACEANS OF ORKNEY

As with the neighbouring Shetland Islands, the cetacean fauna (whales, dolphins, and porpoises) of Orkney is one of the richest in the UK. Favoured localities for cetacean sightings are off headlands and between sounds of islands in inshore areas, and over fishing banks in offshore regions. Although the majority of sightings records for several species occur on the west coast, this may relate to the easier opportunities to see animals from cliff-tops there. Much of the low-lying sand dune areas occur on the east side of Orkney making it more difficult to spot cetaceans from here.

Since 1980, seventeen species of cetacean have been recorded along the coast or in nearshore waters (within 60 km of the coast). Of these, seven species (25% of the UK cetacean fauna) are present throughout the year or recorded annually as seasonal visitors. Of recent unusual cetacean sightings, single humpback whales have been seen on a number of occasions in summer. Sperm whales, although not annual, have been recorded several times in Orkney waters, mainly during winter months between October and March. Recently, six sperm whales remained in Scapa Flow between 22nd February and 25th March 1993, and eleven sperm whales stranded at Backaskail Bay, Sanday on 7th December 1994, where they died the subsequent morning.

### CETACEAN SPECIES REGULARLY SIGHTED IN THE REGION



**Minke whale**  
*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*

The minke whale is the most frequently observed baleen whale species in the region. Most observations have been made along the west and south coasts of Orkney and in the Pentland Firth, but this may reflect the better cliff vantage points available there. The species is widely distributed in small numbers, with most sightings (singles or groups of up to ten) occurring between June and October.



**Long-finned pilot whale**  
*Globicephala melas*

The long-finned pilot whale is an infrequent visitor to nearshore waters. Sightings of individuals or groups usually numbering up to 20 individuals (occasionally up to 200 individuals) have been recorded year round, with no indication of any particular area favoured, although largest numbers are recorded between November and March, when several mass strandings have also occurred.



**Killer whale**  
*Orcinus orca*

The killer whale is widely distributed throughout Orkney waters, occurring in all months of the year, but with peak frequency of nearshore sightings between June and October. Although sightings of the species are fairly infrequent, individuals and groups of 2-10 whales have been reported particularly around Pentland Firth, the Scapa Flow and the North Isles. Closely associated with purse seine fishing activities, pods of up to 150 killer whales have been observed in the North Sea east of Orkney.

**Risso's dolphin**  
*Grampus griseus*

The Risso dolphin is widely distributed throughout the region. The species is most frequently sighted in groups of 5-20 along the west coasts of Orkney, particularly west mainland and west Hoy, but also off North Ronaldsay and in the Pentland Firth. Although sightings are generally concentrated between April and November, with a strong peak in the month of August, strandings have occurred between November and March suggesting that the species may be present in the area year-round.



**White-beaked dolphin**  
*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*

The White-beaked dolphin is fairly common and widely distributed in groups usually numbering 5-20 individuals. Most sightings occur offshore in the northern North Sea east and south of Orkney or at either end of the Pentland Firth throughout the year, peaking between June and October

**Atlantic white-sided dolphin**  
*Lagenorhynchus acutus*

The deepwater Atlantic white-sided dolphin is an infrequent visitor to nearshore waters, generally traveling in large groups. The pelagic species favouring the continental shelf is most frequently sighted around the waters to the west of Orkney out to Sule Skerry between May and October, particularly August. Nearshore movements have sometimes led to mass strandings.



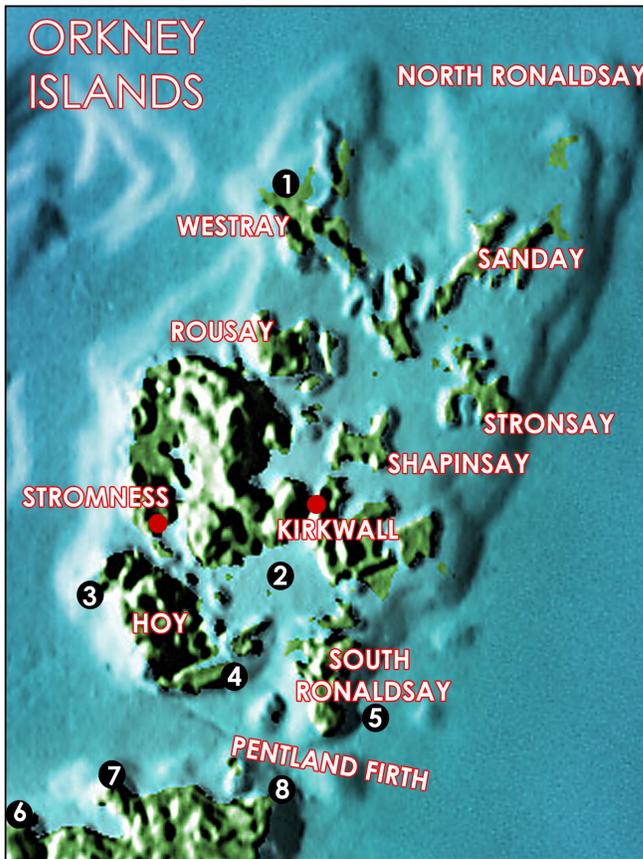
**Harbour porpoise**  
*Phocoena phocoena*

The harbour porpoise is widely distributed and common throughout the Orkney region. Although present throughout the year, peak numbers and frequency of sightings occur between June and October (especially July and August) when singles or family groups of 2-3 may form aggregations numbering up to 100 individuals.

**Rarer cetacean species recorded in the area since 1980**

Fin whale *Balaenoptera physalus*, Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*, Sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus*, Sowerby's beaked whale *Mesoplodon bidens*, Cuvier's beaked whale *Ziphius cavirostris*, Northern bottlenose whale *Hyperoodon ampullatus*, Short-beaked common dolphin *Delphinus delphis*, Bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*, False killer *Pseudorca crassidens*, and Beluga *Delphinapterus leucas*. In addition, three species have been recorded prior to 1980: Blue whale *Balaenoptera musculus*, Sei whale *Balaenoptera physalus*, and Narwhal *Monodon monoceros*.

## REGIONAL MAP



### Sightings hotspots

- 1) Rackwick (Westray)
- 2) Scapa Flow
- 3) Old Man of Hoy (Island of Hoy)
- 4) Cantack Head Island of (Hoy)
- 5) South Ronaldsay (South Ronaldsay)
- 6) Strathy Point (Caithness)
- 7) Dunnet Head (Caithness)
- 8) Duncansby Head (Caithness)



Hoy Sound, Orkney



Duncansby Head, Caithness



Old Man of Hoy, Orkney

### How to get there

**British Airways** offer flights to Kirkwall, Orkney from Inverness, Aberdeen. In addition, connecting flights are available from London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dublin, Belfast and Shetland. Alternatively, the following **ferry** services are available: Aberdeen to Kirkwall, Scrabster to Stromness, John O'Groats to Burwick, Gill's Bay to St Margaret's Hope.

## THREATS TO CETACEANS, PAST AND PRESENT

Past threats have included an opportunistic drive fishery for long-finned pilot whales which persisted for centuries, the last organized drive taking place in July 1891 when 114 pilot whales were killed in Inganess Bay and Wideford Sands. The largest catch recorded was of 450 animals killed at Westray in autumn 1843. Similarly, a drive fishery formerly existed for Atlantic white-sided dolphins, with entire schools being driven ashore and killed, for example in August 1858 when about 20 individuals were captured in Scapa Bay.

Present day threats facing cetacean species include conflicts with fisheries, notably incidental capture in fishing gear and competition for food source. Another threat is habitat degradation, mainly by pollution, for example waste from fish farms, especially in and around Scapa Flow, although contaminant levels are amongst the lowest in the UK. Other potential local threats include collisions with high-speed vessels, or noise disturbance from ultrasonic seal scramblers deployed at fish farms, vessel traffic, or seismic exploration activities. A proposal for an offshore wind farm has been approved for Scapa Flow, but any impact upon cetaceans has yet to be evaluated.



## 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.

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The Sea Watch Foundation, 11 Jersey Road, Oxford, OX4 4RT  
01865 717276  
info@seawatchfoundation.org.uk

(Dr Peter Evans 01286 672071)

[www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk](http://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk)