



CETACEANS OF WESTERN SCOTLAND

The cetacean fauna (whales, dolphins and porpoises) of western Scotland (including the Western Isles, West Highlands and South-west Scotland) is possibly the richest in the UK and one of the most important areas in north-west Europe for cetaceans. Favoured localities for cetacean sightings are protruding headlands such as Cape Wrath, Rubha Ruadh (north of Handa), Point of Stoer, Red Point (south of Gairloch), Ardnamurchan Point in the Highlands; Neist Point (Isle of Skye), Butt of Lewis and Eye Peninsula (Isle of Lewis), and Barra Head, the sounds between islands notably Harris, Barra and neighbouring islands, Handa and the Shiant Isles, Skye and the Small Isles (Eigg, Rum, Canna and Muck), and around Atlantic islands like the Monachs, Flannans, and St Kilda group (Outer Hebrides), as well as offshore fishing banks, the continental shelf edge, and other areas with uneven bottom topography, such as the Shiant and Stanton Banks.

Since 1980, as many as twenty-one different species of cetacean have been recorded in the region within 60 km of the coast. Of these, eleven species (approximately 39% of the 28 UK cetacean fauna) are either present through the year or recorded annually as seasonal visitors. Of recent unusual live sightings, a humpback whale was seen at Loch Ainort, Isle of Skye, in December 1994, one remained in the Firth of Clyde from 3rd January until end of March 1995, a group of four-six was seen at Loch Linnhe, Strathclyde in late September 1997, and single humpbacks were seen in the Sound of Sleat during August 2004 and again in August 2006, with a sighting at the same time off Barra; a mother and calf pygmy sperm whale live-stranded at Stranraer on 18th Oct 1999; a Cuvier's beaked whale live-stranded and was rescued at Loch Nedd, Sutherland on 15th Dec 1993; a beluga was seen in Loch Duich and off Applecross (Highland) on 24th and 26th April 1995; ten striped dolphins were observed with a group of common dolphins off Mallaig (Highland) on 20th June 1998, with live-strandings of the species at Sunadale, Grogport, Strathclyde on 24th Aug 1995, at Staffin (Isle of Skye) on 6th Aug 1997, and at Ardnave (Isle of Islay) on 31st Oct 1999.

CETACEAN SPECIES REGULARLY SIGHTED IN THE REGION



Fin whale
Balaenoptera physalus

The fin whale, although uncommon around the west of the Outer Hebrides, can be sighted occasionally in the Minches, Sea of Hebrides, and off South-west Scotland. Most sightings are of single individuals or small groups of 2-3 animals.

Sightings in the region occur between April and October, with most recorded from May to August. However, farther offshore in deep Atlantic waters west of the continental shelf, hydrophones mounted on the sea bed indicate that the species is present at these latitudes also between October and March (when vocal activity is greatest).

Minke whale
Balaenoptera acutorostrata

The minke whale is widely distributed in small numbers. Peak numbers and frequency of sightings occur between July and October when singles or groups of 2-3 may form aggregations of 5-15 individuals. Photo-ID studies show that some individuals return to the same localities year after year.



Sperm whale
Physeter macrocephalus

The sperm whale is uncommon throughout the region, but may be sighted in deep waters west of the continental shelf edge. The species can sometimes be seen in nearshore waters where mass strandings have occasionally occurred (e.g. Feb-Mar 1988, Nov 1996). There is no apparent seasonal pattern of occurrence.

Long-finned pilot whale
Globicephala melas

Occurs mainly in deep waters west of the continental shelf edge where pods of tens to hundreds can be seen. Sightings of 10-50 individuals are sometimes seen nearshore, where occasional mass strandings occur (e.g. April 1992). Sighting in the region generally peak between April and September.



Killer whale
Orcinus orca

Although the killer whale or orca is uncommon, the species is widely distributed in the region. Occurring mainly between May and September either singly or in groups numbering up to 14 individuals, repeat sightings have been recorded in and around the Little Minch, east of Harris and west of Skye, the Uists, and around the Small Isles (Eigg, Rum and Canna), Mull, the Treshnish Islands, Staffa, and Iona. Some individuals with unique marks (identified by photography) have been seen repeatedly in particular locations for periods exceeding ten years.

Risso's dolphin
Grampus griseus

The Risso's dolphin is widely distributed mainly in groups of 5-25 (occasionally up to 50) individuals. Sightings occur generally between April and September, with numbers peaking in August and September. Good locations for seeing this species include the Eye Peninsula (particularly Tiumpan Head to Chicken Rock) off the east coast of Lewis, around Neist Point in South-west Skye, and around the Small Isles.





White-beaked dolphin
Lagenorhynchus albirostris

Widely distributed but most frequently observed around the Outer Hebrides west to St. Kilda, east to the North Minch, in the Little Minch, and the southern and western ends of the Sea of the Hebrides. Group size varies between 10-100 individuals. Sightings often occur nearshore, with peak numbers between July and September in all regions. Recently there appears to have been a northwards shift of the population to the northern edge of the North Minch.

Atlantic White-sided dolphin
Lagenorhynchus acutus

The Atlantic white-sided dolphin occurs mainly along the northern end of the North Minch, the southern end of the Sea of the Hebrides, and along the shelf edge north and west of the Outer Hebrides. Group sizes are often large (100-1,000 individuals). Peak numbers and frequency of sightings in the region occur between July and August.



Short-beaked common dolphin
Delphinus delphis

Although mainly an offshore species, sightings off South-west Scotland north to the Isle of Skye are common year-round, with numbers and frequency of sightings reaching a peak between May and early July, declining sharply from August onwards. The species typically occurs in groups of 5-20 individuals but larger groups of up to 500 individuals have been recorded. A recent northwards extension of range has been observed.

Bottlenose dolphin
Tursiops truncatus

The bottlenose dolphin is uncommon throughout the year, although small resident or semi-resident communities numbering 5-20 individuals occur in a few scattered localities (e.g. Barra, Islay, Mull, and the Sound of Sleat). The species may also be seen offshore where individuals commonly associate with other species such as long-finned pilot whale. Greatest numbers in coastal waters are reported between April and September.





Harbour porpoise
Phocoena phocoena

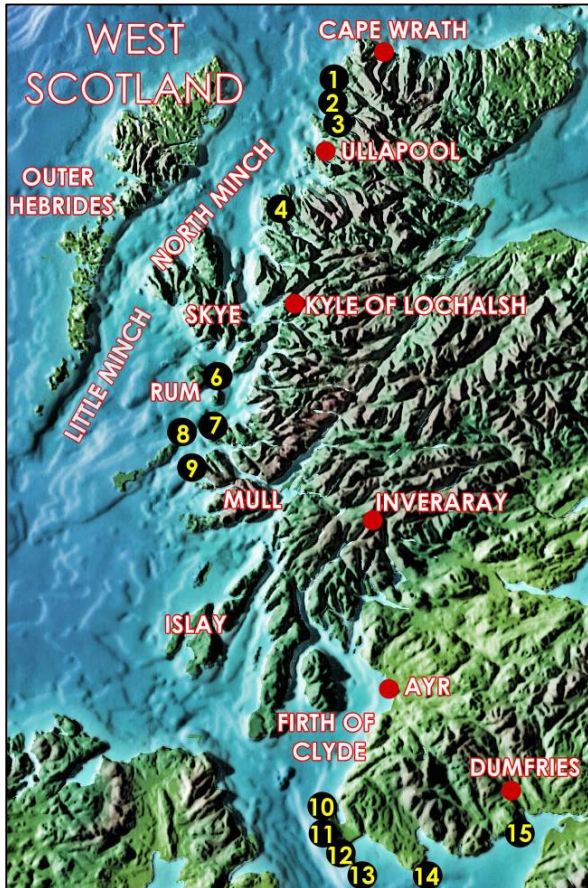
The harbour porpoise is widely distributed throughout the region and is especially common in nearshore waters along the West Highland coast. Peak numbers and frequency of sightings generally occur between July and October, when singles or family groups of 2-3 may form aggregations numbering 10-100 individuals.

Other cetaceans recorded in the region since 1980

Blue whale *Balaenoptera musculus*, Sei whale *Balaenoptera borealis*, Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*, Northern right whale *Eubalaena glacialis*, Sowerby's beaked whale *Mesoplodon bidens*, Cuvier's beaked whale *Ziphius cavirostris*, Northern bottlenose whale *Hyperoodon ampullatus*, Beluga *Delphinapterus leucas*, Fraser's dolphin *Lagenodelphis hosei*, and Striped dolphin *Stenella coeruleoalba*. The only record of a Fraser's dolphin in UK was a male washed ashore dead on the coast of South Uist at the end of 1995.

Acoustic monitoring of cetaceans in the Atlantic using US Navy receivers suggests that the deep waters of the Rockall Trough due west of St Kilda, are occupied regularly by blue whales.

REGIONAL MAP



Sightings hotspots

- 1) Handa Island (Highland Region)
- 2) Point of Stoer (Highland Region)
- 3) Stoer Head Lighthouse (Highland Region)
- 4) Gairloch (Highland Region)
- 5) Neist Point (Isle of Skye)
- 6) Small Isles (Rum, Eigg, Canna & Muck)
- 7) Ardnamurchan Point (Highland Region)
- 8) Cairns of Coll (Argyll & Bute)
- 9) Calliach Point (Argyll & Bute)
- 10) Corsewall Point (Dumfries & Galloway)
- 11) Black Head (Dumfries & Galloway)
- 12) Ardwell Point (Dumfries & Galloway)
- 13) Mull of Galloway (Dumfries & Galloway)
- 14) Burrow Head (Dumfries & Galloway)
- 15) Southernness Point (Dumfries & Galloway)



Stoer Head, Highland Region



Corsewall Point, Dumfries & Galloway



Isle of Jura, Argyll & Bute



St Kilda, Outer Hebrides

THREATS TO CETACEANS, PAST AND PRESENT

Historically, whaling of large cetacean species such as the blue, fin, sei, humpback and northern right whale posed a threat during the early part of the 20th century, with a whaling station operating from Bunaveneadar, West Loch Tarbert (Isle of Harris) from 1903-27 (with a brief resumption in 1950-51). Although stocks of the commoner species like fin and sei whale did not show any obvious sign of decline, the rarer species like humpback and northern right whale became extremely scarce, and only the former is showing any signs of returning to the area.

Nowadays, threats to cetaceans in the region come primarily from various other human activities. These include conflict with fisheries either by competition for the same resource (e.g. herring and mackerel stocks have declined significantly in the region over the last half-century), and incidental capture in fishing gear such as bottom set gill nets, tangle nets, purse seine and mid-water trawl nets. Although much of the region is relatively unpolluted, another potential threat is habitat degradation, particularly via organic contaminant waste produced by the numerous salmon farms that have been established here in recent years. Habitat disturbance is another threat, with underwater noise generated from large tankers and other vessels, and from seismic survey activities particularly along the continental shelf edge west and north of the Outer Hebrides. Sound disturbance from recreational vessels including whale-watching boats poses a further threat, along with the potential for physical damage from these often high-speed craft, although the majority are very responsible and follow a code of conduct.



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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