



CETACEANS OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland has a moderately rich cetacean fauna. Fifteen species of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) have been recorded along the coasts or in nearshore waters (within 60 km of the coast) of the region since 1980. Of these, eight species (29% of the 28 UK species) are either present throughout the year or recorded annually as seasonal visitors to the region. The most common species in nearshore waters are the harbour porpoise *Phocoena phocoena*, short-beaked common dolphin *Delphinus delphis*, bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*, and minke whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, with Risso's dolphin *Grampus griseus* and killer whale *Orcinus orca* recorded occasionally. In offshore waters, the short-beaked common dolphin is the most abundant species.

Headlands and the sounds between islands are the most favoured localities for cetaceans in coastal waters of 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.

CETACEAN SPECIES REGULARLY SIGHTED IN THE REGION

Minke whale

Balaenoptera acutorostrata

Uncommon in the northwest Irish Sea, the North Channel and waters north of Co. Antrim, occurring mainly between July and October



Killer whale

Orcinus orca

Uncommon, occurring mainly between May and September. Although primarily an offshore species, a good sighting locality is Rathlin Island (Co. Antrim), and the species has been known to enter some of the marine loughs such as Belfast Lough.

Harbour porpoise
Phocoena phocoena

Widely distributed in small numbers in the North Channel and nearshore Northern Irish waters, mainly between July and October. Good sighting localities include around Copeland Island, Ballygalley Head, Island Magee, Black Head, and Whitehead.



Bottlenose dolphin
Tursiops truncatus

Present in small numbers in most months of the year, but with peak numbers and frequency of sightings in April, and August to September. Good sighting localities are around Copeland Island and the entrance to Belfast Lough.

Short-beaked common dolphin
Delphinus delphis

Widely distributed and fairly common (sometimes in large groups), although mainly offshore. Peak numbers and frequency of sightings occur between May and September.



Risso's dolphin
Grampus griseus

Uncommon, generally in groups numbering up to 15 animals. The species occurs mainly between March and September. A good sighting locality is Rathlin Island.

Other cetacean species recorded in the region include: Fin whale *Balaenoptera physalus*, Sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus*, Sowerby's beaked whale *Mesoplodon bidens*, Gervais' beaked whale *Mesoplodon europaeus*, Northern bottlenose whale *Hyperoodon ampullatus*, Long-finned pilot whale *Globicephala melas*, Striped dolphin *Stenella coeruleoalba*, White-beaked dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*, and Atlantic white-sided dolphin *Lagenorhynchus acutus*.

REGIONAL MAP

Sightings hotspots:



- 1) Benbane Head (Co. Antrim)
- 2) Rathlin Island (Co. Antrim)
- 3) North Channel
- 4) Fair Head (Co. Antrim)
- 5) Garron Point (Co. Antrim)
- 6) Ballygalley Head (Co. Antrim)
- 7) Island Magee (Co. Antrim)
- 8) Black Head (Co. Antrim)
- 9) Whitehead (Co. Antrim)
- 10) Belfast Lough (Co. Antrim)
- 11) Copeland (Co. Down)
- 12) St. John's Point (Co. Down)



White Park Bay & North Channel



North Antrim coast



Benbane Head, Co. Antrim



Rathlin Island, Co. Antrim

THREATS TO CETACEANS

Cetaceans in the region face three potential pressures from human activities: conflicts with fisheries (either by competition for a common food resource, or accidental capture in fishing gear), habitat degradation (mainly by pollution), and disturbance (from vessel traffic and underwater sounds). However, there are few reports of accidental capture of cetaceans in this area and there is no information on contaminant levels in cetaceans for the region. A morbillivirus infection was found in three harbour porpoises stranded on the coast of Co. Down in 1988. Disturbance by recreational activity is a problem in waters close to major holiday resorts such as Portrush, Bangor, and Newcastle. Vessels pose threats of direct physical damage to cetaceans. Noise disturbance is another problem; the sound frequencies generated by engines and cavitation of the propeller overlap with frequencies used by cetaceans and may result in negative responses such as increased dive times and vessel avoidance. Seismic survey vessels pose a similar threat as they release low frequency underwater sounds, which overlap the hearing of baleen whales, and may affect smaller cetaceans such as the short-beaked common dolphin and harbour porpoise by changing the distribution of their prey.



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.