



RISSO'S DOLPHIN IN UK WATERS

DESCRIPTION It is relatively easy to identify Risso's dolphins *Grampus griseus* at sea, especially an older individual, due to their distinctive scars and scratches which deepen with age, resulting in a lightening of the body colour - mature dolphins may be almost entirely white. These marks are probably caused by the teeth of other Risso's dolphins, as well as the sharp beaks of squid, a major prey item. The body is robust and stocky, and an adult can reach a maximum length of 4 metres and a weight of 500 kg. The head, which has no beak, is large and rounded, with a unique crease which leads from the blowhole to the upper 'lip'. Risso's dolphins are active at the surface of the water, rarely bow riding as such but often swimming alongside vessels and surfing the waves.



Regular, common or fairly common
 Occasional
 Casual or absent

DISTRIBUTION Risso's dolphin is a fairly abundant, widely distributed species which ranges from West Africa, Portugal and the Bay of Biscay, north along the west coast of Ireland and from the Irish Sea into west and north Scottish waters (especially the Hebrides and Shetland). It is not usually seen in the southern North Sea or most parts of the English Channel, areas which now contain few small cetaceans. It generally favours deep offshore waters, but may be seen closer to the shore around oceanic islands, and in Britain and Ireland, most sightings occur within 10 kilometres of the coast.



SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR The dolphins tend to form pods of between 2 and 45 animals, with temporary gatherings of several hundred taking place occasionally. The social structure appears to be cohesive, with individuals staying together for long periods of time. The dolphins can be rather rough with one another, slapping, splashing and striking being observed, and this behaviour undoubtedly leads to some of the distinctive scarring seen on the skin.





REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY Knowledge of reproduction and breeding in Risso's dolphin is fairly limited, but they are believed to have a gestation period of 13 - 14 months - in British waters, mating takes place mainly between April and July. Newborns are around 1.5 metres long, and reach sexual maturity at 3 or 4 years of age.

DIET Cephalopods (such as octopus, cuttlefish, and small squid), crustaceans, and occasionally small fish form the prey of Risso's dolphin, with the dolphins often swimming in a line formation in order to improve effectiveness of hunting.



THREATS Although often living in comparatively unpolluted waters, Risso's dolphins sometimes become entangled in fishing gear and may face the threat of sound disturbance or direct collision with vessels in those localities where recreational activities are common.

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.
- Kruse, S., Caldwell, D.K., and Caldwell, M.C. 1999. Risso's Dolphin. Pp. 245-280. In: *Handbook of Marine Mammals. Volume 6: The Second Book of Dolphins and the Porpoises* (Eds. S.H. Ridgway and R. Harrison). Academic Press, San Diego. 486pp.
- Reid, J., Evans, P.G.H. and Northridge, S.P. 2003. *Cetacean Distribution Atlas*. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough. 68pp.

