



CETACEANS OF SHETLAND

The cetacean fauna (whales, dolphins and porpoises) of the Shetland Islands is one of the richest in the UK. Favoured localities for cetaceans are off headlands and between sounds of islands in inshore areas, or over fishing banks in offshore regions.

Since 1980, eighteen species of cetacean have been recorded along the coast or in nearshore waters (within 60 km of the coast). Of these, eight species (29% of the UK cetacean fauna) are either present throughout the year or recorded annually as seasonal visitors. Of recent unusual live sightings, a fin whale was observed off the east coast of Noss on 11th August 1994; a sei whale was seen, along with two minke whales, off Muckle Skerry, Out Skerries on 27th August 1993; 12-14 sperm whales were seen on 14th July 1998, 14 miles south of Sumburgh Head in the Fair Isle Channel; single belugas were seen on 4th January 1996 in Hoswick Bay and on 18th August 1997 at Lund, Unst; and a striped dolphin came into Tresta Voe on 14th July 1993, eventually stranding, where it was euthanased.

CETACEAN SPECIES REGULARLY SIGHTED IN THE REGION

Humpback whale

Megaptera novaeangliae

Since 1992, humpback whales have been seen annually off the Shetland coast, with 1-3 individuals per year. The species was exploited during the early part of the century by commercial whaling and became very rare for over half a century. Sightings generally occur between May-September, particularly in June and July, mainly around the southern tip of Shetland.



Minke whale

Balaenoptera acutorostrata

The minke whale is the most commonly sighted whale in Shetland waters. It has a widespread distribution, with most sightings occurring between July-September, particularly off the east coast. The species is seen singly or in groups of up to 15 animals.

Long-finned pilot whale

Globicephala melas

The long-finned pilot whale is a pelagic, deep-water species. It is generally sighted along the continental shelf edge between the months of September and March although the species will come inshore (e.g. a pod of ten was seen at Burra Haaf in August 1994), and this was exploited in past centuries through a "drive" fishery.



Killer whale

Orcinus orca

Although killer whales are rare, there has been an increase in sightings since systematic recording began in 1989. In winter, the species is closely associated with the mackerel purse-seine fishery, and has been frequently observed 80-150 km offshore north of Shetland. At other times, it is widely distributed in nearshore waters around Sumburgh Head, Mousa, Noss, Yell and Bluemull Sounds. Coastal sightings generally occur between April-September, with group sizes ranging from 1-12 animals, but usually 6 or less.

Risso's dolphin

Grampus griseus

Risso's dolphins are widespread and common in nearshore waters, particularly on the east coast, north-east of Unst, in Bluemull (between Yell and Unst) and Colgrave Sounds (between Yell and Fetlar), between Whalsay and Out Skerries on the eastern coast of mainland Shetland, and around the islands of Noss, Mousa, and Fair Isle. Sightings of this species generally occur mainly between the months of April and November, with group sizes varying between 5-20 individuals.



White-beaked dolphin

Lagenorhynchus albirostris

White-beaked dolphins are widespread and common in inshore waters, particularly on the east coast and between Sumburgh Head and Fair Isle, although the species occasionally enters the voes at Whiteness and Clift Sound near Scalloway. The white-beaked dolphin can be sighted throughout the year with numbers peaking between July and September.



Atlantic White-sided dolphin

Lagenorhynchus acutus

The Atlantic white-sided dolphin is a pelagic, deep-water species occurring mainly along the continental shelf edge north and west of Shetland. Nevertheless, the species is widespread in nearshore waters where it is mainly observed between Sumburgh Head and Fair Isle, and along the east coast of mainland Shetland. Coastal sightings peak between June and October, particularly August. The species is generally seen in large herds that can number up to 1,000 individuals.

Harbour porpoise

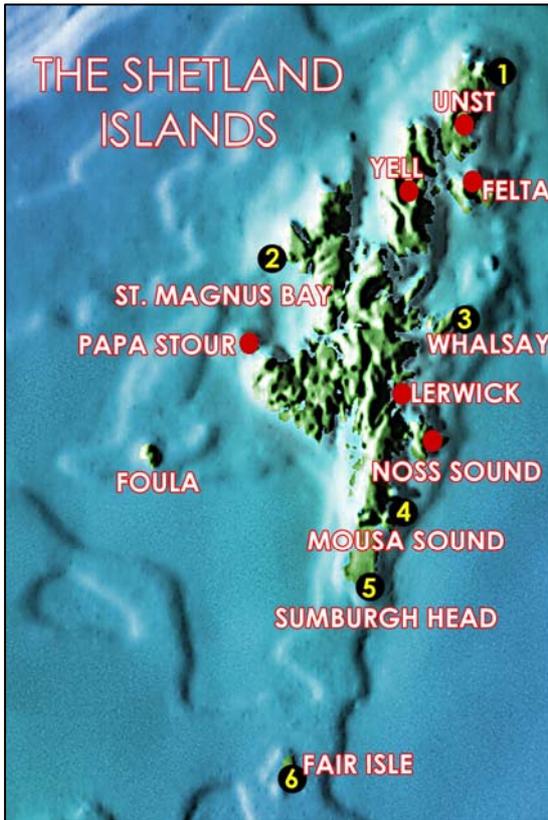
Phocoena phocoena

Harbour porpoise are common and widespread in Shetland nearshore waters, particularly along the east coast between Whalsay and Out Skerries, Bressay and Noss, and between Aithwick and Sumburgh Head in the south-east, with more ephemeral sites favoured including Quendale Bay, St Ninians, and Scalloway, and at least until recently, Yell Sound and Bluemull Sound. They occur year round with numbers peaking in July-October. They may be seen singly, in groups of 2-3, or aggregations of up to 100-200 individuals. Porpoises are strongly associated with sand eel fishing grounds. In the 1980s, a low level of sand eel recruitment resulted in a significant decline in summer coastal population numbers, and this has been repeated from 2002 on.



Rarer cetacean species recorded in the area since 1980 include: Fin whale *Balaenoptera physalus*, Sei whale *Balaenoptera borealis*, Sperm whale *Physeter macrocephalus*, Sowerby's beaked whale *Mesoplodon bidens*, Cuvier's beaked whale *Ziphius cavirostris*, Northern bottlenose whale *Hyperoodon ampullatus*, Beluga *Delphinapterus leucas*, Striped dolphin *Stenella coeruleoalba*, Short-beaked common dolphin *Delphinus delphis*, and Bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*. Four other species have been recorded from Shetland prior to 1980: Northern right whale *Eubalaena glacialis*, Blue whale *Balaenoptera musculus*, Narwhal *Monodon monoceros*, and the False killer whale *Pseudorca crassidens*.

REGIONAL MAP



Sightings hotspots:

- 1) Esha Ness
- 2) Lamba Ness
- 3) Whalsay
- 4) Mousa Sound
- 5) Sumburgh Head
- 6) Fair Isle

THREATS TO CETACEANS, PAST AND PRESENT

Whaling posed a threat to large species such as fin, sei, and humpback whale during the early part of the 20th century, and the long-finned pilot whale was subject to an opportunistic "drive" fishery until 1903.

Present day threats to cetacean species in the region include conflicts with fisheries, notably incidental capture in fishing gear (including coastal tangle net fisheries), and competition for food. Although habitat degradation through pollutants is less likely to be a problem in Shetland compared with many other regions of UK, local threats include collision with fast moving commercial vessels and disturbance from high frequency noises such as ship propellers or seismic activities (now concentrated along the continental shelf edge north and west of Shetland).



Esha Ness



Noss Sound



Mousa Sound



Sumburgh Head