



CETACEANS OF SOUTH-WEST ENGLAND

This region encompasses the Severn Estuary, Bristol Channel and the English Channel east to Seaton on the South Devon/Dorset border. The waters of the Western Approaches of the English Channel are richer in cetaceans than any other part of southern Britain. However, the diversity and abundance declines as one goes eastwards in the English Channel and towards the Severn Estuary.

Seventeen species of cetacean have been recorded in the South-west Approaches since 1980; nine of these species (32% of the 28 UK species) are present throughout the year or recorded annually as seasonal visitors. Thirteen species have been recorded along the Channel coast or in nearshore waters (within 60 km of the coast) of South-west England. Seven of these species (25% of the 28 UK species) are present throughout the year or are recorded annually.

Good locations for nearshore cetacean sightings are prominent headlands and bays. Since 1990, bottlenose dolphins have been reported regularly nearshore, the majority of sightings coming from Penzance Bay, around the Land's End Peninsula, and St. Ives Bay in Cornwall, although several locations along both north and south coasts of Devon are good for bottlenose dolphin.

Cetaceans can also be seen in offshore waters. The main species that have been recorded include short-beaked common dolphins and long-finned pilot whales. Small numbers of harbour porpoises occur annually particularly between October and March off the Cornish & Devon coasts.

CETACEAN SPECIES REGULARLY SIGHTED IN THE REGION



Fin whale

Balaenoptera physalus

Rarer visitors to offshore waters, fin whales have been sighted mainly between June and December along the continental shelf edge at depths of 500-3000m. Regularly observed offshore from ferries travelling between the south coast of England and northern Spain.

Sperm whale

Physeter macrocephalus

Although rare, sperm whale sightings have been recorded between October and December in offshore waters along the continental shelf edge at depths of 1000-3000 m.





Long-finned pilot whale

Globicephala melas

Groups of long-finned pilot whales can sometimes be seen, mainly offshore, with peak sightings occurring in November and December

Killer whale

Orcinus orca

Sightings of the killer whale are rare, but the species may be seen around the South-west of England in most months, but particularly between March and September.



Harbour porpoise

Phocoena phocoena

Sightings of the harbour porpoise are relatively uncommon in most parts of the region. However, the species may be seen in small group in nearshore waters between October and March at sites like Baggy Point (N. Devon) and Berry Head (S. Devon).

Bottlenose dolphin

Tursiops truncatus

Most frequently observed dolphin in near-shore waters, generally in groups of 5-20 individuals.

Peak numbers occur between January and April in the South-west approaches to the English Channel, with largest number of sightings in Penzance Bay, around the Land's End Peninsula, and St. Ives Bay in Cornwall. In the rest of the region, numbers peak between March and August.





Short-beaked common dolphin

Delphinus delphis

Occurs mainly offshore. Peaks in numbers and frequency of sightings occur between August and January in the South-west Approaches of the English Channel. In the rest of the region, numbers peak between August and December.

Striped dolphin

Stenella coeruleoalba

Rare. Recorded in very small numbers. Peaks in numbers and frequency of sightings occur in the South-western Approaches of the English Channel between July and September, extending through the winter further south towards the Bay of Biscay.



Risso's dolphin

Grampus griseus

Uncommon, occurring in the region mainly between March and September.

Other cetacean species recorded in the region include: Minke whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*, Cuvier's beaked whale *Ziphius cavirostris*, Sowerby's beaked whale *Mesoplodon bidens*, Northern bottlenose whale *Hyperoodon ampullatus*, White-beaked dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*, Atlantic white-sided dolphin *Lagenorhynchus acutus*, and False killer whale *Pseudorca crassidens*.

The minke whale has recently shown signs of increase in the English Channel, and small numbers are seen mainly between June and October.

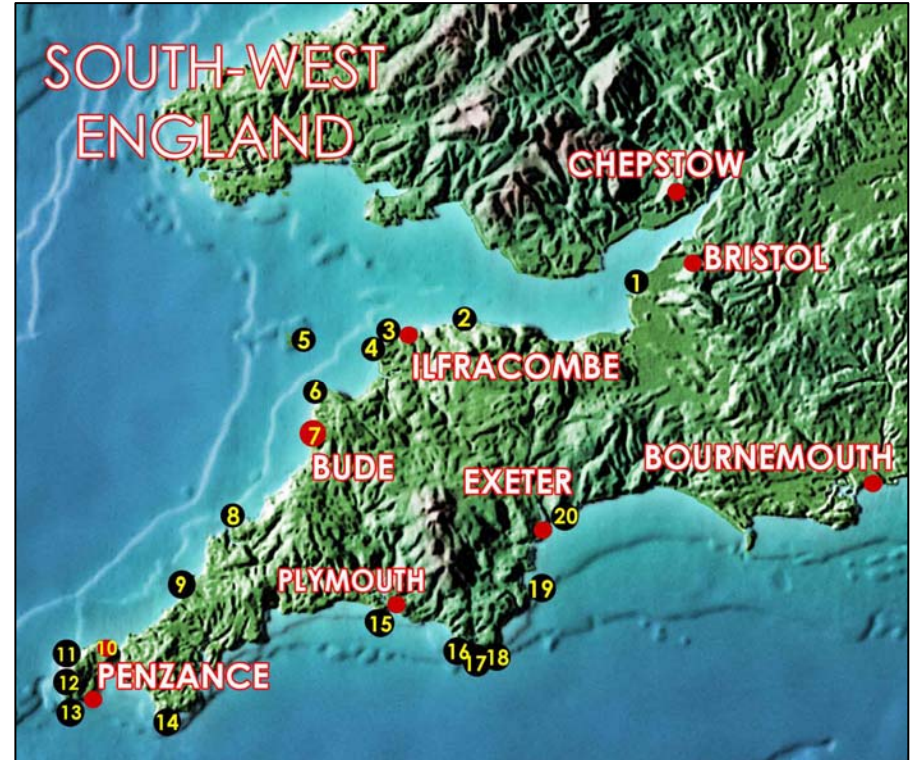
Sightings hotspots:

- 1) Brean Down Fort (Somerset)
- 2) North Foreland (Somerset)
- 3) Morte Point (N. Devon)
- 4) Baggy Point (N. Devon)
- 5) Lundy Island (N. Devon)
- 6) Hartland Point (N. Devon)
- 7) Bude (N. Cornwall)
- 8) Trevoze Head (N. Cornwall)
- 9) St. Agnes Head (N. Cornwall)
- 10) St. Ives (N. Cornwall)
- 11) Pendeen (N. Cornwall)
- 12) Land's End (Cornwall)
- 13) Gwennap Head (Cornwall)
- 14) Lizard Point (S. Cornwall)
- 15) Rame Head (S. Devon)
- 16) Bolt Head (S. Devon)
- 17) Prawle Point (S. Devon)
- 18) Start Point (S. Devon)
- 19) Berry Head (S. Devon)
- 20) Beer Head & Lyme Bay (S. Devon)



Ilfracombe, N. Devon

REGIONAL MAP



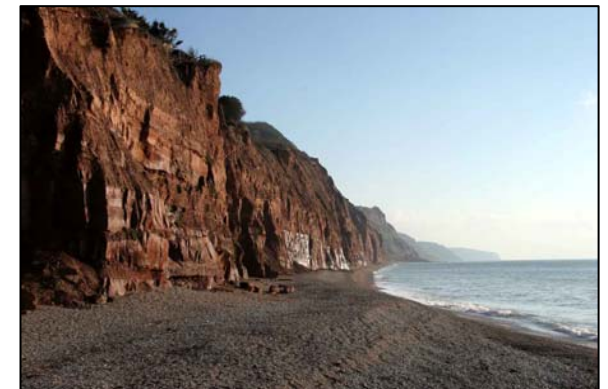
Hartland Point, N. Devon



Tintagel, N. Cornwall



Sidmouth, S. Devon



THREATS TO CETACEAN SPECIES

Cetaceans face three potential threats in the region from human activities. These include conflict with fisheries, habitat degradation, and disturbance.

There are several fishing fleets operating off the coast in this region, which may be in direct competition with cetaceans for food resources. However, the main threat may come from entanglement with fishing gear. In particular, in recent years there has been a major by-catch of short-beaked common dolphins in the South-west from the bass fishery.



Habitat degradation results from pollution; although contaminant levels in cetaceans in this region are low, they are generally higher than other regions of the UK.

Disturbance may result from recreational activities such as speedboats and jet skis operating in resort areas. These activities can result in the physical damage of cetaceans through collisions or disturbance by the noise generated by these vessels. This may result in negative responses such as vessel avoidance and increased dive times.



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.