

THE WHITE BEAKED DOLPIN IN UK WATERS



DESCRIPTION The white-beaked dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris* is a large and very robust dolphin, measuring 2.5 - 3 metres when fully-grown. It is often confused with the Atlantic white-sided dolphin, a species that is slightly smaller and slimmer, and has a distinct long white oval blaze on its sides, from which a yellow-ochre band extends backwards towards the tail stock. In European waters, the white-beaked dolphin has a short, thick, white beak (hence

the name), and the white, grey and black body patterning varies between individuals. The white on the side of white-beaked dolphins always reaches onto the back of the animals, behind the dorsal fin, unlike the white-sided dolphin where the white is restricted only to the sides of the animal. In front of the dorsal fin, white patches may occur on the flanks and on top on either side behind the head

White-beaked dolphins are fast and powerful swimmers, and commonly bow-ride, especially in front of large, fast-moving vessels, although they tend to lose interest rather quickly if the vessel is travelling too slowly. An active species, it engages in acrobatics such as breaching and tail lobbing.

STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION A species of continental shelf seas, the white-beaked dolphin favours the cool temperate and sub-arctic waters of the North Atlantic, and is rarely found south of the English Channel. Its distribution extends northwards to Iceland, the Greenland Sea and central west Greenland. It is common in British and Irish waters, being the most common species in the central and northern North Sea, around Shetland and Orkney and across to north-west Scotland. It also occurs commonly along the west coast of Ireland, around the Faroes, Iceland and west Norway, but is only occasional off southern Ireland, in the Irish Sea and western Channel.

From line transect surveys in July 1994, a population estimate of 7,856 white-beaked dolphins (95% confidence limits 4,032-13,301) was made for the North Sea and Channel. A further 11,760 (95% confidence limits 5,867-18,528) dolphins, either white-beaked or white-sided dolphins (specific identity not known) were estimated for the same region.



■ Regular, common or fairly common
■ Occasional
■ Casual or absent

Like many other smaller species of dolphin in UK waters, peak numbers of white-beaked dolphins occur between June and October, particularly August, although in northern Britain it is present throughout the year.



SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR White-beaked dolphins have been reported in large schools of up to several hundred individuals in the eastern North Atlantic. In UK waters, however, most sightings are of groups of less than ten animals, although schools of 20-100 animals can be seen in late summer and the occasional aggregation of up to five hundred individuals has been seen.

The dolphins are often observed in association with other small cetaceans, such as Atlantic white-sided dolphins, and have been seen feeding in close proximity to minke whales, bottlenose dolphins, and Risso's dolphins.

REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY Mating is thought to occur in the spring or summer, with calves being born mainly around eleven months later between May and August (although some may be born in September or October). Calves measure between 1.2 and 1.6 metres at birth. Most aspects of the life history of this species are still unknown.

DIET White-beaked dolphins eat a variety of prey, such as cod, whiting, hake, haddock, mackerel, and herring, various species of sandeels, gobies, flatfishes, and scaldfishes;



cephalopods such as the octopus, and sometimes crustaceans. Analyses of stomach contents from various parts of the North Sea and from Newfoundland have revealed cod, whiting, and hake as predominant prey. In the Hebrides, white-beaked dolphins are often seen associated with mackerel shoals. They have been observed herding fish using co-operative techniques, communicating with each other using whistles, tail slaps, and somersaults.

THREATS In the past, the species was hunted in northern European waters, but nowadays only a few are taken, on an opportunistic basis, by coastal communities in the Faroes, Iceland and west Greenland. Some white-beaked dolphins are caught in purse seine and trawl nets in areas such as the North Sea and off western Ireland, but the numbers accidentally captured are not known.



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.
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Reid, J., Evans, P.G.H. and Northridge, S.P. 2003. *Cetacean Distribution Atlas*. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough. 68pp.

