

GREAT BRITAIN

An outstanding place to go whale and dolphin watching

Introduction

The opportunities for watching whales and dolphins in Great Britain are as exciting as they are varied. This is not surprising when you consider that our islands consist of 9,040 miles of coastline overlooking the North Sea, English Channel, Irish Sea, Celtic Sea and westwards to the open Atlantic. Our sailing traditions give away Britain's impressive maritime location, being superbly situated at the western edge of the European continent and completely surrounded by water. Despite this, it is often assumed that whales and dolphins only exist far from our shores, in clear tropical waters or at the edge of the polar ice.

Nothing could be further from the truth. British waters play host to a plethora of whale, dolphin and porpoise species. Some, such as the Northern Minke Whale, Harbour Porpoise and Common Bottlenose Dolphin, are easily viewed from land or dedicated whale watching boats. Others, including the Long-finned Pilot Whale, White-beaked Dolphin and Killer Whale are present in certain locations at specific times. Finally, there are those species, such as the Humpback Whale, Fin Whale and Sperm Whale, that are capable of turning up almost anywhere, yet they are all only rarely sighted.

The really exciting thing about whale and dolphin watching in Britain is that in order to see all of the species above and more, you have to make the most of the many different opportunities that exist throughout our Isles for watching cetaceans. The most obvious of these is to take a trip with one of the many dedicated whale watch operators listed in this book. These boats are travelling further and seeing more species every year. But there is another, more adventurous side to whale watching in Great Britain. This involves taking a ferry, yacht, or other boat and simply going exploring, or picking a remote headland, taking your binoculars and telescope, and just waiting to see what happens. Whilst this might seem like a bit of a random thing to do, the truth is that we still have much to learn about the lives of cetaceans on our doorstep. Whilst you may see nothing as a result of your adventures, you may also have an encounter with a rare species or witness a behaviour that few people have ever seen in the wild before.



Dolphin on the bow © Charlie Phillips

Beyond the surf

So why are the waters around Great Britain of such importance for cetaceans? The answer is that our seas offer a whole range of different oceanic conditions that provide distinct habitats for different species and populations. One of the most important factors is depth. Great Britain sits on the European continental shelf surrounded by relatively shallow seas that are generally less than 200m deep. Shallow waters are important for several species of cetacean that feed on or near the bottom, such as Harbour Porpoise, Common Bottlenose Dolphin and White-beaked Dolphin.

To the west of Great Britain, where the continental shelf drops away to the ocean floor, the water depth increases dramatically, reaching several thousand metres below sea level in some places. These waters run particularly close to the west and north of Scotland, and support deep-diving squid hunting cetaceans such as the Sperm Whale, Northern Bottlenose Whale and Long-finned Pilot Whale. The proximity of deep water also influences the frequency with which large baleen whales enter British waters. They are believed to follow the edge of the continental shelf on their annual migrations between Arctic feeding grounds and warm-water breeding grounds. However, every year, small numbers of Fin, Sei and Humpback Whales pass close to our shores, having apparently taken a detour from their main migration routes.

Current knowledge

British waters are also influenced by a number of major water currents. Some bring cold or warm water close to shore. Others carry important nutrients, whilst still others are partially desalinated by the great rivers of the British Isles and mainland Europe. One current that is so significant that it affects the climate of Europe, is the Gulf Stream. Originating near the Bahamas in the Caribbean, it sweeps north-east at a speed that can exceed 125km per day! Passing to the west of Britain, it has a significant warming effect on our seas, raising their temperatures above normal for this

latitude, and providing suitable conditions for Risso's Dolphin, Short-beaked Common Dolphin and Common Bottlenose Dolphin, all of which prefer warm temperate waters. Indeed, Scotland's Moray Firth is home to the world's most northerly resident population of Bottlenose Dolphins.

Although we love to complain about it, the changeable nature of the British weather is actually an asset for our cetaceans! The gales that frequently whip up our seas during the winter months play an important role in mixing up water layers and dispersing nutrients. During the long summer days, planktonic organisms gather near the sea surface and convert these nutrients during photosynthesis. These phytoplankton form the basis of a marine food chain that ends with whales, dolphins and seabirds. So the combination of turbulent winter seas and long, calm, summer days provides for a productive marine ecosystem and an abundance of prey for whales and dolphins.

Getting back to nature

There are numerous factors that attract whales, dolphins, and porpoises to the seas around Britain. In turn, we have become so captivated by their grace, intelligence, and, in some cases, sheer size, that we are heading to the coast and out on the water in increasing numbers just to catch a glimpse of these magnificent mammals. In so doing, we remind ourselves of the importance and fragility of Britain's sea life, and the responsibility we all share if we are to preserve it for the future.



Why Great Britain?