

Best of British

The British Isles offer plenty of opportunity to watch an impressive range of cetacean species. What's more, you don't even have to set foot in a boat to see them, as CAROLINE WEIR explains.

At least 27 species of cetacean have been recorded in the waters surrounding Britain and Ireland. Several of these species are resident and seen all year round, while others are seasonal visitors or occur only rarely. While it is true that detecting and identifying cetaceans can be difficult, it can be surprisingly easy to watch some species in areas that they occur with some predictability.

Most cetacean species are best seen between May and October, when seas tend to be calmer and more conducive to observation. This is also when many species calve and follow prey into coastal waters.

Scotland

The Scottish coast provides some of the best cetacean-watching in Britain. In particular, the waters around Shetland and Orkney and those along the west coast and Outer Hebrides provide a rich diversity of species.

Shetland has become well known for annual sightings of humpback whales, one to three having been seen annually in early summer since 1992, often close to land. The best vantage point for viewing humpbacks and most other cetaceans in Shetland is the car park at Sumburgh Head at the southern tip of the mainland. Other species such as harbour porpoise, white-beaked, Atlantic white-sided and Risso's dolphins, and minke and killer whales may be seen throughout the summer. Shetland remains a stronghold for the declining harbour porpoise, and gatherings of more than 100 can occur in good feeding areas such as Mousa Sound and around Noss and Whalsay. The ferry trip from Aberdeen to Lerwick can provide good cetacean-watching, while ferries from the Mainland to outlying islands such as Whalsay, Out Skerries, Foula and Fair Isle can also be productive.

Orkney holds a similar range of species to Shetland, although sightings tend to be less frequent. Orkney has produced regular sightings of sperm whales over the last decade, while it is likely that any headland on the islands could provide sightings of harbour porpoise and white-beaked dolphins in summer.

The west coast of Scotland provides many possibilities for cetacean-watching. Minke whales are a speciality of tour boats operating within the Inner Hebrides, leaving

from Tobermory on Mull and mainland harbours such as Mallaig and Oban. In the area between Mull and the south coast of Skye, minke whales can be almost guaranteed during the summer months. It is also possible to see minke's and other cetaceans from headlands along the west coast and in the Outer Hebrides. Ardnamurchan Point (mainland north of Mull), Neist Point (west coast of Skye), Rubha Reigh (mainland north of Gairloch), Cape Wrath, and Tiumphian Head and the Butt of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides are probably the best locations. Harbour porpoises can be seen throughout the region.

During early summer, particularly in June, common dolphins are regularly sighted from whale-watching boats in the Inner Hebrides. Further north, both white-beaked and Risso's dolphins are common in the waters of the northern Minches. A good way to view these species and also seabirds such as storm-petrels is on the daily ferry trips between Ullapool and Stornoway. Several pods of killer whale visit these waters annually, and it is also occasionally possible to see larger species such as fin and sperm whales which enter the Minches from deeper water further west. In August 1998, two northern bottlenose whales visited Broadford Bay off the Isle of Skye - this species has been recorded annually in the region over the last few years. A small group of bottlenose dolphins is seen regularly in Barra Sound in the Outer Hebrides, and the species seems to be on the increase in the waters around Coll, Tiree and Mull.

The east coast of Scotland is less spectacular for cetacean-watching but still produced regular sightings. The Moray Firth is home to a resident population of some 130 bottlenose dolphins, which range as far south as the Firth of Forth. Good places for seeing them include North Kessock, Chanonry Point, Cromarty, Fort George, Burghead, Spey Bay and Findochty, while several dolphin-watching boats operate in the region. The bottlenose dolphins are also seen regularly in Aberdeen harbour especially during the spring. Harbour porpoise and minke whale meanwhile, are most reliable in the Moray Firth. In summer, white-beaked dolphins are regularly sighted from the coast of Aberdeenshire.

England

The English coastline cannot compete with the bounty available in Scottish waters. The east coast produces small numbers of bottlenose and white-beaked dolphins and harbour porpoises. Minke whales can be seen occasionally during summer, and killer whales sometimes occur in late summer. North Sea oilrigs also report Atlantic white-sided dolphins and long-finned pilot whales, but these species rarely venture close to shore. It may be possible to spot them on ferries from Newcastle.

Cetaceans are primarily seen from prominent cliffs, headlands and islands such as the Farnes, Scarborough, Flamborough Head and Spurn Head. The southern North Sea and the eastern English Channel are generally poor for cetacean-watching, with only small numbers of harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphins reported. However, further west there is a small group of bottlenose dolphins off Dorset. The coasts of Devon and Cornwall are home to a group of some 40 bottlenose dolphins, but the animals roam widely and can be difficult to find: St Ives and Newquay during summer are the likely locations. Small numbers of harbour porpoise occur mostly along the north coast of England and can be seen from headlands such as Pentire Point, Hartland Point and Foreland Point. Killer, minke and fin whales and Risso's dolphins have been reported off Cornwall in recent years.

Commercial ferries from Plymouth, Penzance and Portsmouth, or specialised boat trips out to the Western Approaches of the English Channel or into the Celtic Sea can be a productive alternative to coastal watching. They may yield basking shark, minke whale, harbour porpoise and striped dolphin in summer, and large numbers of common dolphin in winter.

Wales

Cetacean-watching in Wales is mostly centred on a resident population of bottlenose dolphins which range throughout Cardigan Bay. Boats operate out of New Quay and Aberporth to see them and harbour porpoises, and they may be spotted anywhere along the coast, particularly between Cardigan and Aberporth. Waters around islands such as Bardsey, Ramsey, Skomer and Skokholm are home to harbour porpoises and may also produce sightings of Risso's dolphin and minke whales. Slightly farther offshore, pelagic common dolphins can be found in the Irish Sea. The best way to see them is to take one of the ferries from Fishguard or Pembroke to Rosslare. These ferries have also produced fin whales and striped dolphins in recent years.

Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland

The waters off south-west Ireland are among the best in Europe for cetacean-watching, and a wide diversity of species has been recorded. The Head of Kinsale, Galley Head, Mizen Head and Dursey Head are all excellent, but Cape Clear Island remains the best site along the south coast. Species recorded in the region include harbour porpoise, common, bottlenose, white-beaked, Atlantic white-sided and Risso's dolphins, and pilot, killer, minke, northern bottlenose, Cuvier's beaked, fin, sei and humpback whales. It is possible that pelagic trips along this coast would also encounter striped dolphins. The proximity of south-west Ireland to the continental shelf break is probably a factor in the high proportion of pelagic species recorded. Elsewhere, the west coast of Ireland is home to a resident population of bottlenose dolphins in the Shannon estuary, where it is possible to take boat trips out to see them, and also a single, friendly bottlenose dolphin that has now lived in Dingle Bay for over 14 years. The remainder of the Northern Ireland coast and the east coast of Ireland is home to harbour porpoises and bottlenose, white-beaked and Risso's dolphins, as well as minke and killer whales.

Sea-watchers across Britain and Ireland are asked to report cetacean sightings to the Sea Watch Foundation, which has monitored cetaceans since 1972. Please note as much information as possible, including date, time, location, species (if known) and number of animals. For copies of recording forms or to submit sightings, contact Sea Watch Foundation, 11 Jersey Road, Oxford, OX4 4RT.

