

## Northern Bottlenose Whales, Isle of Skye

### C. Weir

When a call came through on the morning of 20<sup>th</sup> August that two bottlenose whales had been sighted in Broadford Bay on the Isle of Skye, Ian Phillips, Harry Scott and I set off immediately to try and find them. Northern bottlenose whales are usually associated with cold, deep waters of the North Atlantic, mostly seaward of the continental shelf edge, and this was therefore a rare opportunity to see them at close range.

On arrival at Broadford Bay, the two animals were immediately visible only a few hundred metres from the jetty, resting motionless at the surface like logs. As we watched, they disappeared under the water and reappeared (with slightly forward-projecting blows of over a metre in height) several minutes later. The blowhole of bottlenose whales is located in an indented area behind the forehead which is clearly visible as the animal surfaces, along with the triangular dorsal fin situated two-thirds of the way along the back. Although bottlenose whales are capable of diving for up to two hours, these animals seldom remained below the surface for more than eight minutes.



**Plate 1.** Northern bottlenose whale breaching in Broadford Bay, August 1998 (C. Weir).

Bottlenose whales have a reputation for showing curiosity around boats, a characteristic that led to their easy exploitation by North Atlantic whalers. In Broadford Bay the whales often surfaced

close to the stern of stationary vessels and raised their heads from the water for a better view. During such encounters we were able to see the bulbous forehead and dolphin-like beak that gives this species its name. Their level of activity often increased in the presence of boats with continuous rolling and blowing, and long periods of tail-slapping. This behaviour was often followed by periods of breaching, where both animals leapt clear of the water in a succession of up to 20 breaches.

Although the whales frequently engaged in spectacular behaviours such as breaching, much of their time was spent in social interactions with each other. The animals would hang vertically in the water touching each other with their heads and beaks, and roll on their backs to expose the belly and flippers. These behaviours gave rise to several questions concerning their age and sex. Although one of the whales appeared both slightly smaller and lighter in colour than the other, it was not small enough to be considered a juvenile. Both animals were estimated to be just under six metres (18 feet) in length, which would suggest that they were either mature females or immature males. Adult male bottlenose whales reach just under ten metres (32 feet) in length, can weigh up to seven and a half tonnes and have a very steep and often pale forehead, resulting in a squarish profile.

The whales left Broadford Bay on the 9<sup>th</sup> September, after a stay of over a month. It is possible that there was not enough food in the bay to sustain them as they feed primarily on deep-water squid, with some fish and invertebrates. Only ten sightings of bottlenose whales have been made since 1979 during seabird and cetacean surveys carried out by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) to the north and west of Scotland, all occurring in deep offshore waters. The Broadford

Bay sighting and a sighting of two northern bottlenose whales in Loch Eishort on the west coast of Skye during 1997, therefore offer a rare and welcome insight into the life of this normally uncommon and inaccessible species.

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**Plate 2.** Northern bottlenose whale, August 1998 (C. Weir).