



# Splash!

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## The Official Newsletter for the Biscay Dolphin Research Programme Supporters Group

Issue number 1, August 2003

*Dear Friends,*

*Welcome to the first ever edition of Splash!  
- the only newsletter for friends and  
supporters of the Biscay Dolphin Research  
Programme.*

You may remember me as the Wildlife Officer aboard the Pride of Bilbao and you will definitely have attended one of my talks about the amazing world of Cetaceans.

This news letter is issued free of charge and we hope you will enjoy the contents. There is however a donations sections and although you no doubt gave generously whilst on board the ship you will be aware that we need to expand our work into the Research of these superb sea mammals. Our education role is also of primary importance and these two subjects feed into the Conservation of cetaceans. So thank you in advance if you can once again give generously. If you unable to afford a further donation then not to worry and we hope you will enjoy this Newsletter.

This newsletter has only been made possible thanks to the effort of the BDRP team who are all volunteers with a passion and commitment to the conservation of whales, dolphins, seabirds and other marine life.

In this issue we will be bringing you up to date with the whales, dolphins and other marine life encountered in the Bay of Biscay in recent months. You will also be able to find out more about our monthly surveys, the techniques used and the results of those surveys. There is also a special Creature Feature where we share with you our knowledge of the beautiful and distinctive Common Dolphin.

I would like to Introduce you to **Duncan Fyfe** who has been a Researcher with BDRP for some while and who has given up his time to produce this Newsletter.

On behalf of all the volunteers of BDRP I hope that you will enjoy this...the first edition of Splash and we hope you will continue with your support of the work we carry out.

**Clive Martin**

Director  
Wildlife Liason Officer  
Biscay Dolphin Research Programme

### News from the Bay

#### March and April 2003

Throughout March significant numbers of Common Dolphins were seen on the Celtic-Biscay shelf edge. It is thought that these animals are not present in this area during the winter months which tend to be unproductive in terms of planktonic growth - a basic requirement of the food chain. It would seem these sightings were of animals returning early from their wintering grounds further north in the Irish Sea, Western Approaches and Western English Channel. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April a group of 300plus were seen on the south side of the Brittany peninsula. Tragically however, some were seen in close association with pair trawlers working the area and were seen entering the nets. You can find out more about Common Dolphins in the Bay in our Creature Feature below.



#### **Common Dolphin**

BDRP surveys have discovered large populations of this beautiful animal in the English Channel and the Bay of Biscay. Sadly they are threatened by accidental capture in fishing nets (bycatch)

Striped Dolphin were observed over the abyssal plain in the northern part of the Bay with sightings of between 6 and 150 animals recorded. Pilot whales also made a re-appearance during the later part of March and

April and were recorded with increasing frequency. Risso's dolphin, Curviers beaked and fin whales were also encountered. Sightings highlights in terms of rarity included a probable false killer whale in the Southern Bay.

#### **False Killer Whale**

Fairly large groups of this small cetacean have been seen in April/May in previous years, although they are always scarce animals.



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March also saw the three Directors of BDRP, Tom Bereton, Andy Williams and Clive Martin attend the European Cetacean Society Conference in Gran Canaria. They not only presented 2 posters but were also heavily involved with organising workshops on "Cetacean Research in the Bay of Biscay" and "Using Ships to Carry Out Research and Monitoring". The conference was well attended so was a good opportunity for networking and the sharing not only of ideas but important scientific information.

#### **May**

May was a busy period for sightings, helped by great conditions - i.e calm seas and good light. Sperm whales were active and striped dolphins also encountered in greater numbers. Bird highlights included a Honey Buzzard that stayed with the ship for some 20 miles whilst crossing the Southern Bay.

The May Survey Team had an exciting trip and logged 8 species and 490 animals including Sperm Whales, Fin Whale, Striped and Common Dolphins. Highlights included excellent views of 4 Northern Bottlenosed whale moving down the port side of the boat at sunset during the northbound leg of the survey. The most intriguing observation recorded by the Survey Team was a group of 4 small cetaceans observed that same evening. They showed features of group of small whales known as 'Black Fish' (the Pilot Whale being the most common black fish encountered) because of their black appearance. These animals were indeed very black with no contrast in colour seen on the body and were about the size of a Striped Dolphin. The animals didn't break the surface

during the observation highlighting just how frustrating and difficult it can be to identify cetaceans at the best of times.

#### **June**

As Senior Wildlife Officer Clive Martin reported some very interesting sightings which included possible Rough Toothed Dolphins and Pygmy Killer Whale. There were also encounters with False Killer Whales including one encounter in close association with a huge aggregation of Striped Dolphin. It is probable the striped dolphins were coming together to seek protection whilst calving when they are most vulnerable to predation by other cetaceans such as killer whales and false killer whales. Sightings of Northern Bottlenosed Whale and fin whales were also good. However, the latter part of June was a little quiet from a sighting point of view but the BDRP lectures on board the Pride of Bilbao were very well attended. The June Survey Team also had an exciting trip. A sunfish was seen drifting past in the early morning of the southbound leg and a possible blue shark drifted under the beam. The team had an enlightening time after dark when they searched around the ships lights on deck for insects. Hummingbird moth, silver and vestar butterflies were amongst the finds.

#### **July**

July began with the remarkable sighting of a beaked whale in the English Channel in French water. Whilst these animals are encountered frequently in the Bay of Biscay they are rarely further north and this represents the first sighting of a beaked whale in the English Channel for quite some time. This animal was later identified as a Northern Bottlenosed Whale. Sperm and Fin Whales continued to show well and pygmy killer and false killer were also seen. Clive Martin had a busy time as senior wildlife officer with numerous cetacean encounters at the beginning of the month. However, the July Survey team had a quiet time until they observed a group of 200 Common Dolphins in the Western Approaches on the last day.

#### **Little Shearwater.**

The highlight of the July Survey.



Copyright: Paul Gale

**The Importance of BDRP surveys - Effort Based Data on Board the Pride of Bilbao.**



BDRP is one of the few organisations in the world to carry out year-round monitoring of offshore whales and dolphins using scientific methods. Each month, whale and dolphin recording is carried out from the bridge of the Pride of Bilbao, using a team of three expert surveyors. In addition to recording detailed information each time a whale or dolphin is spotted (such as species identity, age and number of individuals etc), BDRP surveyors record other scientific information at fixed times. Information on the geographical position of the ship and environmental conditions (such as sea state and weather) are logged at regular intervals even if whales and dolphins have not been seen (so called 'effort-related data'). By recording this effort data, we can relate the number of whales and dolphins we see, to the time spent looking for them in suitable conditions. This scientific approach is very important, because it means we can have confidence that our findings on where cetaceans live are truly representative. BDRP has gained an international reputation for the high quality of its scientifically collected data. Amongst many new discoveries, BDRP data has highlighted the importance of the English Channel as a key wintering ground for Common Dolphin and the deep water canyons north of Bilbao as one of the easiest places in the world to see rare and mysterious beaked whales.

**Results of the May and July Surveys**

Surveys are conducted whilst on a return trip from Portsmouth to Bilbao - the same length of time as you would have on a mini-cruise.

**MAY Cetaceans Recorded:**

Sperm Whale -	6
Northern Bottled-Nosed Whale -	4
Cuvier's Beaked Whale -	1
Fin Whale -	2
Long-finned Pilot Whale -	4
Common Dolphin -	195
Striped Dolphin -	240
Bottle-nosed Dolphin -	25
Risso's Dolphin (pos.) -	1
Dolphin Spp. -	7
Cetacean Spp. -	5

**Birds Recorded:**

Gannet -	282
Cormorant -	2
Northern fulmar -	109
Manx shearwater -	8
Little egret -	1
Ringed plover -	1
Dunlin -	3
Whimbrel -	2
Great skua -	2
Lesser Black backed gull -	228
Great black backed gull -	24
Yellow-legged gull -	1
Kittiwake -	4
Arctic tern -	5
'Comic' tern -	2
Collared dove -	4
Barn swallow -	7
House martin -	1

**Research Team:** James Phillips, Duncan Fyfe, Lisa Groth

**JULY Cetaceans Recorded:**

Cuvier's Beaked Whale -	3
Fin Whale -	19
Minke whale -	1
Common Dolphin -	226
Striped Dolphin -	96
Bottle-nosed Dolphin -	33

**Birds Recorded:**

Gannet -	395
Northern fulmar -	94
Manx shearwater -	4
Cory's shearwater -	6
Sooty shearwater -	1
Little shearwater -	3
European storm petrel -	1
Small petrel spp. -	1
Common scoter -	8
Turnstone -	3
Whimbrel -	19
Small wader spp. -	2
Great skua -	4
Pomarine skua -	1
Lesser Black backed gull -	127
Great black backed gull -	4
Yellow-legged gull -	2
Herring gull -	25
Kittiwake -	6
Arctic tern -	2
Common tern -	3

**Plus:**

Sunfish -	1
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Research Team:  
James Phillips, Nigel Symes, Duncan Fyfe

# Creature Feature

*The BDRP is in the unique position of being able to study cetaceans for almost 12 months of the year and as result our understanding of these amazing creatures is forever evolving. The scientific world know so little about cetaceans that the BDRP is only too pleased to be able to contribute to that knowledge base and in doing so help with their conservation. We would like to share some of that knowledge with you through our Creature Features over forthcoming issues.*

## **Common dolphin *Delphinus delphis***



Copyright: Biscay Dolphin Research Programme

The most often encountered species in the Bay of Biscay. The characteristic 'hourglass pattern' means that once a good view is available the identification should be quite simple. Generally the species is between 1.7-2.6m with the larger adults not normally larger than 2.4m. A highly gregarious and conspicuous species, frequently encountered in large groups of over 100 but it is thought that the fundamental social group consists of around 30 individuals. Found throughout the world in warm and temperate waters although not frequent in the Mediterranean except around the straits of Gibraltar where they are sentries to the Atlantic. Common dolphins are commonly seen offshore around the British Isles and are the most frequently encountered species on the ferry routes through the Bay of Biscay. During the winter common dolphins are found in the western approaches and around the Brest peninsular in large numbers. For this reason that they are thought to have suffered repeated human impacts from pair-trawlers, as well as from the Erica oil-spill. For those travelling aboard the Biscay ferry crossings can expect to see common dolphins all year round.

Group sizes in the north east Atlantic are generally less than 100 in number. This increases dramatically after calving in May and June when the groups gather together to protect the young. In July and August groups of 2,500 animals may be encountered.



This is an acrobatic and highly active species. Common dolphins may be encountered in large groups that are broken up into smaller sub groups. If a large group is encountered they may seem to be all around the ship for some time. This species is a frequent visitor to the bow of boats and ships alike and may spend several hours with boats that are travelling slowly. Aboard the Biscay ferries and other large ships this species appear to make a mad dash for the bow of the ship, this can afford observers excellent views of this magnificent, and beautifully coloured species and their young.

Common dolphins are similar in size to striped dolphins and morphologically highly similar, both having long well defined beaks, a falcate dorsal fin and pointed pectoral fins.

Without doubt the most distinctive feature of this species is the 'hourglass' pattern. This colour pattern varies within groups and within regions. It is marked with the sharp 'V' in the dorsal colouration just below the dorsal fin. On the flanks of the animals and from the dorsal 'V' to beyond the eye is a coloured area.

This pigmentation can range from an ochre through to a greyish green colour. The area of flank leading back to the tail fluke is a lighter grey or 'washed' shade of black. Like striped dolphins common dolphins have a facial band. This extends from the beak to the front and top of the pectoral fin. There are thought to be two forms of this species, the long and short beaked. The main and most obvious difference is that the beak is long and slender in the long beaked form and short and wider in the short beaked. The short beaked form also tends to have a thinner stripe from the tip of the beak to the pectoral fin.

### Confused?

The main species that common dolphins get confused with is striped dolphin. However depending on where you are other species can also give rise to confusion such as Atlantic white-sided dolphins and some of the other *Stenella* species but the 'V' shape of the cape and yellowish colour on the front of the flank should resolve any confusion. A confusion area on the flanks of striped dolphins is much higher and distinct and this should help to resolve confusion.

These beautiful and graceful animals are a real treat to watch.

## BDRP Merchandise:

A range of BDRP merchandise such as mouse mats and framed photographs will soon be available by mail order. Proceeds from the sale of such items will again go straight towards the work of the BDRP. Details will appear in the next issue of Splash.

# STOP PRESS!

### WHALE AND DOLPHIN SPECIALS:

#### September Whale and Dolphin Themed Mini Cruises on the Pride of Bilbao

BDRP and P&O are pleased to announce that we are running 2 whale and dolphin specials in September of this year. These are special themed cruises where BDRP volunteers and staff will be onboard to help you spot and identify the whales, dolphins and other marine life of the Bay of Biscay. Departure dates for each respective cruise are **27<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> September**. The Theme Cruise is currently being offered at a special price of £98 !!! They are expected to cost £119pp inclusive of en suite cabin. Each trip WE HOPE will include (weather permitting/Captains permission) a visit to the Bridge where the BDRP surveys are conducted, as well as Monkey Island, the highest point of the ship.

You can book via 08705 202020 quoting "Whale and Dolphin Special".

### In the Next Issue:

- News from the Bay
- Results of the Aug/Sep/Oct surveys.
- Who's who of the BDRP
- What you can do to help.

*Due: October/November 2003*

*Kind regards and thanks for your support*

**Duncan Fyfe**  
*BDRP Supporters Group Officer.*

With Thanks to our Splash contributors: Andy Williams, Clive Martin, Tom Bereton, James Phillips

Dear Supporter,

I thought I would use this space to briefly introduce myself and reiterate my thanks to you for Supporting the BDRP.

My interest in wildlife has been there since childhood and numerous trips to Africa have only served to reinforce that interest. I have been a teacher, published research on wildlife tourism and environmental education and now work for the Environment Agency making sure nothing nasty gets into our rivers to end up in the marine environment. More recently I worked at Marwell Zoological Park where I first established contact with the BDRP.

As a researcher it gives me great pleasure to know that by taking part in BDRP surveys I am also contributing the conservation of the marine environment (and cetaceans in particular) through increased understanding of these beautiful creatures. I hope that by sharing some of that knowledge with you through this newsletter you can share in that joy and in doing so act as ambassadors for our whales and dolphins.

Kind regards  
**Duncan Fyfe**

### To receive further copies of Splash!

If you would like to receive further copies of SPLASH! - emailed to our supporters free of charge - then please email Duncan at the following address

[Duncan@fyfe2003.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:Duncan@fyfe2003.fsnet.co.uk)

The BDRP will hold your details in confidence and they will not be passed onto any third party.

## HOW TO MAKE A DONATION

The BDRP is a non-profit making organisation run entirely by volunteers and funded largely by donations from the public. If you would like to make a further donation then please send a cheque or postal orders made payable to:

"BDRP"  
6 Manor Way,  
Lee on Solent,  
Hampshire. PO13 9JH

All proceeds will go straight to the BDRP to enable us to continue our work conserving the whales and dolphins of the Bay of Biscay scientific investigation and educational activities.

**Once again we THANK YOU for your support.**