

# Dolphin Watch Newsletter

Ceredigion Coast and Countryside News

Spring/Summer 2004



Welcome to the second edition of Dolphin Watch news. Exciting developments are taking place this year as Friends of Cardigan Bay and the Cardigan Bay Marine Wildlife Centre who will be setting up two new monitoring sites at Aberystwyth and New Quay harbour are joining us. Our recording forms have also been revamped so now more information than ever can be gained from our watches on those cliff tops. Last year our volunteers saw bottlenose dolphins, harbour porpoise, sunfish and even a Minke Whale – all here in Cardigan Bay!

## One volunteer's tale .....

Can you spare a few hours to watch dolphins this summer, read the poster. Well I thought, that sounds like a pleasant way to spend a couple of hours little realising the pleasure and excitement that was in store. So on a windy afternoon on an exposed hillside I was shown how to distinguish a Bottlenose Dolphin from a Harbour Porpoise, which at distances of up to a mile is not always easy. Once I spotted a group of three dolphins about 400 yards out to sea. The group had obviously detected their next meal of mackerel and were putting on the most wonderful demonstration of fishing. The seas was so clear that not only could I marvel at the aerial acrobatics involved with pursuing their prey, but the manoeuvring, twisting and turning beneath the waves was also visible. It's when one is involved in this type of experience that you realise what grace and elegance these creatures possess. John Page

Dolphin Watch is an annual summer survey of the Bay's bottlenose dolphin population and recreational boating traffic. Now in its' 11<sup>th</sup> year, the survey involves local volunteers in 2 hour watches from 6 land-based sites. So if you have a spare 2 hours to give on a regular basis between June and September and would like to get involved this year, please get in touch. Don't worry if you have no experience as training and support is provided.

### Did you know?

- Observer effort during the first 10 years of this study now exceeds 6,200 hours
- The average number of bottlenose dolphins in sight at any one time is 3.5, although larger groups of up to 26 animals have been recorded at the study sites from time to time
- Dolphins are seen with the greatest frequency at Mwnt where dolphins have been present in over 60 % of watches since the first field season there in 1998



- Sighting rates at New Quay Head however, have been lower in recent summers than in the mid-1990s. We don't know whether this reflects changes in the local abundance of the dolphins' prey. We do know from our systematic boat counts, that the decline has not coincided with increasing levels of boat traffic

- Most dolphin behaviour recorded during encounters with boats

describes dolphins remaining at the same location (42 % and 45 % of encounters with passenger trip boats and recreational motor boats respectively)

- 'Approaching' or 'bow-riding' is recorded more frequently in encounters with trip boats than recreational motor-boats (12 % and 6 % respectively) as is 'leaping'. 'Heading away' however, is recorded in 23 % of encounters with motor boats compared to 15 % of encounters with trip boats

### Want to know more?

Full information can be found in the following reports that are available free from the Coast & Countryside Section:

- *Site Use by Bottlenose Dolphins and Interaction with Boat Traffic on the Ceredigion Heritage Coast 2002 and 2003*
- *Cetacean Site Use and Boat Traffic on the Ceredigion Marine Heritage Coast, West Wales 2001*
- *Cetacean Site Use and Boat Traffic at New Quay on the Ceredigion Marine Heritage Coast, West Wales 2000*
- *Cetacean Site Use and Boat Traffic on the Ceredigion Marine Heritage Coast West Wales 1994-1999*

"Watching a mother and calf underwater together really blew me away. The calf flipped over and its white tummy was clearly visible. My first time to see such an amazing sight and one that I would have missed had I not been attracted by your posters" **Andie Clay**.



## More about the animals ....

Bottlenose dolphins are highly social animals. A long-lived species, these animals may survive in the wild for 40-50 years or more. Despite their long lifespan, the reproductive rate of bottlenose dolphins is low. Females produce a single calf every 2-6 years, following a gestation period of about one year, and the pregnancy rate does not appear to decrease with age.



The current estimated population of bottlenose dolphins is 127 animals though a photo-id study in 2003 has suggested a larger population. They range around the whole of Cardigan Bay in varying group sizes.

Bottlenose dolphin and her calf © Janet Baxter

## How do I tell the difference between a bottlenose dolphin and a harbour porpoise?

Size, for one thing. Harbour porpoise are on average half the size of a bottlenose dolphin. Offshore populations of dolphins in cold British and Irish waters are amongst the largest examples of this species in the world, reaching lengths of 3-4.1m, whilst bottlenose dolphins inhabiting the warmer near shore waters are generally smaller at around 2-2.5m in length. The harbour porpoise dorsal fin is also much smaller, and more triangular, and the front of the head is more rounded than the bottlenose dolphin with its' distinctive "beak". Unlike the more sociable and gregarious bottlenose dolphin, the harbour porpoise is less likely to be seen leaping out of the water or bow-riding boats.



Harbour porpoise and her calf © Janet Baxter

We know from the recent findings of the Marine Environmental Monitoring work that all is not well between the two species. Post mortems on dead strandings of marine mammals around the Welsh coastline has shown that by far the biggest cause of death amongst harbour porpoise in Cardigan Bay is from bottlenose dolphin attack.

## 8 knot speed limit trials

Skippers of power craft at New Quay recently suggested a change to the outer-boundary limit of the 8 knot speed guidance that originally extended one nautical mile from New Quay head to Tresaith along the Marine Heritage Coast. For the last two years, the outer-boundary has been changed to 200 metres off shore from a point off New Quay head to a point off Ynys Lochtyn. 8 knot buoys have been placed at intervals along the 200 metre mark to assist with identification of the speed zone area.

All craft operating within this area are asked to adhere to this speed limit. The advice is also that outside this area vessels travel at a speed that skippers feel able to spot marine mammals at a distance. These inshore waters and headlands provide shelter and feeding opportunities for a variety of protected marine wildlife including grey seal, harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphins. The cliffs are also home to a variety of seabirds during the main breeding season from March to July. Noise from powered craft travelling at speed can cause disturbance both above water and under water to these protected creatures. Boats travelling at speed are also less likely to spot marine mammals in the area and are less likely therefore to be able to take avoidance measures.

### Code of Conduct

If dolphins/porpoise are encountered at sea:  
Maintain a steady speed and course or slow down gradually. Don't chase, manoeuvre erratically, turn towards or attempt to feed or touch them. Take extra care to avoid dolphins with their young and don't attempt to swim with them

## Recreation boating scheme

An application for an Objective One grant has been made to help fund the development of a recreation boating scheme in Ceredigion. The aim of the scheme essentially is to demonstrate that dolphins and boating can co-exist in the same waters with proper management in place. Many lessons have been learned from the experience of the last 10 years of Dolphin Watch, and the aim is to put these into practice along the whole of the County's 60 mile coastline.

In a nutshell, the scheme will employ a Water Ranger and project officer who will patrol the inshore waters to ensure compliance with the code of conduct and byelaws. They will provide additional information/educational materials on the code of conduct for distribution at all launch sites and at sea; through wide discussion with boating and diving clubs produce a Ceredigion wide recreation boating plan that will cater for the needs of recreational boat users and the bottlenose dolphin population; and develop further opportunities for marine wildlife tourism by promoting shore-based watching and an accreditation scheme for skippers. The scheme is scheduled to start this year, and the 2 new staff will be based in premises on New Quay harbour from 2005.

### Gwyneth Phillips

Sadly Gwyneth, who had been the local co-ordinator at the New Quay site since Dolphin Watch started 10 years ago, passed away at the end of last year. Gwyneth was one of the founder members of the Marine Heritage Coast and worked tirelessly for the conservation of the dolphins in the Bay for many years.

### This year's survey June 3<sup>rd</sup> – September 4<sup>th</sup>

Site co-ordinators

Aberystwyth – Janet Baxter (Friends of Cardigan Bay)

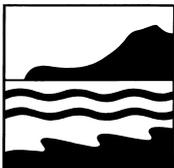
New Quay Birds Rock – Penny Sharp

New Quay Harbour – Fernando Ugarte and Helen Baxter (Cardigan Bay Marine Wildlife Centre)

Llangrannog – Roy Evans

Aberporth – Liz Allan (Coast & Countryside Section)

Mwnt – Michelle Dunne (West Wales Wildlife Trust)



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