

Common Dolphin

Delphinus delphis (Linnaeus, 1758) Order: Cetacea



The common dolphin varies considerably in appearance, however there are two recognised forms of this species: the short beaked and the long beaked. The long beaked is the most likely seen in our coastal waters, and are therefore described in this guide.

The common dolphin has a streamlined slender body shape usually ranging from 1.6-2.6m adult length with newborns measuring 0.8-0.85m. Common dolphins have a tan or yellowish-tan hour glass pattern on the lower flanks. Dorsal fins in this species are centrally placed, slender and sickle shaped. The forehead has a distinct dorsal groove along the slender beak. Sexual dimorphism in cetacean species is subtle and the common dolphin is no exception. Females have mammary slits either side of the genital slit on the underside of the body, these are absent in the males, however it is normally impossible to determine the sexes of animals in the water.

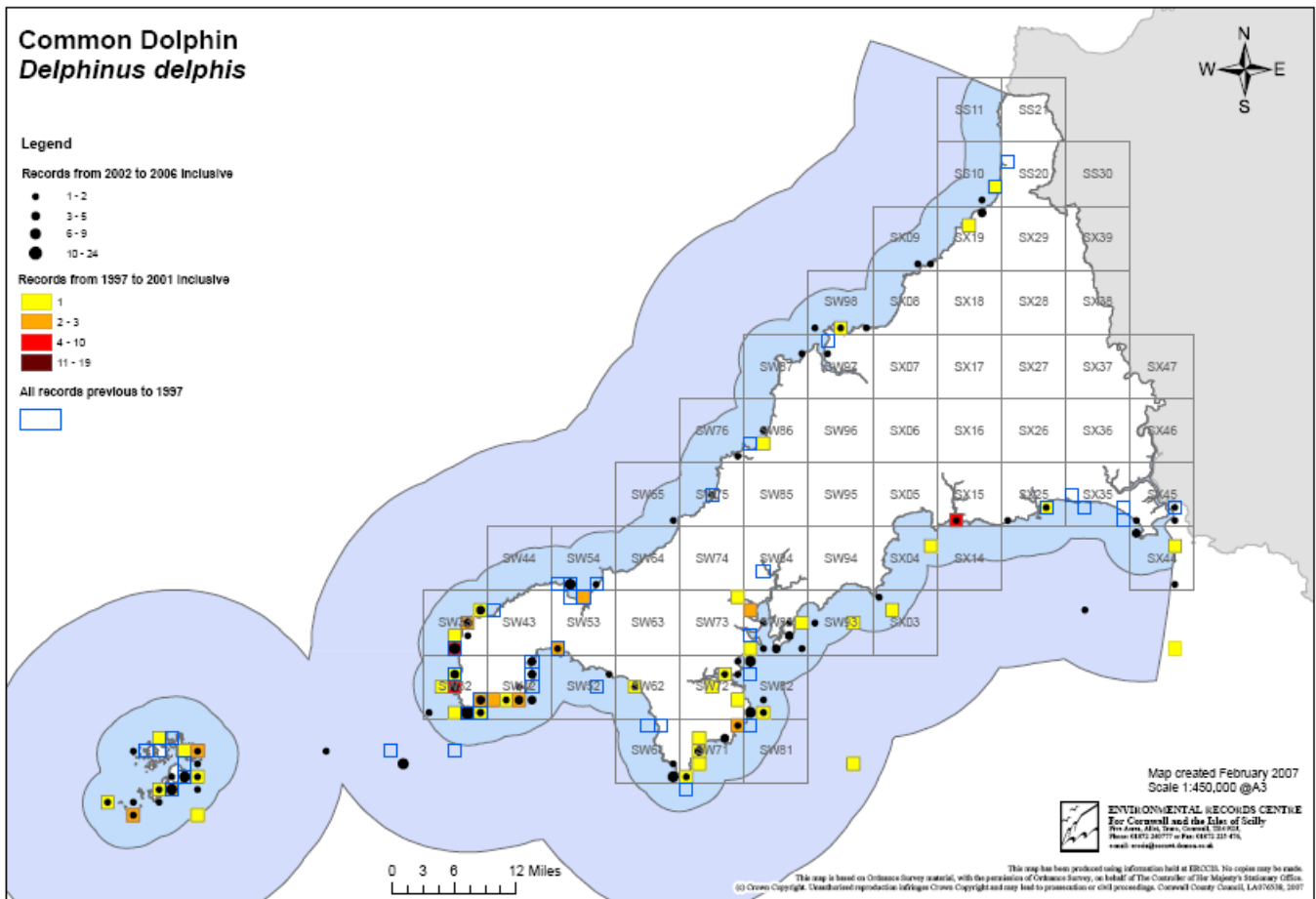
Common dolphin can be confused with striped and bottlenose dolphin, however the distinctive hourglass pattern on the flank distinguishes this species from others quite clearly when observed at close proximity.

Common dolphins are often found in very large groups, or mega pods, of thousands of animals, but in UK coastal waters most sightings of large groups are in the hundreds. Males and females school together but adolescent males often form their own pods. Little is known about cetacean reproduction but in common with other cetaceans the common dolphin typically produces a single young. Birth usually occurs in periods of high productivity in the food chain (April – September), to sustain the lactating mother, females usually lactate for 10 months. Mothers have been observed using their beaks to nudge their newborn calves to the surface for their first couple of breaths. Common dolphins live for up to 25yrs (estimated by sectioning teeth).

Common dolphins are distributed from oceanic to coastal waters, but always in full salinity waters and are rarely seen entering smaller estuaries.

Common dolphins feed on squid and fish and often display coordinated hunting activity schooling prey into 'bait balls'.

The only natural predator of common dolphins in UK waters is the orca. However, there is evidence to show deaths by attacks of bottlenose dolphins are becoming more prevalent, though the reasons for this are largely unknown. Human impacts include pollution, reduction in prey stock due to over fishing, entanglement in fishing nets (bycatch) and increased noise in the marine environment. In coastal waters bycatch is of major concern and several mitigation measures are being trialled throughout the country.



Sightings of Common Dolphins are concentrated around Lands End and the Lizard. There appear to be more sightings between 2002 and 2006 off Gribba Point, Lands End, Lizard Point, Manacle Point and Rosemullion Head than during the 1997-2001 period. Sightings of Common Dolphins further up the north coast were sparse. Common Dolphins tend to stay further offshore where they are often seen in large pods which can number up to several thousands, however as the sightings record indicates, they do also come inshore.

Number of records per date class
 2002 to 2006 inclusive 82
 1997 to 2001 inclusive 51
 All records previous to 1997 122
Total 255

UK BAP species
 Protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
 Annex A of EU Council Regulation 338/97 and therefore treated by the EU as if they are on CITES Appendix I thus prohibiting their commercial trade.
 The UK is a member of the ASCOBANS agreement

Common dolphins occur in warm temperate, subtropical, and tropical waters worldwide.

Survey Methods

incidental sightings records
 Surveys from vessels or land observation points.
 Acoustic monitoring to identify areas of high activity around the Cornish Coast.

Did you know?

Common dolphins may feed at depths of 260m for up to 8 minutes at a time.

Key references

Cawardine, M. (2000) Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises. Dorling Kindersley Handbooks
 Evans, P. G. H. (1987) The Natural History of Whales and Dolphins. Facts on File
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 American Cetacean Society www.acsonline.org/index.html