

## Minke whale

*Balaenoptera acutorostrata* (Lacepede, 1804) Order: Cetacea

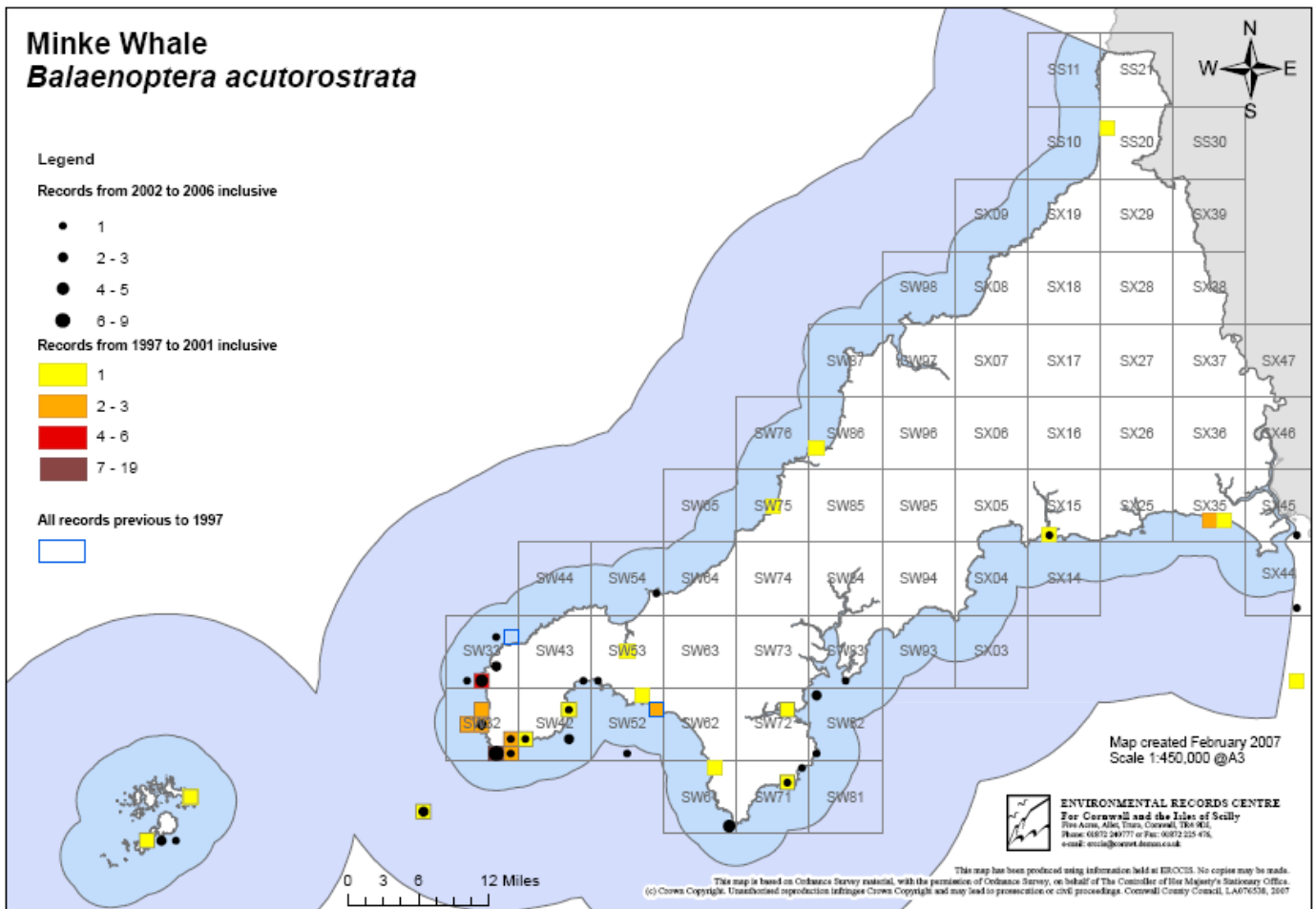
Minke whales are the smallest of the baleen whales, a group named after the plates of fine hairs that hang from the upper jaw and filter out food from the water. Fully grown they reach 10m (33ft), while newborns are 2.5m (8ft). They are streamlined creatures with a long, pointed head, short arched dorsal fin two thirds of the way down their back and have two short, pointed pectoral fins. Grey on top and white underneath, they are difficult to spot at sea, despite their size. They can be easily confused with other similar species such as sei, fin and Bryde's whales. The one distinct physical difference from these other whales is that the minke whale's pectoral fins each have a white band across them, and is a feature found only in the northern hemisphere population. At sea a minke whale can be spotted by the spray of moisture it makes when it exhales at the surface from its blowhole, which are two openings on the top of the head. This is usually low and bushy, so is difficult to detect over a long distance, but on calm days it can be heard. When diving, the snout breaks the surface first followed by a blow and then the back including the dorsal fin appear, after which the back arches and the dorsal fin rises as the entire animal sinks below the surfaces without showing the tail. They make loud low frequency vocalisations, which can be heard underwater over great distances, probably to communicate with each other.

Normally solitary, minke whales may also be seen in twos or threes. They are rarely seen in larger groups, but in rich feeding grounds as many as 400 can gather in the same area. They can live for approximately 50 years, with calves becoming mature adults between 3 to 8 years old. A female gives birth to a single calf every 2 years, following a gestation period of 10 – 11 months, while the calf will remain with the mother up to 6 months old until it is weaned. Minke whales are separated into three geographically separated subspecies: Northern (found throughout the northern hemisphere and as far as the southern tropics), Dwarf (found in the southern hemisphere outside the polar region) and Antarctic (found in only the polar and temperate areas of the southern hemisphere). All of these have migrate annually between warm breeding grounds and cold feeding grounds.

Minke whales are a deep water, open ocean species and are rarely seen close inshore unless deep water occurs close to the coast. In Cornwall they have been recorded relatively regularly from St Ives around Land's End and up to Fal Bay, and out to the Isles of Scilly.

Plankton, krill and small fish are the target prey of minke whales. They will either slowly skim the surface to filter water through their baleen plates or take a massive mouthful as they lunge out of the water, expanding the throat pleats to maximise the volume they can scoop up and then strain the water out again through the baleen to gather food.

Killer whales may gang up to separate a mother and calf, so that they can drown and prey upon the defenceless youngster. Otherwise, minke whales are too large to be prey to any other natural predators. Humans now pose their greatest threat through whaling, but entanglement in nets is a problem too. Although rare, ship strikes are also a danger. It is possible that sonar can deafen whales close to the source of the device emitting the noise, while vocalisations may be drowned out by the noise created too, making it difficult for individuals to keep in contact.



Between 1997 and 2001 isolated sightings of Minke Whales were reported from the north and south coasts of Cornwall. Gwennap Head and Gribba Point have been hotspots for sightings between 1997 and 2007. Between 2002 and 2006, sightings were also reported from Lizard Point, Falmouth Bay, Lamorna Point and Lands End. Minke Whales are more abundant in northern parts of the UK than the south but studies have identified a concentration of sightings in the Bay of Biscay.

The northern minke whale population is thought to be around 185,000 individuals in the Atlantic, with unknown numbers in other areas. The dwarf subspecies population is unknown, while the Antarctic subspecies is anywhere between 0.5 – 1.4 million.

#### Survey Methods

land-based surveying can be used for recording minke whales due to their greater abundance over other baleen-type whales

Boat based surveys from ships that cross areas of open ocean (e.g ferries) through programmes such as Organisation Cetacea (ORCA) and Marinelife.

#### Key references

Carwardine, M (1995) Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises. Dorling Kindersley Handbooks.

Walker, D & Wilson, A. (2007) Whales and Dolphins of Great Britain. Cetacea Publishing.

Reeves, R., Stewart, B., Clapham, P. & Powell, J. (2002) Sea Mammals of the World. A&C Black Publishers Ltd.

#### ***Number of records per date class***

*2002 to 2006 inclusive 27*

*1997 to 2001 inclusive 26*

*All records previous to 1997 2*

***Total 55***

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

#### Did you know?

The minke whale has been known as the pikehead, pike whale, little finner, sharp-headed finner, lesser finback and, in Cornwall, as the lesser rorqual.

Recent strandings of minke whales include a 9m animal at the Roseland in 2008 and a 7m whale near Padstow in 2007. A live stranded minke whale, 5m long, was successfully refloated from the Long Rock, Marazion, in 2003.