

## Risso's dolphin

*Grampus griseus* (Linnaeus, 1758) Order: Cetacea

Stranded Risso's dolphin showing the blunt nose of the species  
We hope a better picture will be available soon.



Risso's dolphin is amongst the larger of the dolphin species, adults growing up to 3.8m (12.5ft). They are mostly grey but are usually paler or white underneath which helps to conceal them from predators. As they get older, males in particular will gain an increasing number of scars from courtship battles with other males to achieve dominance within a group, giving them the right to mate with the females. The scars are made by their teeth as they 'rake' each other across the body during the fights, causing a series of long thin slices that, once healed over, are white. Older animals therefore can appear much lighter in colour, and this feature is of great help when identifying the species. Other notable features are the long sickle-shaped pectoral fins, with the dorsal fin also of a similar shape standing tall from its central position on the back. Risso's dolphins have a blunt head with no protruding beak, a crease runs from the blowhole on top of the head down to the upper lip. Inside the mouth there are only between 4 and 14 teeth, all of which are in the lower jaw. The upper jaw and palate are hard and flat, adapted for its main prey: squid. Risso's dolphins are generally active at the surface with breaching (jumping partially or entirely out of the water), lobtailing (throwing the tail above the surface) and spyhopping (lifting the head and upper body above the surface, sometimes held in position for several seconds) regularly recorded. They tend to shy away from boats and rarely come over to bowride, preferring instead to swim alongside nearby if they want to interact.

Not much is known about Risso's dolphins, though it is thought that they have a gestation period of 13-14 months and in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean there may be a peak in calving between December – June. Calves measure around 1.3m – 1.7m (4.2ft – 5.7ft) and can live for approximately 30+ years. They travel in groups, known as pods, usually with up to 30 members, but have also been known to travel in pairs or alone. Rare gatherings of hundreds of animals also reported. They are a social species, and in many locations have been seen interacting with other cetacean species including pilot whales and bottlenose dolphins.

Risso's dolphins are a deep-water species, preferring the offshore areas near the continental shelf, but are also sometimes seen close to the coast, particularly where land quickly gives way to deep water. It is not known whether this is part of a seasonal movement or migration, but may be linked to their food sources.

Squid is the primary prey item of Risso's dolphin, hence their preference for deep water. They will also take cuttlefish, octopus and fish, which may why they sometimes come inshore. Larger predators such as orca and sharks may prey on Risso's dolphins in some parts of the world, especially young or weak individuals that would be more vulnerable and less capable of escape. Otherwise it is humans that pose the greatest risk through pollution and overfishing, which can degrade their habitats and reduce the amount of prey available for them, and from being bycaught in fishing nets. Drive hunts in Japan and the Solomon Islands force entire pods into shallow water where they are killed and as a result there have probably been local declines in the area of this and several other cetacean species affected by these large-scale operations. Harpooning also takes places in Indonesia, the Lesser Antilles and Japan, further endangering this particular population.

## Distribution map

This species can be found in many areas of the world in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans, but are not found in the cold waters around the Arctic and Antarctic regions. Around Britain and Ireland they are mainly recorded from the Western coasts and in the Irish Sea around the Isle of Man. In Cornwall the best areas seem to be around the Land's End peninsula, although they remain a relatively rare sight for local seawatchers.

### Survey Methods

Both land and boat-based sea watching surveys have recorded Risso's dolphins in many locations worldwide. In the UK, Marinelife and Organisation Cetacea (ORCA) run surveys from ships of opportunity such as ferries, while land-based projects such as Sea Watch South West has also reported the species on occasion.

Not enough is known about Risso's dolphin to make an estimate of the global population, but on a smaller scale some populations are thought to number around 175,000 in the tropical East Pacific, 85,000 in the Western North Pacific and East China Sea, and about 30,000 each for the East and West coasts of the USA. In the UK they are protected against intentional harm and disturbance under the Countryside and Wildlife Act 1985.

### Did you know?

Did you know?: Risso's dolphin is also known as the grey dolphin, whitehead Grampus, grey Grampus and Grampus. Some of these are of course similar to the scientific name *Grampus griseus*, which could translate as 'large' or 'fat mottled fish'. Grampus is an old name that has been used in the past by the Cornish people to refer to Risso's dolphin. In April 2004 two Risso's dolphins were reported dead to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network – one at Trevone, near Padstow, and then at Trevaunance Cove, St Agnes, a week later. Both animals showed evidence of bycatch and may have been accidentally caught together in one incident. In more recent strandings history, a newborn Risso's dolphin found dead on the Isles of Scilly in August 2008 was taken for post mortem and found to be possibly the first recorded case of an attack on this species by bottlenose dolphins, as evidenced by the numerous rake marks across its body and associated internal injuries.

### Key references

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