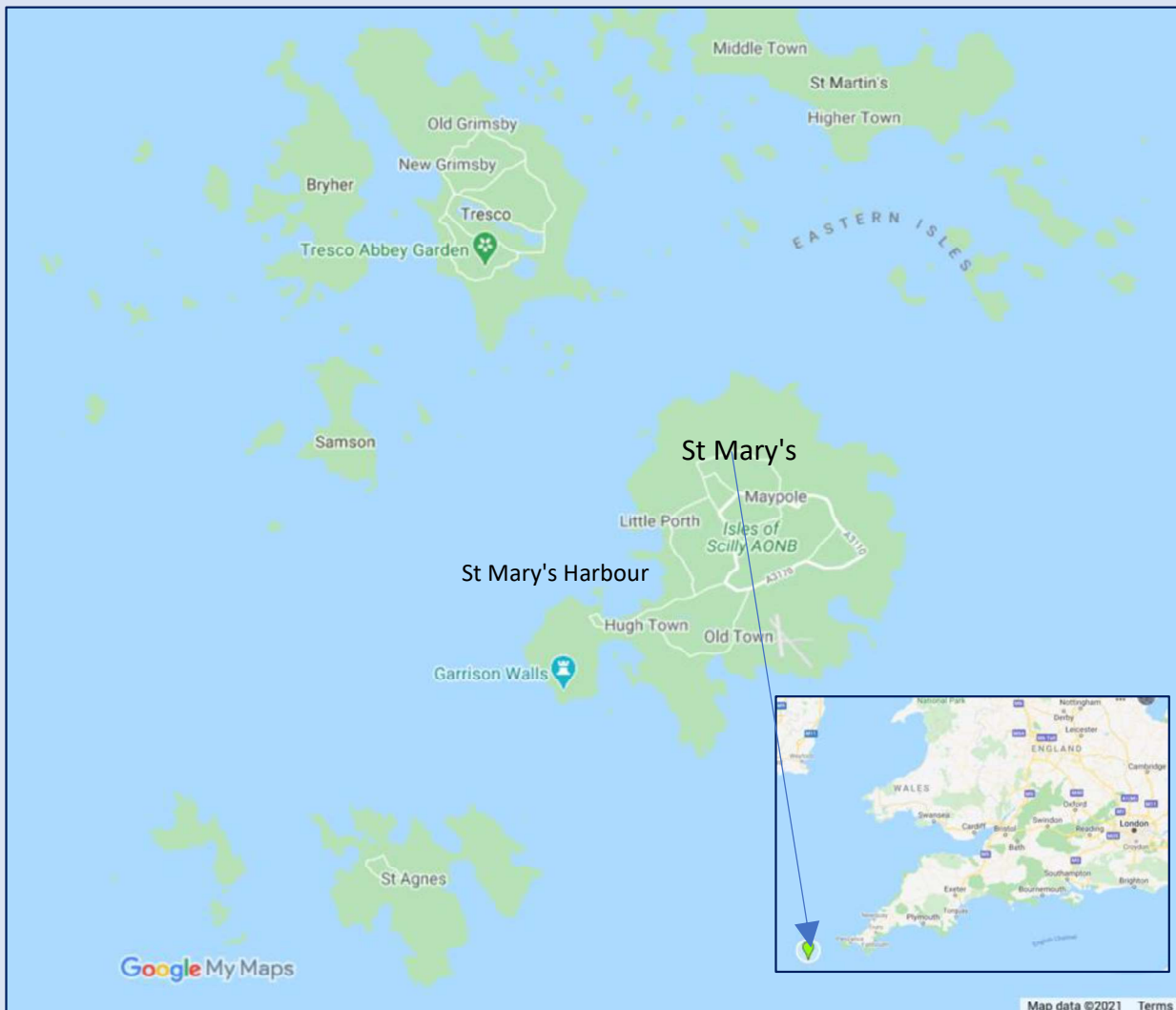


Sea Watch News -

News from around the region - cetaceans recorded off the Isles of Scilly since 2000

In this occasional feature, friends of Sea Watch, Robert L Flood and Joe Pender, report on cetaceans recorded off the Scilly Isles over the past two decades.

The Isles of Scilly lie 45 km off the southwest of the Cornish peninsula. The archipelago comprises five inhabited islands and in the region of 150 other islets and large rocks. The area that covers Scilly is about 16.4 km². The hub of the islands is St Mary's, home to about 1,800 of the 2,000 or so residents, the terminus of most travel to the mainland, and the location of the main harbour.



Since 2006, we have operated 'Scilly Pelagics' on MV *Sapphire* out of the harbour on St Mary's. 'Scilly Pelagics' (www.scillypelagics.com) is mainly run for seabirders, but we take great interest in all ocean creatures, including cetaceans, pinnipeds, turtles, Basking Sharks, and so on, and we participate in a shark tagging program.

The operation is seasonal, running May to October, with July and August the busy period.

Normally, trips head south six to eight miles, but occasionally visit Seven Stones Reef about 20 km to the northeast of St Mary's or Pol Bank about five km southwest of Bishop Rock Lighthouse.

The local ferry MV *Scillonian III* operates from April to October inclusive and there are often spotters aboard recording seabirds and cetaceans. In addition, birders and wildlife enthusiasts record sightings of cetaceans from shore throughout the year.

Cetacean sightings are usually printed in the annual *Isles of Scilly Bird and Natural History Review* published by the [Isles of Scilly Bird Group](#) (ISBG) and we now record cetacean sightings using the [Sea Watcher App](#).

The two common cetaceans off Scilly are the resident harbour porpoise, found in inter-island waters and inshore, and common dolphin, frequently encountered offshore but occasionally venturing into inshore waters. Additional dolphin species recorded annually are bottlenose and Risso's. The only regular whale species is minke, but sightings of fin and humpback appear to be on the increase, while long-finned pilot whale is scarce and irregular and orca is extremely rare. The first record of bowhead whale for Britain this century was photographed off the island of St Martin's and was identified as such by international experts. The following summarises records that reached the ISBG although we realise numerous other sightings are not submitted by observers.

Harbour Porpoise

Present year-round throughout the archipelago, generally in small groups of up to six, but on 3rd September 2011 over 30 were together off Round Island in the north of the archipelago.

Common Dolphin



Recorded in every month. A regular sight on our pelagic trips, frequently seen riding the bow wave of MV *Sapphire*. Numbers on any given day usually are modest, typically involving a few to 30 animals, often in several smaller groups including young animals. However, more loosely associated groups totalling 100 or more animals are observed each year and this has occurred in most months. We have enjoyed the sight of 'super pods' on numerous occasions. 'Super pods' include up to 500 on 16th April 2002 and over 200 in August and September 2013. In 2015, over 300 were offshore on 16th October, then over 800 were counted from land on 20th October, and around 200 were still present on 3rd November; a melanistic individual was among these animals.

Mid-April to early May 2020, many hundreds were present close to the islands, including a count of over 450.

Sadly, annual strandings of dead animals have occurred in January, February, March, April, May, July, August, and October.

Bottlenose Dolphin



Up to five records of singles and pods are recorded each year, mainly offshore, in March, May, June, July, August, September, and October. Occasionally a single animal 'hangs around' the islands, exploring the harbour and investigating local tripper boats. Pods typically involve less than ten animals, but there have been some impressive sightings including over 60 on 10th July 2003, over 30 on 20th October 2011, over 50 on 9th August 2013, and over 35 recorded numerous times in the first two weeks of August 2015.

Risso's Dolphin



Up to three records of singles and pods most years, recorded in March, May, June, July, August, September, and October. Pods typically involve less than ten animals, but larger numbers have been recorded, including 18 on 8th October 2001, up to 20 on 3rd May 2002, up to 15 on 27th May 2016, and around 20 on 24th May 2019.

Striped Dolphin

We are not aware of any live sightings since 2000. Stranded dead animals were found in February 2000 and in February and July 2001.

Humpback Whale



A rare sight in Scillonian waters with two breaching on 5th September 2002, one breaching on 30th August 2008, and one breaching on 11th August 2015. However, in 2020 a mother and calf were loafing offshore on 31st August, and sightings were regular from Christmas Eve 2020 into the new year, with four on New Year's Eve, and a young animal in inter-island waters throughout this period, still present at the end of February while writing this article.

Fin Whale



Rare and sporadic off Scilly in modern times, although the amount of annual sightings since 2015 (except 2016) is an encouraging and exciting development. Apart from one May record, all records have been in the autumn and winter months, August–January. Prior to 2015, animals were seen in October 2002, October 2009, three were recorded several times over the winter 2009/2010, and one animal on 9th January 2012. From 2015, animals were recorded on 18th September 2015,

on 6th/7th August 2017, and on 24th May 2019, with two on 2nd December 2019. Two to four animals were regularly recorded mid-December 2020 into January 2021.

Long-finned Pilot Whale

Rare in Scillonian waters. Dead individuals were washed up on 18th February 2001 and 10th July 2001. In 2012, singles were reported on 21st July and 17th October. A local fisherman took video of a pod of about a dozen animals on 30th August 2015.

Minke Whale



The most frequently seen whale in Scillonian waters. Sightings each year fall in the period May to October, although this small whale may avoid sighting from shore in the winter months. The number of sightings each year has increased from one or two 20 years ago to 10 to 15 in the last five years. Most sightings involve single animals, but increasingly multiples are seen. For example, there were three together in October 2015, five in August 2017, and eight in May 2019.

Orca

Undoubtedly a very rare visitor to Scillonian waters, with a male on 23rd June 2001, six animals on 6th May 2002, and four animals on 8th May 2002.

Bowhead Whale

Expect the unexpected! A vagrant was identified by Sea Watch and an international group of whale experts, from photos taken by local residents on 20th February 2015.

Northern Bottlenose Whale

What was almost certainly this species was seen on 18th July 2016.

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