

Cetaceans

of Norfolk



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Species descriptions by Carl Chapman Norfolk County Recorder for Pinnipeds and Cetaceans.

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Bibliography

For more information on Norfolk Cetaceans please see the forthcoming publication:

Norfolk Cetaceans

An identification guide and historical record of whales, dolphins and porpoise in the county

This will be available free to members or for purchase from the NNNS website www.nnns.org.uk later in 2023.

For up-to-date sightings please check <https://norfolkcetaceans.wordpress.com>

Introduction

As a naturalist and a wildlife tour leader, Carl Chapman has had the opportunity and good fortune to have studied cetaceans in many of the world's oceans.

In this latest addition to Norfolk & Norwich Naturalists' Society's portfolio of Species Guides, Carl has drawn on his extensive photographic library and his species knowledge and historical records, to present a description of all the species known (or suspected) to have occurred around the Norfolk coast.

Species have been "traffic lighted" according to the strength of the evidence using the categories shown below.

Key to status of Norfolk records

Pre-1920 or disputed records, or known only from skeletal remains

Irregular sightings at sea but most usually occurring as fatal strandings

Live individuals at sea off the Norfolk coast

North Atlantic Right Whale

Eubalaena glacialis

Almost as wide as it is long this species has an arched upper jaw. There is no dorsal fin or ridge. The colour is predominantly black with white callosities on the head and small white patches on the underbelly. The most distinctive feature is the 'V' shaped blow. This whale is a surface feeder 17 to 18m in length.

The species has two populations. The nearest is in the North Atlantic, wintering off the coast of Florida and summering North of the Bay of Fundy in Canada. Only a few hundred animals are now known to exist. It has never recovered from the extensive hunting which the species has endured throughout history.

Norfolk status

Known only from a single, old, debatable record from 1784



Minke Whale

Balaenoptera acutorostrata

The body is dark grey. When close enough the brilliant white bands on the pectoral flippers are diagnostic. There is a single median head ridge and the dorsal fin rises steeply from the back about two thirds along the length of the animal. This is the smallest of the rorquals at about 10m in length.

Widely distributed from the tropics to the Arctic Circle.

Norfolk status

Regular each year in small numbers off Norfolk, predominantly in Autumn.

The first recorded occurrence in the county was in 1829.



Sei Whale

Balaenoptera borealis

Sei Whales never raise their tail flukes and seldom breach. Their dorsal fin is usually the last part of the whale to be seen as it submerges. They usually perform shallow dives with the dorsal fin being seen for a long time. The dorsal fin is tall and often hooked at the apex. It has an arched rostrum and a single median head ridge. The blow is diffuse and up to 3m high. Animals can grow to 18m in length.

It occurs around the globe in temperate waters during Summer and in tropical areas in Winter.

Norfolk status

Known only from a single, disputed Norfolk record of a stranded individual at Holkham Gap in 1971.



A Scottish individual photographed in 2021

Fin Whale

Balaenoptera physalus

This is the second largest animal on the planet at up to 22m in length; exceeded only by the Blue Whale. It is asymmetrically coloured the right side being paler than the left. The dorsal fin which appears to rise gradually from the back of the animal is set well back and is less erect and more recumbent than other *Balaenoptera*. The tall 6m cone-shaped blow is often dissipated by the time the dorsal fin appears.

The species occurs in temperate and polar seas across the globe.

Norfolk status

Fin Whales must occur regularly on passage off Norfolk but are only occasionally recorded.

There have been about a dozen records since it was first reported in 1842.



Humpback Whale

Megaptera novaeangliae

A whale of up to 18m in length with a knobbly marked rostrum. The pectoral flippers are long and white and are often visible under the water. The dorsal fin is very variable but always sits atop a hump. When diving the tail flukes are often lifted high out of water. When preparing to dive it arches its back before showing the underside of the tail fluke, the white and black patterns of which can be used to identify individuals. The blow is busy at the top and highly visible but variable in height at 4 to 10m. The species is well known for spectacular breaches and often tail slaps, flipper slaps and spy-hops. It inhabits all the world's oceans in coastal or shelf waters.



Norfolk status

The first Norfolk record was in October 2013 off Hemsby, with subsequent November records that year between Happisburgh and Winterton.

There were further autumn records in 2014, 2015 and 2019.



Blue Whale

Balaenoptera musculus

The largest animal on the planet, sometimes over 30m, with an obviously large splashguard. The mottled skin surface often appears blue when the animal is below the surface. The dorsal fin is comparatively small and set well back. Blue Whales have a very tall blow, around 9m high, very visible and slender. The tail stock is thick and the tail flukes are raised before diving.

It inhabits all the world's oceans, being mainly found just off continental shelves and island mounts but it is not uncomfortable in relatively shallow water.

Norfolk status

The only evidence for the presence of Blue Whales in Norfolk coastal waters is from a piece of baleen, dredged off Cromer in 1916.



Short-beaked Common Dolphin

Delphinus delphis

This small, beautiful and entertaining dolphin can be recognised by the distinctive hourglass pattern on its flank. It is less than 2m long and variable in colour. The intensity of yellow on the thoracic patch can be almost white to ochre. The falcate dorsal fin is in the middle of the back and often shows a paler area on the fin itself. Animals have a medium length beak.

It inhabits oceanic and offshore waters in warm tropical to cool temperate areas of the Pacific and Atlantic.

Norfolk status

The first Norfolk record was not until 1943 but records are becoming increasingly more frequent as the water in the North Sea gradually warms to provide a more favourable environment, although its occurrence does not yet appear to be annual.



Long finned Pilot Whale

Globicephala melas

Pilot Whales are distinctively dark grey to black. The most distinctive feature is the wide based dorsal fin one third of the body length from the head which is low with a rounded tip. The bulbous head may extend over and beyond the mouth. The blow is strong, noisy and approximately 1m high. Animals frequently spy-hop.

It inhabits sub-polar waters in the North Atlantic. It is normally a deep-sea animal but can come close to shore when food is plentiful, putting them at risk of mass strandings.

Norfolk status

The first record was in 1879. Since then animals have been seen on 11 more occasions, most recently in 2014 when about twenty animals were seen off Cley and Weybourne, moving off eastwards.



Weybourne, November 2014



North Atlantic

Risso's Dolphin

Grampus griseus

This dolphin species has a tall sickle shaped dorsal fin, no beak and is blunt headed. The general colouration is dark Grey although extensive scarring can turn older animals almost completely white. Pectoral fins are long, straight and pointed. There is a vertical crease at the front of the head.

It is found in temperate and tropical waters at the edges of continental shelves where squid are most prolific. Classic locations in Britain are around the Western and Northern Isles and off the SW headlands.

Norfolk status

There is just a single record of this species in Norfolk from May 2018 when an individual was found dead on Gt Yarmouth beach.



Atlantic White-sided Dolphin

Lagenorhynchus acutus

A large Dolphin 2.8m in length. It has a black dorsal area and dorsal fin with dark grey to black pectoral fins. The underparts and lower jaw are white. The beak is blunt and there is a white blaze on the flank followed by a yellow ochre blaze to the tail stock.

It inhabits temperate and sub-polar waters in the North Atlantic. They are found mainly over continental shelf edges and only occasionally in coastal waters.



Norfolk status

A rare visitor. One washed ashore dead in November 2006 at Blakeney.

A group of six dolphins off Scratby in August 2012 were thought to be of this species.

White Beaked Dolphin

Lagenorhynchus albirostris

This is a black, grey and white dolphin. The dorsal fin is half-way along the body and is followed by a white 'shawl'. The beak is short and white or whitish. This is a very active dolphin with a noisy strong blow approximately 1m high.

It occurs in temperate and sub-polar seas of the North Atlantic and is common in British waters.

Norfolk status

The first Norfolk record was in 1845 and up to the end of the 20th century this was the commonest dolphin species recorded off our shores. However numbers have substantially reduced since then and it is now only seen about once every four or five years.



Orca

Orcinus orca



Norfolk status

The first report was in the early 1600s and since then Norfolk has had 14 or 15 records, the most recent being distant offshore sightings in 2013 and 2021. An exciting prospect is that records might increase with the development of the Grey Seal rookeries in the county.

Orcas have a distinctive black and white, bold colouration. The dorsal fin is tall and erect. There is a white eye-patch with no beak. A distinctive and uniquely patterned grey saddle over the dorsal area to the rear of the dorsal fin can be used to identify individuals. The males, which can be up to 9m long, are much larger than the females which are no more than 5m long.

They are the most widely distributed cetaceans in the world occurring in all oceans.



False Orca

Pseudorca crassidens

False Orcas have a uniform dark body colour. The centrally placed dorsal fin is variable in shape but prominent with a strong concave trailing edge. The head and body are slender and the beak rounded. The species readily approaches boats. Animals sometimes leave the water when surfacing to breathe. The long pectoral flippers are forward placed and elbow shaped.

Mostly a deep-water species in tropical and temperate latitudes worldwide.

Norfolk status

There is just a single Norfolk record from 1935 when eight individuals were stranded in Wooton Creek.



Striped Dolphin

Stenella coeruleoalba

This 1.8 to 2.7m long dolphin has a well-defined beak and a mid-placed bluish-black to black dorsal fin. Pectoral fins are also bluish black. The distinctive flank pattern incorporates bluish-black stripes from the eye to the pectoral fin and from the eye to the anus. There is a broader pale blaze from the head to the dorsal fin.

It occurs worldwide in tropical and temperate waters, mainly on the seaward side of continental shelves.

Norfolk status

There is a possible record of this species from the nineteenth century, but it is undated and surrounded by much controversy.



Common Bottlenose Dolphin

Tursiops truncatus

The size of animals varies considerably. The body is dark to light grey on the upper side, shading to a pinkish white or white on the underside. The centrally placed tall falcate dorsal fin often has unique nicks which are an aid to identification of individuals. There is a slight dark dorsal cape sometimes visible. The fluke and flippers are dark and there are often teeth rakes of other dolphins present.

Perhaps the most adaptable cetacean, it occurs worldwide in tropical and temperate latitudes. Inshore animals often move into, and indeed occupy, bays and estuaries.

Norfolk status

The first Norfolk occurrence was not documented until 1920. Since then there have been around 30 records, including a number off the North Norfolk coast in 2020 with three filmed bow riding a fishing boat just off Sheringham.



Newquay, South Wales



Chanonry Point, Moray Firth

Sperm Whale

Physeter macrocephalus

This whale has a large body size which is brown to grey in colour. The enormous head is box shaped and the skin is wrinkled. The blow, due to the positioning of the blowhole, is forward left facing and up to 6m in height. There are a series of bumps along the spine behind a blunt low dorsal fin.

This is a deep-water species distributed throughout the world's oceans, with males and females having separate home ranges. Females and young animals form matriarchal groups in the deep water of the tropics and sub-tropics. Mature males inhabit higher latitudes around both poles, undertaking long migrations to the female ranges. Sadly any Sperm Whale entering the southern North Sea will usually strand. The water is far too shallow to support squid, their main food supply.

Norfolk status

There is a long history of strandings on the Norfolk coast dating back to before 1606. Most recently, there was a significant movement of Sperm Whales in the southern North Sea in 2016 giving some views of live animals off the Norfolk coast but also resulting in many fatalities both in the UK and in Europe. Three animals live stranded at Hunstanton, two of which were refloated and there were a further 2 or 3 offshore.



Narwhal

Monodon monoceros

This small cetacean is a species of the high Arctic. Males have an erupted tooth that develops into a tusk up to 3m in length. There is no beak and no dorsal fin. The skin is of a mottled grey colour. The pectoral fins are short and curved, the tail fluke has convex lobes.

While this might seem an unlikely species for Norfolk, animals have been found at the same latitude in Holland, and there are old records from the Suffolk estuaries and from Essex and Kent in the first half of the 20th century. As Arctic waters warm, animals could venture forth to explore new habitats, in the same way that the Thames and the Seine have played host to Beluga in recent years, and Walrus has appeared as a well documented vagrant around the British coast.

Norfolk status

There is a reputed sixteenth century record of this species which Thomas Southwell, an eminent Victorian naturalist, included in his catalogue of Norfolk wildlife.



Screenshot from Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society website. © WDC

Northern Bottlenose Whale

Hyperoodon ampullatus

A long to medium cetacean ranging in length up to 10m. It can be grey, tan or brownish with a huge melon which is white or cream and squared off in males. It has a well defined beak and a falcate dorsal fin, two thirds of the way back along the animal. There is no medial notch in the tail and the blow is slightly forward facing and around 2m high.

It occupies Arctic waters in summer moving South, but rarely below 55 degrees North, for the Winter.

Norfolk status

First recorded in Norfolk in 1700. It has occurred three times in the first two decades of the 21st century, with three animals being recorded off Weybourne in August 2020.



Sowerby's Beaked Whale

Mesoplodon bidens

A Medium sized cetacean. Animals can range up to 8.5m in length. There are usually a few linear scars on the skin. These are usually singular rakes and not paired. The species has a long beak without a large melon. The falcate dorsal fin is two thirds of the way along the back and the area around the eye is dark. Animals surface 'beak first' and with a good view the two small teeth of males can be seen protruding outside the lower jaw. Once called the 'North Sea Whale' its range is thought to be limited to the Northern Atlantic



Dorsal view of an individual washed up on Titchwell beach in 2017 - D. Richmond

Norfolk status

First recorded in Norfolk in 1892. Beaked whales are creatures of deep water so not many are recorded off the Norfolk coast. Those that are observed are usually washed up dead or live-stranded, with a very poor prognosis for survival.

Two live individuals were seen off Brancaster Harbour and Cley in August 2020 but one of these subsequently stranded and died further round the coast to the east.

Cuvier's Beaked Whale

Ziphius cavirostris

A medium sized cetacean ranging up to 6m in length with a falcate dorsal fin behind the mid-point of the back. Linear scars along the body are usually double rakes matching the distance between the teeth of males, which have two small teeth protruding at the distal end of their lower jaw. It can be very variable in colour, the face and head are white with a dark area around the eye. The beak is short and the head appears first when animals are surfacing.

It has a worldwide distribution in cool to temperate waters.

Norfolk status

Just two Norfolk records in 1989 and 2002. The second of these was witnessed live stranding just south of Walcott early in the evening of 20th June but died later that night despite rescue attempts by the RSPCA and Norfolk Coastguard.



Harbour Porpoise

Phocoena phocoena

Diminutive in size but can reach up to 2m in length. Animals have an indistinct beak and the upperparts are black to dark grey the underparts are pale. The centrally placed dorsal fin is low and triangular. The appearance at sea is of a slow rolling motion when it surfaces. The dark pectoral fin is connected to the gape by a thin dark stripe which is impossible to see in the field. The lips are dark.

Occurs discontinuously in cool temperate and sub-arctic waters of the Northern hemisphere.

Norfolk status

By far the commonest cetacean seen in Norfolk waters. Persistent watching from any vantage point around the coast should eventually give the observer a sighting.

