

Marine Mammals of Scotland

Learning Level All
Run Time 7.40 minutes

Welcome to another in the Catch my Drift mini talks series, I'm Theo, and I am a marine biologist and the aquarium team supervisor here at Macduff Marine Aquarium. I'll be telling you today about marine mammals.

Marine mammals are animals that breathe air, give birth to live young, and live most of their lives out in the sea, or rely heavily on it. Cetaceans, such as dolphins, whales, and porpoise, and pinnipeds, such as grey seals, are all part of this group. Other examples from further afield include fur seals, sealions, narwhals, belugas, manatees, dugongs, polar bears, sea otters, and even a few species of bat!

Here in our Scottish waters, we have more than 20 species of cetacean, which makes us one of the hotspots in Europe. We have species that are more common like the common dolphin, the bottlenose dolphin, minke whale, and white-beaked dolphin, and some that are more elusive and only visit us from time to time such the killer whale.

We often see bottlenose dolphins swimming past the aquarium. They are probably our best-known cetacean, and for good reason. The Moray Firth is home to the largest population and the only known population in the North Sea. We have 195 individuals and they have been seen as far south as the Firth of Forth and beyond, on the coast of France.

You can often see bottlenose dolphins at Chanonry Point, catching salmon by flipping them up into the air and catching them with one bite. Bottlenose dolphins will also teach their calves to hunt, where to hunt, and even have a unique set of clicks and whistles for one another.

Harbour porpoise are the smallest but most abundant cetacean in our waters. They don't really have a beak, so their heads look really rounded, and they're quite elusive as well. At the surface, all you'll really see is the triangle of their fin, rather than the acrobatics of a bottlenose dolphin.

Interestingly, the term "porpoising" is a bit of a misnomer. It actually refers to a dolphin travelling at speed and launches itself out of the water. Harbour porpoise - being timid and elusive - rarely, if ever, perform this behaviour.

White-beaked dolphins are often seen in the Minch and the Outer Hebrides, but are also seen on the east coast of Aberdeenshire. Some white-beaked dolphins actually lack the white beak, which makes them quite difficult to identify sometimes. They have a huge dorsal fin, and their pectoral fins – which are the ones on the sides - are actually about 20% of their total body length, which is pretty big.

Though elusive, they are very active, and you can see them travelling in pods of 5-20 individuals, but it's not unusual to see them in huge supergroups (or super pods) of thousands, of these animals. They also like to interact with other species. They're often seen with Atlantic white-sided dolphins, bottlenose dolphins when feeding, and they'll travel alongside humpback whales.

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One of our most common whale species we'll see here on the Moray Firth is the minke whale. This is actually the smallest of all baleen whale. A baleen whale is a whale that has sort of like bristles coming out of its mouth rather than teeth and it uses them like a giant sieve. Oftentimes people think that this means they will only eat things like krill, but actually, our minke whales will also eat smaller fish like herring and sprat.

They can reach 8 to 9 metres in length and if you're unlucky enough to see one out of water, or lucky enough to see one from above, you can actually see they have white armbands on their pectoral fins. Though usually solitary, they do gather at good feeding grounds. They're pretty shy, but if you're lucky, you might see one breach.

Most of the harbour and grey seals in the UK are found here in Scotland, in internationally important numbers. Around 30% of the European population of harbour seals are found in the UK, and around 80% of those - which is about 80,000 individuals - are found in Scottish waters. Grey seals are actually one of the more rare seal species in the world - their entire population is only about 400,000. Around 40% of these are actually in the UK, and a huge 90% of that are here in Scottish.

Harbour seals – sometimes known as common seals – live up to 30 years. They're actually our smaller species of seal, you'll often see them looking pretty cute with their rounded heads and their big eyes on the front of their faces. Harbour seals prefer to haul-out – that is to leave the sea and come to the beach – in more sheltered areas and don't stray much further than 50 km to feed. In June and July, harbour seals give birth, or “pup”. You might think of white-furred seals when you think of these, however, harbour seals give birth to pups which have already shed its white coat in the uterus and when they are born, they are ready to go swimming.

Grey seals can live for up to 30 years too but are far larger than harbour seals. They can get to be about 2 metres in length and have what we call a “Roman nose” appearance, with their eyes slightly to the sides of their head. If you're lucky – or unlucky in some cases – you can see them on the beaches and swimming around in the sea; fairly curious, they'll always pop their heads up to have a look around and see what's happening. They can travel over 100 km to reach feeding grounds and they prefer to haul-out in more exposed sites, like the Isle of May. In Autumn, they'll visit these traditional haul-out sites to pup and these are the seal that you think of with the white fur. Some local hotspots for seeing grey seals include Findhorn Bay, Portgordon, and Newburgh.

As much as we love these animals, we do have to remember that they're wild. Our interference can cause harm and even death, so, a few things you can do. First, you can read the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code. It's a two-part document which is available via [Nature Scot](#) and it gives you the best practice to actually view these animals safely without causing them any potential danger. If you do come across a deceased dolphin or seal washed up on the beach, you should report it to the [Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Hotline](#). They have a phone number you can call to report the animal, and they'll take it away for scientific evaluation. If you come across and animal which is stranded and alive and it's injured, you can call [British Divers Marine Life Rescue](#) which will come and try and refloat it or assess its injuries and take it to specialist care. If you wish to help research when you're out at the beach, you can download the [Mammal Mapper App](#) and report sightings there and use the [Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust's Whale Track](#). You track these animals in real time and report your own sightings to help in conservation efforts.

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Thankfully, all of these animals are protected by law and have recently been granted more protections by the implementation of several Marine Protected Areas. So, I hope you enjoyed this brief talk about our Scottish marine mammals, and you feel compelled to learn more and protect these creatures. Thank you for watching.