

Leatherback Turtle spotted during survey

During a routine cetacean research survey, researchers and volunteers from the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (HWDT) were treated to an unusual encounter. While crossing the Minch on Sunday 5th June, between Skye and Harris, a massive leatherback turtle, measuring about 1.5 metres, was spotted to the delight of all onboard. As *Silurian*, HWDT's research vessel, approached, the leatherback turtle slowly dived but resurfaced close by and allowed the observers onboard a good 10 minutes gawping before it swam sedately away. Skipper, Dave Hanna, said "*It was the most exciting moment of my life.*" That wasn't the only sighting that day; seven different pods of common dolphins and four minke whales were also recorded. *Silurian* and her crew will continue surveying the waters off the west coast of Scotland until the end of September, inviting volunteers onboard to assist with the data collection.

The leatherback turtle is the first spotted by HWDT since surveys began onboard *Silurian* in 2001. Leatherbacks undertake enormous migrations from tropical breeding grounds to temperate feeding waters. The turtles are typically seen in British waters during the summer months when the swarms of jellyfish they prey on are abundant. They are one of the largest reptiles on the planet with consequently few natural predators. However, leatherbacks are listed as critically endangered due to entanglement in fishing gear and marine litter (a plastic bag looks a lot like a jellyfish!).



You too can help build a better understanding about the marine environment off Scotland's west coast by reporting your sightings to HWDT. Sightings Officer, Sandra Koetter, says "*It is exciting that a leatherback turtle has been spotted, it is very rare that we receive reports of turtles. Sightings like these emphasis how rich our marine environment is and we need you to help us understand it better.*" You can report your sightings using the online sightings form found at www.hwdt.org.