

Rare treat for cetacean researchers

The Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust's (HWDT) research vessel *Silurian* had a very special encounter on the 29th June. HWDT crew and volunteers were conducting a research survey between South Uist and Coll when someone spotted a large, bushy blow in the distance. As *Silurian* approached, and the engines were turned off, a humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) surfaced within a few hundred metres of the vessel to the great delight of all onboard. Relief Science Officer, Sarah Barry, commented "The whale surfaced three or four times in a row and then dived for about five minutes, so it was most likely feeding below the surface, which is an encouraging sign for the area". The animal, approximately 10 metres in length, seemed content surfacing alongside *Silurian* for about an hour and a half. Photographs were taken of the humpback's tail flukes, which have a distinctive pattern, and will be compared with other organisations photo-identification catalogues to try and identify the individual.



Humpback whale sightings are rare off the west coast of Scotland but not unheard of. In June of this year, a humpback was spotted off Gairloch and in recent years sightings have numbered one or two a year. The species is widely distributed in all oceans, making extensive migrations and ranging from their tropical wintering grounds to the edges of the polar ice zones. Unmistakable in appearance, the humpback whale's pectoral (side) fins are long and narrow (*Megaptera* means "great wing") and may measure as much as a third of the body length. When



fully grown, humpback whales can measure up to 17 metres and weigh 40,000 kg; the female is normally slightly larger than the male. The tail fluke can measure up to five metres across, has a serrated trailing edge, and is black with distinct patterns of white on the underside; this pattern is unique to each animal and is used for identifying individuals.

HWDT conducts research surveys onboard *Silurian* throughout the spring, summer and

autumn months. Volunteers are welcomed onboard to assist with vital data collection which will be analysed by HWDT scientists to provide a better understanding of cetacean distribution and abundance off the west coast of Scotland. Encounters such as this remind us that the waters off the west coast of Scotland are exceptional, playing host to a great variety of cetacean species. Reporting sightings to HWDT will contribute to the knowledge of cetacean distribution and abundance within the area. If you are lucky enough to encounter a cetacean, please report your sighting at www.hwdt.org or by contacting the office on 01688 302620.