Scotland's Secret Dolphins

Scotland's Hebrides may be home the UK's smallest resident population of bottlenose dolphins, scientists have revealed. These lively, acrobatic dolphins delight wildlife-lovers who live in and visit the west coast of Scotland. However, the group may number as few as 50 animals, according to researchers from the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (HWDT).

Scientists have used photographic techniques to identify individual dolphins by their unique natural markings such as nicks in their fins or scars. This has allowed them to count the number of dolphins in the population, and discover how small it is.

© M. Brook/HWDT

"Bottlenose dolphins are perhaps the best known of our dolphin species. However, whilst many people know that there are bottlenose dolphins in the Moray Firth on the east coast of Scotland and Cardigan Bay in Wales, the Hebridean dolphins are less famous" said HWDT scientist Susannah Calderan. "In partnership with other academic and local organisations, we've found out much more in recent years about how many of them there are, and where they live."

© HWDT

Researchers have discovered that in the Hebrides there appear to be two distinct groups of bottlenose dolphins. One group is found in and around the Sound of Barra in the Outer Hebrides. It comprises around 15 individuals. In the Inner

Hebrides, there is a group of around 35 individuals that range from Skye down to the Kintyre peninsula. These dolphins are seen year-round, and are thought to be resident in the area. Usually they are in small groups, but sometimes large groups comprising most of the population are spotted around the Hebridean coasts.

"The west coast of Scotland is famous for its wildlife, and we're really lucky to have these dolphins in our waters" said Susannah Calderan. "But the small size of this population makes it vulnerable. It's so important that the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, which is a small local charity, continues its unique work, as only by doing long-term research can we find out what we need to know about these animals so they can be protected."

© HWDT

END