



2007 Survey Season

The Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust's Biodiversity Officer, Susannah Calderan, shares some of the highlights of 2007's research season on Silurian

HWDT's vessel 'Silurian' has travelled the length and breadth of the Hebrides over the summer months. Some of the time, she's a floating classroom, travelling round the islands visiting schools. But most of the time we're out surveying the Hebrides for whales, dolphins and porpoises (cetaceans), on ten or seven day trips, assisted by volunteers.



This summer's work has again taken HWDT crew and volunteers far and wide across the Hebrides. Our fifth full season on the boat has rewarded us with all the amazing sights and experiences one would expect from the Hebrides, from the cetaceans we have encountered, to the remote and beautiful areas we have worked in. We have also worked harder than ever this year, with kilometres of visual survey effort having doubled from 2003 to 2007 (from over 4,000km to over 8,000km). Even when the weather isn't good enough for visual surveys, we still tow a hydrophone to detect the underwater echolocation of harbour porpoises – this year we've towed it for over 11,000km.

Whilst there really never is a dull moment onboard *Silurian*, 2007 brought some particular highlights, not least in the new areas we were able to travel to. Regions we have surveyed for the first time this year include the seas to the south and west of the Outer Hebrides, and the more northerly regions of the Minch. We've managed to take in the Monach Isles, Shiant, and Flannan Isles, and all the wildlife that lives there. Without our research on *Silurian*, much of the Hebrides would receive little or no cetacean survey coverage, and the distribution, abundance and diversity of species in those waters would remain unknown. Our work really is unique.

Our greatest survey mission this season was in August, surveying white-beaked dolphins in the North Minch. White-beaked dolphins are rarely seen around Mull, but the North Minch has historically been an excellent area for the species. However some recent research has suggested they may be declining in the region, and being displaced by common dolphins, which are being encountered much more frequently in that area. To find out we journeyed as far north as we've ever been – to Cape Wrath and the Butt of Lewis. The sightings data we collected indicated that white-beaked and common

dolphins do manage to coexist in the Minch in waters of similar temperature, although white-beaks were usually found further offshore and in deeper water than commons.



Killer whales – one of the area’s most popular and charismatic cetaceans – have been sighted four times from *Silurian* this season, out of a total of 15 recorded encounters in the area. This is a high sighting rate considering the rarity of killer whales around the Hebrides. Only ten individual killer whales have been identified photographically by HWDT between 1992 and 2007. Seven out of these ten have been seen in more than one

year. Although killer whales are capable of travelling long distances – which is one of the reasons we see our small number of animals so infrequently – there are no matches between the killer whales photographed in the Hebrides and those in Iceland, Norway or even Shetland and Orkney.

2007 has been a very successful season scientifically, but has also been a lot of fun. Many thanks to our crews, volunteers, and staff supporting us in the office, and to everyone who’s been sending us their sightings over the summer – look forward to hearing from you next year!

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