



Northern bottlenose whale sighted off Skye

The Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (HWDT) have learned that two northern bottlenose whales have been spotted in the Sound of Raasay during August. This is the first report since 2009 of the species off the west coast of Scotland. Wilko Bulte, who encountered the whales while out on a wildlife boat trip explains, “A girlfriend and I had joined a boat trip, mostly aimed at seeing the sea eagles. After we saw the birds, Skipper Pete went further out to show us more bird life. We never got to see those birds, as we found ourselves with the two bottlenose whales! The birds were quickly forgotten as you can imagine.”

Northern bottlenose whales are a deep diving species, usually preferring the deep offshore waters of the North Atlantic to coastal locations. However, while sightings of this whale species are not common off the west coast, reports in recent years have highlighted regular appearances of northern bottlenose whales in the autumn months (August, September and October); mostly in the vicinity of Skye where there are some deep channels and basins. Historically, whalers apparently used to report large numbers of bottlenose whales off Scotland in June.



Northern bottlenose whales usually live in very deep waters and can sometimes become disorientated in the matrix of channels, narrows and islands found off the west coast. Unfortunately HWDT have received reports and also witnessed whales becoming so disorientated that they can't find their way back to open sea and sadly perish. Sandra Koetter, HWDT's Sightings Officer, adds, “*Loch Linnhe seems to be a popular place for bottlenose whales to travel up and get*

stuck, after passing the Corran Narrows they find it extremely difficult to navigate back out. There are no clear cut reasons why this happens and needs further investigation.”

Northern bottlenose whales can be inquisitive, and may approach boats with interest. Wilko adds, “While looking through my camera I could not help wondering who was observing whom? After being a bit on the shy side initially and holding their distance from the boat, the whales decided to get closer and closer. It felt they were curious to find out who had invaded their territory.” Bottlenose whales may also stay close to injured or distressed companions. These characteristics contributed to the species being greatly depleted by whaling in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Current threats include the accumulation of toxic pollutants such as organic pesticides in whale tissue and organs, entanglement in fishing nets and marine litter, and noise disturbance, which interferes with their complex echolocation and use of sound. As a squid eating cetacean, northern bottlenose whales may swallow plastic bags mistaken for prey. Plastic was found in the stomach of a Cuvier’s beaked whale that stranded on Mull in 2004, and it is likely that this issue also affects other species of beaked whales, such as the northern bottlenose whale.

Sightings such as these remind us that the waters off the west coast of Scotland are extremely special, playing host to a great variety of species. Reporting sightings to HWDT will contribute to our knowledge of species distribution and abundance within the area. If you are lucky enough to spot a cetacean, please report your sighting online or contact the research office on 01688 302859.