

Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust

research education conservation

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Oban Bay sperm whale may be sick or confused – boats users asked to stay away

Following sightings of a sperm whale in Oban Bay over the past two days, the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (HWDT) is concerned that the animal may be sick or confused – and is urging boat users to stay away from the whale in order to avoid causing it needless distress.

The charity first received reports of the sperm whale – the largest predator on the planet – in Oban Bay early on Saturday (30 March) morning.

Olivia Harries, HWDT Biodiversity Officer, said: *“This is a spectacular animal but we are urging boat users to stay away from the whale wherever possible so as not to cause it distress.”*

“While it’s exciting to see an animal of this size so close to shore, sperm whales usually inhabit very deep waters – so we are concerned that the sperm whale may be sick. Cetaceans have a tendency to come closer to shore when ill and can eventually strand. However, this individual may simply be confused and if so it will hopefully navigate to deeper waters eventually.”

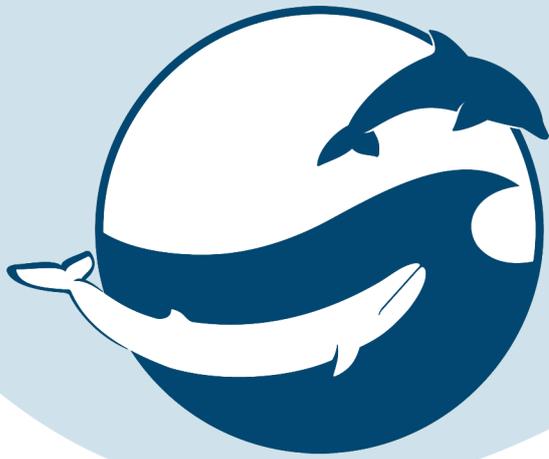
The Coastguard has issued a warning to all boats warning them of a large, live whale in the bay and advised that they proceed with caution.

Chalice Charters, based in Oban, managed to take some impressive images of the sperm whale, showing the animal’s characteristic tail fluke as it dives. Chris Jackson, of Chalice Charters, says of the sighting: *“We watched while the whale ranged north/south in the harbour keeping to deeper water - the maximum depth here is only about 40m. The ferries did proceed with caution and there was little boat traffic about. At first I thought it was a humpback whale, but it certainly is a sperm whale - the first I've ever seen so very exciting.”*

Sightings of sperm whales are rare in the Hebrides but not unheard of, the last reported sighting to HWDT was a group of five individuals in the Sound of Raasay in February. Despite reports being rare, the UK still has the highest number of sperm whale sightings in Northern Europe.

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Sperm whales are the largest predator on the planet, with males reaching lengths of 18 metres. They are found globally, although it is thought that only males frequent sub-polar regions. They famously dive to incredible depths to hunt a variety of prey, including the giant squid.

HWDT contacted the British Marine Divers Rescue (BDMLR) to advise them of the whale's presence. BDMLR are the organisation concerned with assisting stranded marine mammals round the UK coast and are on standby in case the whale comes ashore. Stephen Marsh, of BDMLR, comments "*We are really concerned that this whale is in an area where there is a lot of boat traffic and is very close to the shore at some times. However it has been seen logging, or resting at the surface and so is currently quite relaxed. As it is diving for up to 30 minutes at a time it doesn't seem to be compromised other than being in the wrong place. Ideally it will head south to open water of its own accord so we would ask any boats that do have to work in the area to try and stay north of the animal*".

HWDT is dedicated to enhancing knowledge and understanding of Scotland's whales, dolphins and porpoises and the Hebridean marine environment through education, research and working within local communities as a basis for the lasting conservation of species and habitats. For more details call 01688 302620 or visit www.hwdt.org.

The charity asks members of the public that encounter a whale, dolphin or porpoise – collectively known as cetaceans – to report sightings to HWDT through its website (www.hwdt.org).

"By reporting sightings, the public will be directly contributing to a better understanding of the local marine environment. If people manage to take an image of cetaceans, we would be very grateful they could forward these to our Sightings Officer at sightings@hwdt.org. Images can be used in Photo Identification studies – allowing our researchers to track the moments of individuals, collectively adding to the understanding of the different species, both locally and internationally," said Olivia Harries.

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Notes to editors

1. Established in 1994, HWDT is a registered charity that has pioneered practical, locally-based education and monitoring programmes on cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) in the Hebrides.
2. HWDT conducts long-term monitoring of cetacean distribution, abundance and habitat use; educates people about the marine environment, with a focus on cetaceans; and works with local communities to ensure long-term sustainability of the marine environment. The charity is based in Tobermory on the Isle of Mull, where it has its main education and research offices, a visitors centre and shop.

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