

## Rare whales strand in the Hebrides

In February, the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (HWDT) received a report of two dead Cuvier's beaked whales washed up on a beach in Islay. Cuvier's beaked whales are a deep-diving species inhabiting waters off the continental shelf, and strandings are rare on the west coast of Scotland. A few days after the Islay strandings, we received another report, again of a Cuvier's beaked whale, which had washed up on a beach in Tiree. Then a third report the next day of a possible beaked whale on Mull.



Stranded Cuvier's whale at Kintra, Isle of Mull.  
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The following week, there were three more reports of beaked whale strandings, this time in the Outer Hebrides. Two of these were Cuvier's beaked whales and the third was a Sowerby's beaked whale. This was shortly followed by another Cuvier's stranding on Mull. Such a high number of beaked whale strandings in such a short space of time within our study area is highly unusual. Over the past 16 years, 20 Cuvier's beaked whale strandings have been reported

in the whole of Scotland. Six, (possibly seven) of these were on the west coast of Scotland alone during February and March 2008.

Multiple strandings of beaked whales have previously been linked to military sonar activity. Although it is not fully understood how sonar affects whales, it is thought that exposure to mid-frequency sonar signals particularly affects species whose dives are long and deep, such as beaked whales. However, military sonar is not the only possible explanation – the beaked whale event has certain characteristics which suggest there may be other causes behind the event.

Dr Bob Reid at the Scottish Agricultural College Veterinary Science Division, co-ordinates the Scottish Strandings Network and conducts post-mortems on stranded animals. Most of the animals he examined were not fresh enough to obtain tissue samples, or determine the cause of death. However, in each case he was able to estimate roughly how long the animals had been dead. It appears that all animals may have died at a similar time, providing some evidence towards this being a multiple strandings event.

We do not know yet whether there were any military sonar exercises taking place in the area in the weeks preceding these strandings events. HWDT, along with the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS) have put in a Freedom of Information request to

find out if these strandings may have been linked to sonar activity, and we are currently awaiting a response.

HWDT's Community Sightings Programme is essential for finding out about strandings, so if you find a stranded whale, dolphin or porpoise, please contact the Trust as soon as possible. The organisation is also interested in receiving reports of sightings of live animals at sea. Tel: 0800 0858 110; email:sightings@hwdt.org

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