

# Hebridean Whale And Dolphin Trust



## **BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN PROJECT**

**FIELD AGENT REPORT 2004 – Nick Richardson**

---

## **CONTENTS**

---

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Area covered</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Area reports:</b>	<b>4</b>
3.1. Islay	4
3.2. Arran	5
3.3. Kintyre	6
3.4. Argyll	7
3.5. Mallaig, Arisaig & the Small Isles	8
3.6. Wester Ross	9
3.7. Skye	11
<b>5. Conclusion</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Appendices and acknowledgements</b>	<b>14</b>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of Field agent was originally set up, with funding from WWF, to assist with the work of the Hebridean Bottlenose Dolphin Project (HBDP) Officer in the following areas:

- Coordinating and enhancing the existing network of cetacean observers, through a combination of contacting and visiting various boat operators/fishermen/marine interest groups around the Hebrides
- Collating and collecting sightings, photo-identification and anecdotal evidence of bottlenose dolphins (bnd) and other cetaceans
- Giving regular updates i.e. sightings, photo-id and stories to the HBDP officer and HWDT Executive Director, which could then be relayed to WWF
- Where possible, giving talks to local interest groups and communities in the West coast of Scotland
- Generally raising awareness and the profile of the HBDP by distributing information and a sightings plea poster

The main aim of the Field Agent role was to try and improve on the existing understanding and knowledge of bnd habits and distribution; in particular their patterns of movement around the west coast. By improving communication links and cooperation between the relevant boat operators, nature groups and the HBDP/HWDT, it was hoped that the objective of tracking specific groups of bnd as they travel around the study area could be achieved. Receiving good quality photo-id shots from contacts would further improve the prospect of this being accomplished.

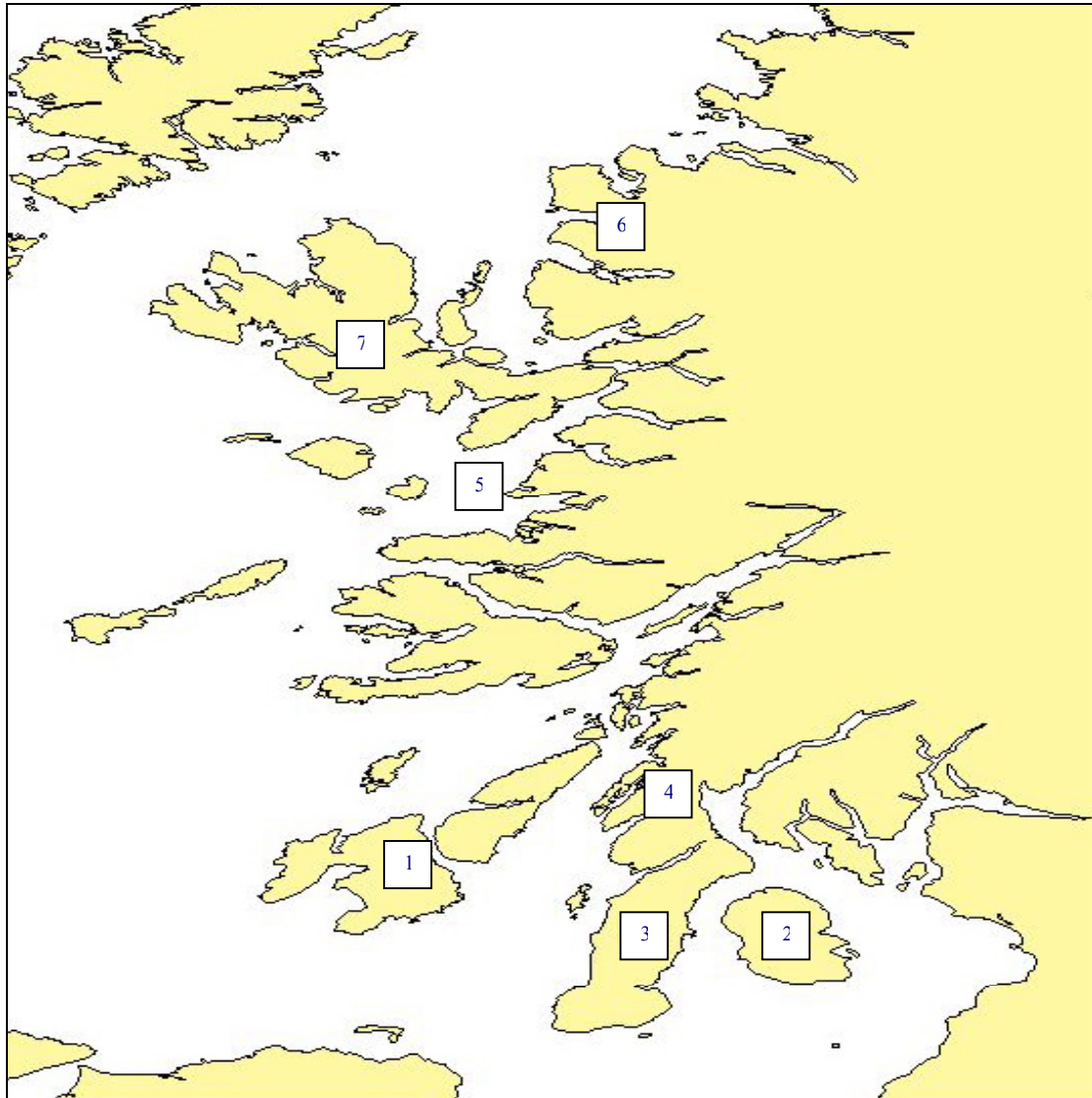
To compliment this, the Field Agent was also responsible for raising awareness of the work of HWDT, through providing the public, relevant ngo's and information centres with a variety of trust literature and interpretation materials.

At the same time, perceptions and the general awareness of HWDT was assessed en-route, with the views of both the general public and marine wildlife tour operators taken into account.

This report provides a breakdown on the areas visited by the Field Agent, between late June and August of 2004, and includes various contact details and a summary of sightings information collected. It also considers the feasibility of the Field Agent job description, and attempts to evaluate opinions expressed by individuals towards the HBDP and the role of HWDT. It is not meant as a scientific report.

The appendix contains a disc of sightings data collected, and a folder with information and contact details of various marine operators, and other relevant groups for future reference.

## 2. AREAS COVERED



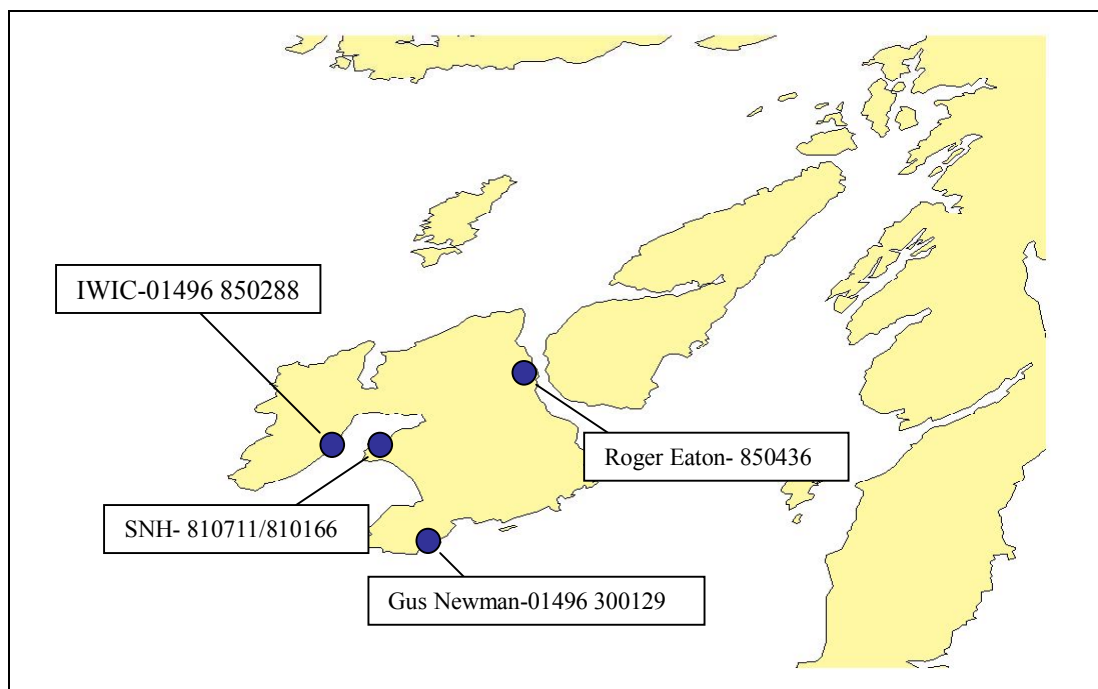
1. Islay
2. Arran
3. Kintyre
4. Argyll
5. Mallaig, Arisaig & the Small Isles
6. Wester Ross
7. Skye

The original itinerary also considered visits to the Western Isles, Coll and Tiree. These were omitted after financial consideration, and so that time could be spent assisting the HBDP officer in coordinating the bnd sightings network, communicating with new and existing contacts, and responding to bnd sightings in the Sound of Mull.

It would be very beneficial to HWDT for a representative to visit these omitted areas (particularly the Western Isles) in the near future, to increase awareness of HWDT and improve the sightings network.

### 3. AREA REPORTS

#### 3.1. ISLAY



#### Summary

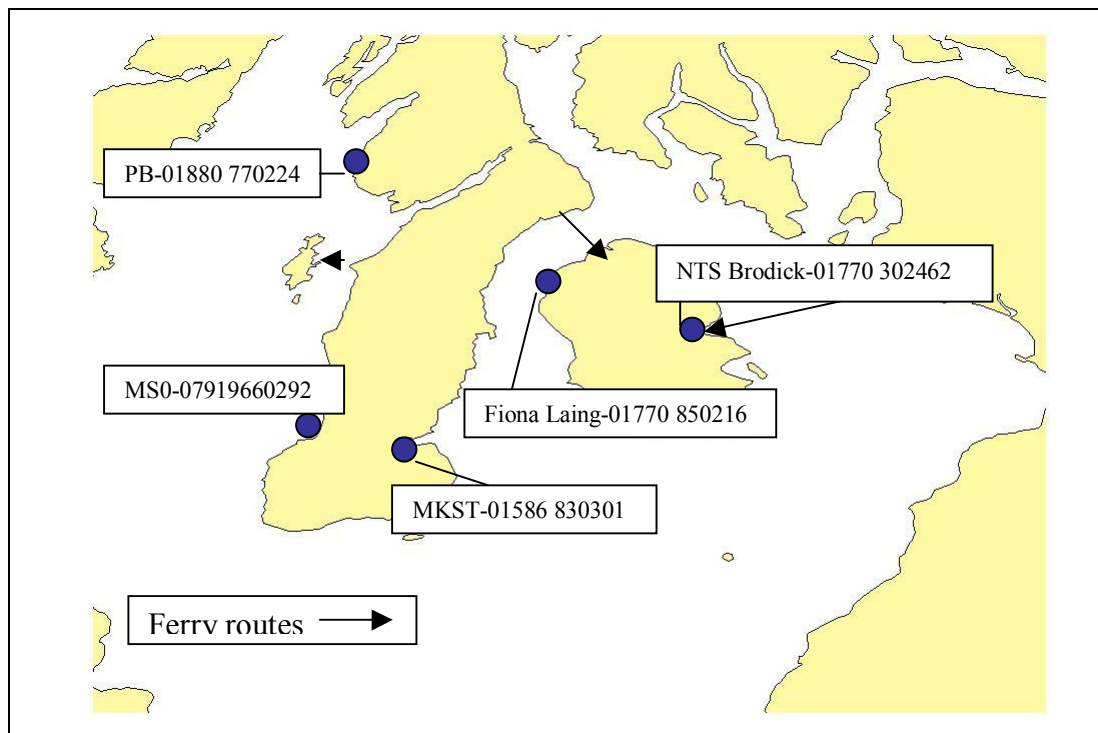
Islay has, in the past, been a hotspot for bnd sightings, with Loch Indaal and the coastline around Port Ellen in particular, offering good opportunities for research in recent years (see Potter 2001, Bailey 2002).

Since the HBDP moved from Port Ellen to Tobermory, sightings in 2003/04 have been sporadic at best, with only probable sightings of bnd in Loch Indaal and very occasional sightings elsewhere, mainly coming from the ferry services to Port Ellen and Port Askaig. The main source of this sightings information has been the natural history records kept by the Islay Wildlife Information Centre (IWIC) in Port Charlotte. Fiona Macgillvery, the centre manager, is keen to keep links with HWDT and can be contacted at anytime for sightings updates. All strandings on the island are also recorded by IWIC. Roger Eaton, the skipper of Islay Marine Charters, reported very little bnd activity in 2004, his only sighting being a brief encounter with a small group in April. Roger covers a lot of ground around Islay, Colonsay and the waters off south Jura on wildlife and angling charters, and is therefore a good contact for HBDP. Both Louise Gregory of SNH (Bowmore), and Gus Newman (Port Ellen), a local boat builder and scallop diver, have good links with the community and should hear of any significant sightings.

In general, there is a relatively small network of observers in place on Islay and only a handful of marine wildlife operators compared to other islands. Also, some parts of the coastline, particularly in the north and west, are very sparsely populated, even by Hebridean standards, with an exposed topography not ideal for land based cetacean watching.

**Key contacts:** Fiona Macgillvery (IWIC), Gus Newman, Louise Gregory (SNH), Roger Eaton (Islay Marine Charters).

### 3.2. ARRAN



#### Summary

The Isle of Arran has had a relatively high concentration of bnd sightings in 2003/04, with often large groups of dolphins (25+) being reported year round at a number of different sites around the island. Recent hot spots have been on the west coast between Lochranza and Pirmill, and on the east coast, in and around Whiting Bay.

Groups of bnd are often seen very close to the shore on the West coast, the proximity of the main road to the shore making it an ideal platform for observing the behaviour of the dolphins at close quarters. This also provides a realistic chance of tracking groups by car as they travel up and down the Kilbrannan Sound (this has been done by local naturalist Fiona Laing on several occasions). Where groups are seen just feet from the shore - around Catacol and Pirmill in particular - there is considerable potential for taking photo-id shots. Fiona currently has a digital video camera with some footage of bnd behaviour around Arran, from May '04, and is very keen and willing to help with data collection in the future.

Calmac ferry staff on the Claonaig-Lochranza also reported seeing large groups of bnd, "every month or so", throughout 2003/2004, and offered to report any sightings in the future.

The NTS team at Brodick Castle are keen to maintain links with HWDT and keep a log of all reported cetacean sightings and strandings on record at their ranger station. It would be worthwhile to copy this backlog of sightings in the future.

There is also the opportunity to hire a self-drive dory in Lamlash, which in suitable weather conditions, could be used to take photo-id and track bnd movement from the water; a relatively cheap and logistically uncomplicated way to respond to sightings and carry out further research.

**Key contacts:** Fiona Laing, NTS Brodick Castle, Ferry staff (Claonaig-Lochranza).

### **3.3. KINTYRE (See 3.2.ARRAN Map for contacts)**

#### **Summary**

Kintyre also had consistent bnd sightings recently; I received a number of anecdotal sightings from locations on both sides of the peninsula. Locals on the east coast in Carradale, both at the beach campsite and the fishing pier, had seen a large group of 20+ bnd close to the shore, as recently as “less than month ago” from 29/6/04. Campbeltown locals interviewed also reported a large group of 25+ bnds, including calves and juveniles, present for several hours in the town’s loch at around the same time. The authentication of these sightings and accurate dates would obviously be very useful, but the evidence available does seem to suggest at least one large group of bnd are travelling regularly around the south east coast of Kintyre in both directions.

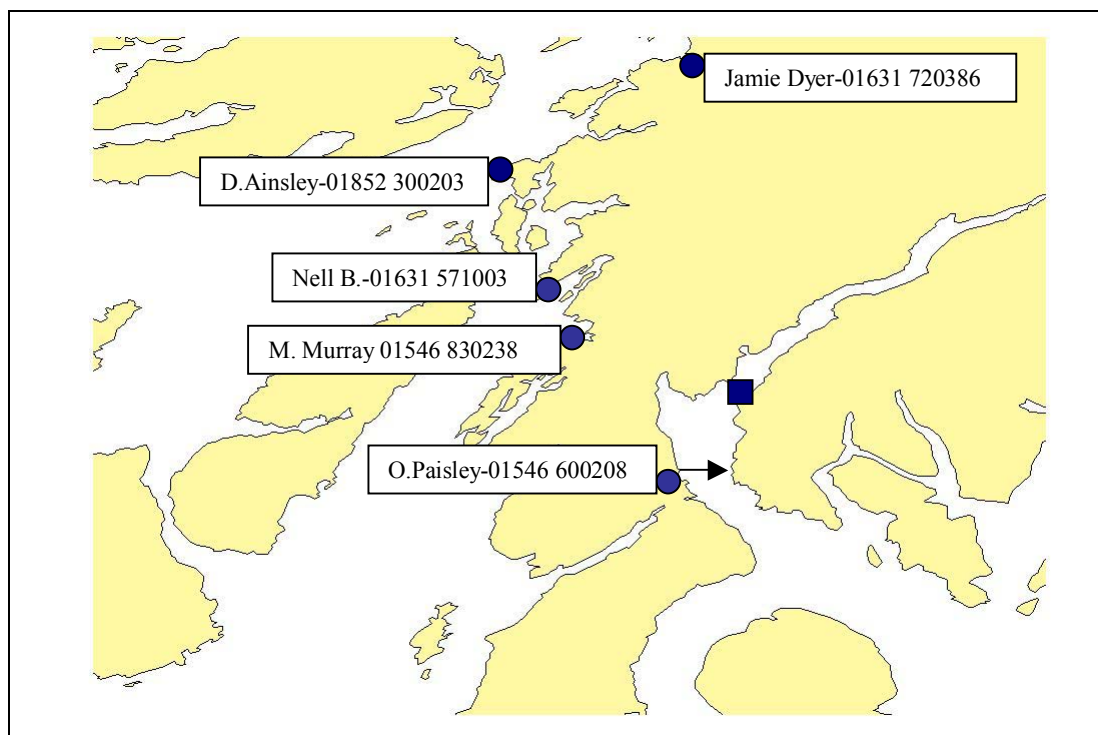
The discovery of the Seabird Observatory at Machrihanish, and warden Eddie Maguire, was a major bonus in being able to study bnd movement around south Kintyre. The observatory is open 10 hours a day, 7 days a week from April-October as a sea-watching station. In the past, Eddie has seen groups of bnd feeding around the rocks in front of the hide, and may have witnessed some interesting herding behaviour. An experienced naturalist, Eddie is willing to keep a log of all sightings, and contact HWDT when bnd sightings occur. Moving north, I visited Muasdale and the local shop owner who had seen a group of 12 bnd from Glenbarr in January 04. He proudly showed me a thirty year old picture of a bnd he had photographed, breaching next to a boat off Muasdale. It was clearly a very treasured possession.

Ferry staff on the Tayinloan-Gigha crossing reported seeing “a very large group, between 20 or 30 bnd”, playing and feeding near their vessel sometime between 22-29<sup>th</sup> June.

On the morning of July 1<sup>st</sup> I had my first personal sighting in Kintyre of c8 bnd from Kilberry campsite. Staff at the campsite were very enthusiastic and have fairly regular sightings of bnd; they are keen to relay any to HWDT in the future. To prove this, they contacted HWDT recently to report a group of 12 bnd in the area from 31/7 to 3/8.

**Key contacts:** Eddie Maguire - Machrihanish Seabird Observatory (MSO), Mull of Kintyre Seatours (MKST), Port Ban (PB) campsite (Kilberry).

### 3.4. ARGYLL (Kennacraig -Oban)



#### Summary

As with Kintyre, groups of bnd have been reported at several points on both the east and west coasts of Argyll. On the east coast, a number of people interviewed in Tarbert reported seeing a large group of 30-40 bnd, feeding and breaching close to the towns east pier (approximately 15/6/04) for several hours. The ferry crew on the Tarbert - Portavadie crossing were enthusiastic about the same sighting; they also noted very large quantities of herring and mackerel in the Loch at the time. There have been reports of bnd in Loch Fyne as far up as Otter Ferry (marked with square) in the east. Owen Paisley, a regular contact of HWDT, has noted a narrowing in the loch around this area, where bnd may be using a channel, created by opposing sand banks, to herd and funnel herring and other prey species. A regular sailor in Hebridean waters, Owen has logger software on board his yacht and is happy to be contacted for sightings.

Mike Murray, skipper of Gemini Cruises and water taxi, is based at Crinan Harbour and runs tours around Loch Craignish, and to the Sound of Jura. He is a very useful contact for the waters off the east coast of Jura, an area which is very sparsely populated and difficult to cover. The loch manager at the Crinan canal, Liz ?, reported a memorable sighting of 25+ bnd, playing and milling in front of the canal gates in July of 2003, and promised to make contact with any further sightings.

In Ardfern, no sightings were reported by locals during my visit. The HBDP does have a good contact there however. Nell Buchanan, who works in the chandlers and boat yard in Ardfern marina, often receives anecdotal sightings from local and visiting sailors. Nell worked as a HBDP volunteer on Islay in 2002, and can be contacted regarding sightings, and also to distribute sightings cards and information for HWDT.



Other useful contacts in the Argyll area:

- David Ainsley- Runs Sealife-Adventures (formerly Porpoise Dive Charters) from Balvicar Bay on Seil Island. Cruises around Corryvreckan and the Garvellachs.
- Jamie Dyer- Senior Aquarist at Oban Sealife Centre; BDMLR regional coordinator, and has had bnd sightings in Loch Creran in the past. Very helpful.

There are other operators and potential contacts for this area shown in the information appendix; some of these could be approached in future to improve the Argyll sightings network.

**Key contacts:** David Ainsley, Owen Paisley, Mike Murray (Gemini Cruises), Nell Buchanan, Jamie Dyer.

### **3.5. MALLAIG, ARISAIG & THE SMALL ISLES\* (See 3.7. Skye Map) (\* not including Rhum and Canna)**

#### **Summary**

Mallaig was the first place where no new contacts were successfully made for the HBDP. I spoke to several people in the town, but in general gained no information. In Arisaig, however, the skipper of the MV Shearwater (Small Isles passenger ferry and tours), Ronnie Dyer, has been sending cetacean sightings to The Seawatch Foundation for some time now, and is very helpful. He has kept the HBDP informed of all bnd sightings, in and around the Sound of Arisaig and Mallaig, since our meeting on July 6<sup>th</sup>, and will hopefully continue to keep us informed in the future. The Shearwater sails primarily from Arisaig to Eigg and Muck, with occasional sailings to Rhum, through out the summer season.

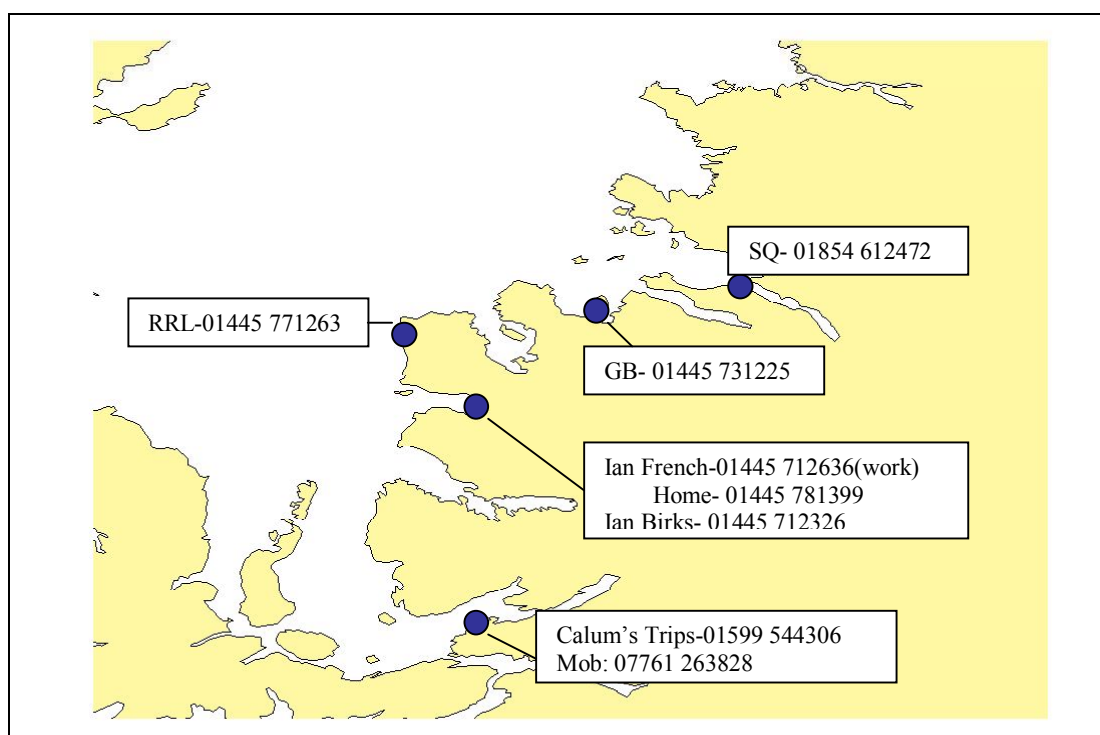
While there are no marine wildlife tours operating out of Eigg, there are several locals who are frequent boat users, and therefore see cetaceans on a fairly regular basis. Ian Lever, the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust Project Officer, has good links with many people on the island, and is a boat owner himself. Ian would like to maintain links with the trust; the possibility of a school visit from Silurian, presentations, and the need for marine interpretation on the island were discussed during my visit. These would be good to follow up. Other contacts made on Eigg were:

- Eric Weldon; husband of the island's G.P.- is on call with a RIB for medical emergencies and often sees cetaceans around the Small Isles.
- Angus; The only creel fisherman on the isle - a keen observer who has quite regular sightings, particularly north of Rhum and Muck.
- John Chester; The Scottish Wildlife Trust's Warden on Eigg – conducts a number of wildlife surveys around the isle, and sea watches from a hide at Kildonnán which looks out over the Sound of Eigg and the Maxwell Banks.

No contacts were made on Muck, but some of the residents were aware of HWDT, and now have sightings cards and information relating to cetaceans. As with Eigg, the locals were very enthusiastic about the work of the trust and keen to find out more. Again, it would be very positive to arrange a visit with Silurian at some point in the future.

**Key contacts:** Ronnie Dyer, Ian Lever, Eric Weldon, Angus, John Chester, CAMAS (Community Action on Muck for all Seasons) The Square, Isle of Muck, PH41 2RP.

### 3.6. WESTER ROSS



#### Summary

Despite being one of the more remote areas of Scotland, Wester Ross is home to some marine operators that have been helpful contacts for the project so far. The crew of Summer Queen cruises in Ullapool, who run day sailings around Loch Broom and the Summer Isles, are one such contact. They are positive and helpful when contacted about sightings, and recently sent some useful bnd dorsal fin images which have been added to the HBDP database.

It was also interesting to note that, when interviewed, the Summer Queen crew expressed concern at an apparent rise in seasonal water temperatures that they had observed, and noted that sightings of harbour porpoise and certain seabirds (in particular gannets and puffins) in the area have decreased significantly in the last two years. This issue obviously requires some further

investigation. As with some of the other areas covered, there have been occasional sightings of a large family group of around 30 bnd (most recent on 4/7/04) in Loch Broom, and along the north coast of Wester Ross. The warden at Gruinard Bay campsite reported no sightings in 2004, but did recall watching a large group of bnd for several hours in the bay in August of 2003, and also occasional sightings of a large group in previous years. Other recent sightings of bnd have been recorded in Little Loch Broom, Loch Torridon and Loch Ewe; these have been added to the HBDP database.

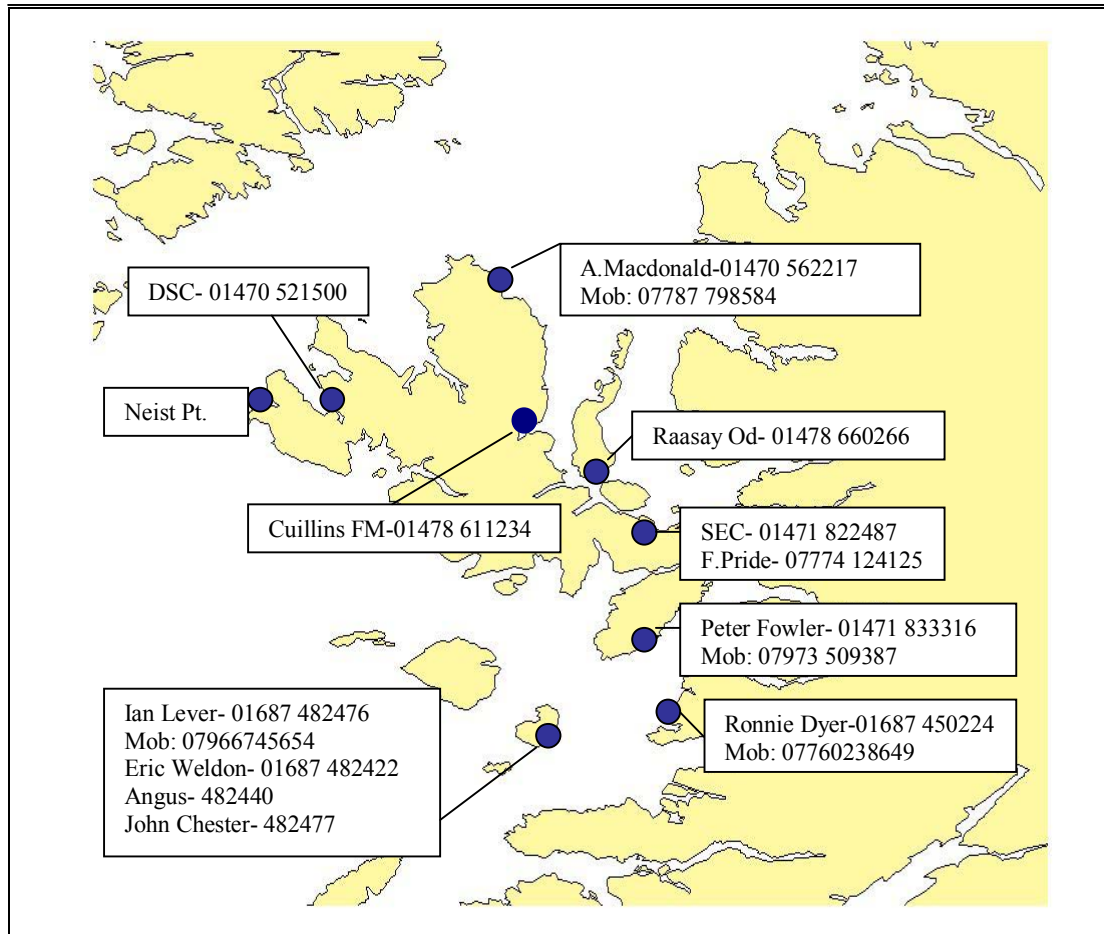
Cetacean activity in and around the Loch Gairloch area has been well monitored for several years. Ian Birks, a co-founder of SMWOA (Scottish Marine Wildlife Operators Association), has, until recently, been studying the resident harbour porpoises in the Loch, working closely with Dr. Peter Evans and the Seawatch Foundation. This survey work and associated business, Gairloch Marine Life Centre and Cruises, has been recently taken over by Ian French. Ian is very enthusiastic about having strong links with HWDT. During the winter months he is currently involved with providing marine education at local schools, and would like to work with the trust on this if possible.

Just north of Gairloch lies Rua Reidh Lighthouse, which provides another excellent vantage point for land based cetacean surveys. A useful contact for the future, the number is shown above, with further details in the appendix.

A popular marine operator in Plockton, Calum Mackenzie, runs seal trips around Loch Carron in south Wester Ross. Calum and his first mate, Jan Storie, have sent bnd sightings and photographs to the HBDP. They have been very helpful contacts for the project, and hopefully good links can be maintained in the future.

**Key contacts:** Summer Queen Cruises (SQ), Gruinard Bay (GB) campsite, Rua Reidh Lighthouse (RRL), Ian French, Ian Birks, Calum Mackenzie.

### 3.7. SKYE



#### Summary

Skye has, along with the Isle of Mull, perhaps the greatest number of marine wildlife operators of all the Hebridean islands. Similarly, sightings of bnd have been fairly common around the island in the last two years; this fact may be a reflection of the amount of boat effort in the area. The close proximity of relatively large population and tourist centres, such as Portree and Broadford, to bays where bnd have been observed, may also be a factor in the number of reported sightings.

The north and east coasts of Skye account for the highest percentage of bnd sightings, with various group sizes (up to 30+) being recorded. There are occasional records and anecdotal accounts of activity around the Lochs and inlets of the west coast. Unfortunately there are very few contacts in this area at present; it would be useful to increase the focus on this part of the island in the future.

The main source of sightings information is the Skye Environmental Centre in Broadford. They keep a log of all cetacean activity reported; staff have good links with the local boat operators (particularly Family's Pride) and fishermen who provide the bulk of this data. On the eastern side of the Sound of

Raasay, staff at the Isle of Raasay Outdoor Centre said they regularly observe groups of bnd, but couldn't offer any more information at the time of writing. Angus Macdonald, who runs Staffin Bay Cruises, also reported a group of 20+ bnd in Staffin Bay on the 4/7/04. Both are happy to be contacted in future regarding sightings.

Staff at the seal colony in Loch Dunvegan also mentioned fairly regular bnd encounters, the last around 6/7/04, and are willing to report further sightings. Neist Point is well known as a good location for land based sea watching. The caretakers of the lighthouse at Neist reported seeing cetaceans on a regular basis, but were unable to identify anything accurately, or provide any contact information. The Point could provide an excellent base for conducting a thorough land based survey of the area; the site offers a good elevation and near-complete views of the Little Minch, Cuillin Sound and the Sea of the Hebrides.

Peter Fowler, owner and skipper of Seafari in Armadale, provides regular updates on all sightings, and works closely with Ronnie Dyer in Arisaig when sightings occur. He is currently in regular contact with HWDT regarding sightings in the Sound of Sleat. The warden at Armadale Youth Hostel, Joanna Whysall, also records sightings and is a keen observer of cetaceans in the Sound.

Susanne Arnold, centre manager of the Eilean Ban Trust in Kyleakin, is very keen to forge links with HWDT. She is particularly enthusiastic about the idea of a community presentation from the trust; Phil Johnston did have a talk here planned prior to leaving the trust. An HWDT interview on Cuillins FM (telephone interviews are possible), a recently established local radio station on Skye, could also be used to further raise the profile of the HBDP and HWDT on the island.

**Key contacts:** Skye Environmental Centre (SEC), Peter Fowler (Seafari), Angus Macdonald (Staffin Bay Cruises), Family's Pride, Dunvegan Seal Colony (DSC), Raasay Outdoor centre.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Sightings of bottlenose dolphins around the Hebrides are notoriously difficult to predict. The topography of the area, lack of access and remoteness of much of the human population makes it difficult, not only to locate groups of bnd, but also to track their movements successfully once they have been discovered.

As already stated, the role of HBDP Field Agent was initially designed to aid in the collection of bnd photo-id and other relevant data, and to improve on the existing sightings network by visiting operators. The job description was modified, after discussion with staff and directors, to include a more dedicated awareness-raising element for HWDT as a whole.

The Field Agent post has provided both the HBDP, and HWDT, with sightings information, and an external perspective of the trust, that would have been difficult to attain without personal visits to the areas covered in this report.

By distributing sightings posters and meeting with the public, boat operators, and relevant n.g.o.'s around the Hebrides, the network of people reporting sightings of bnd, and other cetaceans has been enhanced.

Sightings of bnd have definitely been recorded on a much broader scale, and from more varied locations, than in previous years; this fact will be shown in the Community Sightings report for 2004.

Sightings collected may often have been vague with imprecise dates, but in general they have increased our knowledge and understanding of bnd distribution around the study area.

Improving awareness of the trust has encouraged individuals that may otherwise have been unaware of HWDT, to report sightings. The number of people that have phoned in using the sightings free phone number, and mentioned seeing posters requesting sightings information, has been very encouraging.

Marine wildlife tour operators are on the increase through out the Hebrides, and this no doubt brings with it an increase in effort, and subsequently more cetacean related data available. Hopefully HWDT can continue to tap into this vital information, and continue to improve on the positive links, good will, and consistent dialogue being fostered by present members of staff.

Several new contacts have been discovered and, presuming that good links are maintained with these people and organisations, the coverage of the sightings network and general work of the trust can continue to be improved in the future.

## **Acknowledgements**

A huge thank you to all who have helped me along the way;

To WWF for funding, absolutely everybody at HWDT and Sealife Surveys respectively,, Tom and Kath, everyone on the Silurian bnd monitoring trip; Duncan, Davey and Ali, Mike and Paul, Fiona Laing, Fiona Macgillvery, Lindy Maclellan, Ronnie Dyer, Peter Fowler, Jamie Dyer, Ian Lever, Eric Weldon and everyone I met on Eigg, the lady who lent me her push bike on Muck!, Annette Mckay at Summer Queen Cruises, Stuart Mackinnon and the Gibson family for the loan of the shed and of course, Morrison, my trusty van.