



Otters favour sheltered, relatively undisturbed stretches of rocky coastline with offshore kelp

Otters

Shetland is home to an internationally important population of Otters, numbering about 1000. Until about 40 years ago Otters were hunted for their fur. Otter houses (traps), well built stone structures placed strategically above the high tide mark, can still be seen today, but without the trap door of course!

Shetland Otters are active by day and if you watch patiently you should be rewarded with good views of these fascinating animals. Remember to walk into the wind, as Otters have a keen sense of smell and continue to look well ahead for signs of movement. The best time to look is either side of low tide when they are busy hunting among the kelp beds using their sensitive whiskers to locate prey. The animals soon habituate to man and the ferry terminals at Toft and Gutcher are good places to see them. In winter and spring mother and cubs (usually one or two) can often be seen together. Cubs are born blind and do not leave the natal holt until they are about two months old when their mother takes them for their first dip in the sea. Some eight months later the family will split up.

An Otter house – once used as a trap



Code of Conduct

- Keep your boat at least 30m from cetaceans and never approach them directly.
- Do not touch live stranded cetaceans, report to the SSPCA (Tel: 01595 840321) or SNH (Tel: 01595 693345)
- Do not disturb seals when they are out of the water or with pups.
- Do not touch dead seals or cetaceans due to risk of infection from them.
- It is an offence to wilfully disturb Otters at their holt.

Cetacean Sightings

The Shetland Biological Records Centre and other bodies are trying to find out more about Shetland's cetaceans.

Please forward details of the date, location, species, number and a brief description of the animals, and photographs or video if available to: Shetland Amenity Trust, Garthspool, Lerwick, ZE1 0NY. Tel: 01595 694688

Shetland names:

Shetland name	Common name
<i>Dratsi</i>	Otter
<i>Neesick</i>	Harbour Porpoise
<i>Selkie</i>	Seal
<i>Caain whale</i>	Pilot Whale
<i>Herring hog</i>	Minke Whale



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Sea Mammals

heritage
Shetland
culture

Dratsies, Neesicks and Selkies



Introduction

Shetland is surrounded by rich and productive seas, which provide food for a greater diversity of marine mammals than found anywhere else in the British Isles. Common Seals and Otters frequent sheltered voes, Grey Seals favour more exposed coasts, while whales and dolphins are often spotted passing headlands. The continental shelf is only some 30 miles to the west of Shetland so even cetaceans normally associated with deep water can occasionally stray inshore.



A pod of migrating sperm whales alongside the MV Good Shepherd



Minke Whale – the dorsal fin is set well back on the body

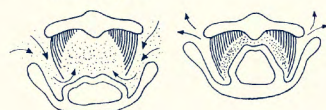


Left: Common Seals basking at low tide Right: Bull Grey Seal

There are two types of whale – toothed whales and baleen whales. Toothed whales (including porpoises and dolphins) may have as many as 120 teeth, as in white-sided dolphin, or as few as 4 in Risso's Dolphin. The number is related to diet. All toothed whales use echo-location to locate their prey, eyes are of limited use except in the sunlit surface layers of the sea. Baleen Whales feed by trawling through the sea, forcing large quantities of water through dense fibrous baleen plates that line their jaws like brushes. The fibres trap small organisms which the animal scrapes off with its tongue and swallows.



Baleen plate



Water being forced through the baleen plates, trapping small organisms which form the baleen whales' diet

The Harbour Porpoise is the smallest and most frequently seen cetacean in Shetland. Usually all that is seen is the short triangular fin breaking the surface of the water. Dolphins are larger than porpoises and have taller dorsal fins that are distinctly hooked back.

Whales, Porpoises and Dolphins

A sighting of a whale or school of dolphins provides the ultimate wildlife thrill for many people. Twenty-two species of cetacean have been recorded in Shetland although a handful of these have occurred very rarely or only as stranded corpses.

Killer Whale – the tall, straight fin indicates that this is a bull



White-Beaked Dolphin – showing the pale saddle



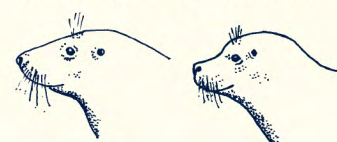
Seals

Two species of seal breed in Shetland, the Common or Harbour Seal and the Grey Seal. The population of both species now numbers around 3,000 – 3,500.

Shetland's Common Seal population is internationally important and represents 20% of the British total. Both species were hunted for their fur in the recent past. In the late 1960s as many as 1,000 Common Seal pups a year were being taken. This was unsustainable. The population went into steep decline and in 1973 legislation was introduced to ban hunting of Common Seals in Shetland. Their numbers then recovered and reached a peak of 6,000 in the 1990s, but have since undergone another steep decline.

Grey Seals continued to be exploited into the 1980s but at much lower levels. Today both are protected during a close season.

Both species can often be seen together at Mousa, Scatness or Sumburgh Head when identification is not always straightforward.



Seal profiles: Note the Grey's roman nose and the Common's more dog-like profile

Mousa Sound – a good place to look for sea mammals



An explorer's guide to Shetland's sea mammals



Killer Whales, or Orcas, are often seen in Shetland during the summer months. They are most frequently seen from Sumburgh Head and in Mousa Sound, where they feed on shoaling fish and hunt seals.

White-Beaked Dolphins (pictured overleaf) are the most commonly encountered dolphin, and are identified by the diagnostic white beak and pale saddle behind the dorsal fin. They are often seen in late summer from the MV Good Shepherd as it plies between Grutness and Fair Isle.

White-Sided Dolphins, usually a deeper water species, lack the pale saddle shown by the White-Beaked. In late summer, small groups occasionally enter voes such as Weisdale and Whiteness, remaining for several days if sufficient food is present.



Grey Seals pup in October, on exposed, inaccessible beaches. The pup's fluffy white coat is moulted after a month and they can then enter the sea. Grey Seal milk is 50% fat and pups grow very quickly, being weaned at about three weeks having gained 15-45 kg in weight - an energy intake equivalent to approximately 70 cream buns per day! Whilst females are busy suckling young, the dominant male patrols the beach looking after his harem. He will attempt to mate with all his females about three weeks after they give birth. The fertilised egg is implanted three months later and the foetus starts to develop.



Watching sea mammals

When watching seals and Otters, remain quiet and stay close to the ground to minimise disturbance and to get the best views.

Looking for whales and dolphins requires patience and a great deal of luck. A high vantage point and calm sea increase the chances of success. Look carefully for tell-tale signs - fins breaking the surface or a whale blow. Once you spot a cetacean you will probably need binoculars to identify it. When trying to identify whales and dolphins, the key features to note are the shape of the dorsal fin, its position relevant to the body, the head shape, general colour and pattern, length, presence and shape of blow.

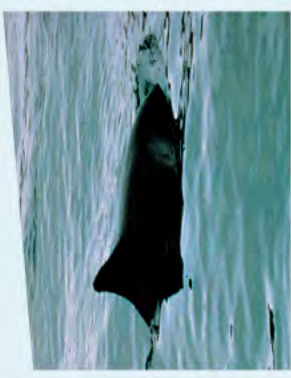
Remember that in Shetland anything is possible. Beluga, Sperm Whale and Fin Whale have all been seen here in recent years.



The two species of seals have quite different social calendars. Common Seals pup in June in sheltered coastal areas. Pups are able to swim soon after birth and are weaned at about 6 weeks.



The Minke Whale is the commonest baleen whale in Shetland waters. Up to eight metres long, they are frequently seen from Sumburgh Head in June and between Fetlar, Whalsay and Skerries during July and August. The tall sickle-shaped fin is situated well back on the blackish body and the blow is rarely seen.



Mousa, Noss and Yell Sounds are all good places to look for the Harbour Porpoise. Their numbers increase in summer when animals move inshore, often accompanied by newly born calves. They feed on shoaling fish especially sandeels.



Pilot Whales used to be a much more common sight in Shetland and herds were once actively caa'd (driven ashore) and killed, as remains the case in Faroe today. The largest known caa was at Quendale in the south mainland when 1540 animals were driven ashore. The last was at Weisdale in 1903 when 83 were killed.



Risso's Dolphins are distinctive if seen well as they lack a beak and often look pale grey. Two other dolphin species, Common and Striped, are rare visitors to Shetland normally being found in warmer waters.



In most of Europe, Otters are freshwater animals but in Shetland they have adapted to a marine lifestyle. The sea provides a plentiful supply of their favourite foods, fish and crabs. Freshwater is also crucial to wash salt out of their coats. This maintains the waterproofing and insulative qualities of the fur.