



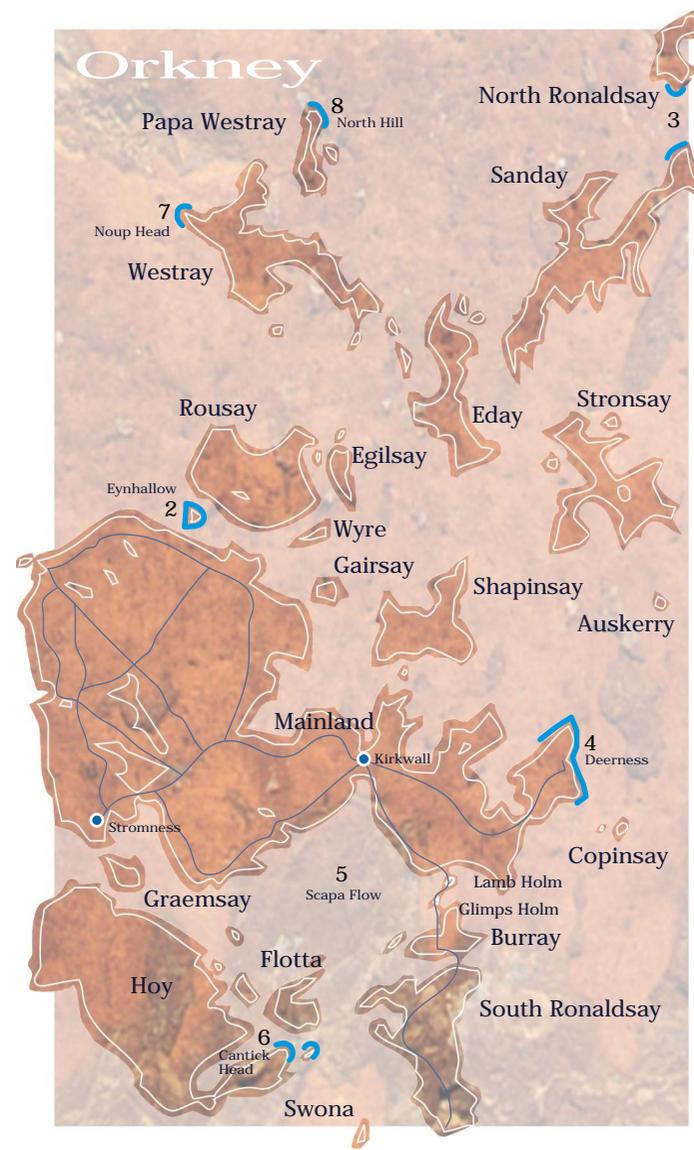
grey seal pup



minke whale



grey seal bull



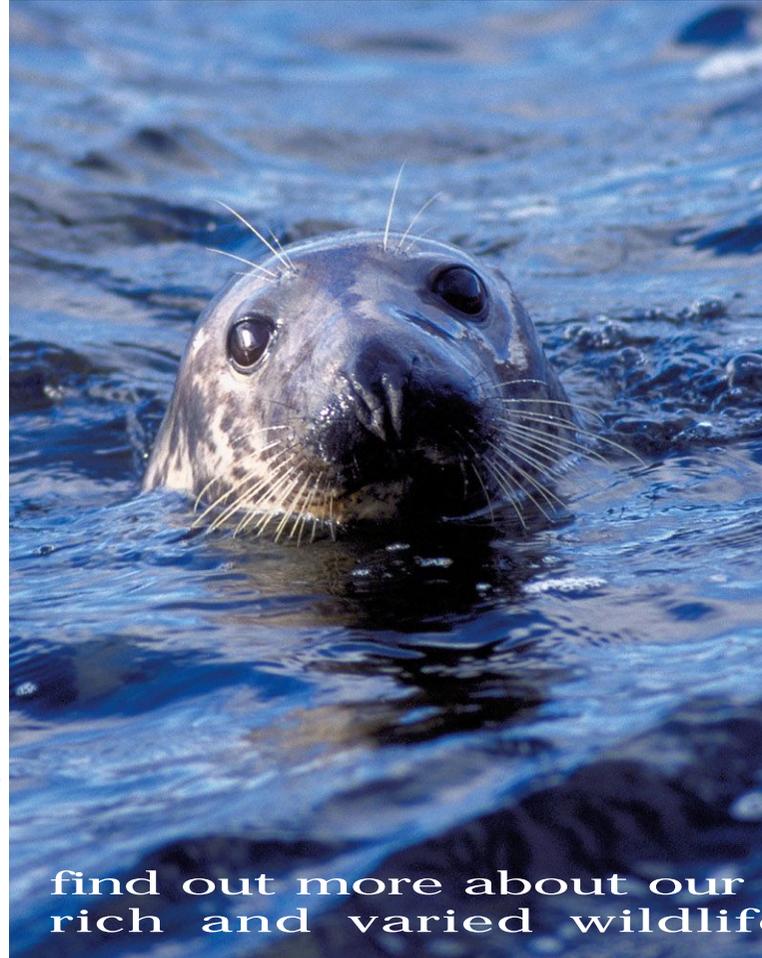
guidance for visitors

Please remember:

- To take care on the cliffs as they can be dangerous
- To avoid disturbing nesting birds
- To keep dogs under control at all times
- To take your litter home with you
- Not to pick wild flowers
- Respect private property



Orkney's Seals and Cetaceans



cover images: top bottle-nosed dolphin bottom grey seal design and illustration: Iain Ashman photography: Laurie Campbell, Lorne Gill (SNH), R. Holt (SNH/MNCP), Neil McIntyre, Sue Scott, David Whitaker

find out more about our rich and varied wildlife

Orkney's cetaceans

Eighteen different species of whale have been recorded off Orkney, but the ones you are most likely to see are minke whales, killer whales and pilot whales. Closer to shore, you may be lucky enough to spot the harbour porpoise, which often occurs in sheltered inlets.

There are two types of cetaceans: the toothed whales which include all the dolphins, porpoises and bigger whales with teeth, and the baleen whales, which feed on plankton. Plankton are the tiny plants and animals which float in the sea. Baleen whales have a series of horny plates which allow them to sieve seawater for plankton. However, some baleens, such as the minke whales, also feed on fish. Surprisingly, when you consider the size of their food, most of the world's large whales are baleens. Baleens tend to use temperate water, such as our own, in summer when the long daylight means an abundance of plankton, and then retreat to the tropics during winter.

Orkney has a long history of association with whales. At one time, whale strandings would have been a welcome additional food source and, historically, pods of small whales would have been driven onto shore. In the 19th century, whaling ships heading for the South Atlantic often took on Orkney sailors, who were renowned for their skill in small boats. The Stromness museum has a number of interesting items relating to the whaling industry from this period.



bottle-nosed dolphins

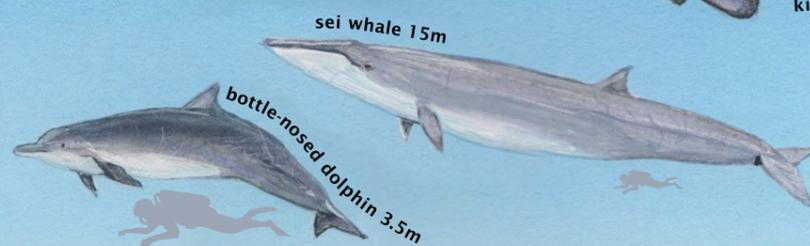
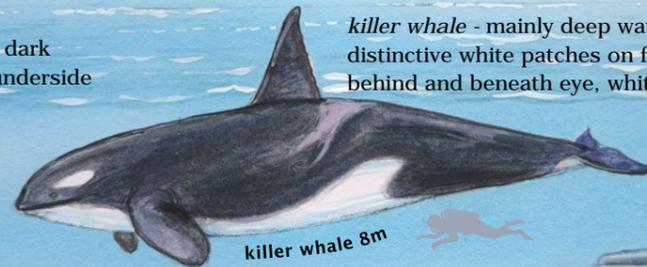
The waters around Deerness 4 and Scapa Flow 5 are among the frequent haunts of porpoises. Most common of the dolphins around Orkney is the white-beaked dolphin, but the white-sided dolphin and risso's dolphin are also present.

Cetaceans are the only mammals which are completely aquatic, living and breeding in water. They have lungs and require air to breathe. The cetacean group include the whales, the dolphins and the porpoises. The blue whale is the largest animal that has ever lived, and is over 30 metres long - although its cetacean cousin, the harbour porpoise, is only about a metre in length.

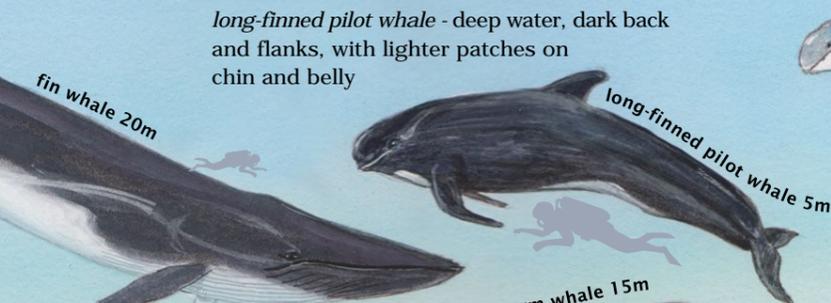
minke whale - shallow seas and deep water, dark colouration on back, changing to white on underside

killer whale - mainly deep water, distinctive white patches on flank, and behind and beneath eye, white belly

harbour porpoise - shallow seas, commonest cetaceans in British waters, no 'beak' to head

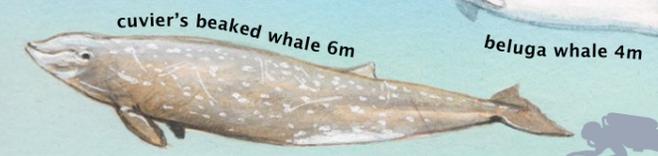
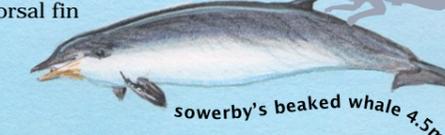
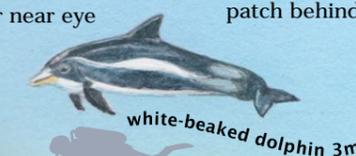


risso's dolphin - shallow seas and deep water, characteristic scratch markings on grey body



white-beaked dolphin - shallow seas and deep water, white over beak and flipper near eye

atlantic white-sided dolphin - deep water, distinctive oval patch behind dorsal fin



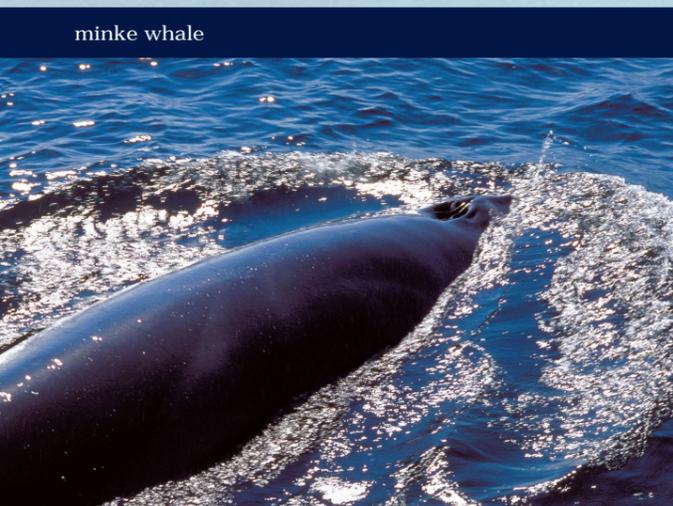
Lengths indicate an average size for each species

Toothed whales have a wider diet, including squid, octopus, fish and in one or two species, seals and even other whales. The largest toothed whale is the sperm whale. This is usually a deep water species, but occasionally individuals are seen closer to land. The sperm whale holds the cetacean record for deep water diving and is known to descend to more than 2000 metres to hunt for squid on the ocean floor.

There is no guarantee that you will see these creatures, but generally the west side of the islands is a more likely area to observe cetaceans. Places like Cantick head on Hoy 6, Noup Head on Westray 7 and North Hill on Papa Westray 8 may be fruitful. If you are travelling by sea, particularly across the Pentland Firth or to the northern islands, always keep a look out. Late summer offers the best opportunities for seeing whales and dolphins.

Cetaceans recorded in Orkney waters

blue whale	sowerby's beaked whale
beluga whale	killer whale
sperm whale	long-finned pilot whale
sei whale	atlantic white-sided dolphin
fin whale	white-beaked dolphin
minke whale	common dolphin
northern bottlenose whale	bottle-nosed dolphin
narwhal	risso's dolphin
cuvier's beaked whale	harbour porpoise



minke whale

Orkney's wildlife year

	january	february	march	april	may	june	july	august	september	october	november	december
common seals												
grey seals												
dolphins												
porpoises												
toothed whales												
baleen whales												

times of the year when these species are most commonly seen

Orkney's Seals and Cetaceans

Orkney seals

Orkney is home to both the grey seal and the common seal. These species belong to a group of animals called pinnipeds. This means 'winged feet' and refers to their flippers, which are specially adapted for life in the sea. There are at least 33 species of pinniped world-wide, including seals, sea lions, fur seals and walrus.



grey seal pup

Seals spend most of their time at sea, and might swim thousands of miles during their lives in search of food. They come ashore for three reasons: to breed, to moult, and to rest between fishing expeditions.

Their clumsiness on land belies their supreme elegance when swimming underwater, where they are skilled hunters of fish and other marine prey. Seals can dive for up to an hour at depths of more than 200 metres and even down to 500 metres without surfacing for breath.



grey seal

common seal

There are five races of common seal and Britain holds about 5% of the world population of this species and about 40% of the European subspecies. There is a minimum of 26,400 common seals around Scotland during the breeding season, although this number may be much higher. There are an estimated 7,100 common seals in Orkney.

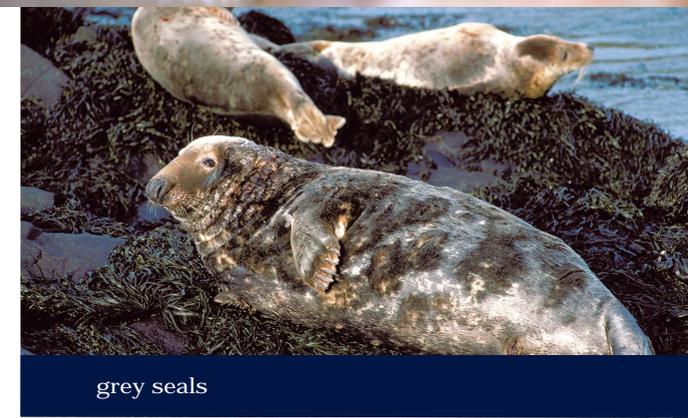
The breeding cycle of common seals is earlier than that of grey seals. They begin to arrive at the breeding grounds in June, and most births take place at the end of June and the beginning of July. Mating takes place when a cow has finished (or almost finished) suckling her calf.



common seal

Unlike the grey seal, the common seal is born with a grey-brown adult coat, having shed its white baby coat in its mother's womb. These pups can swim immediately.

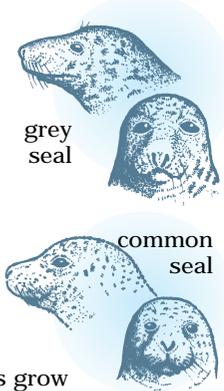
Important common seal haul-outs in Orkney include Switha **1**, Eynhallow **2** and the strait between Sanday and North Ronaldsay **3**. If you wish to see common seals, they haul out throughout the year and sheltered rocky bays often have groups of animals resting.



grey seals

grey seal

These can be identified by their longer straight 'Roman noses' and a head shaped more like a horse than the doglike one of the common seal. The coat tends to be light grey rather than being spotted all over and grey seals are also larger than common seals. The male seals grow to about 2.3 metres (7.5 feet), while females are smaller and average 1.8 metres (5.9 feet) in length. Around 36% of the world's population breeds around Britain and in the region of 17.5% of the world population of grey seals is found in Orkney. Orkney waters are home to at least 25,000 grey seals and there are an estimated 99,400 grey seals around the Scottish coast and islands.



grey seal

common seal

Grey seal cows give birth to a single white-coated pup in the autumn, starting in late September. The milk is incredibly rich and contains 60% fat, which ensures that by the end of the brief period of maternal care, the young have grown sufficiently to care for themselves. Three or four weeks after birth, the pup has moulted its coat and after a short period of fasting, heads out to sea on its own.



grey seal pup suckling