



Bay of  
PLENTY



THE SHALLOW WATERS AROUND MULL ARE FULL OF LIFE. THE AREA MADE A LASTING IMPRESSION ON PENNY BUNTING, AND COULD ALSO BE PART OF THE NEXT WAVE OF CONSERVATION LAW

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; HEBRIDEAN WHALE AND DOLPHIN TRUST; PENNY BUNTING; PAUL NAYLOR/SNH

THERE was quite a ripple of excitement around Oban Bay the day a sperm whale came to visit. Having taken a wrong turn, it found itself in the harbour and hung around for a week or so before heading back to deeper waters.

The world's largest predators – each is bigger than a bus – sperm whales are usually only seen in very deep water, where they dive down hundreds of metres to search for prey. The numerous sightings of this remarkable mammal in the shallows of Oban Bay in April last year were quite a talking point.

Equally unusual was the pod of 14 sperm whales spotted a mile offshore near the Firth of Forth, a few weeks later – the first close sighting of the species in that part of Scotland for 10 years.

The presence of the Oban whale was cause for concern as well as excitement. Whales often come close to shore when unwell, and can get stranded. But the creature seemed merely confused, and after 11 days it gracefully departed.

Less fortunate was the dead sperm whale washed up on the beach at Joppa, Edinburgh, in January this year. The 30-tonne animal had injuries suggesting it had been hit by boat propellers in deeper waters.

These extraordinary events highlight an important point: Scotland's coastal waters are teeming with life, and should be protected.

### Thrill

Last year the Scottish government proposed 33 Marine Protected Areas – an important first step in providing much-needed protection to Scotland's marine environment by preventing potentially destructive activities within these areas. More than 10,000 people from across Scotland supported the proposals during a public consultation, and an announcement is expected later this year about which of the protected areas will become reality.

One of the proposed Marine Protected Areas lies just off the Isle of Mull. The remarkable biodiversity that can be encountered there has spawned a multi-million pound eco-tourist industry, as visitors flock to the area to spot cetaceans – the collective name for whales,

dolphins and porpoises – and basking sharks.

Along with my husband and two children, aged 13 and 10, I was lucky enough to come face to face with some of Mull's marine wildlife when we set off from Tobermory aboard Sea Life Surveys' vessel, *Sula Beag*, on a four-hour wildlife adventure.

As we cruised out from the colourful harbour, our guides Ewan and Ruth explained how to recognise the seabirds that swooped around the boat: guillemots, gannets and shags were some of the species the children learned to identify.

Ruth told us to keep a careful eye on what the birds were doing. Groups of different species on the surface could indicate that marine wildlife is nearby: manx shearwater or kittiwakes may mean that minke whales are close, while diving gannets are often fishing for mackerel, a favourite food of dolphins.

As we reached the end of the Ardnamurchan peninsula – an area of the mainland so remote that the school run involves a ferry ride across the bay to Tobermory – two pairs of fins were spotted. They belonged to basking sharks – the second largest fish in the world after the whale shark.

Basking sharks can grow up to 12 metres long and weigh over six tons, and the best way to appreciate their immensity is aboard a small vessel such as the *Sula Beag*. The boat's engines were cut, we drifted silently through the water, and all on board watched apprehensively as the two sharks drew closer.

Even though basking sharks are completely harmless to humans – they eat only plankton – there is still a thrill of danger as one approaches, the sight of those fins causing the heart to quicken.

While one of the sharks chose to swim around us, the second decided to swim right under the boat. A basking shark uses its gills to filter an Olympic swimming pool volume of seawater every hour, consuming up to 30kg of microscopic plankton a day.

As the shark swam under us we had an amazing view of its metre-wide mouth, opened to collect as **D**

A sperm whale, left, has been perhaps the most dramatic visitor to Oban Bay, but Tobermory, above, was the starting point for a wildlife cruise that provided its fair share of excitement, too





**D**much plankton as possible and glowing with a strange pale blue luminosity under the water. Then it disappeared beneath the boat, emerged on the other side, and swam off without so much as a backwards glance.

Basking sharks travel huge distances each year, and have even been known to cross the Atlantic. They visit UK waters in spring and summer, appearing first in Cornwall, and arriving in Scotland around mid-May. The seas around Mull are particularly rich in plankton, so make an ideal feeding ground.

We saw many other creatures that morning: a pair of harbour porpoises, the distant spout of a minke whale, grey seals, white-tailed sea eagles and countless other sea birds. But the close encounter with the basking shark was the highlight of the trip, and something we won't forget in a hurry.

**Vital**

Sea Life Surveys works closely with the charity Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, helping to collect data about the wildlife living in the seas around Mull.

From its research yacht, *Silurian*, the Trust carries out pioneering studies in the Hebridean waters – over the past 10 years, *Silurian* has travelled more than 61,000km from Islay to Cape Wrath and west of the Western Isles.

This area is one of Europe's most important habitats for cetaceans. The long and complex coastline, interaction of currents and wide variety of habitats combine to provide a rich and diverse environment for marine life. The range of species that are regularly sighted is aston-

ishing: minke whales, orcas, basking sharks, dolphins and porpoises are just a few of the animals known to inhabit these waters. In total, 24 species of cetacean have been recorded in the region, along with numerous sea birds.

The *Silurian* crew relies on volunteers to help gather comprehensive data about the area's marine life – and volunteering gives people an opportunity to develop new skills, work alongside marine scientists and visit some of the most remote and wild parts of the British Isles.

The charity's research has revealed a resident population of 55 bottlenose dolphins, Europe's highest density of harbour porpoises and the UK's only resident population of killer whales. The region is also home to around 10,000 basking sharks.

"The impressive range of cetaceans and basking sharks that we documented last year highlights the wealth of marine life in Scotland's west coast ocean environment," says Kerry Froud, the Trust's biodiversity officer.

Dorsal fin photography is used to identify and track individual animals. Each animal is unique and has distinct nicks and markings that distinguish it from others – a little like human fingerprints. Recordings of the high-frequency sounds made by harbour porpoises and white-beaked dolphins are also collected.

This information helps to build an understanding of the movement and behaviour of these creatures –

Clockwise from top: a pod of common dolphin; a basking shark; crew of the Sea Life Surveys vessel *Sula Beag*; a lesser black-backed gull





“THE RANGE OF SPECIES THAT ARE REGULARLY SIGHTED IS EXTRAORDINARY – MINKE WHALES, ORCAS, BASKING SHARKS, DOLPHINS, PORPOISES”



about which little was previously known. Findings support effective conservation and future management of cetacean populations, as well as contributing to the Trust’s education work.

And, perhaps most importantly, the data is used to inform policy makers and make recommendations for effective marine management. Marine ecosystems are fragile, and cetaceans face increasing stress from human activities including climate change, pollution and habitat degradation.

In coming years, white-beaked dolphin, minke whale and basking shark will have specific management plans based on data collected by the Trust, to ensure their continued survival in the area.

#### Sightings

The good news for seasickness sufferers is that you don’t have to take to the water to experience marine life. There are many spots around the region’s coastline where walkers and cyclists may glimpse incredible wildlife.

Recommended places include Ardnamurchan Point, for minke whales and dolphins; Tobermory Lighthouse, on Mull, for harbour porpoises; and Canna Harbour for basking sharks. From Neist Point, on Skye, it may be possible to see any of the cetaceans that regularly visit the region.

Through its Community Sightings Network, the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust welcomes reports of cetacean sightings from residents and visitors – data collected this way is useful for monitoring distribution

rates year on year. Sightings can be reported via the charity’s website or in person at its Tobermory headquarters.

All sightings are also used by the Sea Watch Foundation ([www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk](http://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk)), a national charity improving protection of cetaceans in British and Irish waters. Gazing out to sea has always been an excellent way to spend time – and now it’s even more worthwhile. ■

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#### SEE FOR YOURSELF

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Sea Life Surveys offers a range of cruises, from a 30-minute Wildlife Taster to the full-day Whalewatch Explorer. [www.sealifesurveys.com](http://www.sealifesurveys.com)

The Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust welcomes volunteers to join cetacean surveys on *Silurian*. You can also help by sponsoring a whale or dolphin, and by reporting sightings at the charity’s HQ in Tobermory. [www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk](http://www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk)

Another source of information on cetaceans is WDC, Whale and Dolphin Conservation. [uk.whales.org](http://uk.whales.org)

Forestry Commission Scotland has a printable Forests of Mull leaflet, including the shore walk at Ardmore, where seals, otters and sea eagles may be seen. [www.forestry.gov.uk/scotland](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/scotland)

The Isle of Mull Cycling Club’s website gives recommended routes around the island. [www.isleofmullcyclingclub.co.uk](http://www.isleofmullcyclingclub.co.uk)

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