

all about

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DOLPHINS

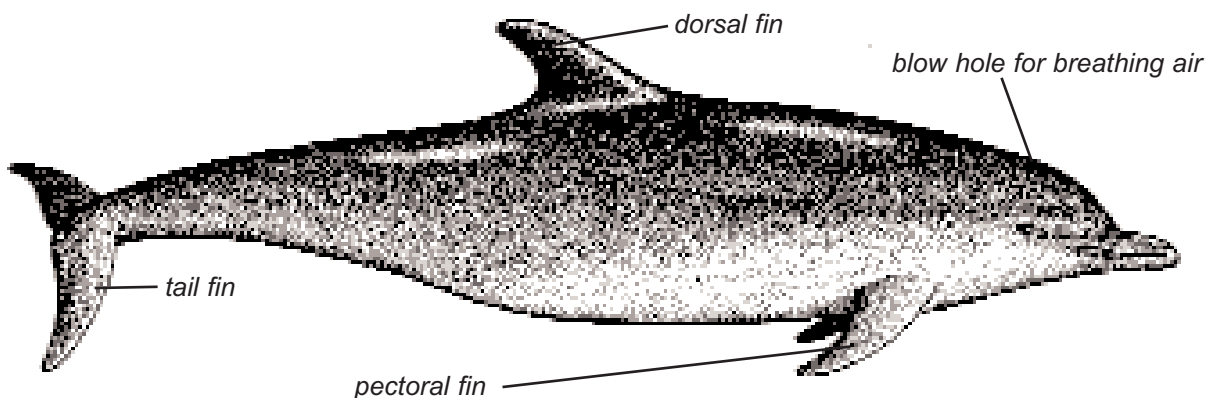
Tursiops truncatus

Dolphins like all other mammals breathe air, are warm blooded and give birth to live young which feed on their mother's milk.

The bodies of dolphins have become well adapted for life in water. They have a torpedo shaped, streamlined body. They have no hind legs and instead of front legs have flippers which they use for balance and steering. Their powerful horizontal tail moves up and down, unlike that of a fish which moves from side to side. Dolphin's nostrils are on top of their head in the form of a blowhole. As they swim along they leap out of the water to take breaths of fresh air.

Dolphins do not have fur to keep them warm but instead have a layer of fat called blubber.

The dolphins living in the Moray Firth have received a lot of publicity and they are often seen from the shore. These are bottlenose dolphins. Bottlenose dolphins are about 4m long and weigh up to 275kg. The males are larger than the females. They have a short 'beak' and a tall fin which curves backwards in the centre of their backs. They are a greyish or brown colour with a paler belly. They are slow swimmers but often leap right out of the water.



Many other kinds of dolphin are found around Scotland. These include common, white beaked and Risso's dolphins.

Harbour porpoises are sometimes confused with dolphins but they are much smaller measuring not much more than a metre. They have small triangular fins on their backs unlike those of dolphins which are slightly curved. They also have short blunt heads with no forehead or beak.

What do they eat?

Dolphins eat squid and many kinds of fish including salmon, sea trout, cod, herring, mullet and eels. They catch their food in their sharp teeth. Dolphins sometimes hunt as a group, herding their prey together at the surface.

Lifestyle

Dolphins are nearly always found in family groups called schools. There are usually up to 10 dolphins in a school although sometimes they are much larger. Dolphins give birth to a single calf every few years. Sometimes other females in a group or 'aunts' help a mother to care for her calf. They help at the birth and 'baby-sit' while the mother is feeding. The mother and calf remain together for many years. Adult males may join family groups but they usually stay together in bachelor groups.

Dolphins communicate with whistles, groans, chirps and clicks. By listening to and interpreting the echoes of their own clicks dolphins can tell the shape of an object and how far away it is. This lets

them know if something is in their way so that they can swim round it. It also tells them what kind of prey is in the area and where it is.

Where do they live?

Bottlenose dolphins are mainly found in shallow water and, apart from the group in the Moray Firth, are uncommon around Scotland. Common dolphins, white sided dolphins and striped dolphins are found in deep water. White beaked dolphins and Risso's dolphins are found in both deep and shallow water.

Apart from the Moray Firth, the best spots for finding dolphins around Scotland are off the west and north coast, especially around the Hebrides and Orkney and Shetland.

Humans and dolphins

Dolphins are less common around the coast of Scotland than they were in the past. They are now protected by law and may not be intentionally killed, injured, captured or harassed.

However dolphins still face problems caused by pollution, accidental capture in fishing nets and disturbance by people.

To protect dolphins we need to protect their habitat. The pollution of seawater by agricultural chemicals, sewage and industrial waste harms the animals that the dolphins feed on and in turn the dolphins themselves. Many environmental organisations are campaigning to keep the sea clean and safe for people, plants and animals.

If dolphins get caught in fishing nets they cannot reach the surface to breathe and they drown.

Dolphins that live close to the shore, like bottlenose dolphins are at risk of being disturbed by boats and jet skis. Watching dolphins is now a popular tourist attraction but this can cause problems for the dolphins. Boats looking for the dolphins can collide with and injure dolphins or separate calves from their mothers. The noises from the boats' engines and echo sounders may interfere with the dolphin's communication and echo location. To help protect the dolphins in the Moray Firth from disturbance by boats the Dolphin Space Programme has been set up by Scottish Natural Heritage and other organisations. This encourages people to 'Watch how they watch' by either watching dolphins from the shore or by only going out on cruise boats which have agreed to follow a code of conduct. A similar code of conduct for 'whale watching' boats and people sailing for pleasure is being introduced for the whole country.

[Finding out more](#)

Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises

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Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises

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[How you can help](#)

If you buy tuna look at the label on the can and make sure that you only buy 'dolphin friendly' tuna. In the Pacific Ocean dolphins and tuna swim together and some fishermen use methods to catch the tuna which also kill many dolphins.

You could become involved with groups of other people concerned with the future of Scotland's wildlife. Check your local newspaper or library for information about groups in you area.

Scottish Wildlife WATCH, which is part of the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), produces a magazine and Scottish newsletter which include information about environmental issues and give you the chance to help wildlife by taking part in projects and surveys.

Contact: Scottish Wildlife WATCH, Cramond House, Cramond Glebe Road, Edinburgh EH4 6NS

Glossary

Echo location

A system of locating objects using sound.

Habitat

The place in which an animal or plant lives.

Prey

An animal that is killed and eaten by another animal.

