

**Report on Sightings from Bluefin of Hamble on voyage from Lagos,
Portugal to Penzance, UK. 1st-11th May 2005**



**Report prepared for SeaMark Trust and ORCA
by
Bart Donato**

Background

For two weeks in early May I had the pleasure of volunteering for ORCA as they teamed up with the Seamark Trust (seamarktrust.org.uk) to carry out a cetacean and sea bird survey from the trust's yacht Bluefin as it was being sailed from the Algarve coast of Portugal to Penzance, on route to its new home in Scotland. This voyage marked a repeat of a journey originally intended for August 2004 but which had to be postponed.

Crew

James Barnett
Sue Davison
Bart Donato
Will Dunsmure
Oggie Isaacs
Mike Stanfield

Voyage

Route

Leaving Lagos on the afternoon of the 2nd May we sailed west, rounding Cape St. Vincent in the early evening then turned north paralleling the Portuguese coast and staying inshore of the main shipping routes and the continental shelf. The 3rd of May we continued this route passing Lisbon mid-morning then north past the islands off Peniche and the nearby submarine canyon in the afternoon. By the 4th May we were leaving Portuguese waters for Spanish waters west of Vigo before tacking north-westward in response to the strengthening northerly wind. The 5th of May saw us west of the Bay of Biscay over the abyssal plain and continuing north-west, then tacking back in towards the Bay proper heading roughly due west until mid afternoon when we turned north again. We maintained this heading overnight but then had engine trouble on the 6th May which halted our progress. By evening we were heading slowly south-south-east back towards La Coruña . The 7th May we continued on this bearing to La Coruña passing back over the continental shelf after dark and arriving in La Coruña early on the morning of the 8th May. We remained in La Coruña until about 1400hrs on the 9th May then headed north-by-east from the harbour on a more-or-less direct course for Penzance. We maintained this heading on the 10th across the Bay of Biscay over the abyssal plain and by the morning of the 11th were back in shelf waters west of Brittany, arriving in Penzance at 1900hrs that evening.

Conditions

All sightings were made from the 'cock pit' and aft desk of the Bluefin, giving an observer position of about two meters above sea-level. At this height the observable field of view is about 1.5km at sea surface under optimal conditions. For much of the voyage sea surface conditions were not optimal and under these conditions the effective field of view was reduced to about 400m. In addition for much of the voyage the spray hood was deployed, restricting forward observation, such that the majority of recordings were made either along side or to the rear of the boat. Throughout the voyage visibility was good and there was no precipitation, however, wind direction and sea state varied considerably from virtual calm and sea state 0 to sustained winds of 25kn with gusts to 30kn and a sea state of 4+. A summary of conditions is given in table 1.

Table 1: Wind and Sea conditions during voyage

Date	Wind direction	Wind strength (kn)	Sea State
2 nd May 05	WSW then NW	1	1-3
3 rd May 05	NNW then NW	3-4 all day	1-2
4 th May 05	NNW then NE	6 increasing to 20	4+
5 th May 05	NNE or NE	18-20 all day	4
6 th May 05	NNE	18 falling to calm then increasing to 8	2-1
7 th May 05	NNE then E	10 increasing to 25+	3-4
8 th May 05	La Coruna	-	-
9 th May 05	NNE then ENE	13 increasing to 18	1-4
10 th May 05	ENE	18-20 then 15	4-4+
11 th May 05	variable NNE - ENE	variable 15-20 all day	4-4+

As can be seen from Table 1, sea states of 3 or more were experienced for much of the voyage, limiting observations of cetaceans to those in the immediate proximity of the boat, and making bird watching a challenge.

Sightings



Cetaceans

Common Dolphin *Delphinus delphis*

By far the most numerous and frequently encountered cetacean, in fact the only cetacean recorded with certainty on more than one occasion. The first sighting was on the 2nd May at 36°58'N 008°58'W, a few miles south west of Cape St. Vincent when a group of about 10 animals was encountered feeding under a large gannet flock. The final sighting was of a pod of c14 animals on the 10th May at 46°45.7'N 007°01.1'W. Many groups contained young animals, generally about ¾ adult size, with the largest number being c6 young in a group with c9 adults on the 6th May at 46°27.2'W 009°35.1'W which intermittently bow rode with the boat for about half an hour. This latter group contained an individual with distinctive pale marks on either side of its dorsal fin (top left animal on frontispiece photograph). An animal bearing a close resemblance to this individual was seen briefly on the 7th May at 46°27.2'N 009°35.1'W in a pod of c10 adults and c5 young, suggesting that the same pod may have been involved in both sightings. This distinctive individual appeared to be a dominant member of the pod, and on one occasion was watched as it approached a bow riding individual from behind and above, then turned upside down and pushed the other dolphin away from the boat before righting itself and continuing bow riding.

The pod encountered on the morning of the 3rd May gave the impression of being asleep as they slowly approached the boat from the East and passed directly across the bows at about 20m range without any obvious response to the boat's presence. Having passed across the bows they then changed behaviour dramatically suddenly veering back towards the boat and diving out of site. Rather than joining the boat or moving directly away they must have then passed under the boat, reappearing and milling in the boat's wake briefly about 100m behind the boat before being lost from sight.

Bottle-nosed Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*

One sighting of a pod of 5-6 adults on 2nd May at 36°59.1'N 009°00.3'W a few miles west of Cape St. Vincent. The pod approached the boat from the North East and bow rode for about 4 minutes before departing to the south.

Pilot Whale sp *Globicephala* sp

One sighting of a pod of 6+ animals (presumably long-finned pilot whales *Globicephala melaena*) on the 9th May at approximately 43°30.0'N 008°21.9'W close to Cabo Prior on the North West Spanish Coast. Under relatively calm conditions the pod could be seen logging, slow swimming and spy-hopping about a mile to the South of the boat and within about ¾ of a mile of shore.

The locals in La Coruña report that 'calcheron' are frequent in summer in the La Coruña inlet, and that they are a nuisance to the local recreational fishermen as the fish vanish when they are present. 'Calcheron' is the Spanish for Pilot Whale, although the description of "large, blunt faced dolphins" would equally well have described Risso's Dolphin which might also be expected inshore in the summer.

Cuvier's Beaked Whale *Ziphius cavirostris*

Following the sighting of a single probable Cuvier's Beaked whale on the 6th May at 46°40.0'N 009°52.50'W a pod of at least three animals were seen at 46°39.8'N 009°46.4'W. On both occasions the animals involved were seen at about 300m range and noted as being tannish or grey-brown in colour with low puffy blows (not unlike small sperm whale blows) and a pronounced dorsal fin. Of the blows seen a number were made without any of the body of the animal being in view, one was made with just the dorsal fin showing above the surface and two were made with both the fins and the body above the surface. Given the proximity of the two sightings it is possible that the same individuals or members of a single pod were seen on both occasions.

Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus*

A series of about ten low puffy blows at regular intervals seen at 44°30.9'N 011°29.6'W on the 5th May were identified from observer experience as being the blows of a single sperm whale. Unfortunately the animal itself remained out of sight in the swell.

Other Cetaceans

A pod of dolphins seen on the 5th May, at 45°09.822'N 10°49.1'W, feeding at about ¾ of a mile range were thought to be striped dolphins *Stenella coeruleoalba*. Unfortunately the views obtained were brief and though suggestive (apparently small common dolphin sized with a bluish body colour lacking the patterning of common dolphin) they were inconclusive and the dolphins did not approach the boat.

Two blows seen on the 6th May at 46°40.0'N 009°52.5'W (close to the sighting of a probable Cuvier's Beaked whale) had the tall thin structure of large rorqual (*Balaenoptera* sp) blows. Unfortunately, the whale producing the blows was over the horizon (at a guessed range of 2+ miles) and was not seen.



Sea Birds

Gannet *Sula bassana*

By far the most regular and numerous sea bird recorded. The largest number (101 in two two-hour watches) were recorded on the 2nd May moving west along the Algarve coast, culminating in a flock of c250 birds feeding over a school of common dolphins at 36°58'N 008°58'W, South West of Cape St. Vincent. Thereafter smaller numbers were recorded throughout the voyage with the vast majority heading North. Most individuals showed signs of immaturity and of the few hundred seen over the course of the voyage no more than 20 were full adults.

European Storm-petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*

Two birds were seen on the 6th May (at 46°36.4'N 010°04.01'W and 46°38'N 009°40.0'W) and a further two the next day (between 45 04.2'N 009 00.8'W and 44°41.69'N 008°52.33'W) in the Southern Bay of Biscay.

Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*

First recorded on the 5th May at 44°28.9'N 001°34.8'W and thereafter seen daily. Most sightings were of one or two birds, and they often spent time following (or circling) the boat.

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea*

There were 5 sightings, all of single birds, on the 3rd May in the proximity of the Estremadura Provence islands, west of Peniche, where a small number are known to breed.

Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*

There were three sightings, including a group of 3 birds resting on the sea in calm conditions, on the 6th May in the Southern Bay of Biscay (around 46°39'N, 009°49'W). Otherwise the only sighting was of a single bird on the 9th May in mid-Biscay.

Balearic Shearwater *Puffanus mauretanicus*

Two moving west along the Algarve coast on 2nd May

Great Skua *Stercorarius skua*

Single birds were seen on the 3rd, 4th and 6th May. All heading North, and all ignoring the boat.

Black-headed gull *Larus ridibundus*

One on 1412hrs on the 6th May at 46° 38.43'N 009° 38.51'W in outer Biscay.

Kittywake *Rissa tridactyla*

One on 6th May at approx. 46° 27'N 009° 35'W in Outer Biscay, followed by a few on the 11th May approaching Cornwall)

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*

One on the 3rd May at approx 39° 00'N 009° 36'W off NW Portugal

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*

One on 3rd May at approx 39° 00'N 009° 36'W off NW Portugal; two singles on 7th May at approx. 44 49'N 008 55'W in Biscay



Land Birds

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Two birds were seen during the voyage both of which landed on the boat. An exhausted and soaked bird was found sheltering on the port deck on the afternoon of the 10th May at 46°36.1'N 007°05.9'W in the middle of the Bay of Biscay. This bird (named 'Julio') remained onboard until we reached Penzance on the evening of the 11th May. A second bird joined the boat briefly on the afternoon of the 11th May at 49°20.3'N 005°56.3'W in the western English Channel circling the boat then leaving and returning for about 15 minutes before landing briefly, and then flying off to the north.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Perhaps unsurprisingly this was the most frequently encountered 'land' bird during the journey. Although none were seen during the passage up the western side of Portugal and Spain, they were seen daily from the 7th May onwards once we had entered the Bay of Biscay. All sightings were of 1-2 birds. Birds seen on the 7th and 9th May were heading South-east towards Iberia, suggesting the weather was causing difficulties with their northbound migration across the bay. On the night of the 10th May one bird landed in the cockpit of the boat, but only stayed briefly.

Other notes

Occasional patches of by-the-wind sailor jellyfish *Velella velella* were seen throughout the voyage from just off Cape St. Vincent into the South-west approaches. Most nights some phosphorescence was also seen in the boats wake, with a

particularly impressive show on the night of the 7th May heading south to La Coruña when the sea sparkled with light in the boat's wake.

Summary

Over the course of the journey we logged at least 22 encounters with 5 species of cetacean, mostly common dolphins but also bottle-nosed dolphin, pilot whale, sperm whale and Cuvier's beaked-whale. The Bottle-nosed dolphin and pilot whale sightings were both made in shelf waters while the sperm and Cuvier's beaked whales were both recorded over the abyssal plain. Common dolphins were recorded in both areas. The majority of common dolphin sightings were either of pods feeding while being shadowed by a small cloud of gannets (aiding in their location), or of dolphins that were first seen heading into the boat to bow ride or simply investigate us. A number of the pods actively approached the boat but then investigated the boat's wake showing no interest in bow riding. This behaviour suggests that they may have been investigating the boat to see if there was any food associated with the vessel, as might be expected around a trawler.

In addition to the cetaceans a good selection of sea birds were seen including Cory's and Manx shearwaters, European storm-petrel and great skua, some of which lingered around the boat and some of which headed past without lingering. The majority of sightings, including almost all the gannets, great skuas and terns were of northbound migrants. Unsurprising land birds were few and far between with none recorded from the Algarve coast until we were within the Bay of Biscay. Most sightings were of swallows, including birds moving both north and south, at very low levels and often within the wave troughs.

Most recording was done either in shelf waters or over the abyssal plain with the potentially more species-rich shelf-edge waters mostly being crossed at night. The one sub-marine canyon crossed (North West of Peniche on the west Portuguese coast) yielded very few sightings despite the presence of a number of fishing vessels suggesting relatively productive waters. It should be born in mind that the number of sightings was likely influenced by the overall weather and sea conditions which were not optimal for much of the time and this will have influenced the distribution of sightings and species recorded.

Acknowledgements

I owe a huge debt of thanks to both ORCA and the Seamark Trust for allowing me the opportunity to join Bluefin and the support they provided, especially to Mike, James, Oggie, Will and Sue for making the journey such a wonderful experience.

Appendix 1 - Cetacean Records

Date	Time BST	GPS Reading Latitude (N) Longitude (W)		Wind direction/ force	Visibility	Sea state	Precipitn.	Species (ID confidence: def, prob, pos)	No. of adults	No of young	Distance to sighting	Animal heading direction (eg.N/S)	On Watch Y/N	Notes
02/05/05	1825	36° 58'	008° 58'	SSW	20+ mi	2	none	common dolphin	c10	-	20m	-	N	Feeding under flock of c250 Gannets
02/05/05	1838	36° 59 190'	009° 00.38'	SSW	20+ mi	2	none	bottlenose dolphin	5-6	-	2m	-	N	Into bow from NW then bow ridding fro 4 mins
02/05/05	1750	37° 07.50'	009° 04.30'	SSW 4kn	20+ mi	1	none	common dolphin	6	1+	25m	W	N	Slow travelling to W in tight pod across the bow
03/05/05	AM	39° 01.07'	009° 36.84'	N	20+ mi	1	none	common dolphin	4	0	20m	W	Y	Slow travelling across bow with quick investigation of stern
03/05/05	PM	39° 47.87'	009° 35.52'	NW	20+ mi	1	none	dolphin sp	1	0	20m	E	N	Obs: MS+S. Larger than Common dolphin
03/05/05	1900	40° 11.00'	009° 34.86'	NNW 5kn	20+ mi	1	none	common dolphin	7	0	10m	W	Y	Slow travelling across bow (sleeping?) then sudden turn to reappear in boat's wake
04/05/05	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	No cetaceans
05/05/05	1100	44° 30.90'	011° 29.6'	NNW	20+ mi	3	none	sperm whale	1	-	c 1km	stationary	N	A series of c10 low puffy blows c1 km to West of boat. Animal not seen in waves but blow shape and frequency consistent with single sperm whale.
05/05/05	1820	44° 54.80'	010° 54.16'	NW	20+ mi	4	none	whale sp	1	-	c400m	-	N	Single blow of sperm / cuvier's beaked-whale type
05/05/05	1845	44° 58.05'	010° 52.96'	NW	20+ mi	4	none	whale sp	1	-	-	-	N	Single blow of sperm / cuvier's beaked-whale type
05/05/05	2020	45° 09.82'	010° 49.17'	NNW	20+ mi	3	none	dolphin sp - prob striped	c10	-	c600m	-	N	Small pod probably feeding, being shadowed by c15 gannets. 1 individual seen reasonably well allowing probable id.
06/05/05	0600	46° 20.7	010° 29.4	N 11kn	20+ mi	2	none	dolphin sp.	1	-	-	S	N	Obs: MS. Single small dolphin.
06/05/05	0845	46° 35'	010° 05'	NbyE 10kn	20+ mi	2	none	whale sp	1	-	c800m	-	N	Single blow of sperm / cuvier's beaked-whale type
06/05/05	1110	46° 40.0'	009° 52.50'	NNE 11kn	20+ mi	2	none	prob Cuvier's BeakedWhale	1	-	c300m	-	Y	Single low puffy blow and surface c300 to starboard of boat. Whale orientated away from boat so poor view of profile. Back of animal broad and tannish in colour

Date	Time BST	GPS Reading Latitude (N) Longitude (W)		Wind direction/ force	Visibility	Sea state	Precipitn.	Species (ID confidence: def, prob, pos)	No. of adults	No of young	Distance to sighting	Animal heading direction (eg.N/S)	On Watch Y/N	Notes
06/05/05	1115	c46° 40.0'	009° 52.50'	NNE 11kn	20+ mi	2	none	whale sp - prob roqual	1-2	-	2+ km	-	Y	2 tall blows to ESE of boat from below horizon. Shape suggestive of roqual sp but no sign of animal over horizon.
06/05/05	1220	46° 39.88'	009° 46.45'	ENE 9kn	20+ mi	1-2	none	Cuvier's Beaked Whale	3+	-	300m	-	N	300m off stern then falling away. 3 blows at once. Grey-brown back with distinct pointed and smoothly sickle shaped dorsal fin. Blow compact, low and apparently forward pointing. Blow before body appeared at surface. Most blows with no visible surfacing, 1 with just a dorsal fin and 2 with body seen clearly. In profile body tightly arched at surface - diving? No flukes.
06/05/05	1545	46° 38.55'	009° 40.06'		20+ mi	1	none	dolphin sp	1	-	-	-	Y	Single surface heading into boat then vanished
06/05/05	1945	46° 27.23'	009° 35.15'	NbyE 5kn	20+ mi	1	none	common dolphin	c9	c6	400m to 2m	-	Y	Pod first seen feeding with occasional herding-type splashes c400m ahead and to port of boat. The pod then came to the boat for c20 mins of bow riding, wake riding, and playing. Occasionally chorus-lined away on swells then returned. Some animals surfaced and (apparently) deliberately made a puffing noise. Eventually headed off to the south.
07/05/05	1005	45° 11.41'	009° 03.62'	NNE 20Kn	20+ mi	4	none	common dolphin	1	1	100m	S	Y	Heading parallel to boat.
07/05/05	1325	44° 49.7'	008° 55.1'	NNE 20kn	20+ mi	4	none	common dolphin	c10	c5	5m	-	Y	4 dolphins appeared along side the boat before moving away only to return with others for c10 minutes of bow-riding. One individual with distinct markings alongside its dorsal fin looked very similar to a member of the pod seen at 1945 on the 06/05/05.

Date	Time BST	GPS Reading		Wind direction/ force	Visibility	Sea state	Precipitn.	Species (<i>ID confidence: def, prob, pos</i>)	No. of adults	No of young	Distance to sighting	Animal heading direction (<i>eg.N/S</i>)	On Watch Y/N	Notes
		Latitude (N)	Longitude (W)											
08/05/05	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	In port - La Coruña
09/05/05	1425	43° 30.05'	008° 21.95'	NNE 9kn	20+ mi	1	none	pilot whale sp	6+	-	c1.2 km	logging	N	Logging / slow swimming and occasionally spyhopping about a mile to stern (S) of the boat and within about ¾ mile of shore.
10/05/05	1627	46° 36.17'	007° 05.9'	ENE 18kn	20+ mi	4	none	common dolphin	2	-	5m	NE	Y	Moving NE into bow of boat then vanished
10/05/05	1750	46° 45.7'	007° 01.1'	ENE 18kn	20+ mi	4	none	common dolphin	c13	1+	5m	NE	Y	Appeared moving NE around boat on all sides
11/05/05	c1500	49° 30.2'	005° 51.1'	ENE 16kn	20+ mi	4+	none	dolphin sp	1-2	-	50m	S	Y	Single surface then gone. pos. Bottlenose dolphin

Appendix 2 - Birds recorded on dedicated watches

Note: All times are BST. All sightings recorded by BD. Ls Black-b Gull only recorded in 'offshore' waters.

2nd May

Watch start time	Watch start location	Watch end time	Watch end location	Sea State	Visibility	Precipitation	Species	Number	Notes
1150	37°05.41'N 008°39.43W	1400	Lagos Harbour Mouth	1	20+ mi	0	'Commic' Tern Gannet Balearic Shearwater	27 69 2	All west, all prob Common All west All west
1600	Lagos Harbour Mouth	1800		3	20+ mi	0	'Commic' Tern Gannet	7 32	All prob Common

3rd May

Watch start time	Watch start location	Watch end time	Watch end location	Sea State	Visibility	Precipitation	Species	Number	Notes
0900	38°49.57'N 009°36.00'W	1200	39°15.35'N 009°36'43'W	1	20+ mi	0	Cory's Shearwater Great Skua Gannet Arctic Tern Sandwich Tern	1 1 14 4 1	13N 1S
1800		2100					LBB/Herring Gull	100's	Trawler hopping, otherwise no birds of note

4th May

Watch start time	Watch start location	Watch end time	Watch end location	Sea State	Visibility	Precipitation	Species	Number	Notes
1200	42°23.00'N 009°31.00'W	1500	42°38.83'N 009°41.08'W	4+	20+ mi	0	Gannet Great Skua 'Commic' Tern	5 1 3	Prob Arctic

5th May

Watch start time	Watch start location	Watch end time	Watch end location	Sea State	Visibility	Precipitation	Species	Number	Notes
0600	44°10.81'N 11°26.65'W	0900	44°27.9'N 011°42.6'W		20+ mi	0			Nothing!
1415	44°37.06'N 011°09.10'W	1800	44°51.6'N 10°55.1'W		20+ mi	0	Gannet prob small Skua sp	6 1	

6th May

Watch start time	Watch start location	Watch end time	Watch end location	Sea State	Visibility	Precipitation	Species	Number	Notes
0900	46°36.40'N 010°04.09'W	1200	46°40.2'N 009°48.8'W	2	20+ mi	0	Fulmar Great Skua Gannet Euro Storm-petrel Ls Black-B Gull	2 1 4 1 1	2 N, 2 S 1200
1800	46°31.65'N 009°36.68'W	2100	46°23.5'N 009°32.4'W	1	20+ mi	0	Fulmar Gannet Manx Shearwater Kittywake	2 2 1 3	3 adults

7th May

Watch start time	Watch start location	Watch end time	Watch end location	Sea State	Visibility	Precipitation	Species	Number	Notes
0930	c45°15.13'N c009°05.1'W	1100	45°04.2'N 009°00.8'W	3-4	20+ mi	0	Fulmar Gannet 'Commic' Tern Arctic Tern	2 2 3 1	
1100	45°04.2'N 009°00.8'W	1500	44°41.69'N 008°52.33'W	4	20+ mi	0	Fulmar Euro. Storm-petrel Ls Black-b Gull Gannet Arctic Tern	4 2 2 1 1	

9th May

Watch start time	Watch start location	Watch end time	Watch end location	Sea State	Visibility	Precipitation	Species	Number	Notes
1400	43°26.56'N 008°22.0W	1700	43°48.20'N 008°13.45'W	1-4	20+ mi	0	Gannet Swallow	c92 1	1 SE

10th May

Watch start time	Watch start location	Watch end time	Watch end location	Sea State	Visibility	Precipitation	Species	Number	Notes
0800	45°41.89'N 007°31.10'W	1100	45°59.66'N 007°23.17'W	4	20+ mi	0	Fulmar Gannet Manx Shearwater Ls. Black-b Gull Great Skua Small passerine sp	5 6 1 1 1 1	
1500	46°26.29'N 007°11.19'W	1800	46°46.4'N 007°00.6'W	4+	20+ mi	0	Gannet Fulmar Ls. Black-b Gull Swallow Collared Dove	6 2 1 2 1	2 N Found sheltering on deck at 1627

11th May

Watch start time	Watch start location	Watch end time	Watch end location	Sea State	Visibility	Precipitation	Species	Number	Notes
0600	48°12.40'N 006°24.62'W	1000	48°47.6'N 006°10.7'W	4	20+ mi	0	Gannet Fulmar Ls. Black-b Gull Herring Gull	5 8 6+ 1	
1400	49°18.1'N 005°57.2'W	1700	49°44.60'N 005°44.66'W	4 - 4+	20+ mi	0	Fulmar Gannet Kittywake Collared Dove	6 4 3 1	Circling the boat at 1410, landed briefly, then headed off north. Returned 15 mins later. Circled again then left to north again.