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WORLD'S LARGEST ANIMAL SPOTTED FROM PORTSMOUTH-BASED FERRY

Whale and Dolphin Surveyors returning on a ferry from Spain to the UK recently had a rare and amazing encounter with the largest living animal on earth - the Blue Whale - in the Bay of Biscay. The Surveyors, from UK based whale and dolphin charity ORCA were travelling on board Brittany Ferries' Pont Aven from Santander to Portsmouth when they spotted the giant animal.

The Blue Whale is an extremely rare species in the European Atlantic and sightings of the animals from ferries occur on average once a year. These sightings usually coincide with the peak arrival of the Fin Whales during the late summer, so a Blue Whale sighting so early on in the season is extremely unusual.

Dave Chilcott, the ORCA Surveyor who made the sighting commented, "There was wind and rain as we left Santander and I really didn't have high hopes of seeing too many animals. Around 3 hours out to sea the wind eased and so did the rain and suddenly I spotted a large blow some 400 metres ahead of the ship."

"The animal surfaced beside the ferry and you could easily make out the mottled blue body pattern, the small fin and the very wide tail stock. We were looking at the largest animal on the planet and this was a big one. The sighting was all too brief but left us smiling. As we watched and hoped for it to surface again we were rewarded with three huge dense blows as the animal was clear of the ship. I've spent many hours on ships in the Biscay and what a reward to see this incredible creature. The whole experience turned a rainy day into an unforgettable day."

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Sally Hamilton (ORCA director) "It is thrilling to know that as you sit on board a Brittany Ferry, almost on our doorstep, you have the chance to spot one the greatest living animals on our planet."

"Monitoring whale and dolphin populations around the UK and European waters is crucial to their conservation as so little information is known about them. We are decades behind land-based conservation measures and sightings like the Blue Whale truly bring home how much we still need to learn."

ORCA is one of the leading European whale and dolphin conservation charities and has developed a unique partnership with Brittany Ferries whereby important scientific data is collected by ORCA Surveyors on board the ferry company's ships. This data is then used to help protect whale and dolphin populations and habitats.

The charity's simple and unique whale and dolphin survey scheme provides ORCA supporters with the opportunity to both spot and protect these magnificent animals.

The Blue Whale is the largest animal ever to have lived on Earth - an elephant could sit on its tongue. The adult can reach up to 24-30m, and it's found mostly alone, and more rarely in small groups. The massive blow coming from its blow hole can reach up to 10m in height.

For up-to-date news and stories about the project please visit the whale and dolphin officers' blog at www.brittanywildlifeofficer.wordpress.com. More information on Brittany Ferries' services to Spain can be found at www.brittanyferries.com/spain and more details on ORCA are available at www.orcaweb.org.uk.

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