

BISCAY

14-18 August 2009

Introduction

This is a short account of seabird and Cetacean sightings from the Portsmouth-Bilbao P&O Ferry on a trip undertaken in mid August 2009. There were seven participants in our group: Robin Cox, Owain Gabb, Graeme Garner, Kim Hudson, Alein Shreeve, Tim Sykes¹ and Stuart Thomas, four of whom had done the trip at least once before. The weather was settled throughout the trip, with a sea state of 1-2 on the outward journey, and 2-3 (occasionally 4) on the way back, although the light was often poor for photography. This allowed the use of telescopes throughout the trip and made speciation of Cetaceans more straightforward.

Itinerary

We headed out of Portsmouth on the evening of Saturday 14th August, leaving the berth at around 21:00. This is the standard time of departure. We then had a complete day of watching the following day, initially in the relatively shallow inshore waters along the French Coast, before entering deeper water by late afternoon. The boat comes into Bilbao Harbour at around 07:00 (UK time) on the third day, at which point EU Law requires all passengers to get off the vessel. We used this time, as is traditional among bird watchers, to go into the hills above Bilbao, taking a taxi up (at a cost of 20 Euros), to enable us to spend as much time as possible birding. It takes about an hour to walk back to the boat from the summit.

Re-embarkation is at 11:30 (UK time), with the boat sailing just after 13:00. Approximately half an hour out of harbour, you again enter very deep water (the Breton Canyon). As a result, the third day tends to be the most exciting day of the trip, and is the day on which most of the sightings of Cuvier's beaked whale are reported. The fourth day is traditionally the quietest for sightings, as the ferry again spends the majority of time in inshore waters before docking at around 17:30.

The fee for a small two-berth cabin with an en suite bathroom and shower for the duration of the trip was £159. There are less basic options, but these result in a substantial price increase. The cost of food on board is not cheap, and it is a good idea to take some basics with you for breakfast and lunch. This also means that you can stay on deck throughout daylight hours.

Overview

This report details sightings by our group rather than all sightings reported during the trip. Watching was undertaken from the helicopter landing area, accessed from Deck 8, which allows largely uninterrupted views to port and starboard. Paying tour groups are able to use the 'Monkey Deck' situated above the cabin at the front of the boat, from which views ahead of the boat are possible. The more notable sightings ahead of the vessel are communicated to the helicopter deck over the tannoy. A list of species recorded during the trip is at <http://www.biscay-dolphin.org.uk/sightings.html>, while our own records are appended to this short report. The main differences between the two are that we failed to record Sowerby's beaked whale, which was reported twice (although not announced²), that the online account omits striped dolphin (which we recorded relatively regularly from the helicopter deck and which Tim photographed) and that someone was obviously using something akin to the Hubble telescope to identify all their small petrels to species on the outward voyage!³.

Summary of Sightings

Minke Whale

We noted Minke on 7 occasions (8 animals) on Day 2. While there were several good sightings, the best was of an animal that breached several times in front of, and then to the starboard side of the boat. This behaviour allowed excellent photographs to be taken (one of which is included in the photographic section of this account).

¹ All whale and dolphin photographs included in this report are by Tim Sykes.

² The Company of Whales group also failed to record the species.

³ A total of 258 European storm-petrels were reported during the outward journey. We did not keep an accurate log of distant petrels, and even those close to the boat are very difficult to determine to species. Only those watched for a considerable time and for which distinguishing features were noted are speciated in the appendix to this report.

Fin Whale

This was not a classic trip for fin whale, as most views were distant. We recorded 11 encounters over days 2 and 3, with the best view being of an animal rolling several times before seeming to incline more steeply, indicating it probably dived. Low numbers had been recorded in the bay during previous trips, and there was some speculation that this could be linked to the distribution of shoaling fish.

Cuvier's beaked whale

The trip proved excellent for this species, with all sightings on Day 3. We recorded 3 definite Cuvier's beaked whale, a further 17 animals presumed to be of this species (due to the characteristics of the roll, apparent size and the position and shape of the fin) and 1 additional whale (seen briefly but called as a Cuvier's by some observers [not in our group])⁴. This resulted in a total of 10 sightings of up to 21 individuals⁵. Colour / scarring was not a clinching factor in the identification of the closer animals due to the relatively poor light⁶. The pictures taken by Tim indicate a female or immature male due to the grey tones and apparently unscarred skin.

Long-finned Pilot Whale

Pilot whale was first seen at 16:30 on Day 2, with a further 9 sightings and an estimated total of 41 individuals over the remainder of Day 2 and on Day 3. Maximum group size was 5-10 animals. No groups passed particularly close to the boat, with the best sightings being a run of encounters with small groups at dusk on Day 3.

(Short-beaked) Common Dolphin

We conservatively estimated that we recorded approximately 560 common dolphin during the trip. Common dolphins frequently came in to bow ride the vessel, and there were numerous close encounters, including good views of calves. Maximum group size was in excess of 150 animals, with most sightings on the afternoon and evening of Day 2.

Striped Dolphin

We recorded 6 encounters with striped dolphin; 4 on Day 3, and 2 on Day 2. Approximately 120 animals were seen in total. The first animals were noted in a mixed group with common dolphin, but most of the other sightings (as far as we could discern) were of single species groups.

Bottle-nosed dolphin

Approximately 45 bottle-nosed dolphins were recorded, all on Day 2 with a maximum group size of around 40 individuals. Views were good rather than exceptional.

Harbour Porpoise

We recorded an estimated 111 porpoise during the course of the trip, with a maximum group size of 8 animals. These were almost entirely recorded on Day 2, with 2 additional records (6+ animals) on Day 4. Limited behaviour was noted: a sighting of a group of 5 animals in deep water just before 4pm on the second day and an animal jumping clear of the water (unusual in this species) were noted.

Other Marine Sightings

A total of 10 Sunfish (including a group of 5) were seen during Days 2 and 4, and tuna boils were a relatively regular feature of Day 3.

Birds

We recorded 5 species of shearwater: sooty, great, Cory's, Manx and Balearic, but numbers of all species were low, and most of the views relatively distant. Bonxies were frequent on Days 2 and 4, and a single Arctic skua was noted (Day 4). Petrels were numerous during Day 2, with a few Leach's among the early morning birds. The vast majority were smaller petrels, which despite the calm seas were difficult to conclusively identify to species, although most were undoubtedly storm-petrels. A

⁴ It should be noted that Cuvier's beaked whale is regularly called over the tannoy and by observers on deck. In reality many sightings could be northern bottle-nosed whales or other beaked whale species, as while these species are less common, they occur in Biscay. Feedback on photographs provided by Tim of presumed Cuvier's beaked whales to Cetacean experts proved that many views are inconclusive and not safely assigned to species.

⁵ It is likely that this will be (certainly one of) the highest count of the species recorded from the vessel if all group tallies can be combined. The previous record appears to be 24 individuals in mid August 2007.

⁶ No heavily scarred adult males were recorded.

single Sabine's gull was noted on Day 2, but was not seen by all of our group (a few others were reported during the trip).

Land bird migrants seen on or from the boat included wheatear, willow warbler, oystercatcher and a group of small distant waders (probably ringed plover). Visible migration and the lack of more migrants on the boat was disappointing in comparison with other trips.

Hills above Bilbao

The cloud was low over the hills above Bilbao, but this gradually cleared during the course of the morning. The upper reaches of the hills are a mosaic of species rich grassland with rock outcrops, scrub and occasional small pasture fields. As you descend via the road, scrub becomes more frequent, there are some taller deciduous trees and large gardens, and a belt of conifer plantation prior to re-entering the town.

The most obvious species in the open areas around the upper reaches of the hills were tree pipit, with numerous birds present, and stonechat. Notable species in UK terms were red backed-shrike (which was common), nightingale (2), wryneck (1), Sardinian warbler (relatively numerous), melodious warbler (3-4), ciril bunting (5+) and serin (1 juv). Redstart, spotted flycatcher and Cetti's warbler were also recorded, but the weather hampered raptor watching and only buzzard and kestrel were seen. Around the harbour we added Sandwich tern, little egret and Mediterranean gull, with the excursion increasing the overall trip tally by 36 species.

Conclusion

As usual the trip was an excellent social and a good learning experience. The views of Cuvier's beaked whale were exceptional, as was the breaching Minke and the numbers of dolphins. Roll on 2010.

Owain Gabb 28/08/2009

PHOTOGRAPHS

1) MINKE WHALE



B) CUVIER'S BEAKED WHALE



C) COMMON DOLPHIN



D) STRIPED DOLPHIN



E) CORY'S SHEARWATERS



E) GROUP SHOT



Left to Right: Stuart Thomas, Graeme Garner, Kim Hudson, Robin Cox, Alein Shreeve, Owain Gabb & Tim Sykes

F) FRIVOLITY ON DECK



APPENDIX 1 [DAILY LOG]

Day	Time	Sighting	Number	Notes
2	08:15	Gannet	1	First sighting of the day. Regular after this, and not noted
2	08:15	Lesser black-backed gull	1	
2	09:10	Leach's petrel	1	Watched for over 10 minutes as moving at same speed as boat
2	09:10	Storm-petrel spp	4	Distant and not identified to species
2	09:20	Leach's petrel	2	
2	09:25	Porpoise	5	
2	09:35	Sooty shearwater	1	
2	09:40	Porpoise	8	Including 1 calf
2	09:45	Porpoise	c.7	
2	10:00	Balearic shearwater	1	Good view
2	10:00	Porpoise	c.10	Two groups of 4-5
2	10:25	Porpoise	2	
2	10:30	Porpoise	2-3	
2	10:30	Storm-petrel spp	3-4	
2	10:50	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
2	10:50	Sooty shearwater	1	
2	11:00	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
2	11:22	Kittiwake	3	
2	11:22	Porpoise	1	
2	11:35	Porpoise	1	
2	11:35	Storm-petrel spp	7-8	
2	12:10	Porpoise	1	
2	12:10	Tern spp	6	
2	12:15	Porpoise	1	
2	12:15	Tern spp	1	
2	12:20	Minke Whale	1	Rolling
2	12:30	Minke Whale	1	Breaching. Initially seen in front of the boat, but then passed on starboard side. Excellent views with all features noted.
2	12:35	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
2	12:42	Porpoise	6	
2	12:44	Porpoise	12-18	Several groups of 4-6
2	12:48	Porpoise	1	
2	12:50	Willow warbler	1	Landed on deck
2	12:55	Porpoise	1	
2	12:58	Manx shearwater	2	
2	12:58	Porpoise	3	
2	13:01	Common tern	3	Flew from pallet floating past ship
2	13:05	Porpoise	1	
2	13:05	Storm-petrel	1	Identified to species
2	13:09	Porpoise	3	
2	13:14	Porpoise	1	
2	13:14	Storm-petrel	1	
2	13:21	Cory's shearwater	1	
2	13:21	Willow warbler	2	On deck
2	13:52	Porpoise	2+	
2	13:58	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
2	14:00	Oystercatcher	1	Migrant
2	14:15	Porpoise	3+	
2	14:23	Porpoise	1	
2	14:28	Manx shearwater	2	
2	14:28	Porpoise	2	
2	14:30	Porpoise	10+	Actively feeding
2	14:35	Porpoise	6-7	
2	14:44	Bottle-nosed dolphin	5+	
2	14:44	Storm-petrel spp	1	
2	15:03	Sunfish	5	In group next to boat
2	15:12	Sunfish	1	
2	15:20	Minke Whale	1	Distant
2	15:20	Porpoise	1	
2	15:25	Minke Whale	1	
2	15:29	Sunfish	1	
2	15:33	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
2	15:33	Minke Whale	1	
2	15:35	Bonxie (Great skua)	2	
2	15:35	Dolphin spp		
2	15:38	Fin whale	1	After several rolls were observed the animal appeared to arch more steeply indicating diving.
2	15:42	Fin whale	1	
2	15:45	Common dolphin	50-80	
2	15:50	Fin whale	?	2 blows seen distantly may have indicated more than 1 animal
2	15:54	Fin whale	2	
2	15:57	Porpoise	5	Unusual record in deep water
2	16:00	Wheatear	1	Female landed on boat
2	16:06	Bottle-nosed dolphin	40+	
2	16:19	Minke Whale	1	
2	16:25	Bonxie (Great skua)	5	

2	16:27	Fulmar	1	
2	16:27	Great shearwater	2	
2	16:27	Storm-petrel spp	1	
2	16:30	Long-finned pilot whale	3+	
2	16:36	Bonxie (Great skua)	4+	
2	16:43	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
2	16:45	Minke Whale	2	
2	16:54	Fin whale	1	Very distant
2	17:02	Fin whale	1	Very distant
2	17:11	Common dolphin	5-6	
2	17:13	Common dolphin	20+	Good views. Close to boat
2	17:15	Cushion	1	Marine debris
2	17:22	Sooty shearwater	1	
2	17:32	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
2	17:35	Long-finned pilot whale	2	
2	17:55	Storm-petrel spp	3+	
2	18:02	Storm-petrel spp	3+	
2	18:24	Bottle-nosed dolphin	1	
2	18:35	Common dolphin	150+	
2	18:35	Storm-petrel spp	10+	
2	18:42	Common dolphin	20+	
2	18:49	Common dolphin	20+	
2	18:53	Common dolphin	20+	
2	18:56	Common dolphin	50+	Good views of calves
2	18:59	Common dolphin	15+	
2	19:29	Common dolphin	50+	
2	19:29	Striped dolphin	4-5	With common dolphin
2	19:50	Sabine's gull	1	
2	19:58	Common dolphin	100+	
2	19:58	Great shearwater	1	
2	19:58	Striped dolphin	10+	
2	20:06	Long-finned pilot whale	5-10	
2	20:22	Long-finned pilot whale	6-8	
2	20:30	WATCH ENDS		
3	13:15	LEAVES BILBAO HARBOUR		
3	14:05	Cory's shearwater	3	
3	14:09	Common dolphin	10+	
3	14:09	Dolphin spp		Probable bottle-nosed
3	14:09	Striped dolphin	8-10	
3	14:09	Tern spp	1	
3	14:30	Presumed Cuvier's beaked whale	4	
3	14:42	Presumed Cuvier's beaked whale	2	
3	15:00	Cuvier's beaked whale	1	Breached next to boat
3	15:21	Fin whale	1	Blow only
3	15:22	Presumed Cuvier's beaked whale	1	
3	15:29	Cuvier's beaked whale	2	2 animals breaching next to boat.
3	15:45	Fin whale	1	
3	15:45	Presumed Cuvier's beaked whale	2	
3	15:59	Great shearwater	1	
3	16:10	Cory's shearwater	2	
3	16:16	Presumed Cuvier's beaked whale	2	
3	16:30	Presumed Cuvier's beaked whale	2-3	
3	16:40	Striped dolphin	40+	
3	16:45	Common tern	1	
3	16:45	Tuna boil	1	
3	17:25	Tuna boil		
3	17:34	Cory's shearwater	3	
3	17:34	Tuna boils (2)		
3	17:45	Tuna boil		
3	17:54	Dolphin spp	30+	
3	17:59	Dolphin spp	5-10	Probable striped
3	18:05	Wader spp	3	Distant
3	18:20	Striped dolphin	40+	
3	18:59	Fin whale	1	
3	19:05	Fin whale	2	
3	19:15	Striped dolphin	10-15	
3	19:39	Whale spp	1	Called as Cuvier's beaked whale by some on deck
3	19:54	Dolphin spp	5-10	
3	20:04	Long-finned pilot whale	2	
3	20:12	Long-finned pilot whale	4	
3	20:15	Long-finned pilot whale	2-3	
3	20:23	Presumed Cuvier's beaked whale	3	
3	20:42	Long-finned pilot whale	2	
3	20:43	Long-finned pilot whale	3	
3	20:43	Dolphin spp		Several pods at dusk
3	20:44	Long-finned pilot whale	3	
3	20:44	Dolphin spp	20-30	

3	20:45	WATCH ENDS		
4	09:15	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
4	09:20	Porpoise	3	
4	09:23	Storm-petrel spp	1	
4	10:06	Bonxie (Great skua)	2	
4	10:06	Common dolphin	10-12	
4	10:13	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
4	10:19	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
4	10:19	Pillow	1	Marine debris
4	10:40	Common dolphin	10+	
4	11:00	Fulmar	1	
4	11:11	Arctic skua	1	Probable. Distant
4	11:18	Tern spp	10+	
4	11:22	Porpoise	3+	
4	11:38	Sunfish	1	
4	11:41	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
4	11:45	Common tern	1	
4	12:00	Fulmar	2	
4	12:15	Sunfish	1	
4	12:28	Bonxie (Great skua)	1	
4	12:53	Tern spp	2	
4	13:21	Unleaded Petrol Can	1	Marine debris
4	13:54	Sunfish	1	
4	14:06	Coffee Filter	1	Marine debris
4	14:34	Pot Noodle	1	Marine debris
4	15:13	Fulmar	1	
4	15:15-30	Fulmar	3+	
4	17:45	WATCH ENDS		