



# Wild Coastal Trail

## Slighe Cladaich Fhiadhaich

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A guide to the best land-based places to watch sealife in the Highlands  
lùl do na h-àiteachan as fheàrr air tìr gus beatha-mara fhaicinn sa Ghàidhealtachd



# Introduction

## Ro-ràdh

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The Scottish Highlands are one of the world's best places to watch whales and dolphins from the shore.

These magnificent marine mammals, called cetaceans from the Greek word for a sea monster, come to the surface to breathe. You may see a splash, a leap or the silhouette of a dorsal fin before they return to their mysterious underwater world.

Even if the cetaceans are proving elusive, there is always something to see - common (harbour) and grey seals, otters, basking sharks, seabird colonies, waders, divers and carpets of wild flowers on cliff-top and machair. Choose from the locations shown on the map (pages 11 and 12), from rocky shore to golden strand, storm-tossed headland or sheltered estuary.

This booklet will guide you around the trail by recommending the best sites for viewing, although marine wildlife can be seen all around the coast. It also gives advice on identifying what you have seen and useful contact numbers for you to report any sightings.



Common seals, Dunvegan by WDCS/Charlie Phillips

# The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code

## Còd Amhairc Fiadh-bheatha Mara na h-Alba

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This Code is designed for all those who watch marine wildlife around Scotland - whether they are on the shore or at sea. It is not a law or regulation - its purpose is to raise awareness and offer practical guidance.

The code will:

- Help you to enjoy watching marine wildlife.
- Improve your chance of seeing wildlife.
- Help minimise disturbance to marine wildlife.
- Provide a standard for the wildlife-watching industry.
- Help you to stay within the law.

The principles of the code are:

- Be aware of and sensitive to the needs of wildlife.
- Take responsibility for your actions.
- Have respect for other people, wildlife and the environment.

For further information see [www.marinecode.org](http://www.marinecode.org)



Common dolphins by WDCS/Charlie Phillips

This booklet is available in larger print if required.



Highland Council Ranger watching cetaceans at Achmelvich Bay by The Caithness Collection

## Who's out there? Cò tha muigh an sin?

You are most likely to see common and grey seals, bottlenose and Risso's dolphin, harbour porpoise and minke whale. Occasional visitors include orca (killer whale), Atlantic white-sided, white-beaked and common dolphins and more rarely, northern bottlenose, fin and humpback whales.

### Harbour porpoise

1.4 - 1.8m long.  
Small triangular dorsal fin.  
Dark grey or brown.  
No beak or forehead bulge.  
Alone or in small groups.

### Bottlenose dolphin

Up to 4.1m long.  
Large central, curved dorsal fin.  
Grey or brown with pale undersides.  
Short beak, rounded forehead.  
Acrobatic breaches and bow-rides.

### Short-beaked common dolphin

1.6 - 2.5m long.  
Slender, curved dorsal fin.  
Hourglass pattern on sides.  
Lower flanks cream, pale grey behind.  
Streamlined body, slender beak.  
Breaches and bow-rides.

### Risso's dolphin

Up to 3.8m long.  
Tall, curved dorsal fin.  
Very pale to white in some cases.  
Large rounded head, no beak.  
Often heavily scarred with scratches from head to fin.  
Breaches and vertical half-rise out of the water to view the surroundings (known as spy-hops).



Bow-riding dolphins by WDCS/Charlie Phillips



Risso's dolphins by WDCS/Charlie Phillips

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### White-beaked dolphin

2.5 - 2.8m long.

Tall, curved dorsal fin.

Black with white on sides and over back behind fin.

Short, thick, white-tipped beak.

Breaches and bow-rides.

### Atlantic white-sided dolphin

2.1 - 2.6m long.

Tall, curved dorsal fin.

Sloping black head, black on back and white-yellow flank patches.

No white on back behind fin.

Breaches and occasionally bow-rides, often in large groups.

### Orca (killer whale)

Up to 9m long.

Tall, erect dorsal fin.

Black and white.

White oval behind eyes and pale saddle-patch behind dorsal fin.

Acrobatic, fast and active, breaches.

### Long-finned pilot whale

3.8 - 7m in length.

The long-finned pilot whale is really a dolphin.

Jet black or dark grey with a grey or white diagonal stripe behind each eye, and a large, round forehead.

Backward-leaning fin, set forward on body.

Very active and highly sociable, lives in groups of 10 - 100.

Frequently lobtail and approach boats but prefer deep water.

### Northern bottlenose whale

7 - 9m long.

Tall, erect, hooked, dorsal fin.

Dark grey to brown.

Bulbous forehead.

Short, dolphin-like beak.

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### Minke whale

7 - 9m long.

Triangular head.

Curved dorsal fin two-thirds along back.

Large, white stripe across flippers.

Brief, arching roll.

Swims quite close to shore.



Minke Whale

### Fin whale

18 - 24m long.

Small dorsal fin seen soon after blow.

White right lower jaw, pointed head.

Long, slow, shallow roll.

Tall, cone-shaped blow up to 6m high.

Usually in deeper waters.

### Humpback whale

11.5 - 15m long.

Low, stubby dorsal fin two thirds of way along back.

Knobs on head, lower jaw and along flippers.

Exceptionally long flippers with white markings.

Serrated-edge tail with white underneath.

Breaches and flipper slaps (sometimes known as lobtails).

### Sei whale

Up to 19.5 m long.

Large, curved dorsal fin two thirds along back.

Long, sleek body.

Dark grey upper side with lighter grey underside.

Often circular scars on skin.

Tall blow and visible dorsal fin when surfacing.

## When to go watching

### Na h-amannan as fheàrr airson coimhead

Visible from land	West coast	North coast	East coast
Harbour porpoise	Common all year	Common all year	Common all year
Bottlenose dolphin	Regular all year	Occasional July - August	Common all year; best May - Sept
Short-beaked common dolphin	Occasional, mainly May - August	Occasional all year	Occasional all year
Risso's dolphin	Regular May - October Best August - September	Occasional Mainly May - September	Occasional Mainly May - September
White-beaked dolphin	Regular, July - October Best August - September	Occasional May - October, Best August - September	Occasional May - October Best August - September
Atlantic white-sided dolphin	Occasional near to shore May - October	Occasional near to shore May - October	Rare near to shore May - October
Orca (killer whale)	Regular but uncommon Mainly May - October	Regular but uncommon Mainly May - October	Rare all year
Long-finned pilot whale	Rare mainly April - September	Rare all year	Rare all year
Northern bottlenose whale	Rare mainly August - September	Rare May - October	Rare May - October
Minke whale	Rare in winter & spring Regular May - September Occasional autumn	Rare in winter & spring, Regular May - September, Occasional autumn	Rare in winter & spring Regular July - October
Fin whale	Rare May - October	Rare May - October	Rare May - October
Humpback whale	Rare May - October	Rare May - October	Rare May - October
Sei whale	Very rare May - August	Very rare May - August	Very rare May - August

## Ready to watch the show? Deiseil gus an taisbeanadh fhaicinn

Pick a calm day with few ripples on the water as waves can impede visibility and make it difficult to spot marine wildlife.

Wear warm, waterproof clothing: you are on the same latitude as Alaska. Also bring sunscreen to protect you from the summer sun's strong rays. Pack food and drink as the nearest shop or café may be over ten miles away.



Bottlenose dolphins by WDCS/Charlie Phillips

Bring binoculars or, ideally, a telescope for the best viewing.

Take a camera. The light at sunrise and sunset is good for identifying what you see as well as providing memorable photographs.

Look for any disturbance on the surface: it could be a minke whale feeding or a white-beaked dolphin breaching. Follow a flock of seabirds on the surface or diving gannets - they may not be the only ones to have spotted a shoal of fish. Scan the horizon for a fin, hump or blow.

Get comfortable, keep still and be patient. You never know your luck. Please take extra care on steep slopes and cliff tops.

## Identifying your sighting Ag aithneachadh na tha thu a' faicinn

Jot down what you have seen while it is fresh in your memory. Start with the date, time and location of your sighting.

How long is it? Porpoises are generally smaller than 1.8m, dolphins vary between 2.4 - 4m and whales are generally over 5m. Can you give an estimate of the numbers in the group?

What is the size and shape of the dorsal fin? Is it upright like an orca, sickle-shaped like a dolphin, low and triangular like a porpoise, or small and two-thirds down its back like a minke? Can you distinguish colours or patterns?



Whale venting by WDCS/Charlie Phillips

Is there a blow? Jets of water vapour from a nostril suggest a larger species of whale. How high is the blow? Is it single or double? Is it vertical or pointing forward?

What is the cetacean doing? Some species jump out of the water or bow-ride in front of boats. You might see a dolphin catch a fish, but most often travelling behaviour is seen.

Speak to one of The Highland Council Countryside Rangers (details on page 20) who may be able to give you some information on what you may spot.

For training in cetacean watching and identification or for more information about shore-based monitoring in Scotland, contact the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society. (WDCS) Tel: 01343 820339, or e-mail [shorewatch@wdcs.org](mailto:shorewatch@wdcs.org), or visit [www.wdcs.org/shorewatch](http://www.wdcs.org/shorewatch).



Looking for wildlife, Handa. by The Highland Council

# Wild ocean viewpoints Àiteachan-seallaidh a' chuain fhiadhaich

Follow the trail right round the Highland coast or check the map for car parking, viewing points and interpretation board locations. The North, East and West coasts are only a few hours drive apart so, whatever the wind direction or weather conditions, you can head for calmer waters and possibly a better viewing site.





Grey seal by WDCS/Charlie Phillips

## Locations Làraich

### Loch Sunart

Loch Sunart is internationally recognised as one of the best places in Scotland to look for otters. It is worth stopping several times to scan the rocky shores for foraging otters and the offshore reefs for seals. Harbour porpoises also occasionally swim into the loch.

### Ardnamurchan Point

Ardnamurchan lighthouse marks the most westerly point on the British mainland. There is a bird's eye view from its platform which is more accessible and safer than viewing from the rocks below. Look for minke whale, common dolphin, harbour porpoise and basking shark as they head round the Point.

### Arisaig

Minke whales, harbour porpoises, bottlenose dolphins, basking sharks and more occasionally killer whales and sunfish can be seen as they negotiate the sound between Arisaig and Eigg. The bay is home to seals and otters. Look out for Manx shearwater and goldeneye or even sea eagles overhead.

### Mallaig

Mallaig is a working fishing port and ferry terminus for Knoydart, Skye and the Small Isles. Grey seals bob among the boats in the harbour and gulls, hunting for fish scraps, scream overhead. The ferry passages take you into cetacean territory.



Common seal  
Photographer: Ken Crossan  
By The Caithness Collection

### Point Of Sleat

A rough track leads to the lighthouse at the southernmost tip of Skye. You may be distracted from cetacean watching by the panorama stretching from the Cuillins to Rum, Eigg, Ardnamurchan and the Morar coast. Sightings include humpback whales and bottlenose dolphins.



### Kylerhea Narrows

Here, where Skye almost touches the mainland, common and grey seals haul out on the rocks. There is an otter viewing hide along a forest track from the car park. There are occasional sightings of bottlenose and common dolphins.

### Skye Bridge

There are few road bridges from which you can spot so much wildlife. The Kyle is teeming with life including seals, harbour porpoises and otters. In the summer black-throated divers, terns, skuas and gannets fly overhead.

### Loch Dunvegan

The complex of skerries, islets and undisturbed shores around Loch Dunvegan is home to a breeding colony that accounts for 2% of the UK's common seals. The loch is also famous for its dazzling white 'coral' beaches and for birds such as shelduck and divers.

### Plockton

Here elusive otters join oystercatchers on the beach backed by flower-rich machair meadows. Three hundred common seals live on the offshore islands and reefs, being joined by grey seal visitors in autumn.



Otter and fish by WDGS/Charlie Phillips

### Applecross Peninsula

As well as views to Raasay, Skye and the Outer Hebrides, the Applecross Peninsula has good viewing points for whales and dolphins. The unpolluted, plankton-rich waters of the Minch support the greatest number and diversity of cetaceans around Britain's coastline.

### Gairloch

The sheltered sandy bays and headlands around Gairloch are good sea watching sites. You might get a chance to see pods of common dolphin, a minke mother and calf, harbour porpoise and more rarely basking shark, white-beaked dolphin and killer whale possibly in pursuit of salmon.



Lochinver by The Highland Council

### Lochinver

Grey seals and seabirds dine on fishing boat scraps in the harbour. Forty four thousand grey seal pups, a third of Britain's population, take their first dip in Hebridean waters. Look out for otters, red-breasted merganser, eider duck, shag and black-throated diver.

### Clachtoll

Ocean watching along these rocky shores and sandy beaches may be rewarded by sightings of minke whale, basking shark, dolphin or porpoise. Enthusiasts looking for rare species like killer, fin or sei whale should also try remoter locations like Handa Island and Cape Wrath, to the north.

### Kylesku

Common seals give birth, moult, bask and breed in Loch Glencoul from May to September and fish in and around Kylesku Harbour. Bird watching includes ducks, guillemot, razorbill, geese, red and black-throated diver, merganser and golden eagle.

### Ullapool

A herring and ferry port, Ullapool's history is closely linked with the sea. Harbour porpoises, dolphins and even humpback whales visit the sheltered waters of Loch Broom. The Summer Isles are famous for their seal colonies.

### Tarbet/Handa Island

Bottlenose dolphins swim the channel between here and Handa Island and killer whales have been sighted dashing through at speed. Handa is one of north-west Europe's largest seabird colonies with kittiwake, razorbill, guillemot and skua among the 200,000 birds nesting on its cliffs.

### Sango Bay

Harbour porpoises call into Sango Bay, while the deeper waters round Cape Wrath attract larger species like killer and minke whales. Also look out for dolphins, eider duck, fulmar, shag and gannet around the coastline.

### Strathy Point

Strathy Point is one of the best sites along the north coast for sea watching. Cetaceans regularly come close to shore as they navigate the deep waters around the headland. There are information boards at Totegan car park and Strathy Point with its lighthouse. Please take care on the cliff tops.

### Dunnet Bay

Dolphins, porpoises and seals come into sheltered bays like Dunnet to feed and play. To learn about cetaceans and local wildlife, visit the Seadrift Visitor Centre beside the caravan park.

### Gills Bay/John o' Groats

Minke and killer whales and harbour porpoises regularly swim through the stormy narrows of the Pentland Firth especially in early summer. Gills Bay can also be a good place to see grey seals.

### John o' Groats/Duncansby

Grey seals hunt in the fish-rich waters around the Boars of Duncansby where the tidal surge flows like a river through the sea. In late autumn mothers rear their pups on the rocky shores. Nearby is Duncansby Head, with its seabird cliffs and stacks.



Duncansby Stacks by The Highland Council

### Reiss

Sinclair's Bay is one of the longest beaches in the north. Noss Head provides ledges for seabirds and a cliff-top vantage point for cetacean watchers. To the south, Lybster is a good ocean watching spot with views of the Caithness coast from Swiney Hill.

### Golspie

The long beaches around Brora and Golspie give clear views out to sea for passing cetaceans. There are also common and grey seal colonies on the sandbanks of Loch Fleet which, like the Dornoch Firth, is a wetland site of European importance. 20,000 waterfowl over-winter including teal and long-tailed duck.

### Tarbat Ness

A stroll from the lighthouse car park takes you to Tarbat Ness to watch bottlenose dolphins, the Moray Firth's most famous residents. They may come within a few hundred metres of the shore. Out to sea to both north and south, minke whales may be feeding in summer.

### Balintore

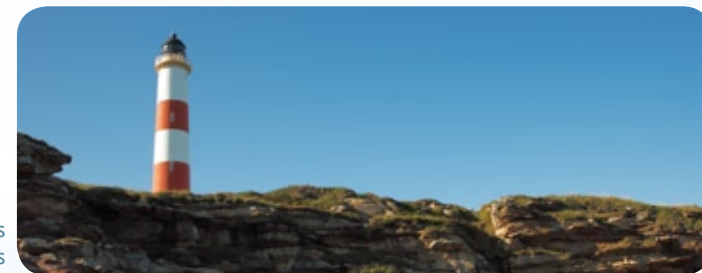
The coast round Balintore and Rockfield offers sheltered viewing spots for bottlenose dolphins or harbour porpoise whose dorsal fin may be the only sign of its underwater presence.

### Ardulie

Common seals living in the Moray Firth haul out on the shore beside the Cromarty Bridge to rest, sunbathe, socialise or replace their winter coats. Watch from a safe distance when females are rearing their pups in mid-summer as you may scare them off or separate them from their young.

### Cromarty

A stroll along the waterfront takes in the busy sealife lanes where the headlands of the Sutors form a bottleneck at the mouth of the Cromarty Firth. They provide a good vantage point to watch bottlenose dolphins. Porpoises and seals can also be seen from the shore, the Cromarty-Nigg ferry and the viewing point on the South Sutor.



Tarbat Ness  
by WDCCS/Charlie Phillips

### Chanonry Point

Popular Chanonry Point is one of Europe's best places to view bottlenose dolphins from the shore. Strong currents and relatively deep water take them close to the shingle spit, and seaward from the lighthouse. If the car park is full, check the map for alternative quieter viewpoints along the coast.

### North Kessock

The WDCS Dolphin and Seal Centre provides an excellent introduction to cetacean watching. There are exhibitions, leaflets, maps, guide books and experts on hand to answer questions and suggest good viewing points. You may even spot a dolphin, seal or otter.

### Ardersier

You can combine a visit to Fort George, the garrison fort built after The Battle of Culloden, with dolphin watching in the narrow channel of deep water between Ardersier and Chanonry Point. There is also plenty of shoreline bird activity.

### Nairn

The long, sandy beach is a good place for cetacean hunters and wildlife watchers generally. At high tide birds like redshank rest in the harbour. Keep a look-out for that elusive splash.

### Spey Bay

Although outwith the Highland area, the WDCS Wildlife Centre at Spey Bay provides an excellent introduction to cetacean watching. The centre also has a café and toilets (for more details see p22).



Dolphin watching at Chanonry Point by WDCS/Charlie Phillips

## Pass on your sightings Innis na chunnaic thu

The Highland Council Countryside Rangers	
Caithness	01847 821531
Sutherland	01571 844654
Wester Ross	01854 613904
Easter Ross/ Black Isle	01349 868563
Skye & Lochalsh	01471 822905
Lochaber	01397 705922
Inverness & Nairn	01463 702932

Your sightings are invaluable to scientists, as surprisingly little is known of the lives of these mammals of the deep. The Sea Watch Foundation collects cetacean sightings throughout Britain. Tel: 01545 561227 or E-mail: [sightings@seawatchfoundation.org.uk](mailto:sightings@seawatchfoundation.org.uk) or log your sightings online at [www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk](http://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk).

### Marine life visitor centres

Gairloch Marine Life Centre, Wester Ross Tel: 01445 712636.  
WDCS Dolphin and Seal Centre, North Kessock near Inverness Tel: 01249 449500.  
WDCS Wildlife Centre, Spey Bay near Elgin Tel: 01343 820339.  
Seadrift Visitor Centre, Dunnet Tel: 01847 821531.



Seadrift Visitor Centre, Dunnet  
by The Highland Council

Durness Visitor Centre  
Tel: 01971 511750.

Assynt Visitor Centre  
Tel: 01571 844654.

The Land, Sea and Islands Visitor  
Centre, Arisaig  
Tel: 01687 450263.

Gairloch Visitor Centre  
Tel: 01445 712071.

## In an emergency

### Ann an cùis èiginn

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Report stranded or sick animals to the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA) Tel: 0870 7377722; British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) Tel: 01825 765546 or Coral Reef Research Unit (CRRU) Tel: 01261 851696.

Report dead seals or cetaceans to the Scottish Agricultural College Tel: 01463 243030.



Grey Seal pup  
by The Highland Council

## Report a crime against wildlife

### Aithris eucoir an aghaidh fiadh-bheatha

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To report wildlife crimes such as the injury, disturbance or harassment of cetaceans, or any other wildlife, contact the local police and ask to speak to the local Wildlife Crime officer. Disturbance and harassment of wildlife is a crime and can have serious impacts on individual animals and even on whole populations. Ongoing disturbance can lead to chronic stress, poor health, increased mortality, habitat abandonment plus impacts on reproduction and care of young. Harassment includes actions such as chasing or continually trying to encounter wildlife that is trying to escape.

Report the disturbance or harassment of cetaceans to a local Wildlife Crime officer or the police. Tel: 01224-304111 / or 01224-306206, however, there is no 24 hour cover and ongoing incidents should be reported via the Force Service Centre on Tel: 0845-6005700. Guidance regarding the recording and reporting of wildlife crime incidents can be found at: [www.snh.org.uk](http://www.snh.org.uk)

## Find out more

### Faigh tuilleadh a-mach

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To find out more about cetaceans or how you can help to protect these animals and the marine environment where they live, contact the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS) - [www.wdcs.org.uk](http://www.wdcs.org.uk)

#### Other contacts:

British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) - [www.bdmlr.org.uk](http://www.bdmlr.org.uk)  
Caithness Sea Watching - [www.caithness-sea-watching.co.uk](http://www.caithness-sea-watching.co.uk)  
Cetacean Research & Rescue Unit (CRRU) - [www.crru.org.uk](http://www.crru.org.uk)  
Dolphin Space Programme (DSP) - [www.dolphinspace.org](http://www.dolphinspace.org)  
Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust - [www.hwtdt.org](http://www.hwtdt.org)  
Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code - [www.marinecode.org/index.asp](http://www.marinecode.org/index.asp)  
Scottish Natural Heritage - Marine Life from Boat and Coast - [www.snh.org.uk/pubs/](http://www.snh.org.uk/pubs/)  
Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) - [www.swt.org.uk](http://www.swt.org.uk)  
The Seawatch Foundation - [www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk](http://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk)  
WiSe (Wildlife Safe) Scheme - [www.wisescheme.org](http://www.wisescheme.org)

If you are interested in watching marine wildlife from the sea, please choose a responsible, accredited, tour boat operator. Details can be found on the Dolphin Space Programme or WiSe websites, or by calling the DSP project officer on Tel: 07921 106144.

## Notes

### Notaichean

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Produced by  
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