

Name: Cliff Benson

Date: August 2005.

Location: St George's Channel.

Title: Superpod of Common Dolphins, 2005.

Memory:

Cliff Benson is the Founder and Managing Director of Sea Trust, based in Goodwick. Over the years he has been involved in numerous surveys, including the one he recounts below.

Cliff asks that anyone wanting to use/cite this work contacts him beforehand to ask for permission. Cliff can be contacted at: seatrustwales@gmail.com.

"At the time of the August 2005 superpod, we, Sea Trust, were the Wildlife Trusts Marine Section, and had funding from the then CCW, to carry out boat surveys of the Common Dolphins.

Before that, I and other keen birdwatchers would club together to hire a boat to look for rare sea birds out in the Celtic Deep. We saw lots of great birds such as Wilson's Petrel, Great Shearwater, and different species of Skua, but I began to realise there were lots of Common Dolphins out there as well. We often saw big pods of up to 100, but when I looked for references to confirm that the Southern Irish Sea / Celtic Deep held large numbers of Common Dolphins I could find nothing.

At the time there was a lot of pair trawling going on in the Western Approaches and there was estimated to be upwards of 7,000 common dolphins being caught and dying in their nets (nothing changes). Common dolphin numbers in the Mediterranean were also in steep decline, so it seemed sensible to try and get out there as often as possible and monitor the situation in our waters. It is something we have been doing for two decades, both from the Cartlett Lady and the Stena Europe, and the shore.

The first Superpod was encountered with a group of Cardiff WT members from Cardiff University WildSoc aboard.

Dr Richard Cowie, Chair of the Cardiff Group (WTSWW) arranged for a weekend field trip for a mixture of his group and the Cardiff Universities Wildlife Society - with half of them coming out with us on the Saturday, and the others on the Sunday.

It was excellent weather and as we motored out west, we soon encountered a couple of smaller Pods, of around twenty dolphins. As we continued out, I spotted what looked like a snowstorm in the distance through my binoculars, maybe ten miles away. Andy Rickard, our Skipper, changed course in that direction and slowly we began to realise that the snowstorm was a huge gathering of feeding Gannets *Morus bassanus* - beneath them spread out over a mile or more of sea was a massive amount of feeding common dolphins! As far as we could



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see in any direction there were dolphins! Adults, subadults, even tiny babies, a huge aggregation of these superb animals. All the passengers who had been chattering and joking went quiet, all awestruck, the only sound was of the dolphins blowing and the gannets' raucous excited calling as they plunged into, what must have been, a phenomenally large bait ball of fish. And the clicking of cameras! I had a video camera and the film I took was later seen on the BBC World News by many millions of people around the globe.

To be honest we claimed 1500, but there could easily have been twice that or even more. We just cut the engines and feasted our senses on the experience. There is no way you can accurately count such a huge gathering!

Of course, the other half of the group were full of expectations the following day having been regaled back in their lodgings by the lucky ones who had witnessed the spectacle with us the day before. We set sail again, but the sky was ominously dark and the sea chopping up. We came past the gannet colony on Grassholm and had a very brief view of a Minke Whale - but by then the wind was stiffening and the waves were increasing in size. A few faces were beginning to turn green and we had to make the decision to head back to port. It just goes to show the sea can be kind one day and cruel the next, feast or famine!"

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