

ORCA Wildlife Report

Icelandic Wonders and Wildlife

Boudicca 18/06 – 01/07/2019

The ORCA Cruise Conservationist Team: Anna Bunney and Jenna Silk

19/06/19: Day at Sea

The ORCA team were on deck from the early hour of 5am for the Boudicca's first day at sea, in the North Sea. We were extremely pleased to see a calm sea state and minimal swell, ideal conditions for spotting cetaceans (whales, dolphins, and porpoises) in our very own UK waters. A number of guests were even up early to see what we were getting up to, and to get involved; and we didn't have to wait for long before we had our first brief encounter with a pod of three **unidentified dolphins** close to the ship. Sometimes, we aren't always able to identify the animal to a species level due to weather conditions, lighting, the length of the encounter, the amount of the animal on show, and their distance from the ship. But this is still very useful data in acknowledging the presence of marine mammals in the area.

Minutes later, a **grey seal** was spotted resting in the water ahead of the ship. Seals are often found far out to sea – and sometimes can even cross the North Sea! Grey seals are identifiable from their 'dog – like' head and face shape, as opposed to the feline face of a harbour/common seal. Within the rest of this deck watch, another small pod of **unidentified dolphins** was spotted, some possible **bottlenose dolphins**, and our first **harbour porpoise** of the day; all we needed was a whale to complete our array of marine mammals!



Grey seal in the North Sea

After a tasty breakfast to refuel our energy levels, we returned to our post on deck 7 at the front of the ship to continue our search for marine mammals. The day continued much like the morning's sightings, with another **seal**, **unidentified dolphins** passing, and many more **harbour porpoise**. The calm conditions made for some lovely sightings of **harbour porpoise** close to the ship, as these small and shy beings can be easily missed.

In the afternoon, Jenna was able to meet with the bridge crew to establish when we would be in certain areas known for their rich productivity, and thus a likely presence of cetaceans. During this meeting, a **minke whale** was spotted on the port side of the ship by those on deck, and not too far from the ship! But the highlight of the day was the charismatic pod of around four **white-beaked dolphins** breaching a little way from the starboard side of the ship, launching themselves from the water creating some dramatic splashes and giving us a flash of their distinctive black and white patterning. The day finished with just a couple more close-up sightings of **harbour porpoises**, a successful day in the North Sea with 55 animals being sighted in total.

20/06/19: Day at sea

The day began early again at 5am for the ORCA team and some eager guests, sailing the stretch between the Orkney and Shetland Islands and the Faroe Islands. And it was a mere twenty minutes into the first deck watch before our early efforts were rewarded with a pod of three **white-beaked dolphins** swimming very closely to the bow of the ship, giving us a tantalising view before they disappeared into the waves. The morning continued quietly with less favourable conditions, a moderate number of white caps on the waves and some swell were making it somewhat harder to find commotion from marine mammals in the water. Just after 7am two **unidentified dolphins** gave us another fleeting encounter as their fins cut through the waves just ahead of the bow.

We had expected more sightings from that morning as we sailed over an area of varying bathymetry, where the depth of the seabed went from around 100m to 1km deep, and into shallower depths again (such features can cause upwellings of nutrients from the currents pushing up from the depths against the steep inclines of the seabed). But at around 11am when sea conditions had improved and the Faroe Islands had just about come into view on the horizon to the starboard side of the ship, a **sperm whale** was seen blowing on the horizon to the port side, by two vigilant guests who had joined in our deck watch, one even got a photo of the dorsal fin for the ORCA team to be able to identify the species of the animal; photos can be a superb way to look back at a brief encounter, almost frozen in time for us to gain more information about the animals in this way. A little while later a single **unidentified dolphin** was spotted swimming quickly but closely from the starboard side of the ship; all of the data we collect on the conditions of the sea and weather, and from our sightings, is processed using specialised software that can account for any likelihood of animals missed by the observer(s) and based on the many factors we record.

The afternoon followed with a larger theme of cetacean sightings... featuring the smaller **minke whale** around 3pm, as the views of the Faroe Islands were tapering off. Minke whales are the smallest rorqual whale at approximately 10m in length, with a pleated throat that can expand to take in a large volume of water and small schooling prey. Two more distant sightings of **unidentified whales** blowing out nearer the horizon were seen before the ORCA team needed to retire for dinner.

However, the ORCA team returned on deck for one last opportunity of the day to carry out their deck watch and data collection efforts. It was quiet on deck as the guests retired to enjoy the evening entertainment, but just before the day came to an end, at around 20:20, Anna looked towards Jenna (on the port side of the ship) and behind her saw an enormous whale break the surface within a few hundred metres from the ship and almost burst with excitement as she announced its presence to a somewhat startled Jenna! We quickly pressed the button to record the button to record our position and time on our data logger, and rushed to the portside barrier to view the whale as it surfaced several times expelling its huge blow of air. We quickly confirmed the species as a **fin whale**, the second largest animal on the planet at around 27 metres in length! We rushed down the port side of the ship, pointing out the whale to as many interested guests as possible as we made our way to the guests enjoying their evening at the sheltered stern of the ship, many of the guests were able to admire the huge whale as we parted ways towards our horizons.



A huge fin whale surfacing near the Boudicca

21/06/19: Cruising Reyðarfjörður

After waking to her alarm at 04:30, Jenna was donning her many many layers to keep warm on deck whilst looking out of her window at the pleasant looking sea conditions, and was brought to a fuller sense of awake by a defined, angled blow of a whale. She quickly grabbed her binoculars for a better look at the animal to which the blow belonged, and although the animal itself wasn't clearly visible the blow was spouting at an angle every time – consistent with that of a **sperm whale** due to its off-centre blowhole that causes an angled blow to the left.

When she made it on deck to greet Anna and the early risers, she excitedly shared what she'd seen from her cabin window. Ninety minutes into the watch, another angled blow was seen to the starboard side of the ship relatively far away, those on deck with binoculars watched the animal blow a number of times before it dived, bringing up the fluke of its tail as it descended, a trademark of yet another **sperm whale**. Only a **harbour porpoise** was spotted before a thoroughly chilled ORCA team came off deck for breakfast. The sea conditions were eerily smooth.

However, timing was not on their side, only a few minutes later guests spotted a pod of around six **orcas/killer whales** pursuing a **minke whale**, one of the guests managed to get some incredible photos, they even witnessed one of the orcas spy-hop, where they raise their head vertically out of the water before sinking back below the surface. Before Anna and Jenna returned to the deck a couple of **humpback whales** and probable **minke whale** had also been seen. The rest of the morning was quiet with just a couple of sightings of **harbour porpoises** at the mouth of the fjord.



A puffin with a beak full of fish, sighted from the Boudicca in Reyðarfjörður



A male orca surfacing – note the huge black dorsal fin, which can be up to 2m high in males. Photo credit Richard Lovelock



Humpback whale lifting its tail fluke before a deep dive. Photo credit Richard Lovelock

The ORCA team were lucky to experience the RIB boats while the ship was docked in Eskifjörður, it was a sensational experience that felt like we were flying across the calm waters of the fjord. The operator of the rib said we'd been travelling at a speed of around 40knots, thrilling! We had some lovely close up views of eider ducks, fulmars, puffins, guillemots, and black guillemots, flying by or ducking below the surface as we soared across the water.

The evening's watch was busy with **harbour porpoise** sightings, including some calves, and many seabirds resting on the surface or gliding over the calm waters, including fulmars, gannets, common guillemots and puffins. Harbour porpoises' vocalisations are pitched at a frequency that is outside of an orcas range of hearing; perhaps this is why this was all we had seen that evening. It has been suggested that unusually quiet areas that are usually frequent with whale and dolphin sightings, are sometimes so due to the presence of orcas in the area.



Fulmars and their reflections in the calm waters of the Icelandic Sea



A diving puffin! Note the bright orange legs which are characteristic of this species



A puffin with a beak full of sand eels, flying away from the Boudicca

22/06/19: Cruising Eyjafjörður and Akureyri

The ORCA team were up on deck for 5am again to cruise along the north coast of Iceland, passing near to Husavik, one of the whale watching hotspots of Iceland for spotting humpback whales, and we were not disappointed...

The sightings began from around 05:20 with the smaller residents of the ocean first, a pod of four **white-beaked dolphins** swimming a little way out from the portside of the ship, followed within 10 minutes by a lone **harbour porpoise** close to the ship. Only seconds later another pod of around six **white-beaked dolphins** were spotted breaching to the port side before swimming closer towards the ship; with just a couple more being seen near to the ship again only 15 minutes later.

After 6am, the excitement levels began to rise, and rightly so... with four individual sightings of **humpback whales** being spotted blowing, and some fluking (raising their tails out of the water to take a deeper dive) between 06:10 and 06:52 along with one distant **unidentified whale**. Whilst watching the distant blowing whale, an enormous splash was seen right on the horizon, as much as we all tried, we could not see the body of the whale as it was so far away, but the enormous splash from its breaches were very visible indeed, a sheer demonstration of size and power. Humpback whales will breach possibly for a number of reasons, for communication, for fun, and to remove itchy barnacles from their skin. Whilst focusing on the breaching whale in the distance, we all gasped in surprise at the sound of a close whale blow just metres from the starboard side of the bow, a **humpback whale** that rolled raising its tail fluke into the air for a dive. Everyone was ecstatic with the close encounter; we became giddy with excitement and began amusing ourselves concocting whale/cetacean related puns... I won't disappoint you by listing them here! We had a handful more of unidentified whales and **humpback whales** before enjoying a close view of five **white-beaked dolphins** riding the waves at the bow giving us beautiful views of their prominent colouration.

Before we had even entered Eyjafjörður, we had already hit double figures with **humpback whales**, and had further sightings of **white-beaked dolphins**, some riding the bow. Some guests had seen their first ever whale, with great views of the flukes rising out of the water. Entering Eyjafjörður the deck was bustling with over 100 guests taking in the beautiful scenery and keen to see some whales. After turning into Eyjafjörður, four **humpback whales** were quickly spotted blowing and fluking ahead of the ship towards the land, our first sign of the abundant humpback sightings to come. The ORCA team hinted to the guests to keep an eye on the smaller whale watching boats in the area and to watch the waters around them, and sure enough the whales were popping up nearby with their tell-tale blows and raising their flukes. We also had a distant sighting of some **white-beaked dolphins** by one of the whale watching boats, three **harbour porpoises**, and a possible **minke whale**. One of the smaller whale watching RIB boats was surrounded, and very closely, by three **humpback whales**, certainly close enough to smell their blow.



Humpback whale tail fluke in Eyjafjörður

A total of 40 **humpback whales** were seen that morning! Incredible!

In Akureyri the ORCA team went on the whale watching excursion, this gave us some closer encounters with some of the **humpback whales**, some popping up from their dives very closely indeed. One was even seen breaching, though just the once, a true privilege to see.



Humpback whales sighted on the Whale Watching Excursion

23/06/19: Departing Eyjafjörður and out to sea

The journey out from Akureyri was as whale-filled as our journey inwards, and within the first hour we had already seen nine **humpback whales**, one of which surfaced so close to the ship we could look into the water and see it's white pectoral fins splayed beside it beneath the surface, and a **harbour porpoise** was also seen.



Humpback whale close to the Boudicca. Note the long, white pectoral fins (which can be up to 5m long!) underneath the water, and the tubercles or hair follicles around the whale's rostrum. Photo credit Oliver Turpin

Our second hour brought much of the same, but with a lovely view of a **minke whale** to the starboard side, and a few **white-beaked dolphins** attracted to the ship. But from 19:40 things got incredibly exciting... 19 **humpback whales** were seen blowing, fluking, and even a few of them breaching ahead near to the other two ships ahead of us! As we approached, we got closer views, with some seen feeding below a flock of feeding birds, one **humpback whale** in particular was throwing the rear two-thirds of its body into a dramatic tail-slap, in an almost rear-breach, not far from port-ahead, an impressive display of power. Two further large groups of **humpbacks** were encountered successively after, a group of 12 and a group of nine, with breaches still being seen!



Breaching humpback whale

The entire evening was filled with **humpback whale** sightings, all around the ship, it was truly special. Breaching and pectoral fin slapping were being seen frequently in the choppy waves. Despite the wind picking up on deck, the ORCA team and the guests on deck didn't feel so cold with the onslaught of excitement that was unfolding for hours, we were running from side to side with each spectacular encounter. The ORCA team had missed dinner as to not miss the whales, but decided they couldn't go without food for the whole night and retired for supper at 23:40 when the light began to fade.



Breaching humpback whale sequence



Humpback whale doing a deep dive

A total of 72 **humpback whales** were seen during that long watch, more whales than Anna or Jenna from the ORCA team have ever seen in one sitting in their experiences.



Tail and pectoral fin of a humpback whale, passing down the port side of the Boudicca

In a euphoric daze we recounted to some of the crew and guests in the restaurant about the evening's events, with Ollie the Deputy Cruise Director heading out with his camera until 2am! The bridge crew confirmed there were humpback whales and minke whales seen all through the night, still breaching, into the early hour of 4am.

[24/06/19: At sea and Ísafjörður](#)

The activity in the sea seemed to have calmed once the ORCA team were back on deck for the early morning deck watch before docking in Ísafjörður, with our first **humpback whales** being sighted just after 06:05, one of the two gave their presence away with a full breach! In the following hour four more **humpbacks** were spotted in the bay on approach to Ísafjörður, with more breaching seen.

Departing in the evening, it wasn't long before we were greeted by more **humpback whales**, some distant, but some very close to the ship. Just off to the port side slightly ahead of the ship one took for a dive lifting its fluke gracefully out of the water before slipping away below the surface; but some were feeling a little less docile... some were seen breaching out of the water, and another was showing an impressive and fairly prolonged display of tail-lobbing. Whilst tail-lobbing, the dorsal fin located two thirds of the way back on the animal was also visible, the whale appeared to be hauling the entire rear half of its body out of the water repeatedly, needless to say there were many enormous splashes! A total of 14 humpback whales were seen during our evening watch, that's one less than the total number of this species seen by Cruise Conservationist Jenna on her trip around Iceland last year, so a most wonderful send off from Ísafjörður for all who saw them.



Tail-lobbing humpback whale. Photo credit Richard Lovelock



Breaching humpback whale. Photo credit Richard Lovelock



Tail-lobbing humpback whale. Photo credit Richard Lovelock



Tail-slapping humpback whale. Photo credit Richard Lovelock

[25/06/19: Arriving in Reykjavík](#)

As we travelled down the West coast of Iceland, bypassing the area of Grundarfjörður where orcas have been spotted almost daily by whale watching tour operators, the ORCA team and the deputy cruise director Ollie were up on deck from 01:30 as we passed the area around 2am. One guest had also heard that this was the time we'd be surveying from and sat up by one of the bridge decks in the hope of good sightings. Unfortunately, the survey was a quiet one, with a small pod of **white beaked dolphins** seen briefly passing the starboard side of the ship, however we did see another pod of **white-beaked dolphins** putting on a lovely display of breaching when we were approaching Reykjavík.



Acrobatic white-beaked dolphins. Photo credit Richard Lovelock

[26/06/19: Departing Reykjavík](#)

After catching up on some admin and some much-needed sleep, the ORCA team were back out on deck with a number of guests hoping to see some cetaceans on our way out of Reykjavík. On our way out a whale watching vessel was spotted ahead, coming back towards shore, Ollie the deputy cruise director went up to the bridge to see if we could make contact as to whether they had seen anything; unfortunately, they hadn't and the watch continued with only three **harbour porpoise** being sighted.

[27/06/19: At sea](#)

During our day at sea, the ORCA team and some dedicated guests exercised great patience during a quieter watch, with only a couple of sightings of a few **unidentified dolphins**, and a very sneaky **fin whale** surfacing quickly by the bow of the ship before ducking below and swimming off with impressive speed surfacing again on the port side of the ship a little further away.

Anna and Jenna would often entertain themselves with guesses, and a large amount of hope, as to what they may see at sea that day, today they'd both been pretty confident that we may finally see some pilot whales, a distinctive looking member of the dolphin family that have incredibly close bonds between the members of the pod. And this time they were right, into the evening watch a moderate pod of around 17 **long-finned pilot whales** were spotted ahead of the ship on the port side, they crossed in front of the bow and swam down the starboard side of the ship; their presence was a marvellous reward for everyone's persistence on deck putting in the hours watching the waves with the ORCA team. *Great things come to those who wait!*



Pilot whales

28/06/19: At sea

With a quiet morning watch before breakfast, the ORCA team headed back out on deck after the talk about the devastating effects of plastics in our oceans. One of our regular guests on deck spotted an animal directly ahead of the ship, as we headed towards them, four of the animals surfaced right at the bow revealing their brown colour, scars, and pointed beak; Jenna and Anna spotted the animals' unusual face and after enjoying the sighting and watching them swim away beneath the surface, quickly flicked through the cetacean ID book to see what the animals were... **Sowerby's beaked whales!** These are not a species we necessarily *expected* to sea on the cruise although today we were travelling within their range, and as beaked whales, they're rather elusive. Such a close encounter was a special treat, and a new species to Jenna and Anna, and the guests.



A brief encounter with Sowerby's beaked whales, in front of the Boudicca's bow. Photo credit Jim Sheridan

At almost exactly 2pm when the ORCA team were about to head in for lunch, Jenna spotted two blows ahead on the horizon. In these deep waters we had been hoping to see some large whales; they weren't spending a particularly long time at the surface yet using binoculars and photos to help with identifying the animals they were confirmed as a **fin whale** and a **blue whale**. Fin whales and blue whales have been observed associating together and have even hybridised, though the viability of the blue/fin hybrids is not known.



A blue whale coming towards the Boudicca. Photo credit Richard Lovelock.

After this excitement, shortly afterwards, Jenna saw a cluster of splashes a little way out on the starboard side of the ship, and upon looking with the binoculars saw what appeared to be a pod of dolphins rushing towards the ship. However, many members of the pod were quickly identified as **pilot whales** by their distinct dorsal fins and black colour; but amongst them were some smaller, pointed-finned, fast-moving animals, which at a glance appeared to look and behave like dolphins. Jenna and Anna were watching them closely but these were no ordinary dolphins and were lacking in any patterning or colouration other than black and had no prominent beak, Anna voiced her suspicions "Jenna, I think they're **false killer whales**"! After enjoying the views of this incredible mixed pod of around 35 pilot whales and 25 false killer whales for a few minutes, the ORCA team confirmed the species again using the ID book, another new species for both Anna and Jenna, along with the guests!

After pulling themselves away for a speedy lunch-stop the ORCA team returned on deck, the fog began to close in around the ship leaving a varying viewable distance of 50-100m approximately. Jenna quickly briefed the guests on deck to move towards the side of the ship of anything spotted as anything would quickly disappear into the fog behind us, and as if on cue a small pod of **pilot whales** was called out by an excited Anna to the port side of the ship. Soon after the eerie views of pilot whales on the edge of the fog, two mysterious **beaked whales** appeared on the

starboard side of the ship, a mother and calf! Whilst still in the fog, two pods of **dolphins** were seen charging quickly through the surface creating a lot of white water, but due to the misty views the ORCA team were unable to identify the species.



Long-finned pilot whales. Photo credit Richard Lovelock.



A sad sight – gannet with fishing line stuck in its beak

The ORCA team and many guests persisted in the fog for a couple of hours without any sightings after their busy streak, however there came a time to retire for a little while as the fog was not lifting. After dinner Anna and Jenna had settled in their cabins to work on some admin and the roundup presentation, keeping a watch on the bridge cam live feed (useful!). After a very short time the fog seemed to lift and the ORCA team quickly rushed back to the deck, the busy day certainly carried on with the clear horizon...

Ahead several large whale blows were spotted by Anna, it was soon apparent we were going to see quite a special aggregation of very large whales. On approach Jenna and Anna were able to identify the whales as **fin whales** from their dorsal fins and surfacing behaviour, not just a few, but 19 identified fin whales! There were also a couple of distant whale blows that the ORCA team were unable to identify. Amongst the fin whale sightings, a **minke whale** was also spotted fairly close to the ship, and two mysterious sightings of what we can only categorise as '**medium cetaceans**'. We also spotted two pods of five, and then two, **unidentified dolphins**. The ORCA team were rather pleased they got out of their PJs and back into their layers for such a fulfilling evening deck watch, a few passing guests on their laps of the ship also got to see some of the ocean giants.



Fin whale surfacing, with three whale blows in the distance



Fleeting glimpse of a minke whale

29/06/19: Kirkwall

Approaching and travelling through the scenic Orkney Islands, four **grey seals**, and an **unidentified seal** were spotted in the coastal waters. Orcas had been sighted in Scapa Flow a few days before, but unfortunately despite our vigilance we just weren't in the right place at the right time for the orcas; but we did spot a very entertaining pod of

three **common dolphins** as we came into Kirkwall harbour, they swam over to a departing vessel and rode the bow waves. It was nice to see the dolphins leaping at the bow of another ship as opposed to our own, for a full side-on view of their acrobatics.



Common dolphin bow riding a vessel in Kirkwall Harbour

After leaving Kirkwall, the sea was a beautiful bright turquoise against the grey ominous clouds, and sure enough it began to rain. There was a fair swell but very few white caps on the ripples, and the ORCA team were able to spot a couple of shy **harbour porpoise** before taking shelter in the ship for the lightening display that soon ensued, turning our eyes from the seas to the skies for impressive views.

[30/06/19: At sea](#)

The conditions weren't ideal for spotting cetaceans on our final sea day, with choppy waves, strong winds, and lots of white water. The ORCA team and some guests enjoyed some of the sunshine however and had some entertaining views of some diving gannets, but no cetaceans were spotted in the rough sea.

Jenna delivered the roundup presentation in the Neptune Lounge, showing off the spectacular photos taken by guests and staff on board, and sharing some more details about the species that were seen.

[Acknowledgements](#)

This was a spectacular cruise with some once-in-a-lifetime sightings, and we want to say a huge thank you to Fred. Olsen Cruises for having the ORCA team on board for our first ever cruise with the company. The crew have been as

welcoming, friendly, and supportive, as the guests on board Boudicca. We'd like to say a special thank you to Vicki Smith who arranged for our team to come aboard to carry out our exciting work and vital data collection on board, she immersed herself in the ORCA experience spending hours on deck with us witnessing some incredible animals doing incredible things, we're sorry you had to leave from Reykjavik, duty calls! We'd also like to extend special thanks to Cruise Director, Tim Spicer, and Deputy Cruise Director Oliver Turpin, for embracing us into the cruise programme, even putting us on stage in all our layers and surveying gear to give guests a quick update before the evenings show. We'd also like to say a special thanks to the bridge crew and captain for allowing us into the bridge to establish when we'd be hitting possible peak areas of productive water, and for their friendly humour.

We had a wonderful time on board, getting to know as many of you as possible, and were very sad to say goodbye (for now) to those who shared the experience with us while unforgettable memories were made. We thank you for your patience, dedication, enthusiasm, photos (Richard!), and good humour, and wish you all well back home, and in your future travels, and we hope we'll meet again on the waves.



Jenna and Anna – Your ORCA Cruise Conservationists

ORCA is one of the UK's leading whale and dolphin conservation charities, dedicated to the long-term protection of whales, dolphins and porpoises (collectively known as cetaceans), and their habitats. For more information about us, please visit our website www.orcaweb.org.uk

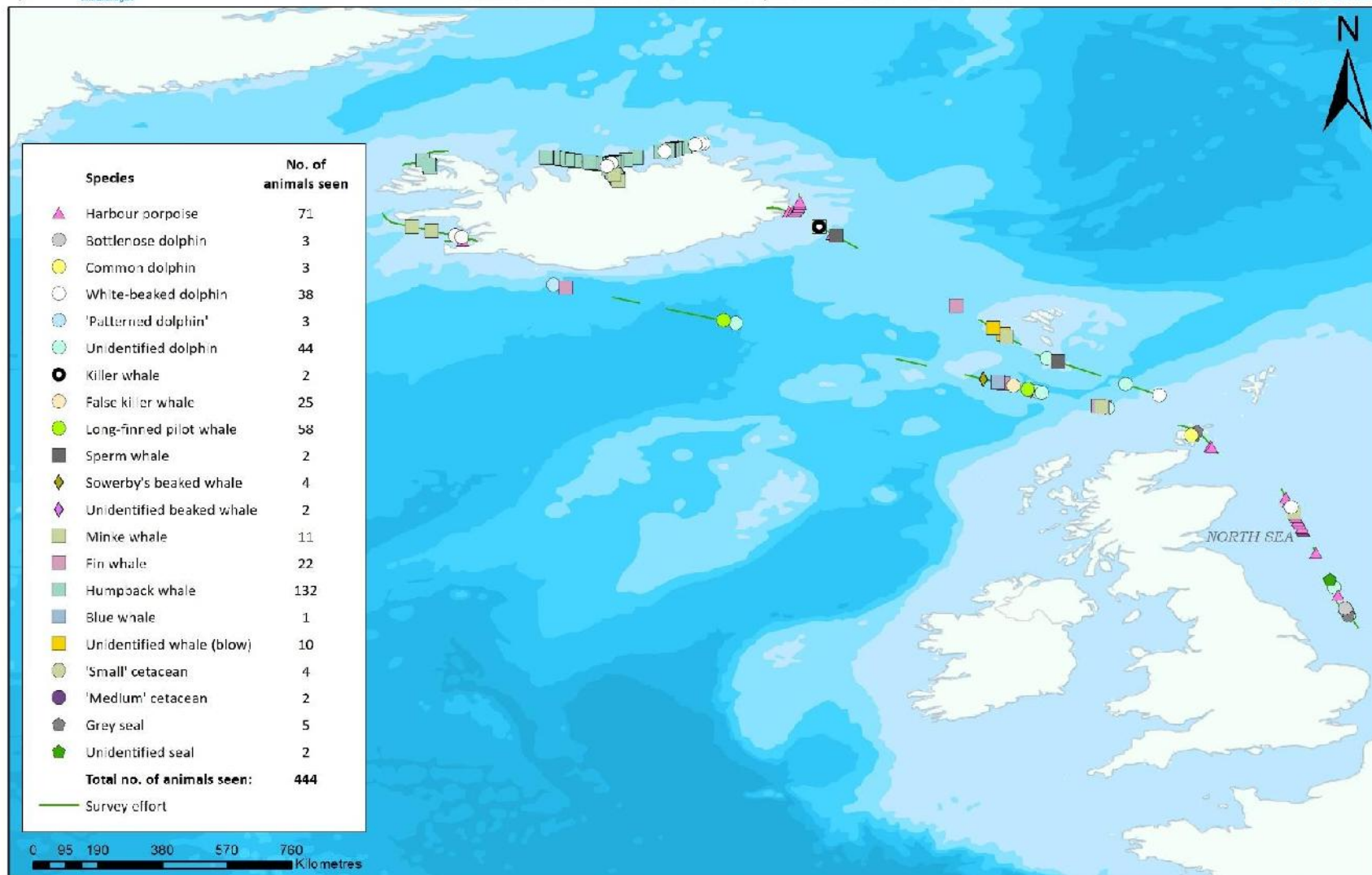
For a map of all the marine mammals seen and recorded during this cruise please see the next page.

Bird List (species sighted from the ship):

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------------|
| Gannet | Pomarine skua |
| Fulmar | Manx shearwater |
| Common guillemot | Arctic tern |
| Black guillemot | Herring gull |
| Razorbill | Greater black-backed gull |
| Atlantic puffin | Lesser black-backed gull |
| Arctic skua | Glaucous gull |

ORCA Marine Megafauna Sightings

Icelandic Wonders & Wildlife, 18th - 30th June 2019



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