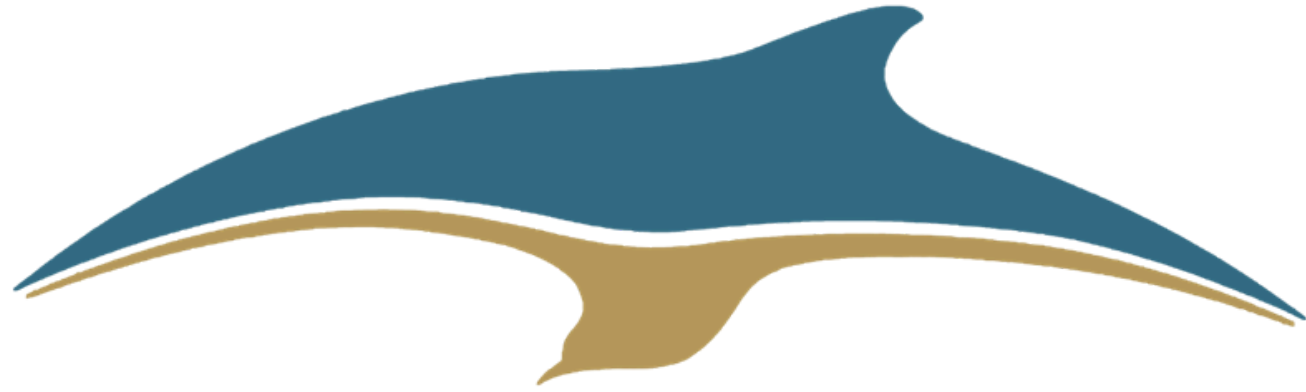


April 2024 to March 2025



MARINElife

Annual Science Review:
Cetacean and Seabird Surveys



Minke whale, Jo Richardson



Billy Heaney
MARINELife ambassador

There's nothing quite like the feeling of being out on the open sea — the wind in your face, the hum of the vessel beneath your feet, and that sense of anticipation as you scan the waves for whatever might appear next. It's addictive, it's exhilarating, and it's exactly what **MARINELife**'s volunteers experience every time they step aboard.

Our surveys have shown just how alive our waters are – from Humpback Whales off Dover to Cory's Shearwaters in record-breaking numbers, the stories coming back from the field have been nothing short of spectacular. Even species we think we know well — like Bottlenose Dolphins — are surprising us, turning up in new places and reminding us that the sea is constantly shifting and full of surprises.

But what really stands out to me is the people behind the data. **MARINELife**'s volunteers are out there in all weathers, eyes fixed on the horizon, turning moments of magic into meaningful science.

So whether you're a seasoned surveyor, a wildlife enthusiast, or someone who simply loves the coast, I hope this report inspires you – every sighting, every survey, every hour spent at sea brings us closer to understanding — and safeguarding — the incredible life that shares our waters.

Executive Summary

2024–25 was a year of renewed momentum for MARINELife. Survey effort increased for the third year in a row, with volunteers and staff covering nearly 22,000 km across UK and near-European waters. This growing effort revealed a rich and dynamic picture of marine life, from soaring seabirds to surfacing whales.

Nine cetacean species were recorded, including rare encounters with Humpback Whale, Fin Whale, and Long-finned Pilot Whale. Common Dolphin remained the most frequently seen species, while Bottlenose Dolphins continued their expansion into the North Sea.

Seabird activity was equally impressive. Cory's Shearwater numbers reached unprecedented levels, Balearic Shearwater counts surged, and Manx Shearwater remained one of the most abundant species across survey routes. The Peltic survey also provided new evidence of Woodpigeon migration across the English Channel, offering fresh insight into coastal bird movements.

None of this would be possible without MARINELife's volunteers, whose commitment and expertise continue to drive one of the UK's most valuable long-term marine monitoring programmes.



Survey effort continues its strong recovery

Survey effort rose 23%, marking the third consecutive year of growth. MARINELife teams covered 21,917 km across 90 surveys, pushing the long-term total beyond 700,000 km since 1995.



A standout year for cetaceans

Nine species were recorded, including Humpback Whale, Fin Whale, and Long-finned Pilot Whale. Common Dolphin dominated sightings, while Bottlenose Dolphins expanded into the North Sea, reflecting wider ecological shifts.



Exceptional seabird records

Cory's Shearwater: an **extraordinary 2,720 birds**, almost all from the Peltic survey.
Balearic Shearwater: fewer sightings, but triple the number of individuals, including a flock of **585**.
Manx Shearwater: over **8,000** birds, widely distributed across survey routes.



Exceptional seabird records

The Peltic survey provided compelling evidence of Woodpigeon migration across the English Channel, resolving a long-standing ornithological question.



Volunteers remain the heart of MARINELife

With more than **50,000 volunteer hours** contributed since 1995, the 2024–25 programme again relied on the dedication, skill, and passion of trained citizen scientists.

Cetaceans

544 sightings of nine species
Humpback Whale off Dover — first MARINELife record since 2019
Common Dolphin: 2,397 individuals counted
Bottlenose Dolphins further expanding into the North Sea

Other Marine Life

Bluefin Tuna sightings extended eastwards into the Dover–Dunkirk route
Grey Seal widely recorded
Harbour Seal concentrated in the eastern English Channel

Seabirds

Cory's Shearwater: 2,720 birds — a record year
•Balearic Shearwater: 2,601 individuals, including a flock of 585
Manx Shearwater: 8,132 birds across 1,728 sightings
Great Northern Diver: first targeted survey in Lyme Bay

Survey Effort

21,917 km surveyed
90 surveys across 25 vessels
New route added: Newcastle–Amsterdam



MARINELife

Highlights 2024–2025

Volunteers

Over 50,000 hours contributed since 1995
Several volunteers completed 10+ surveys this year

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Common terns, Tom Brereton



1. Ships of Opportunity (ShOp) Survey Programmes

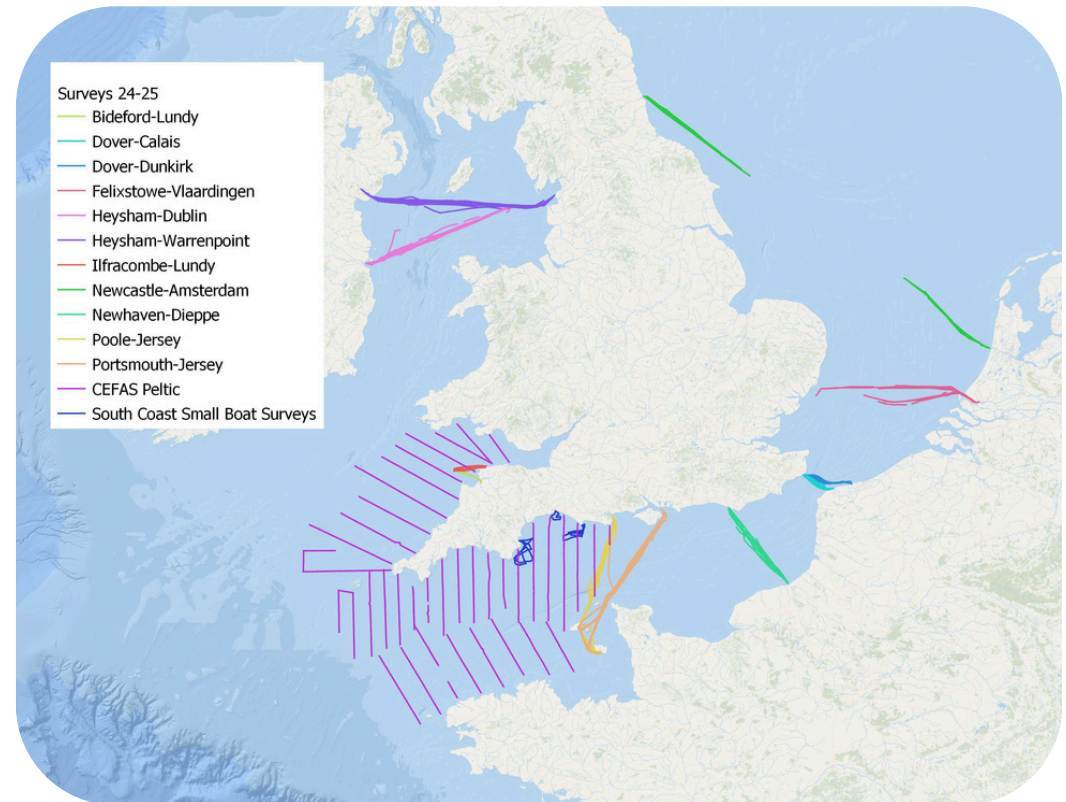
1.1 Summary

Long-term recovery in the extent of MARINELife's Ships of Opportunity (ShOp) Survey Programme continued in 2024-25. Total survey effort (km travelled) increased for the third financial year in succession, by a total of 23%, and is slowly recovering towards the pre-pandemic peak from 2012-2019. Funding secured from the *Cibus Foundation* played a valuable part in the upturn, by contributing to volunteer expenses, costs of training new volunteers and provision of branded clothing.

Outside of JNCC Volunteer Seabirds at Sea (VSAS) surveys, a total 21,917km of trackline was surveyed through 90 surveys on 103 days utilising 25 vessels. All the surveys started from UK ports, but also entered Dutch, French, and Irish waters as well as the crown dependencies of Guernsey and Jersey.

The survey effort in 2024-2025 increased our coverage to date to 700,000 km.

14 survey programmes ran in 2024-25, including: 12 ferry surveys; the CEFAS Peltic research cruise; and small boat surveys in and around Lyme Bay, South West England.



1.2 Monthly ferry surveys

The core of MARINELife's work is running a programme of monthly ferry surveys, first established in 1995. There were **1w** routes sampled in 2024-25, including one new route – Newcastle to Amsterdam.

1.3 MARINELife/JNCC Volunteer Seabirds at Sea Project in England (VSAS England)

Launched in 2022, the project is bringing 'gold standard' European Seabird at Sea (ESAS) seabird recording on selected MARINELife ferry routes in England. Three routes were sampled in 2024-25, with co-ordination and training courses overseen by Debbie Welham.

Eight surveys were completed, including five from Penzance, two from Heysham and one from Newhaven.

Newhaven-Dieppe and Heysham – Dublin, recorded similar species to that found on MARINELife surveys including substantial numbers of auks, gulls and from the Heysham ferry, Manx Shearwaters.

The Penzance to Scilly ferry was similarly productive, with lots of sightings of Manx Shearwater, plus Puffin and Sooty Shearwater. Cetaceans were excellent on this route, with numerous Common Dolphin, plus Harbour Porpoise, Minke Whale and Bottlenose Dolphin.



Surveying from the Scillonian, Tom Brereton

1.4 South Coast Small Boat Surveys

A programme of small-boat surveys has been carried out off South West England, especially in Lyme Bay since 2006. Led by Tom Brereton, the surveys are targeted at understanding the distribution, population size, movements and habitat requirements of three threatened and protected species: Bottlenose Dolphin, White-beaked Dolphin and Balearic Shearwater. Great Northern Diver was added to the focal species list in 2024/25, with new surveys out of Lyme Regis. The surveys are supported through *Naturetrek pelagics* from Portland and Brixham.

1.5 CEFAS Peltic research cruise

The Peltic survey is led by the Government's Fisheries Research Institute CEFAS and is a multidisciplinary survey of the Western Channel and Celtic Sea waters focused on pelagic fish assessment, which runs for several weeks each autumn. MARINELife has been surveying on the Peltic survey each year since 2013 and a 28-day continuous survey ran again in October 2024. Special mention must go to surveyor Pete Howlett, who completed his ninth Peltic survey and a total of 133 survey days.

1.6 North East Cetacean Project (NECP)

Although there were no small boat surveys in 2024-25, a vast number of land-based sightings and photo identification images were collated from the Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire coasts, including through Northern Experience Wildlife Tours pelagics.

Harbour Porpoise and Bottlenose Dolphin were recorded on most days, often with multiple sightings per day. During the summer, sightings of Minke Whale, Humpback Whale and White-beaked Dolphin became a feature, with occasional sightings of Common Dolphin and Risso's Dolphin.

Rarities included a live stranding of a Sowerby's Beaked Whale and a possible Killer Whale. Several unidentified whales were also recorded.



*Bottlenose dolphin,
Martin Kitching*



Monthly Ferry Surveys	Start year	Km travelled
		2024-25
Bideford-Lundy	2014	142
Dover-Calais	2015	758
Dover-Dunkirk	2012	527
Felixstowe-Vlaardingen	2008	1318
Heysham-Dublin	2015	3731+VSAS
Heysham-Warrenpoint	2011	4625
Ilfracombe-Lundy	2011	301
Liverpool-Belfast	2011	
Newcastle-Amsterdam	2024	1209
Newhaven-Dieppe	2012	967+VSAS
Penzance-St Marys	2022	VSAS
Poole-Jersey	2015	1869
Portsmouth-Jersey	2014	2637

Research cruises	Start year	Km travelled
		2024-25
CEFAS Lowestoft - Lowestoft	2012	0
CEFAS Peltic	2012	3447

Small boat surveys	Start year	Km travelled
		2024-25
NECP Project	2009	0
SW England Project	2007	420

All surveys	Started 1995	702,413km
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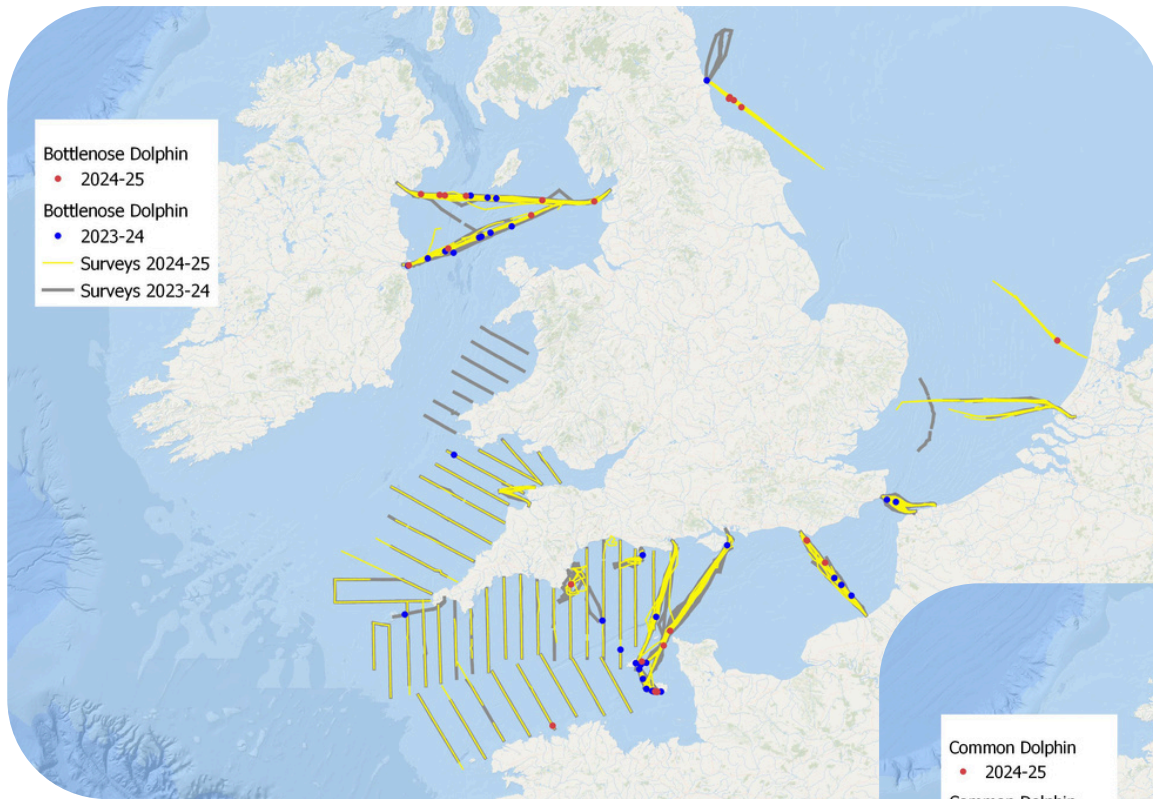
2. Sightings from MARINELife surveys

2.1 Cetaceans

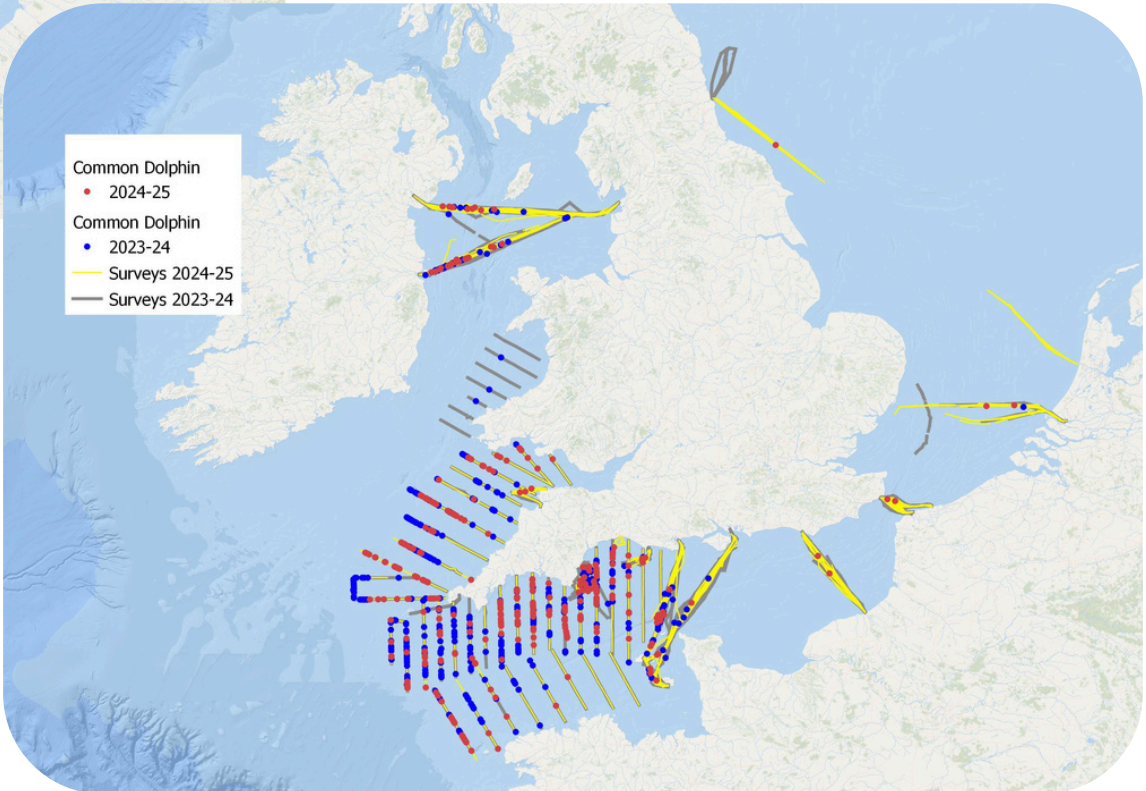
There were 544 sightings of nine cetacean species, compared with 665 sightings of seven cetacean species in 2023–24.

There were 26 sightings of Bottlenose Dolphin, with regular sightings in the Irish Sea, Eastern Channel and around the Channel Islands. The standout feature was a relative increase in the number of sightings in the North Sea, consistent with a substantial arrival of Scottish animals into Eastern English waters since 2019 (see Hackett et al. 2024, NECP report).

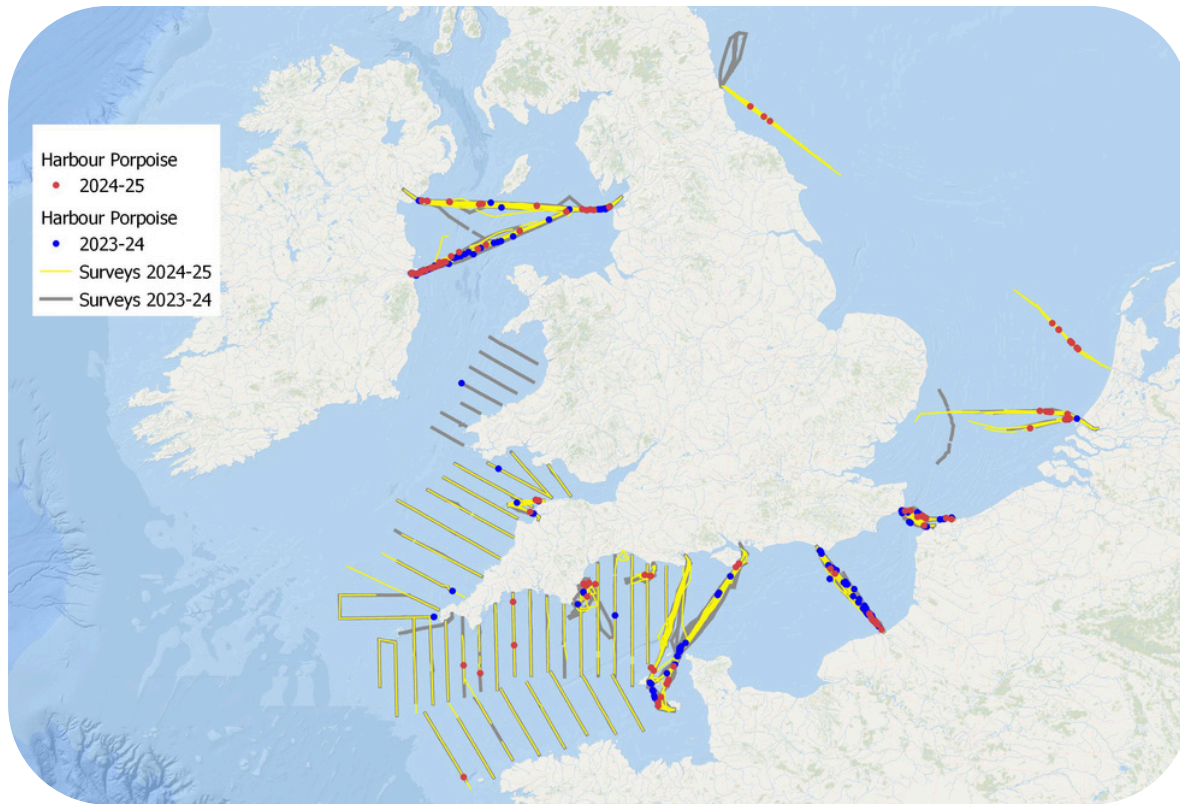
Species	No. of sightings	Total no. counted
Bottlenose Dolphin	26	142
Common Dolphin	329	2397
Fin Whale	1	1
Harbour Porpoise	113	200
Humpback Whale	1	1
Long-finned Pilot Whale	1	7
Minke Whale	9	13
Risso's Dolphin	3	9
White-beaked Dolphin	2	10
Cetacean sp.	6	6
Dolphin sp.	46	92
Whale sp.	7	9
Total number counted	544	2887
Total number of species		9



Bottlenose Dolphin
 26 sightings
 142 counted



Common Dolphin
 329 sightings
 2397 counted



Harbour Porpoise
 113 sightings
 200 counted





*Common dolphin,
Tom Brereton*

Common Dolphin remained the most frequently recorded species, representing two-thirds of all positively identified cetacean sightings. Sightings rose notably in the eastern Channel and North Sea, with additional regular records from Irish Sea ferries, Lundy, the CEFAS Peltic survey, Lyme Bay small-boat work and the Channel Islands, though few were seen in Cardigan Bay.

Harbour Porpoise was often recorded from Irish Sea ferries, the Channel Isles, western Lyme Bay and Eastern Channel routes. Additional sightings came from Lundy and the Newcastle–Amsterdam ferry, with higher numbers than last year on the Felixstowe–Vlaardingen route. Few were recorded on the Peltic cruise, likely due to poor detectability in high sea states.

There were three sightings of **Risso’s Dolphin** in the Western Channel, and two sightings of **White-beaked Dolphin** in the North Sea on the Newcastle–Amsterdam route.

Minke Whale was the most frequently recorded whale, seen mainly from Irish Sea ferries and beyond the Yorkshire coast, with an extra sighting in the Western Channel from the Peltic cruise.

A standout **Humpback Whale** was seen in January 2025 from the Dover–Dunkirk ferry—only the 16th MARINELife record since 1995 and the first since 2019, also from this route.

Two **Fin Whale** encounters were logged: one off west Cornwall on a similar transect to 2023, and another probable sighting near the Channel Islands.

A single **Long-finned Pilot Whale** sighting occurred in the Western Channel on the Peltic cruise, with seven animals recorded. This cold-water species has become increasingly scarce in British coastal waters, with the previous MARINELife record occurring offshore northwest Scotland in August 2022.

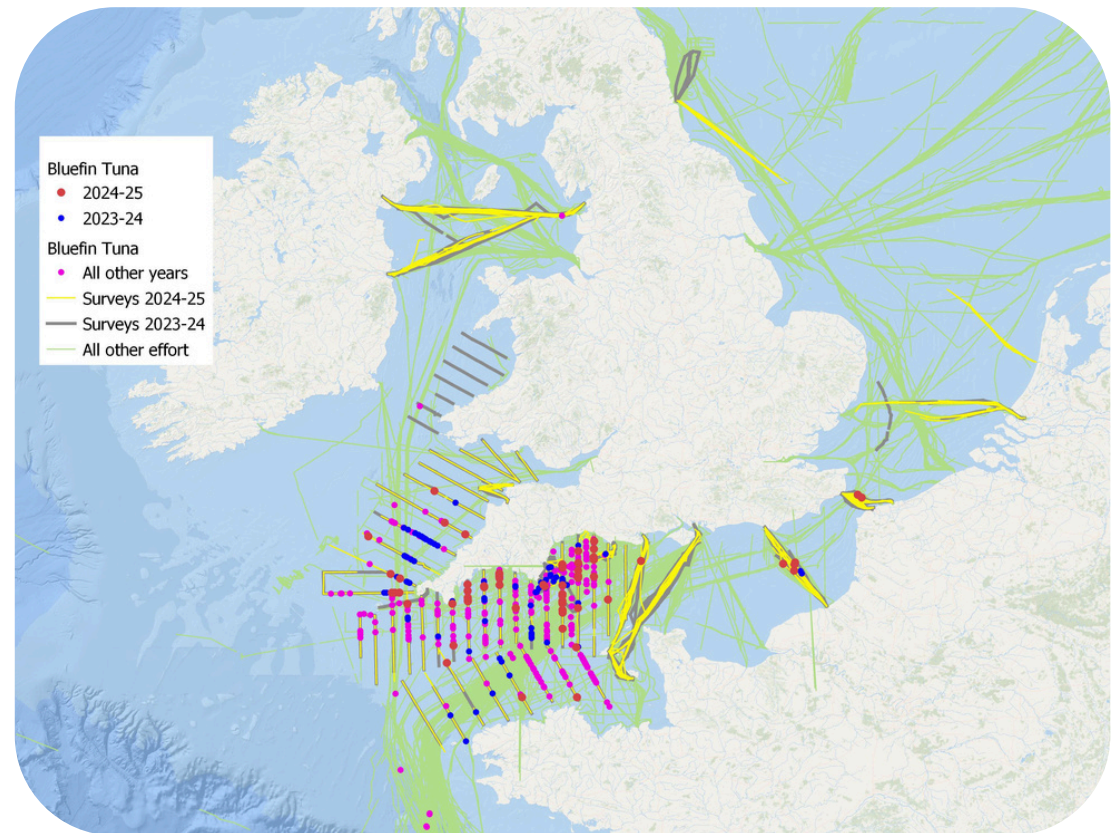
2.2 Other large marine animal highlights

There was a good spread of **Bluefin Tuna** sightings, including, for the first time, two probable sightings from the Dover to Dunkirk Ferry, this being yet another species which appears to be shifting east. The species has been widely record in the Western Channel and off West Cornwall over the last decade.

Grey Seal was encountered on most ferry survey programmes, often well offshore, though it was surprisingly scarce on the Peltic cruise.

Harbour Seal was chiefly recorded on the Dover to Calais, Dover to Dunkirk and Felixstowe to Vlaardingen ferry surveys, with a single record elsewhere from the Newcastle to Amsterdam ferry.

The only **Ocean Sunfish** sighting came from Lyme Bay, whilst there were no shark records over the reporting period.





Carol
MARINELife volunteer

“I first met MARINELife back in 2002 during the Biscay Dolphin Research Program days, and one unforgettable moment hooked me for life: watching Cuvier’s Beaked Whales bow-riding our ship—behaviour never recorded before. That sense of discovery, of being part of something bigger, has stayed with me through 184 surveys, years of training new volunteers, and countless encounters with dolphins, tuna and whales across our seas.

Volunteering with MARINELife isn’t just rewarding—it’s empowering. You gain skills, contribute vital science, and witness the wild in ways few people ever do. If you want purpose, adventure and impact, this is the place to find it.”

2024-2025
186 surveys
52,558km travelled on survey

2.3 Birds

2.3.1 Seabirds

Shearwaters

The globally important and critically endangered **Balearic Shearwater** remains a priority for MARINELife surveys. In 2024–25, 98 sightings produced an impressive 2,601 individuals—almost 50% fewer sightings than 2023–24 but over triple the number of birds. Most records came from the Western Channel, with additional sightings from the Heysham and Dover ferries, where none were seen last year. The highest counts occurred in Lyme Bay and around the Channel Islands, including a remarkable flock of 585 between Jersey and Guernsey on 20 July 2024.

Cory's Shearwater had an outstanding year, with 2,720 birds recorded—almost all on the Peltic survey, where the species was widespread, even on northerly transects off west Cornwall that held few birds in 2023–24. Additional sightings came from the Poole–Jersey ferry and a notable individual off the Isle of Wight on the Portsmouth–Jersey ferry.

Great Shearwater also performed exceptionally on Lyme Bay surveys and the Peltic cruise, producing 221 sightings and 923 individuals, with rare North Sea records from the Newcastle–Amsterdam ferry.



Balearic shearwater,
Tom Brereton



Manx Shearwater

was the third most abundant species, with 1,728 sightings and 8,132 birds. It was widespread across Western Channel surveys, Peltic surveys, the Irish Sea, and in large “off-effort” numbers on Lyme Bay small-boat surveys. New sightings east in the Channel—Newhaven–Dieppe, Dover–Calais, and Dover–Dunkirk—marked a notable expansion, and the Newcastle route also produced good counts.

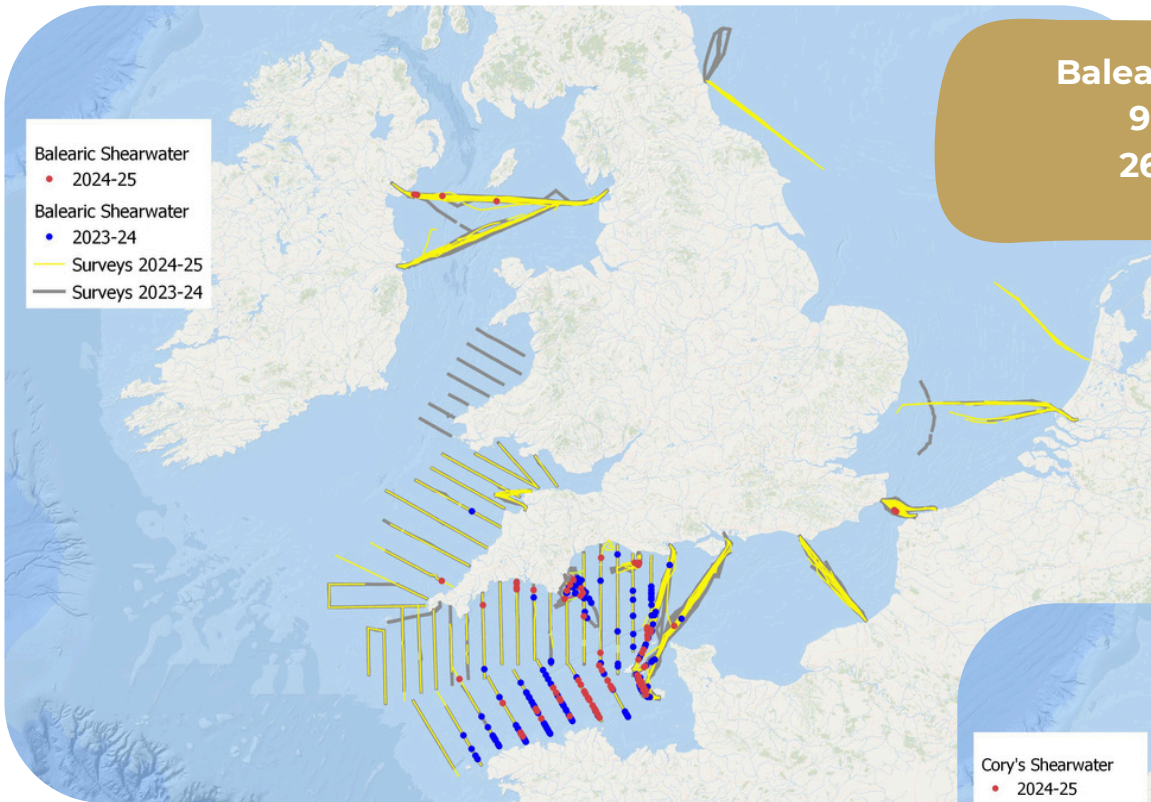
Sooty Shearwater had a poor year, with only 47 sightings of 55 birds, mostly in the western Channel and waters sampled by the Peltic cruise, plus scattered records from the Irish Sea and the North Sea south of Newcastle.

Bird summary

96 species seen

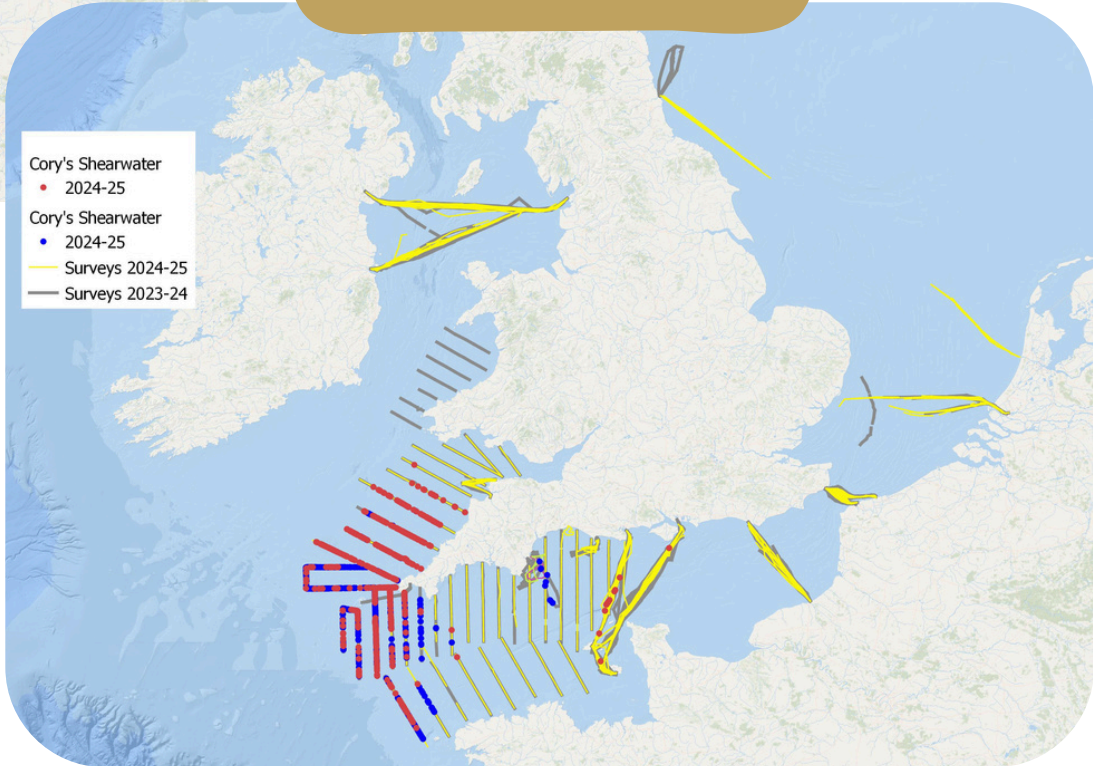
20,000 sightings

~800,000 counted



Balearic Shearwater
 98 sightings
 2601 counted

Cory's Shearwater
 2720 counted





MARINelife survey reveals UK Balearic Shearwater record

“



Warming sea temperatures were thought to have been the main driver for the Balearic Shearwater record in Lyme Bay, off the coast of Devon.



MARINelife

Professor Tom Breton
 Research Director

Divers

There were six sightings of **Black-throated Diver** in coastal Irish and Northern Irish waters, following a blank year in 2023-24.

A total of 28 **Red-throated Diver** sightings were made, with 31 counted. Annual losses included from the Portsmouth-Jersey and Newhaven-Dieppe ferries though more were seen from the Heysham-departing ferries and from Lundy.

A first survey of **Great Northern Diver** was made on the 4th May in Lyme Bay with 13 counted as part of an event for MARINElife surveyors. The survey was formulated as the species may be increasingly using the area for feeding and as a spring gathering ground, given that shellfish and fish stocks have recovered in the area since a ban on bottom trawling of the reefs. There were 15 other sightings of Great Northern Diver including off the Isle of Wight, the middle of the Western English Channel and the remainder in coastal areas off Dublin and Warrenpoint.

*Great Northern diver,
Tom Brereton*



Ducks

It was a better year for **Eider**, especially in the Irish Sea with 12 sightings of 67 birds. A single sighting of **Velvet Scoter** was made in coastal waters off Dublin.

Gulls & Terns

There were twice the number of **Common Gull** sightings than in 2023-24, with the species being particularly widespread in the Irish Sea. More were seen on the Peltic cruise than in 2023-24, though fewer were seen on the Portsmouth and Newhaven departing ferries.

A single **Glaucous Gull** on the 16th November 2024 from the Dover-Calais ferry was a noteworthy sighting of this increasingly rare **Arctic gull** species to the UK.

Great Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Kittiwake and **Lesser Black Backed Gull** were widely distributed, occurring on all routes, with no obvious change in annual status.

There were 77 **Little Gull** sightings totaling 200 birds, with the majority seen in French waters on the Peltic cruise and in coastal waters off Heysham.

Mediterranean Gull was found to be more widespread in offshore waters of the western Channel than in 2023-24, with 132 sightings and 273 counted. Though frequently seen on the other cross Channel ferries, surprisingly Newhaven-Dieppe has drawn a blank over the last two years.

There were three widely spread sightings of **Sabine's Gull**, all in the English Channel in the autumn.

Terns

It was a poor year for several tern species, with only five sightings of **Arctic Tern**, modest numbers of **Sandwich Tern** chiefly from coastal areas and the Channel Islands, and no **Black Terns**. Faring better was the **Common Tern** with 91 sightings of 232 birds compared with 28 sightings and 64 birds in 2023-24. Most birds were seen in the Irish Sea and in waters around Amsterdam port.

Gannet

Gannet was the most abundant seabird seen on surveys, with 9545 counted and 4767 sightings. Gannet was widely seen in all areas sampled. No annual status change was apparent.

Auks

Guillemot was the second most abundant species seen on surveys being seen on all survey programmes, with a total 2796 encounters of 8964 birds.

There were two sightings of **Little Auk**, both in the middle of the Irish Sea in April, seen from differing ferries.

Puffins were seen in all sampled areas except the eastern and southern North Sea with 82 encounters and 200 individuals counted.

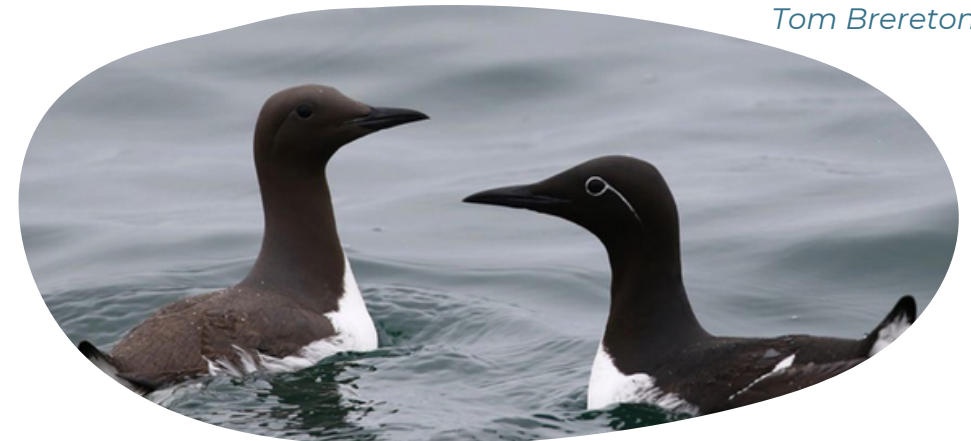
A modest downturn in the fortunes of **Razorbill** was apparent, with 881 sightings of 2605 birds, compared with 973 sighting and 3372 birds in 2023-24. In particular, fewer birds were seen from both Dover departing ferries and the Felixstowe-Vlaardingen ferry.



Cormorant & shags

Cormorant was widely distributed in coastal areas, though there were occasional records well offshore including one mid-Channel on the Peltic cruise on the 21st October, which may have been a migrant. The majority of the 206 Shag sightings were in coastal areas around Ilfracombe, Lundy, the Channel Islands, Belfast and Warrenpoint.

Guillemot & Bridled Guillemot, Tom Brereton





Rob
MARINELife volunteer
Route Coordinator

“Many years ago on the Pride of Bilbao, my family and I met an incredibly enthusiastic Biscay Dolphin Research Project volunteer, the wonderful Clive Martin, excitedly pointing out Fin Whales. His passion was infectious, and I was instantly hooked on marine wildlife. A 2010 MARINELife training day—and an inspiring chat with John Arnott—launched me into volunteering on the new Irish Sea surveys.

From seabird-filled crossings to regular Minke Whale sightings, the Irish Sea has become a treasure trove, and today I coordinate these routes, support volunteers, edit survey blogs, and help train new recruits. Volunteering with MARINELife has been pure joy.”

2024-2025
73 surveys
26,393 km travelled on survey



2.3.2 Land birds

On the terrestrial side of things, the outstanding event was a large migration of **Woodpigeons** witnessed mid Channel during a Peltic survey on the 26th October. A number of flocks were visible on the ship's radar, all moving rapidly south, with an estimated total 10-20,000 birds present over a relatively small sea area. Each Autumn vast numbers of Woodpigeon are recorded heading south through southern Britain, with many ending up moving along the coastlines of Dorset and Devon with some seen heading out to sea. However, the destination of the birds has remained a much debated mystery amongst ornithologists, as there is little ringing or other evidence that the birds cross the Channel into France. The Peltic survey data and observations from Devon and Dorset coast allocations on the same day (including Tom Brereton at West Bay), funnelling to or departing from headlands, finally solve this mystery, providing compelling evidence of a migration from England to France. Further evidence comes from Normont Point, Jersey, Channel Islands where 340,000 Woodpigeons were recorded in October and November 2024 all flying south and presumed to be British birds.

There were no rarities seen though migrating birds included small numbers of warbler, chats, wagtails, pipits, thrushes, finches along with several Snipe, Golden Plover and Merlin, plus Spoonbill, Stock Dove and Marsh Harrier.



Woodpigeon flocks on the CEFAS *Endeavour* radar. Each yellow target on the screen is a flock and the blue trail shows the direct of travel (courtesy of Pete Howlett)

3. Volunteer survey achievements

The level of survey work by MARINELife is undertaken by volunteers is quite staggering. Since 1995, volunteer surveyors have collectively completed a total of 50,000 hours of survey effort with over 700,000 km of track-line sampled.

Across all years, over 500 volunteers have carried out surveys for MARINELife, a number going onto have leading roles in marine science and conservation, showing the value of taking part in surveys as part of career development.



**Thank you to all
our amazing
volunteers!**

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This report should be cited as: **T.Brereton (2026) MARINELife Annual Science Review: Cetacean and seabird surveys, April 2024–March 2025**

5. Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the surveyors who contributed data to MARINELife. Thanks to Carol Farmer–Wright and Robin Langdon for doing much of the data collation and management. Thanks to Emma Wilson, Martin Kitching, Rick Morris, Glynis Northwood–Long, Debbie Welham, Sarah Dove, Tricia Dendle, Tom Brereton, Carol Farmer–Wright, Nicola Simpson and Rob Petley–Jones for their roles in co-ordinating surveys. Thanks to the sponsors who helped make the surveys possible.

