

Media Release

22 July 2019

New research reveals that UK seas are a service station for migrating ocean giants

A new study uncovers the travel history of a humpback whale spotted near Edinburgh thanks to members of the public sharing their sightings on Facebook

Keen-eyed volunteers have used photos shared on social media to reveal the travel history of a humpback whale that spent last winter near Edinburgh. The whale, nicknamed “vYking” by local whale watchers, was one of 4 humpback whales seen regularly in the Firth of Forth in winter 2018. Sightings of humpback whales in UK seas are increasing year on year, with Scotland’s Firth of Forth emerging as a winter hotspot for these ocean giants.

Armed with a photograph of the unique markings on the underside of vYking’s tail fluke, enthusiasts from the local community worked together with scientists to see if it had been photographed elsewhere. When the whale wasn’t found in any scientific catalogues, volunteers began to trawl the internet... only to find a photo of “vYking” on social media! The image was taken 2,610km away in Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the high Arctic, the previous summer by a wildlife photographer. This is the first ever record of a UK-sighted humpback whale in their summer feeding grounds.

Humpback whales make vast migrations between their breeding and feeding grounds, but the origins and destinations of the humpback whales visiting UK waters is not well understood. Excited by the photo from Svalbard, a team of marine biologists began to interrogate the sightings and photos of humpback whales in the Firth of Forth shared on the Forth Marine Mammals Facebook group. They have now published their exciting findings based entirely on the data collected by the local whale watchers. This research suggests that some humpback whales are using UK seas as a service station, a place to rest and feed, on their long migration from their Arctic feeding grounds to their tropical breeding grounds.

Emily Cunningham, one of the marine biologists that led the study, says: “Until 2017, humpback whales had only been recorded a handful of times in the Firth of Forth over the past century – now we’re seeing them every winter on an almost daily basis. UK seas are full of amazing wildlife, so keep an eye on the waves next time you’re at the coast and please share anything you happen to photograph with your local wildlife organisation – it could be the start of a new discovery!”

Daniel Moore, co-lead author, says: “This research shows that UK seas play an important role in the migrations of some humpback whales and demonstrates the need for effective conservation of our marine environment. We hope to continue our research in order to understand more about these movements and the importance of UK waters in contributing to successful migrations.”

Katie O’Neil, co-lead author, says “Our research shows the invaluable contribution that the public can make to our understanding of marine wildlife. Without the dedication and commitment shown by the Forth Marine Mammal group and its volunteers we wouldn’t be able to make important discoveries like this.”

This research is freely available to read in Marine Biodiversity Records, an open access journal, [here](#).

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Available for interviews or further quotes/details.

Currently on expedition in Indonesia but has excellent internet connection and available on WhatsApp call/Skype on a flexible basis.

Images are available for use with this news release. They are granted on a one-time use basis, in association with this release and the photographer must be credited. Images found [here](#).

Notes for editors:

The full reference of the research paper is:

O'Neil, K.E., Cunningham, E.G. and Moore, D.M., 2019. Sudden seasonal occurrence of humpback whales *Megaptera novaeangliae* in the Firth of Forth, Scotland and first confirmed movement between high-latitude feeding grounds and United Kingdom waters. *Marine Biodiversity Records*, 12(12).

The research paper can be found [here](#).

Humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) are found across the globe and make vast migrations between tropical breeding grounds and high-latitude feeding grounds. The humpback whales visiting UK seas are part of the eastern North Atlantic population and little detail is known about their migration habits. Last year, scientists made the first match of a Scottish-sighted humpback whale to breeding grounds in Guadeloupe and earlier this year an Irish-sighted humpback whale was matched to breeding grounds in Cape Verde. UK seas are a crossroads for animals travelling to each of these breeding grounds from high-latitude feeding grounds off Norway (including Svalbard) and Iceland. Sightings of whales in UK seas are increasing year-on-year after almost a century of absence due to commercial whaling, but further research is needed to understand whether this increase is the result of a post-whaling population recovery or a shift in distribution.

This research shared here reports on the first confirmed record of a UK-recorded humpback whale in its high-latitude feeding grounds and suggests that UK seas act as a migratory stopover for whales making the journey to their tropical feeding grounds. Further research is needed to ascertain greater detail on their origins, destinations and maturational status. This discovery underlines the need for effective marine conservation policy and management in UK seas as to achieve a healthy and productive marine environment for the benefit of resident and visiting species alike.

This research relies entirely on sightings and photos collected by volunteer whale watchers and shared onto the Forth Marine Mammals Facebook page. The authors thank all of those whom dedicated time to whale watching and sharing their sightings and photos; without them all, this research would not have been possible.