

## Marine Strandings in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly - 2014 Annual Report

Report by Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network

### Executive Summary

Data on marine organisms that stranded on the shores of Cornwall in 2014 were collected by the Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network (CWT MSN). All species were recorded in the database. However, cetaceans, seals, basking sharks and turtles were examined and recorded in detail by trained volunteers of the Network.

A total of 88 cetaceans were recorded in 2014. Short-beaked common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*) represented the majority of strandings (40%, n=35) followed by harbour porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*) (27%, n=24). There were also two bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) recorded (2%).

CWT MSN volunteers retrieved 15 cetaceans for post-mortem examination. Unusually, bycatch was not found to be the cause of death in any of the animals. One common dolphin and one bottlenose dolphin died due to live-stranding (13%, n=2), six died due to disease (40%) and three died due to starvation (20%). Among the rest of the cetaceans examined, one common dolphin died with possible boat strike (7%), one due to bottlenose dolphin attack on harbour porpoise (7%), and a further two harbour porpoise deaths were due to blunt trauma, possibly caused by bottlenose dolphin attack (13%).

Of those not sent for post-mortem, but examined by MSN volunteers *in-situ* using the Bycatch Evidence Evaluation Protocol (BEEP), 10% (n=8) of the 73 total were found to have features consistent with bycatch, based on recognised net entanglement features such as fin edge cuts/slices, encircling net marks and severed appendages. The remaining cases (n= 65, 90%) were considered inconsistent with bycatch, or were inconclusive based on the data available due to the fact that the carcasses were unsuitable for examination due to decomposition.

93 grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) were reported to the MSN: this is the highest ever annual number of recorded seal strandings, of which 46% (n=43) were categorised as pups measuring less than 120cm. The majority of seal reports were between January to March and October to December, which coincides with the breeding and weaning seasons. The unusually high number of strandings early on in the year is thought to have been caused by the winter storms experienced in late 2013 and early 2014. 2014 saw the first record of a stranded hooded seal for Cornwall. Thanks to collaborative work with Cornwall Seal Group (CSG), two seals (2%) were identified from their photo-ID catalogue. Five seals were both suitable and accessible for post-mortem examination in 2014. 60% (n=3) were found to have died due to disease. In the remaining 40% (n=2), one seal died of entanglement and the other the cause of death was unknown.

2014 saw a very high annual count of dead birds reported, with 1930 birds recorded through 369 individual reports. The majority of these strandings have been attributed to the impact of the severe winter storms experienced across the UK.

The Marine Strandings Network collects records of all species of stranded marine life in Cornwall. Sadly many species are vastly under-recorded but the MSN team are working to raise awareness amongst recorders and the general public to remedy this. During 2014, one basking shark was reported as well as three turtles; two leatherbacks and one turtle of unknown species. Several jellyfish, hydrozoa, crustaceans, blue mussel, cuttlefish and a European squid were also reported to the MSN hotline during the year.

Data were captured in the Marine Strandings Network database. Data on cetaceans, seals and turtles were entered into the UK Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP) database and in the case of turtles, also submitted to the Database of Marine Turtle Records for the United Kingdom & Eire. Data analysis is ongoing.