

Highlights from Lyme Bay in 2018

It has been another world-class year for wildlife sightings on our Lyme Bay marine safaris. As a result of 2018's glorious summer weather, we have operated five trips between June and September, sailing out of Brixham in Devon, aboard the 'Spot-On!' with skipper Ross Parham at the helm – himself a knowledgeable and eagle-eyed marine wildlife enthusiast. With around nine hours at sea on each trip, and cruising at an average speed of 8-10 knots, we have covered large parts of Lyme Bay over past months and, in the process, enjoyed some truly remarkable wildlife encounters.

The undoubted highlight of our first trip, on 15th June, was an extraordinary encounter with a Thresher Shark. Early in the afternoon, in the deeper waters of the middle of Lyme Bay, a big grey animal was seen leaping clear of the water 200 metres or so ahead. Fortunately, it jumped a second time and skipper Ross, who is a keen fisherman, immediately identified it as a Thresher Shark. The shark continued to jump clear of the water as we approached and was eventually right beside the boat, giving stunning views to the amazement of everyone on board! Watching such a rarely-seen fish leap out of the water, at least half a dozen times, at such close range really was a surreal and breathtaking experience. As tour leader, Tom Brereton, had left his camera in the wheel house, there was only time for him to take two pictures as the shark jumped out for one last time. Fortunately, both were sharp; a once in a lifetime opportunity and experience! Thresher Sharks are relatively rare visitors to the UK and are usually found in the warmer waters of the mid-Atlantic. It was a very big individual, around four and a half metres (15 feet) in length and probably weighing more than 350 pounds. Other wildlife encountered on this particular cruise included several Harbour Porpoises and an interesting variety of seabirds, such as European Storm-petrel and Manx Shearwater. After the shark pictures were put out on social media, they themselves sparked a media 'feeding frenzy', with



Thresher Shark – T. Brereton

many outlets very keen to publish them. The images subsequently appeared in a number of national newspapers such as the Telegraph, Times, Sun and Daily Star, plus social media including the LADBible (which has a community of more than 33 million followers). There was even a spoof of a Daily Mail article in Private Eye!

Our second trip took place on Saturday 14th July. It was another exceptional day, helped by the sea conditions being so smooth ... it was like a mill pond. Such days have been hard to come by in recent years in British waters. According to our skipper, the water had only just cleared in the last few days, having been murky and quite choppy beforehand. The sea was now, however, remarkably blue, clear, calm



Portuguese Man o' War

and warm (reaching over 22 degrees C in places), great conditions for viewing the local wildlife. For example, we had privileged views of the normally elusive Harbour Porpoises (the smallest cetacean in Europe) which were seen swimming underwater at considerable distance; a rare sight indeed. There were also hundreds of jellyfish of several species, including Moon, Barrel and Portuguese Man o' War. The highlight, in the middle of Lyme Bay (on the French Banks over 20 miles from land), was a large pod of around 100 Common Dolphins, which came to bow-ride and – thanks to the clear water – were highly visible swimming below the surface. They were feeding, probably on sprats and stayed around the boat for over 20 minutes. The trip again picked up national media interest, with the story featuring in the [Daily Mail](#).

Our third trip took place on 3rd August and was perhaps the best of the three. The undoubted high point was seeing a pod of nine locally rare White-beaked Dolphins, which put on an amazing choreographed performance – bow-riding and swimming beside the boat within touching distance, jumping out of the water, tail slapping, interweaving rapidly in circular movements and surfing in the wake.



White-beaked Dolphin

Through photo-identification studies by the conservation charity Marinelife, one of the animals, with distinct nicks in the fin,

is known to have been in Lyme Bay on four other occasions in 2009 and 2012, highlighting the residence of these dolphins in the Bay. There was also a fantastic supporting cast on this trip that included 150 Common Dolphins, 15 Harbour Porpoises, Grey Seal and lots of seabirds such as nine Balearic, two Sooty and 150 Manx Shearwaters, Pomarine and Great Skuas, four European Storm-petrels, Arctic Tern, 200 Guillemots, 130 Gannets, 200 Kittiwakes and a Mediterranean Gull. Skipper Ross took a stunning video of one of the White-beaked Dolphins breaching repeatedly. The footage can be enjoyed [here](#).

Two further surveys, led by Devon wildlife expert Dave Smallshire, took place on 30th August and 27th September, both of which producing yet more dolphin and porpoise sightings and a good variety of seabirds too. Although no White-beaked Dolphins were sighted on these trips, pods of 125 and 160 Common Dolphins were seen respectively, often giving wonderful views bow-riding in front of the Spot



Great Skua

On! Seabird highlights included 17 European Storm-petrels in August and 23 Great Skuas in September.

Our 2018 Lyme Bay cruises have not only been a great experience for those who joined the trips, but have also generated valuable survey data for the marine charity Marinelife. This dedicated band of marine biologists have been working with statutory conservation agencies to evaluate the importance of the Bay for priority species such as the Balearic Shearwater, Bottlenose Dolphin and White-beaked Dolphin. For the latter species, Marinelife has proposed the creation of a marine nature reserve (Marine Conservation Zone) to operate in partnership with the Wildlife Trusts. The data obtained from Naturetrek trips has formed a key body of supporting evidence for this proposal.

These highly sought-after trips run yearly and to ensure you do not miss any of the action, please contact David Shute on 01962 733051 or email

davidshute@naturetrek.co.uk.