

Great Whales of the Azores (Pico)

Naturetrek Tour Report

29th April – 7th May 2022



Blue Whale



Humpback Whale



Sperm Whales



Fin Whale

Tour report by Cathy Harlow & images by Matt Eade



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Summary

A week of whale watching at its best, with encounters with eight species of cetacean: Blue Whale, Fin Whale, Humpback Whale, Sperm Whale, Risso's Dolphin, Short-beaked Common Dolphin, Bottlenose Dolphin and Striped Dolphin. Favourable weather and sea conditions and a flexible programme allowed us to accomplish all nine of our RIB trips in the first five days of the trip, leaving our land exploration and free day to the end of the week when the weather turned wet and windy. Cory's Shearwaters, Common Terns and Yellow-legged Gulls were present on most of our boat trips, while on land we observed Roseate Tern, Atlantic Canary and Azorean subspecies of Goldcrest, Common Buzzard, Common Chaffinch, Wood Pigeon and Blackbird. Loggerhead Turtle, countless Portuguese Man O'War and a marvellous encounter with leaping Bluefin Tuna rounded off this most enjoyable week, further enhanced by the magnificent scenery of the Azorean archipelago.

Day 1

Friday 29th April

Flight London Heathrow to Lisbon

We all met up at Heathrow Airport for the 18.45 flight to Lisbon, which was on time. On arrival we collected bags and walked across the road to the Melia Airport hotel, for a short but comfortable night.

Day 2

Saturday 30th April

Flight Lisbon to Azores and afternoon Whale Watching

Weather: cloudy with sunny spells and light winds

After a copious breakfast buffet, we returned to the airport and checked in for the flight to Horta, which all went smoothly. We were served a sandwich and drink during the flight of just over two hours. Tantalising glimpses of a calm ocean appeared through gaps in the cloud. Those in window seats got good views of the islands of São Jorge and Pico as we approached Horta Airport on the neighbouring island of Faial. While we were waiting for our luggage, we watched a Common Quail scuttle across the runway into long grass. It reappeared shortly after, allowing others in the group a view. Out at sea, Cory's Shearwaters glided beyond the rocky shoreline and House Sparrows and Common Starlings flew here and there.

Taxis were waiting to drive us the short distance to the ferry terminal. A Little Egret was spotted in the harbour, along with several Yellow-Legged Gulls. Once aboard the ferry, it was a quick 30-minute crossing to Madalena, our base for the week, a quiet town of white-washed homes centred on a cobbled square, shaded by a huge Norfolk Island Pine. Either side of the boat, Cory's Shearwaters raced by but mid-crossing we noted a group of around 100 foraging from the surface in a frenzy of activity. Approaching Madalena, a couple of Common Terns were perched on the harbour wall and a Sanderling was spotted on the shoreline. On arrival we met Nini, one of CW Azores' staff, who would be one of our guides for the week.

We checked into Hotel Caravelas and Cathy and Matt took the group on a short tour of Madalena's lunch spots, shops and other facilities. After a bite to eat, we made our way to CW Azores's base, a short walk from the hotel. After we listened to Enrico's talk on whales of the Azores, news came in of sightings of whales off the north coast of Pico, so we donned life vests and the waterproof jackets supplied by CW Azores and walked across the road to the quay. Michael was captain for the day, and Nini our guide was there to give insight into the wildlife. We headed north and then east along the shore of Pico, beneath its spectacular lava cliffs, with tantalising glimpses of Pico volcano between the clouds. Despite a residual swell and a few white caps, the ride was smooth with the wind behind us. A few Short-beaked Common Dolphins joined us as we pressed forward to a group of some 20 Sperm whales that the onshore 'vigia' had spotted in the area. Whale watching in the Azores is made easier thanks to these land-based spotters, whose powerful binoculars are constantly scanning the ocean for blows and fins.

We were a few kilometres offshore from the town of São Roque when the first blows appeared and a female Sperm Whale fluked up in front of us, taking a deep foraging dive. We observed around 10 others, both mature females and juveniles, at times taking shallow dives and travelling, but also logging on the surface. In the Azores, female Sperm Whales and their offspring, together with juveniles, are resident. The much larger mature male Sperm Whales are mostly solitary and spend their time in more northerly latitudes but visit the Azores for mating. Younger males forming bachelor groups are also found in the north. We observed that calves stay at or near the surface while their mothers take foraging dives and Nini explained that sometimes females will babysit others' calves. In the Azores Sperm Whales form closely related core groups of around 10 individuals, who share vocalisation patterns, known as codas.

After a beautiful first encounter with whales, we made our way back to Madalena, a slightly bumpier ride as we travelled into the wind. We had time for a shower before heading to Petisca, a local restaurant, where we dined on locally sourced beef, pork, chicken and fish dishes, with several choices for vegetarians, accompanied by Pico wines.

Day 3

Sunday 1st May

Morning and Afternoon Whale Watching

Weather: clear sky and light winds

After a substantial breakfast at the hotel, we gathered at CW Azores for 8.45, got kitted out and waited for news from the spotters while skipper Ricardo and guide Marlene got the RIB ready for us. Four Sanderling were spotted on the slipway, while a Purple Sandpiper, four Turnstone and a pair of Grey Wagtail were also noted and a pair of Common Terns flew overhead as we left the harbour. Soon we were on our way heading north towards the island of Faial, where a Humpback Whale had been spotted. The island's summit crater was visible, its fertile slopes a patchwork of cultivated plots growing corn, vegetables and fruits including bananas and pineapples. Steep cliffs line the west coast of Faial and here we found a Humpback whale steadily travelling, taking shallow dives, with its bushy double blow easily distinguished from that of yesterday's sperm whales. The sea was glass-calm and the whale's white pectoral fins appeared blue as it swam below the surface. Several times it took a deeper dive without fluking up.

After a while we left the whale to continue its journey west, while we headed north further out to sea. Here we found a pod of 20 or more Risso's Dolphins whose relaxed behaviour around our boat was wonderful to observe, made even more spectacular as cloud lifted from the 2,351m summit of Pico's volcanic cone – this impressive mountain is Azores and Portugal's highest. The mature male Risso's Dolphins bear multiple scratch marks and scars, giving them a mottled white and grey colouration, while the females and juveniles are darker.

On our way back to port, we were joined by a boisterous group of 40 to 50 Short-beaked Common Dolphins. With jumps and flops galore, it was hard to know which way to look as they popped up around us from all directions. Not to be outdone, a small group of Bottlenose Dolphins appeared briefly and as we sped towards port, we observed a Sooty Shearwater and a Barolo Shearwater in flight among the many Cory's Shearwaters. Back in Madalena by 12.45 we had time for a relaxed lunch before heading out again at 2.30.

Heading south out of the channel between Pico and Faial with Nini, skipper Michael and Pirate his dog, we made our way east along the south coast of Pico. Impressive waves pounded the black lava cliffs, sending up plumes of white surf. The spotters reported a probable baleen whale, as we sped past numerous Portuguese Man O'War, drifting in the wind and currents. Unexpectedly, three huge Blue Fin Tuna breached clear of the surface, landing with an enormous splash. We were drawn to blows ahead and got a glimpse of a large Fin Whale as it took a couple of breaths and then sank from view without reappearing close by. A group of Common Dolphins surrounded our boat, distracting us for a while. Then Antero, one of the most experienced vigia spotters announced that another Fin Whale had surfaced closer to shore. We discovered this was a mother and calf but soon they too had dived from view and were clearly travelling fast as we did not encounter them again. We made our way back to Madalena, passing a Loggerhead Turtle along the way. This evening we ate a buffet dinner at PicoOceano, a restaurant next to our hotel.

Day 4

Monday 2nd May

Morning and Afternoon Whale Watching

Weather: calm and sunny with a light wind

Another calm and sunny day dawned and we left port with Marlene and skipper Leonildo, heading for where the spotters had dolphins in their sight. We passed a flock of many hundreds of Cory's Shearwaters, some resting on the surface and others gliding effortlessly. The spotters led us to group of twenty-five or more Risso's Dolphins. Marlene explained that this is a resident pod, one of whose members has recently acquired a distinctive stumped dorsal fin. We enjoyed wonderful views of these robust dolphins as they gently broke the surface close to our boat.

It was hard to contain our excitement when Marlene announced a possible sighting of a Blue Whale to the south of Faial. Arriving at the area where the whale had last surfaced we were briefly distracted by a pod of lively Common Dolphins when we saw the tall blow of a Blue Whale up ahead. It took several breaths before arching its back for a deeper dive and fluking up. This was a special moment as Marlene explained that only one in three Blue Whale dives result in a fluke up.

After lunch back on shore we set off with Nini and Leonildo, heading for where we'd spotted the Blue Whale earlier. It's incredible just how far out to sea the spotters can find a whale blow – we were 18km off the south shore of Pico Island in water 1,600m deep and here was a Blue Whale ahead. We watched as it fluked up and waited until it surfaced again fifteen minutes later. By the shape of its dorsal fin this appeared to be the same whale we'd seen earlier in the day, moving ever further out to sea. After 10 breaths it took another dive and we waited again for it to surface several times more.

In the evening we had dinner at Mercado Bio, a café around the corner from our hotel.

Day 5

Tuesday 3rd May

Morning and Afternoon Whale Watching

Weather: mostly cloudy with light winds

It was a cloudy start to the day with an almost flat sea as we sped along the north shore of Pico towards the neighbouring island of São Jorge. Marlene explained that recent earthquakes had put the island on high alert for a volcanic eruption with evacuation plans drawn up for the village of Velas. After the earthquakes the surface of the island had lifted by 6cm. Cetacean scientists in the area were gathering data to see if the earthquakes had affected whale and dolphin behaviour in any discernible manner. From nowhere a group of 50 or more Bottlenose Dolphins appeared around our boat in a frenzy of leaps and splashes. We noticed some dolphins turning their paler underside towards the surface and Marlene explained that this is mating activity and such promiscuous behaviour is common.

We continued our search for baleen whales and were rewarded with two tall blows on the horizon ahead – Fin Whales! This was most likely a mother and calf pair and they appeared to be feeding, taking short dives of six to eight minutes before surfacing again.

After a break for lunch, we were back on the RIBs with Nini and Ricardo, cruising north towards Faial, where the spotters had seen Sperm Whale blows. Suddenly, we saw tall bushy blows against Faial's sombre cliffs and these were a pair of Humpback Whales. One of the two had a distinct hollow in the top of its dorsal fin, while the other sported a colony of barnacles on its tail fluke. We enjoyed observing them diving, fluking up and then resurfacing several times over the next half an hour, at times joined by a group of Common Dolphins. Nini thought they might be feeding.

Late afternoon, the sun began to win over the clouds and Pico's summit appeared bathed in sunlight. The spotters announced a Sperm Whale on the surface nearby and we watched as it took several breaths, then fluked up and dived. Some boisterous Bottlenose Dolphins joined us for a grand finale to the day.

After dinner of local specialities at Petisca and a spectacular sunset over Pico mountain, we drove South of Madalena at dusk to await the return of dozens of Cory's Shearwaters to their nesting sites in hollows in the lava. As dusk enveloped us in half light, the first of the birds flew in from the sea, accompanied by a cacophony of eerie calls. Within minutes they were all around us and the noise deafening. The Azores have 60% of the global population of these birds, who spend the winter months in the open ocean. From February onwards the males

start arriving to claim nesting sites, followed by the females, arriving by May. While the males guard the nesting site, the females are out at sea feeding as the egg develops inside. After laying the egg the female returns to the sea to replenish her reserves while the male incubates. When she returns to the nest, they will take turns until the egg hatches in late July. Both parents feed the chick, which by September will weigh more than its parents. By late October or early November, the chicks fledge and make their way out to sea.

Day 6

Wednesday 4th May

Morning and afternoon whale watching

Weather: cloudy with moderate wind and afternoon drizzle

We started the day with a pre-breakfast stroll to look for birds. A European Greenfinch was calling from the tall Norfolk Island Pine gracing the town square. Although Pico has rather few species of land birds, some of those present are abundant. We made our way past town gardens where Atlantic Canaries were singing from their perches. Starlings were flying among the rooftops and Blackbird, Wood Pigeon and Collared Dove were foraging on the ground. Several Chaffinches flitted to and fro and one perched on a stone wall, lit up by the morning sunlight. A Robin was foraging among bushes. Yellow-legged Gulls and Cory's Shearwaters were in flight out to sea.

After breakfast we made our way to the RIBs for our final day of whale watching. It had been full-on but we were keen to make the most of the good weather, which was forecast to change tomorrow. As we left the harbour with Marlene, Leonildo and Enrico, four Sanderling were foraging on the shore and a couple of Common Terns were perched on the harbour wall. Naturally every day at sea is different and brings its own rewards but this morning's trip was firmly focused on Sperm Whales, of which Enrico counted eleven in the area. A highlight was a lively youngster left on the surface while its mother took a feeding dive. Young Sperm Whales are unable to take deep dives, so must wait on the surface and stay safe, sometimes gathering in creche groups overseen by an adult female. A group of Common Dolphins began swimming around the calf, perhaps causing it distress as it unexpectedly began to slap its tail on the surface repeatedly before taking a dive.

Making our way back to port, we passed a small group of Common Dolphins, around ten Risso's Dolphins and a large flock of Cory's Shearwaters on the surface.

After five days in near perfect whale watching conditions, the weather began to change and we rode the whitecaps in a fine drizzle on our afternoon trip. Again, we found Sperm Whales spread over a wide area and we observed them surfacing, taking several breaths and then fluking up for a dive. A large pod of Bottlenose Dolphins appeared and Nini commented that these larger and more robust animals were Oceanic Bottlenose putting on a splendid display of acrobatic leaps and splashes. By now the sea was getting noticeably rougher and we enjoyed an exhilarating if spray doused ride back to Madalena.

In the evening we dined at Atmosfera, an Italian restaurant with a beautiful view of Faial.

Day 7

Thursday 5th May

Exploring and bird watching on Pico Island

Weather: gusty winds and light showers, mist and drizzle at altitude, clearing later in the day

We awoke to a blustery morning and today was planned for exploring the island on land. We started with a visit to the UNESCO world heritage vineyards. Originally the vineyards were planted by the inhabitants of Faial, who laboriously cleared the 500-year old lava blocks to build protective walls around each vine, which was wedged into cracks in an underlying older lava bed. Amazingly, this is an ideal place for the vines to thrive, gaining sustenance from the mineral-rich lava and sufficient moisture from rainfall. We admired a red windmill, whose technology was brought in by Flemish settlers. The different islands of the Azores developed individual styles of windmill and on Pico and neighbouring Faial they have a cone-shaped stone base. This is crowned with an upper timber structure, known as a 'casota' – or little house, accessed by an external staircase. We noted a female Blackcap, a Wood Pigeon and several Atlantic Canaries flitting among the vines.

Our next stop was at one of the Vigia lookouts, where Vitor our guide for the day explained how the spotters locate whales, a skill that was formerly used by whalers. We took turns looking through the powerful binoculars and saw a distant Humpback Whale. Around the building we noted the endemic Azorean Candleberry Tree and invasive Sweet Pittosporum, a species introduced from Australia. A Monarch butterfly, Common Quail, Atlantic Canary, Blackcap, European Robin, European Greenfinch and Wood Pigeon were seen in the area. Vitor pointed out the abandoned nesting site of a Cory's Shearwater, in a hollow under a lava sheet.

At the coastal settlement of Cachorro, a steep ramp was used to roll wine barrels down to load onto boats. Here we viewed the waves crashing onto the jagged black lava cliffs and surf surging through some impressive blowholes. The cliffs were formed by a lava flow from the 1718 eruption on the flank of Pico, the 2,351m high volcano dominating the island. Sea campion *Silene vulgaris* and pink flowered *Drosanthemum floribundum*, a South African species were growing on the cliff edges and we saw a Clouded Yellow butterfly. At Lajido we walked among houses built of lava blocks and a little further along this rugged stretch of coast we ate our picnic lunch by a 15th century lava chapel at Cabrito, where we admired pahoehoe lava ropes. A Common Buzzard was spotted in flight and we also noted a Large White butterfly and European Goldfinch. Rock Samphire *Crithmum maritimum* was growing in crevices in the lava.

At Santo Antonio, we found a colony of Common Terns perched and in flight around an offshore rock, together with a single Roseate Tern. At São Roque, we stopped briefly outside the former Whaling Factory, now a museum. Whaling came to an end in 1987, replaced shortly after that by whale watching, using the same skills to locate the whales. From here we climbed to Pico's central plateau, today shrouded in mist and lashed by strong winds. The road was flanked by yellow flowered Kahili Ginger *Hedychium gardnerianum*, an invasive Himalayan species threatening the indigenous Laurel forest. Also lining the roadside were hedges of *Hydrangea macrophylla*, just starting to bloom. Here we had hoped to explore pockets of native woodland around Lake Capitão but with gusts so strong we could barely stay on our feet, this was not the weather for it. A few bedraggled Muscovy Ducks and a hybrid Mallard gathered to greet us. Instead, we made our way down to sea level and the town of Lajes, where a small patch of salt marsh and tidal mud flats produced three Little Egret, Grey Wagtail, Turnstone, Common Tern and a Clouded Yellow butterfly. Two Common Buzzards flew over as we arrived.

Some of the group had coffee and ice cream and explored the narrow streets flanked by whitewashed houses before it was time to set off along the south coast of Pico to return to Madalena. Tonight we ate at Ancoradouro, a restaurant overlooking the sea with seafood specialities and for vegetarians a tasty 'Cataplana' vegetable stew.

Day 8

Friday 6th May

A free day to explore

Weather: windy and heavy rain showers in the morning clearing to a sunny, warm afternoon

Most of the group opted for a guided excursion to explore the lava tubes of Gruta das Torres – a wise choice considering the day had started with torrential rain and wind. The guide Ugo explained how Portugal's largest lava caves were formed in an eruption from the Cabeço Bravo crater on the side of Pico mountain about 1,500 years ago. Kitted out with hard hats and torches we descended a flight of stone steps into the opening of the tunnel, where the ceiling had collapsed. The walls glittered with what appeared to be flecks of gold but were in fact bacteria. As our eyes adapted to the darkness, we continued along a walkway into the tunnel, careful not to touch the walls, to avoid damaging a powdery white fungus growing here. Underfoot, the crunchy, gassy 'biscuit' lava gave way to gas-depleted, thinner and faster flowing pahoehoe lava, forming a characteristic ropy surface. Lowering our heads for the narrower passages, we emerged into a spacious cavern where reddish stalactites of iron-rich lava hung from the ceiling. Unable to escape, a huge gas bubble had formed the concave roof of the large chamber. At a certain point, we all turned off our torches to experience the total darkness and silence of this magical place. As we exited, we admired the mosses and ferns flanking the steps that led out of the underworld and got excellent views of a Goldcrest.

Returning to Madalena, some of the group opted for the ferry to Faial where we were met by taxis for a 30-minute drive to Capelinhos, the site of a devastating submarine volcanic eruption in 1957, destroying several communities and causing many inhabitants to emigrate to the USA and Canada. A very informative interpretation centre tells the story of the eruption and its impacts and includes a short 3D film. Climbing a spiral staircase to the top of the lighthouse that survived the eruption, the view over the site was magnificent. Some of the group continued to the summit of the hill behind the eruption site for an even wider panorama, while others spotted Atlantic Canary, Common Chaffinch and Blackbird in the adjacent scrub. We also had time at leisure in the attractive port of Horta. The marina is a famous port of call for transatlantic yachts, who leave a record of their passing in the colourful artwork lining the quayside. Some of the group found basking Madeiran Wall Lizards, while Little Egret and Common Tern were noted in the harbour while we were waiting for the ferry back to Madalena. Yellow-legged Gulls and Cory's Shearwaters were seen from the ferry.

For our last dinner, we returned to Petisca for a final taste of Azorean specialities and delicious desserts.

Day 9

Saturday 7th May

Flight to the UK

After an early breakfast, we walked across the road to the ferry terminus for the 8.15 ferry to Faial. The sea had calmed, the sun was out and the views of Pico mountain were irresistible as we crossed the narrow channel

between the two islands. A short taxi transfer and it was then time to say our goodbyes as some of the group continued to São Miguel island to join another Naturetrek whale watching tour. The rest of the group returned to London, via Lisbon.

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Species lists

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	April/May 2022								
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
MAMMALS:										
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		20+	25		10				
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		6		50+	50+				
Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	4	150	100	50	10				
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>			30						
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>			1						
Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>		3		2					
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeanglia</i>		2		2		1			
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	11			1	11				

Birds

Common name	Scientific name	April/May 2022							
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	400+	200	1000	200	50	50	50	100
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>		5		1				

Common name	Scientific name	April/May 2022							
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Barolo Shearwater	<i>Puffinus baroli</i>		1						
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1					3	1	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>						3		
Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix conturbans</i>	1					1		
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		1	1		3			
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		1						
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		1				1		
Azores' Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1							
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	1							
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougalli</i>						1		
Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>				2	4	4		
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				4	4	6	2	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>	h	2	1	2		1		
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>				1	1	1		
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>		1	1		1	2		
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>				1				
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>							1	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>	2			4	2	4		
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				2		4		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					1	1		
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	

Invertebrates

Common name	Scientific name	April/May 2022							
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
BUTTERFLIES:									
	<i>Pieridae</i>								
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			1			1	1	
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea failiae</i>			1			2		
	<i>Danaidae</i>								
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>						1		
OTHER INSECTS:									
Emperor Dragonfly	<i>Anax imperator</i>							1	

Others

Common name	Scientific name	April/May 2022							
		30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
AMPHIBIANS & REPTILES:									
Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>		1				1		1
Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	

Perez's Frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
MARINE:									
Portuguese Man O'War	<i>Physalia physalia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Bluefin Tuna	<i>Tunnus thynnus</i>		2						