

UHI | SHETLAND

One year of marine mammal surveys!

🎉 One year of surveys!

17 September 2026 marks one whole year since UHI Shetland launched our programme of marine mammal monitoring and photo-ID surveys!

What better way to celebrate than by looking back at everything we've achieved together over the past 12 months?

From spotting our first harbour porpoise to collecting thousands of photographs of Risso's dolphins, it has been a busy year. Most importantly, we couldn't have done it without our fantastic team of volunteers, boat skippers and supporters.

So, here are some of the highlights from **Year One!**



1 YEAR 🎂

- **29** surveys
- **158 h 52 min** on the water
- **5** survey vessels
- **36** volunteers
- **48** cetacean encounters
- **4** cetacean species
- **4,574** Risso's dolphin photos

🚤 158 hours on the water

Over the past 12 months, we have completed **29 surveys**, spending a grand total of:

158 hours & 52 minutes at sea

We've surveyed aboard **five different vessels**, exploring the waters around Shetland in all sorts of conditions!

Every hour on the water gives us another opportunity to learn more about the whales, dolphins and porpoises that use Shetland's seas – and to collect valuable information that will help us understand and monitor these animals into the future.



👋 Meet the Boat Team

One of the biggest achievements of the past year has been building our community of marine mammal survey volunteers.

36 volunteers have joined us on surveys! Equating to a whopping 509 hours 37 minutes of volunteer hours.

Our volunteers have been learning how to:

- 🔭 carry out marine mammal surveys and collect scientific data
- 🐋 spot and identify whales, dolphins and porpoises
- 📷 take photographs suitable for photo-ID
- 📝 record sightings and animal behaviour
- 🚤 work safely around marine mammals

And the learning doesn't stop when we get back to shore!

19 volunteers have already submitted photographs taken during our surveys, contributing directly to our ongoing photo-ID and monitoring work.

🚤 A big shout-out to our skippers!

There is another important member of the boat team who deserves a huge thank you: our boat skippers.

Manoeuvring a vessel safely around cetaceans while following the conditions of our licences and research protocols is a skilled job. Over the past year, we have had the opportunity to train several skippers in this work, helping them to safely position and operate the boat so that we can collect the best possible data while minimising disturbance to the animals we are watching.

We couldn't do this work without you!



Volunteer Hall of Fame

- 🏆 **Most surveys joined** Bernard Siddle
- 📷 **Most photos uploaded** Mel Mayo
- ⏱️ **Longest time spent at sea**
Bernard Siddle: 42 hours & 8 minutes
- 🔭 **Most eagle-eyed spotter** Billy Morris





What have we seen?

We've had 48 cetacean encounters during our surveys, involving four different species.

Our Year One sightings:

Species	Number of encounters
 Harbour porpoise (<i>'neesiks'</i>)	20
 Minke whale (<i>'herring hogs'</i>)	8
 Risso's dolphin	16
 White-beaked dolphin	4
Total	48

It has been brilliant to see such a variety of species during our first year – and every encounter gives us another piece of the puzzle when it comes to understanding how Shetland's marine mammals use our waters.

The photo-ID project

One of the main aims of our surveys is to collect photographs that can be used to identify individual animals.

Photo-ID works a bit like a marine mammal passport! Animals with distinctive and relatively permanent features – such as scars, markings, nicks and notches – can sometimes be recognised from photographs taken on different occasions.

Around Shetland, several photo-ID catalogues already exist or are currently being developed for different cetacean species.

At UHI Shetland, we are working closely with **Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC)** and other experts to develop and update the **Shetland Risso's Dolphin Photo-ID Catalogue**.





The first version of this catalogue was compiled by WDC in 2022 using a huge collection of photographs submitted by members of the Shetland community. Four years on, we are now working with WDC and other experts to update the catalogue – and the photographs collected during our surveys are a really important part of that work.

And you've been busy!

During our surveys so far, we have taken a whopping:

4,574 Risso's dolphin photographs!

Of these, **1,526 were taken by Emily**, our survey team lead...

...meaning approximately two-thirds were taken by volunteers! 🎉

That is a fantastic contribution to the project and a brilliant demonstration of what can be achieved when scientific research and community involvement come together.

Back at the desk, these photographs are being carefully **graded** according to their quality and then **matched to individual dolphins** where possible. Over time, this will help us to monitor the population, estimate population size, understand movements and explore how the population may be changing.

So every time you press that camera shutter, you could be helping us recognise a dolphin again years from now!

What happens to your photographs?

 You take the photo →  We grade it →  We identify the dolphin →
 It goes into the catalogue →  We use it to understand the population



Giving back

We want our surveys to be about more than simply collecting data. We also want to create opportunities for people to **learn new skills, get involved in marine mammal research and contribute to science happening right here in Shetland.**

Over the past year, we've developed several resources to help people build their marine mammal and photo-ID skills, including:

 A photo-ID leaflet guide

 An interactive introduction to marine mammal photo-ID course

 An interactive survey induction course to help volunteers prepare before joining us on the water.

 A fun photo-ID game to help train young people, recently used at Shetland Youth Voice's Nature Summit.

We have also been able to support **two early-career marine scientists working remotely with the project**, helping them develop new skills in photo-ID analysis while contributing valuable work to the project and building experience for their future careers.



A huge thank you to our funders

None of this would be possible without the organisations that have supported us during our first year. We would like to give a huge **thank you** to:

NatureScot for funding our initial trial surveys and helping us get the project off the ground.

Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund (SMEEF) for funding winter surveys and providing essential equipment to support our work.

Shetland Community Benefit Fund for providing ongoing, long-term support for two years of boat-based surveys, as well as essential equipment, outreach materials and volunteer development.

BLUE CONNECT for providing long-term support for the project, particularly towards staff time.





💙 **And finally... THANK YOU!**

Most importantly, we want to say a massive **THANK YOU** to everyone who has helped make our first year such a success.

To our volunteers who have got up early, braved the weather, learnt new skills, kept watch for fins and blows, taken thousands of photographs and helped us collect valuable scientific data...

To our skippers who have safely got us out on the water and helped us work responsibly around marine mammals...

To everyone who has shared photographs, helped with training, provided advice, supported the project or simply cheered us on from shore...

This project wouldn't be what it is without you.

Here's to an amazing first year – and to many more hours on the water, many more photographs, and hopefully many more whales, dolphins and porpoises!

👋 **See you out on the water!** 🚤 📷

UHI Shetland Marine Mammal Team



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