

MAMMAL

NEWS



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Short-beaked common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*) in the River Ouse. Photo by Mark Hows

Cambridgeshire cetaceans

On 31 August there were reports on social media of two short-beaked common dolphins in the River Ouse near Earith. They had also been spotted near King's Lynn on 29 August and Downham Market on 30 August, on their way up the River Ouse to Cambridgeshire.

The section of the river is approximately 35 miles from the coast, and not a stranger to marine mammals, as common seals breed here and there have been several records of grey seals, too. But this is the first time that common dolphins have been seen here, and quite a few visitors came to see them.

Common dolphins are mainly found off the south-west and south coasts of England and the west coast of Scotland. Sightings in the Wash, though uncommon, have

increased in recent years, and in the days before and after this sighting, there were other sightings of common dolphins in the Wash. It is likely that these two were part of that pod and got separated, then followed the Wash down into the Ouse.

From 31 August to 2 September a mother and calf common dolphin were present between Earith and the lock at Brownhill Staunch, which probably prevented their progress further upstream. Sadly, the calf had to be euthanised on welfare grounds and the mother was found dead a couple of days later. Marine mammals do not usually do well in freshwater environments: buoyancy is different and there may not be enough of the right food.

Surprisingly, this was not the first Cambridgeshire record of common dolphin. In August 2020, one was seen near Wisbech and later found dead in the River Nene not far from Whittlesey.

Inland cetaceans are not restricted to Cambridgeshire. There have been bottlenose dolphins in the River Ouse (Yorkshire) in January 2022 and River Severn July 2014, a harbour porpoise in the River Severn in 2009, and some notable records in the Thames: common dolphin in March 2021, beluga whale in 2019 and northern bottlenose whale in January 2006.

Dr Mark Hows
Cambridgeshire Mammal Group

Mammals, Amphibians and Reptiles of the North East

I don't think I'll make it as a prophet. In 2012, Northumbria Mammal Group produced accounts of the history and distribution of all the mammal species in North East England (and threw in amphibians and reptiles as a bonus). It was the first time that this had been done for 150 years, and things had changed. It was a massive task and one that I predicted wouldn't need repeating for a few decades. I can't claim to know what has happened with all species – after all, the book had 28 contributors and took 18 months to produce – but here are a few whose status is looking a little different in 2023.

Perhaps the most obvious change is in marine mammals. Some of this is due to increase in observer effort but to be fair, that is due in a large part to there being more to see. I think I've been to the local coast three times this year, twice seeing dolphins. Compare that to several times a year for the previous 60 years and never a dolphin.

Muntjac, against my prophesied increase, promptly disappeared without trace (notwithstanding one that turned up near Chester le Street a couple of months ago).

Fortunes have been mixed among small mammals. The rash of dots for harvest mouse in Cleveland has now spread almost across what was the virtually unblemished county of Durham, but the pockmarks in the riverbanks from water vole burrows have closed over at a similar rate. In 2012 it seemed the dormouse might cling to a foothold in the region; now it seems likely that foot has slipped. Instead, we now have the Sunderland shrew (see page 15), not that anyone is calling that a fair swap.

So I might not be able to predict the future, but hopefully the book is a decent account of the recent past. Although out of print, the Natural History Society of Northumbria has kindly allowed me to put it online, where it can be downloaded for free at:

<https://ravenonthewing.files.wordpress.com/2022/07/mammals-amphibians-and-reptiles-of-the-north-east.pdf>

Ian Bond



The muntjac, which has disappeared from the North East of England since 2012. Photo by Alick Simmons