

Avoiding marine wildlife disturbance

A guide to animal behaviour and best practice



DAERA

Department of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs

An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Comhshaoil agus Gnóthaí
Tuaithe

Department o' Fairmin,
Environment an' Kintra
Matthers

www.daera-ni.gov.uk



Wildlife watching

This guide encourages best practice to ensure that your encounters with wildlife are as enjoyable as possible, whilst respecting the animals' space and staying on the right side of the law.

Disturbance occurs when people change an animal's behaviour or environment, affecting its well-being or survival prospects. Always look out for signs that your presence is not welcome and be prepared to back away or take a different route.

General principles:

- Be cautious and quiet - watch out for signs that your presence is not welcome. Keep your distance, especially around large groups of animals and at sensitive sites (e.g. nesting areas or haul outs).
- Encounters are on the animal's terms; never follow, chase, touch or feed wildlife.
- It is not advisable to swim, snorkel or dive with large marine animals, for your safety and theirs.
- Make sure your paddleboard, kayak, or boat's movements are steady and predictable.
- Even when keeping your distance, pay attention to other people/ watercraft, as overcrowding is a significant issue for the health and safety of wildlife and people.
- If there are already a number of water users present, consider avoiding approach and using a different route or location where possible.



Coastal and marine wildlife

The sensitive wildlife and habitats around Northern Ireland are highly protected and carefully managed. Almost 40% of our inshore coastal and marine areas are designated as Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, Marine Conservation Zones and Areas of Special Scientific Interest. Many of our wonderful animals and plants are protected in their own right, regardless of where they live.

This includes whales, dolphins and porpoises (cetaceans), basking sharks, a huge diversity of seabirds, seals, and even marine turtles such as leatherbacks and loggerheads.

Officers from DAERA Marine & Fisheries regularly patrol the coast around Northern Ireland, by land and sea, to monitor and enforce the protection of its environment.



Keep your distance!

Insensitive behaviour that leads to disturbance or injury of protected species may lead to legal action against you.

Seals

Two species of seal inhabit the coast and seas around Northern Ireland. The harbour seal is smaller, has a dog-like face and prefers more sheltered habitats whereas the grey seal is larger, has a longer head and is more often seen in exposed areas.

Seals haul out to rest, warm up and breed; they are very sensitive to disturbance, especially during the pupping season. As with any large, wild mammal, they may also inflict a powerful bite if they or their young feel threatened.

Harbour seals give birth around May - June; their newborn pups moult their 'baby' coat in the womb and are able to swim almost immediately. By contrast, grey seals are born later in September - November. The pups have a fluffy white coat and usually stay on land for three to five weeks before venturing into the sea.



Best practice

Enjoy the wonderful views but please keep a respectful distance from seals. Watch out for signs of disturbance - heads going up, seals becoming agitated or moving toward the water. When seals start looking at you consistently, they are becoming disturbed and may panic very quickly. If you see any of these signs, back off slowly and quietly. When they rush into the water, they can harm themselves and their young, and suffer cold water shock. Do not outstay your welcome.

When watching seals from land:

- Any approach must be visible and sensitive.
- Pay attention to how the seals are reacting to you.
- Do not creep up on seals, crowd or encircle them, make loud noises or throw things to prompt them to look toward you.
- Never attempt to touch or feed seals, for your safety and theirs.
- Do not outstay your welcome - 15 minutes maximum

Keep your distance (ideally 300m or more). Minimum distance 100m (1 full length football pitch).

When approaching/passing seal haul outs by sea:

- Ensure that you approach slowly and quietly from an oblique angle, making no wake.
- Never approach directly or head-on.

Keep your distance (ideally 300m or more). Minimum distance 100m (1 full length football pitch).

Whales, dolphins and porpoises

Northern Ireland's waters have records for 19 species of whale, dolphin and porpoise (cetaceans). These range from relatively common harbour porpoise (1.5m long), to occasional visits by ocean giants such as humpback whales (15m long). All cetaceans are protected in our waters, regardless of where they are.

Cetaceans vary in their response to watercraft. Some are more sensitive than others, however, they all use sound to communicate with each other and for hunting prey. Some boat noises such as engines, echosounders and propeller sounds are in the same range of frequencies that species like bottlenose dolphins use and may drown out their communications and cause panic, especially for mothers and calves.



Best practice

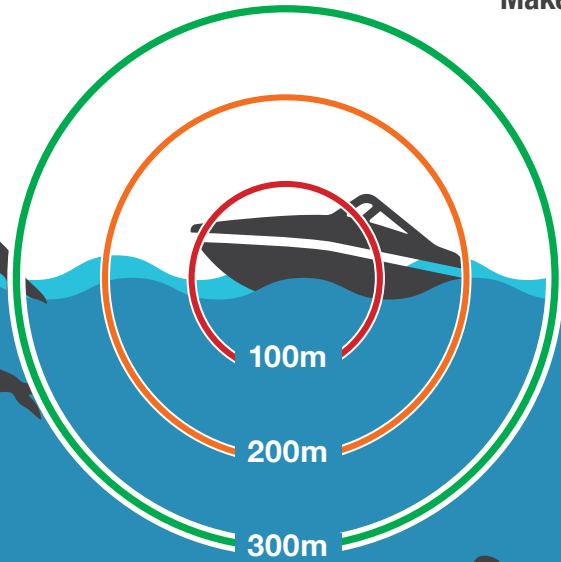
Cetacean watching can be a very rewarding experience, but please pay attention and follow the advice below to make sure you do not disturb these amazing animals. Disturbing cetaceans can cause great distress, especially if they become separated from their social groups. This can lead to changes in behaviours that have long lasting effects, and panic can cause immediate harm to the animals.

- Don't approach if more than two boats/groups are already present.
- Slow down to 6 knots, at least 300m away from the animals; a no wake speed is best. Maintain a steady course and speed to reduce the risk of collision, especially if cetaceans approach your vessel to bow ride.
- Approach slowly at an oblique angle, never in front of the animals and don't approach closer than 100m.
- If calves are present the animals may not be receptive, so steer clear. Never get between mothers and calves.
- Never drive your vessel through groups of cetaceans.
- Never close off their exit route from shallow or confined areas.
- Let them leave when they wish and do not pursue them.
- Watch out at all times for signs that your presence is not welcome, such as rapid swimming or sudden course alteration.
- If panicked, the animals will not necessarily dive to flee, so do not assume they can escape by going under the water.
- If you do need to alter course while animals are bow riding, slow your craft down and even come to a complete stop, if necessary, to encourage them to stop bow riding, then move once clear and safe.
- Do not outstay your welcome - 15 minutes is enough.

Keep your distance!

Avoiding Marine Wildlife Disturbance

Make sure your craft's movements are **constant, steady and predictable**



Keep your distance!
At least 100m

It is NOT recommended
to swim, snorkel, or scuba dive
with large marine animals

Keep your distance!

NEVER TOUCH
OR FEED
WILD ANIMALS

Keep your distance!

Has the wildlife spotted you? Back away or take an alternative route and stay over 100m away



Basking sharks

The waters around Northern Ireland enjoy visits from the world's second largest fish, the basking shark. Basking sharks are filter feeders, consuming the smallest marine food source, microscopic plankton.

Feeding sharks often move unpredictably and can enter a 'trance-like state' where they become oblivious to the approach of vessels. They may also gather in larger groups for courtship, and should be avoided so as not to disturb these important behaviours.

When startled, basking sharks can lash out with their large tails and move rapidly in an attempt to flee or dive. They can also use their powerful tails to breach clear of the water. These large, powerful animals can pose a threat to boats that approach too close and are protected by law from deliberate or reckless disturbance or harm.



Attributed to Chris Train

Best practice

- Keep your distance, especially if you see a shark breach out of the water.
- Slow down to 6 knots at least 300m away from the animals.
- Avoid basking sharks completely when they congregate in large groups.
- If you see a basking shark nearby, move cautiously as although you may only see one shark, there may be others just beneath the surface out of sight.
- If you must pass by, approach slowly from an oblique angle and never cut across ahead of sharks.
- Take your engine out of gear on approach so that the propeller is not turning.
- Do not outstay your welcome - 15 minutes is enough.



Attributed to Gary Burrows

Seabirds

During the summer breeding season more than twenty species of seabird nest on or near our coastline; these include a diversity of species such as cormorants, petrels, gulls, terns and auks. They choose islands, cliffs, harbours and even urban rooftops as safe places to rear their chicks. Some species also nest at inland lakes. Breeding colonies can vary in size depending on the species, ranging from just a few pairs of one species to huge assemblages of thousands of birds of multiple species.

They are all vulnerable to disturbance; the incubation of eggs, feeding of chicks and deterrence of predators can all be disrupted leading to disastrous consequences. If fledglings/chicks are startled, they may take to the air or water before they are ready, causing serious harm and even death.



Best practice

- Keep your distance - a minimum of 100m is recommended. Using binoculars allows a good view without disturbance.
- If in a boat, slow down to less than 5 knots, giving them a wide berth to avoid disturbance. You will see and enjoy the encounter more by not putting them to flight.
- Anchor vessels away from bird feeding or nesting sites to avoid disturbance.
- Approach seabird colonies slowly and quietly, keeping noise and movement to a minimum.
- Avoid travelling through rafts (groups) of birds on the water's surface; they may be feeding, resting, moulting or may be youngsters new to life on the water.
- If nesting birds start to move around in an urgent manner, bobbing their heads, flapping their wings or launching from ledges, move away slowly and quietly to a safe distance.
- Know the locations of specially protected areas and be particularly sensitive around nesting and breeding times as chicks, eggs and fledglings are highly vulnerable to disturbance.
- Do not outstay your welcome - 15 minutes is enough.



Attributed to Gary Burrows

Useful links

Advice and information on marine nature conservation and the work of DAERA Marine & Fisheries Division:

Website: www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/marine

PSNI (potential wildlife crime/disturbance issues):

Telephone: 101

Describe your call as a wildlife crime report and give details. Ask for an incident reference number. Retain the reference number and date.

British Divers Marine Life Rescue

(for live strandings of dolphins, porpoises and whales)

Telephone (24/7, 365): 01825 765546

Exploris Aquarium, Portaferry

(for injured/sick/distressed seals, especially pups, and marine turtles)

Telephone: 028 4272 8062 (select option 2)

Email: aquarist@explorisni.com (for reporting purposes)

USPCA (for injured wildlife such as birds/small mammals)

Telephone: 028 3025 1000

Website: www.uspca.co.uk

DAERA Marine Wildlife Team

(for dead marine animals and disturbance wildlife issues)

Email: Marine.Wildlife@daera-ni.gov.uk

DAERA Marine Conservation Branch

(for Marine Protected Areas and Marine Conservation issues)

Email: MarineConservation@daera-ni.gov.uk

Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (for information on whale, dolphin and porpoise sightings and strandings, and reporting sightings)

Website: www.iwdg.ie

WiSe Scheme (advice on observing marine wildlife sensitively):

Website: www.wisescheme.org

DAERA Avian flu online reporting tool

(for reporting dead birds and advice)

Reporting tool: www.daera-ni.gov.uk/report-dead-wild-bird

Website: www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/wild-birds-and-advice-public

DAERA/NIEA Blue-Green Algae - Advice and guidance on reporting potential Blue-Green Algae

Website: www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/what-do-if-you-think-you-see-blue-green-algae



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