

Dead marine megafauna strandings annual report 2024



Dr Lara Howe – Marine Officer



Introduction

On behalf of the Isle of Man Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture (DEFA), Manx Wildlife Trust have collated information regarding dead marine megafauna strandings since 2013. The present report summarises the annual findings from 2024. Cetacean data obtained is additionally utilised in the annual UK Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP-UK) report.

Training

During 2024, a further five volunteers were trained to attend marine mammal strandings and were added to the database. There are currently 114 trained volunteers, and each possesses a 'stranding pack' which contains all necessary equipment to effectively and safely record data in the field.

Methodology

Dead marine megafauna strandings observed around the Isle of Man are reported to Dr Lara Howe (Marine Officer, Manx Wildlife Trust) via phone, email or social media. Details obtained from the reporter, including location and any other available information, are passed on to a trained volunteer who will attend the stranding.

Following location of the stranded individual, volunteers must report findings on the appropriate recording form (Appendix 3, 4 & 5). We have now migrated to digital forms however they still cover the same information that is provided in the paper recording forms. Initially, date, time and site details (name of location, six-figure grid reference or GPS coordinates) must be recorded. Following this, details of the stranded individual are recorded including species, sex, age, carcass condition (e.g. fresh, decomposed, advanced decomposition), identifiable markings, presence of trauma and presence of tags or markings. Additionally, measurements are taken. The measurements required vary, depending on whether the individual is a cetacean, pinniped or other. Finally, photographs are taken of the body and head, and any notable features including evidence of trauma or entrapment. In some circumstances it may not be possible to obtain all of the required data to complete the recording form due to levels of decomposition, however volunteers are asked to record as much information as possible. Forms are submitted online and photographs are submitted to the marine officer and subsequently added to the stranding database. Cetacean and pinniped stranding records are also sent to CSIP-UK.

Results

In total there were 64 stranded individuals recorded around the Isle of Man in 2024 (Figure 1). Of these, 42 were pinnipeds (36 grey seals, *Halichoerus grypus*, four common seals, *Phoca vitulina*, and two individuals for which the species was unknown), with 21 cetaceans (10 harbour porpoise, *Phocoena phocoena*, one Risso's dolphin, *Grampus griseus*, nine common dolphin, *Delphinus delphis* and one Cuvier's beaked whale, *Ziphius cavirostris*), and one Tope (*Galeorhinus galeus*).

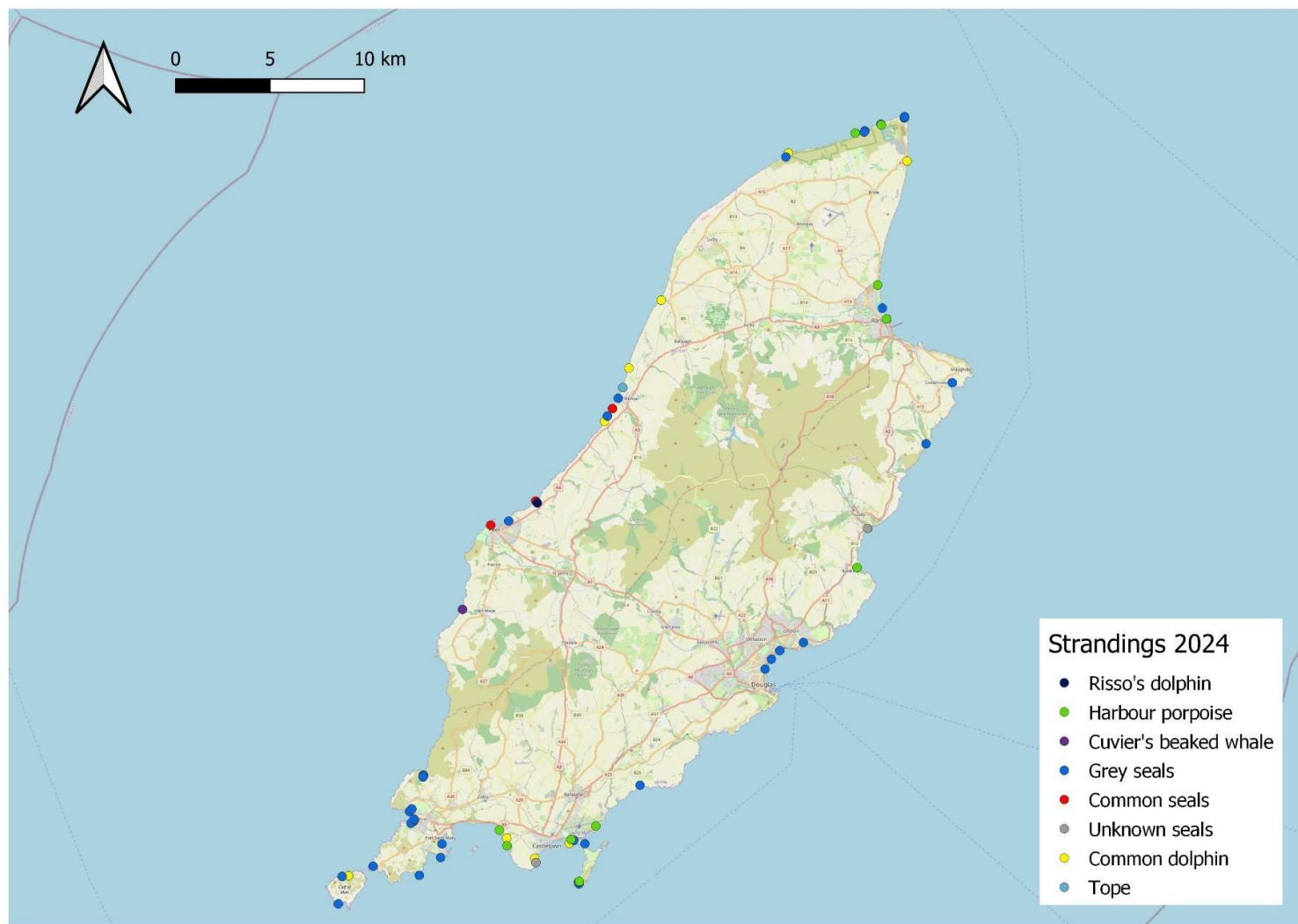


Figure 1 – Strandings reported around Isle of Man in 2024 (n = 64).

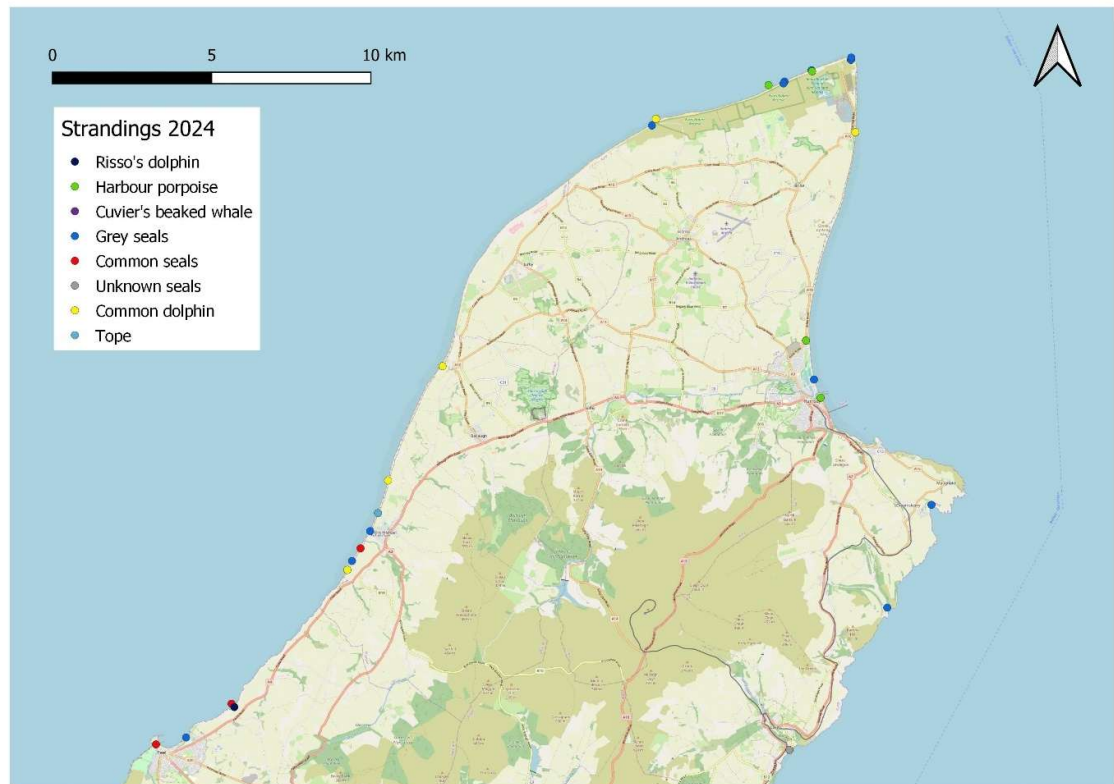


Figure 2 – Closer view of the North of the Isle of Man, depicting strandings in this area during 2024.

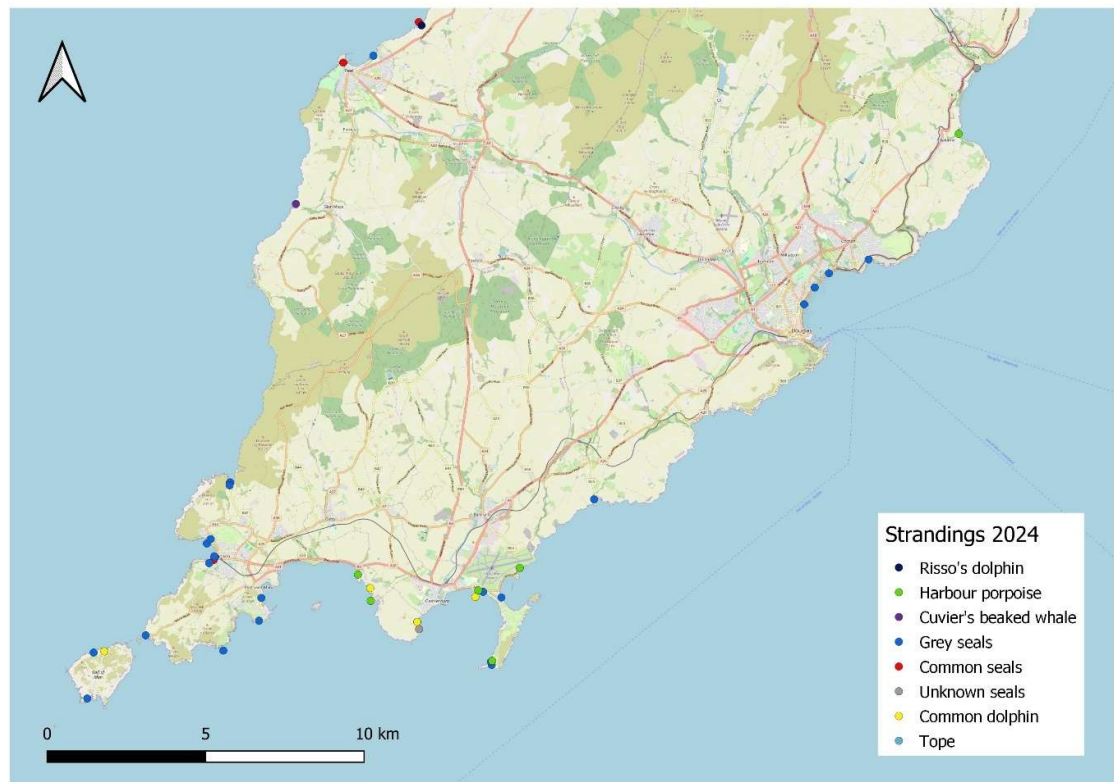


Figure 3 – Closer View of the South of the Isle of Man, depicting strandings in the area during 2024.

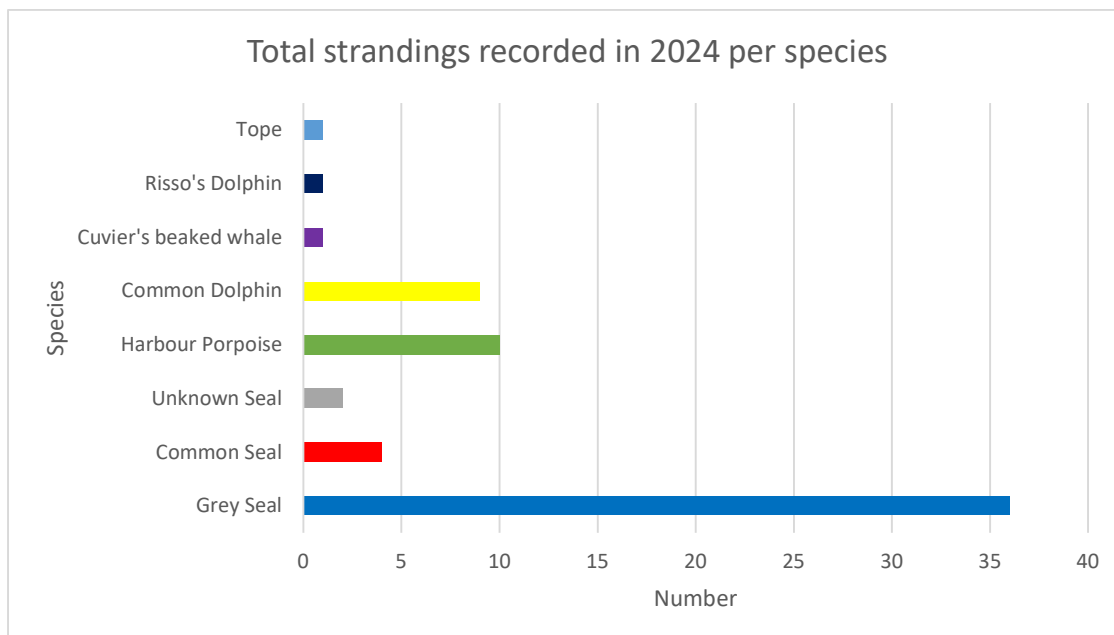


Figure 4 – Total number of stranded individuals (per species) recorded around Isle of Man in 2024.

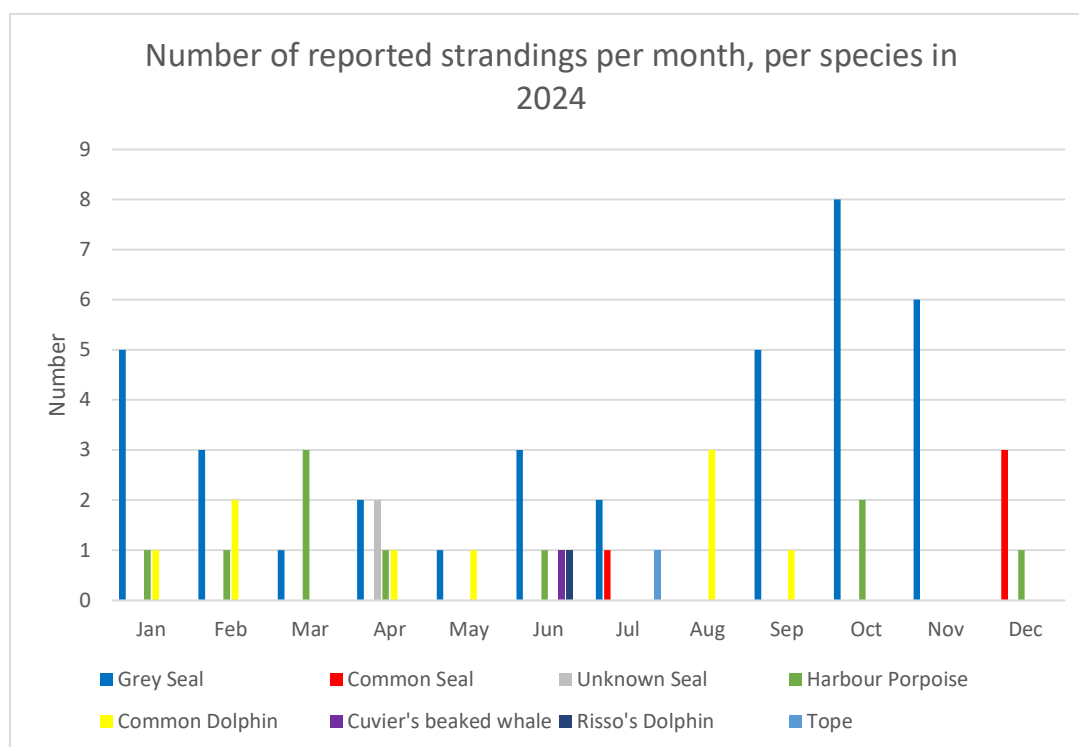


Figure 5 – Number of strandings reported per month around Isle of Man in 2024.



Figure 5 depicts the pattern of strandings reported, per month, during 2024. The number of reported grey seal strandings was highest in October (n=8), with an average of 3 reports each month. August was the only month without a grey seal stranding. Common seals were only reported in July and December, whilst two unknown seal species were recorded in April.

At least one cetacean stranding was recorded every month of the year, with the exception of July and November. Strandings are fairly evenly spread across the year, ranging from one to three individuals.

Seals

In total, 42 seal strandings were reported (36 grey seals, *Halichoerus grypus*, four common seals, *Phoca vitulina* and two individuals for which species was unknown). This is lower than the previous year which reported 51. Of these, six were unattended by volunteers.

Approximately half of the grey seal strandings were observed in the south of the Island between Port Erin and Castletown, the remainder scattered (Figure 6).

When considering the distribution of seal strandings, a high proportion are expected to be in the south around the coastlines of Port Erin, Port St Mary and Castletown due to the geography, prevailing winds and tidal patterns experienced around the south coast (See Appendix 1 & 2). The greatest congregations of seals are known to be around the south coast, in the regions of the Calf and the Sound, and around the north coast at the Point of Ayre.

In contrast the four common seal strandings in 2024 were located on the west coast (Figure 7).



Figure 6 – Grey seal strandings reported around Isle of Man in 2024 (n= 36).



Figure 7 – Common seal & unknown seal strandings reported around Isle of Man in 2024 (n=4 and n=2).



The condition of the recorded individuals varied with over half considered to be either decomposed or advanced composition (n=19), whilst only 12 were classified as fresh.

The proportions of individuals belonging to each age group is displayed in Table 1 (including unknown age individuals). Pups and juveniles made up over half of total seal strandings (54.76%). Sex was unknown for almost all stranded grey seals, apart from four individuals which were determined to be female and two which were determined to be male.

Table 1 – Relative proportion (%) of stranded seals belonging to each age group (adult, juvenile, or pup).

Pup	Juvenile	Adult	Unknown
35.72	19.04	23.81	21.43

Cetacean Strandings

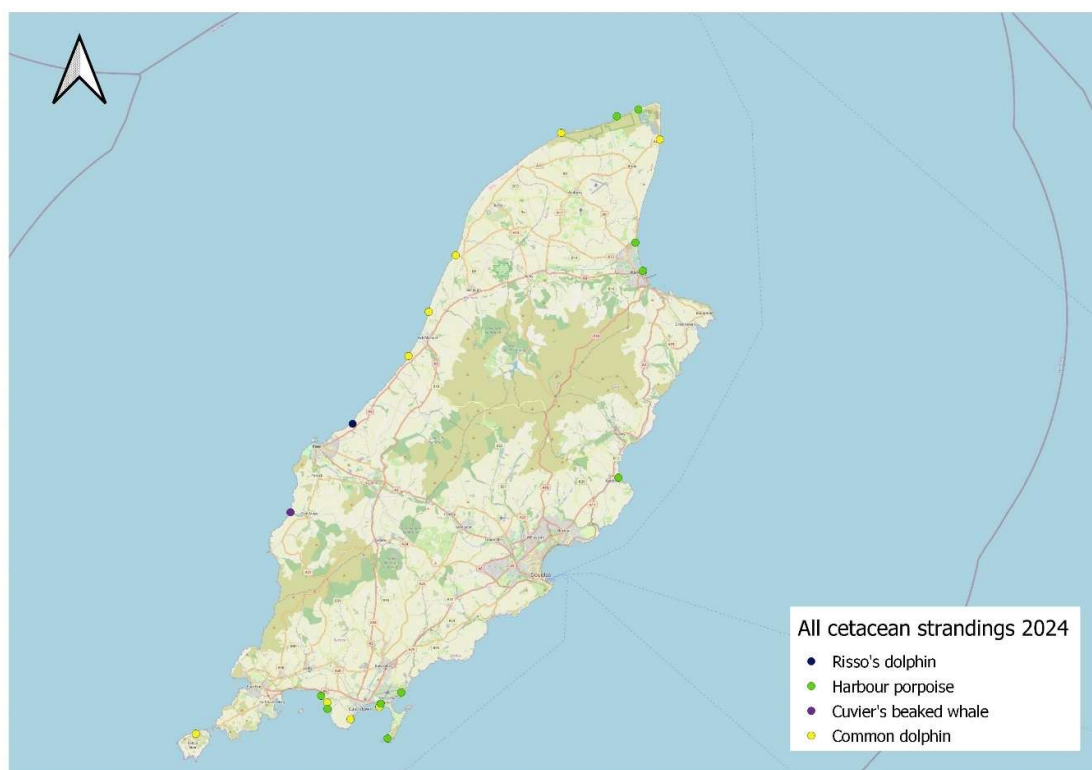


Figure 8 – Cetacean strandings recorded around Isle of Man in 2024 (n = 21).



All cetaceans

In total, 21 cetacean strandings were recorded in 2024: one Risso's dolphin, 10 harbour porpoise, one Cuvier's beaked whale and nine common dolphin.

Harbour Porpoise

In total, 10 harbour porpoise strandings occurred in 2024, compared with 16 in 2023 and 10 in 2022 (Figures 8 & 9). Harbour porpoise strandings accounted for 48% of the total number of cetacean strandings in 2024 compared with 76% in 2023. This proportionate reduction is due to an increase in common dolphin strandings in 2024 (n=9), the ten harbour porpoise in 2024 equating to the annual average during 2013-2024 (9.25 per annum).

Five individuals were stranded in the south of the island and two in the north. The remainder were on the east coast of the Island (Figure 9).

Of those recorded, four were reported to be freshly deceased with the remaining in a state of decomposition or advanced decomposition. Two of the individuals were identified as female, one as male and the remaining were not identified as either female or male. All harbour porpoise individuals were recorded as unknown (assumed adult), with the exception of one immature recorded.

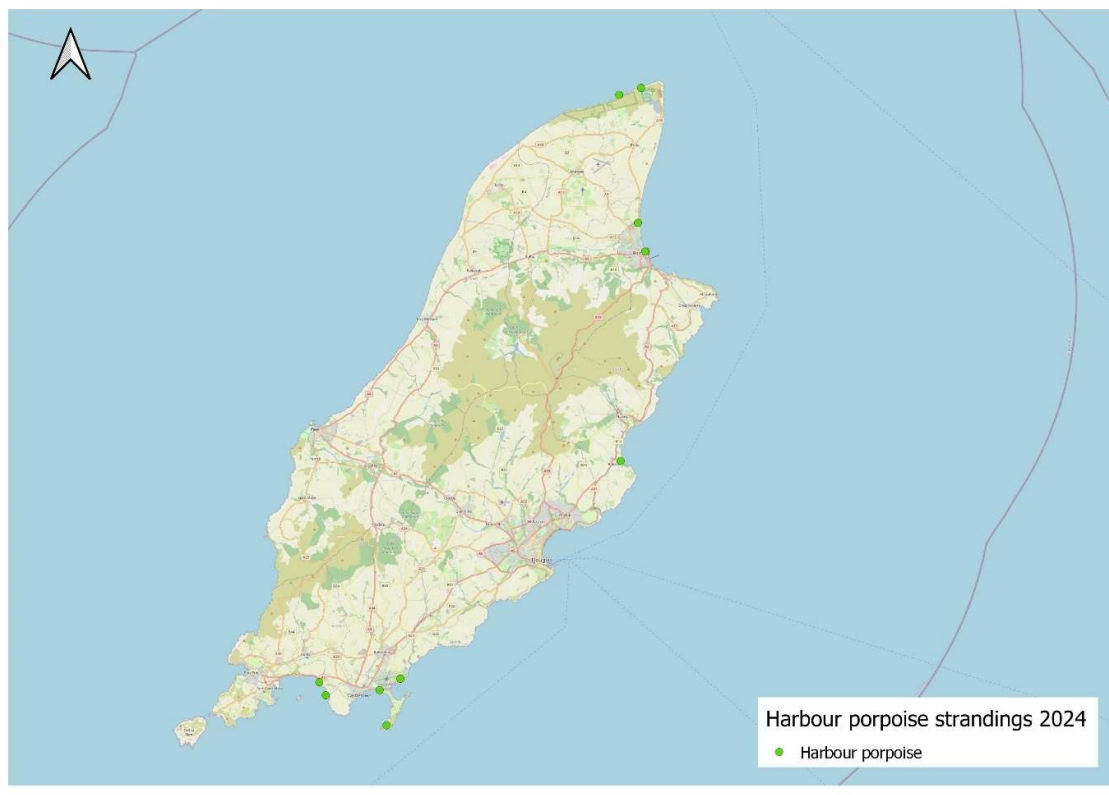


Figure 9 – Harbour porpoise strandings recorded around Isle of Man in 2024 (n = 10).



Figure 10 – All other cetacean strandings recorded around Isle of Man in 2024 (n = 1, n=1, n=9).

Common Dolphin

Nine common dolphin strandings were reported in 2024 (Figures 8 & 10), compared with one reported in 2023 and one in 2022. The nine strandings in 2024 equal the total for all years combined 2013-2023.

In 2024, four individuals were stranded in the south of the island, two in the north with three on the east coast of the Island (Figure 10).

Two of the common dolphin were confirmed as female with another thought to be female, two were male and the rest unknown. One adult was confirmed whilst the remainder had ages unclassified. Measurements taken for eight of the strandings ranged from a total length of 241cm to 150cm with a mean of 198cm.

Risso's Dolphin

One Risso's dolphin was stranded 2024 (Figure 10) compared to three in 2023. The animal was found drifting in the sea off the west of the island at Peel Castle, eventually stranding at Whitestrand in June. A necropsy confirmed a male of length 345cm with an age classed as 'older', having well-worn teeth. A rope tied around the fluke was thought to have been in place for a while, a necropsy examination determining internal indications of drowning including blood in the lungs and eyeballs.



Cuvier's beaked whale

A Cuvier's beaked whale, the first stranding of this species on the Isle of Man was found at Glen Maye (Figure 10) beach on 29th June. Usually found in deep waters (>200m), this is an unusual sighting in the shallow Irish Sea, suggesting it may have drifted in from deeper water. Measuring 331cm total length, the animal was identified as a young female and found in a state of decomposition. Much evidence of haemorrhagic bleeding was determined on the lower belly and sides. Tissue samples were taken for further analysis but any analysis of the samples was not available at the time of writing.

Tope

One tope shark found in July at Kirk Michael (Figure 11) in a state of decomposition. It is thought to be the first shark species recorded since logging of stranding data commenced in 2013 (Figure 11). However, a report 2019, that could not be confirmed, may have been a shark.



Figure 11 – Tope strandings recorded around Isle of Man in 2024 (n = 1).



Conclusions

In 2024, the total number of stranded individuals was recorded to be 64 compared to 72 in 2023 (Figure 12). However, since MWT took over managing strandings recording, generally numbers have been steadily increasing, except for 2015, 2019, 2022 and 2024 (Figure 12). It is likely that the primary cause for the positive trend is the increased level of public perception and knowledge of how to report a stranding. Additionally, as storminess continues to increase this may also play a part in the increasing numbers of individuals washing ashore. This does not necessarily mean more individuals are dying, rather that conditions enable the carcasses to wash ashore. Conversely, there is a direct correlation between storm conditions and pup mortality. This can be seen in Figure 5 where the majority of seal strandings took place between September and November, when grey seal pups are born.

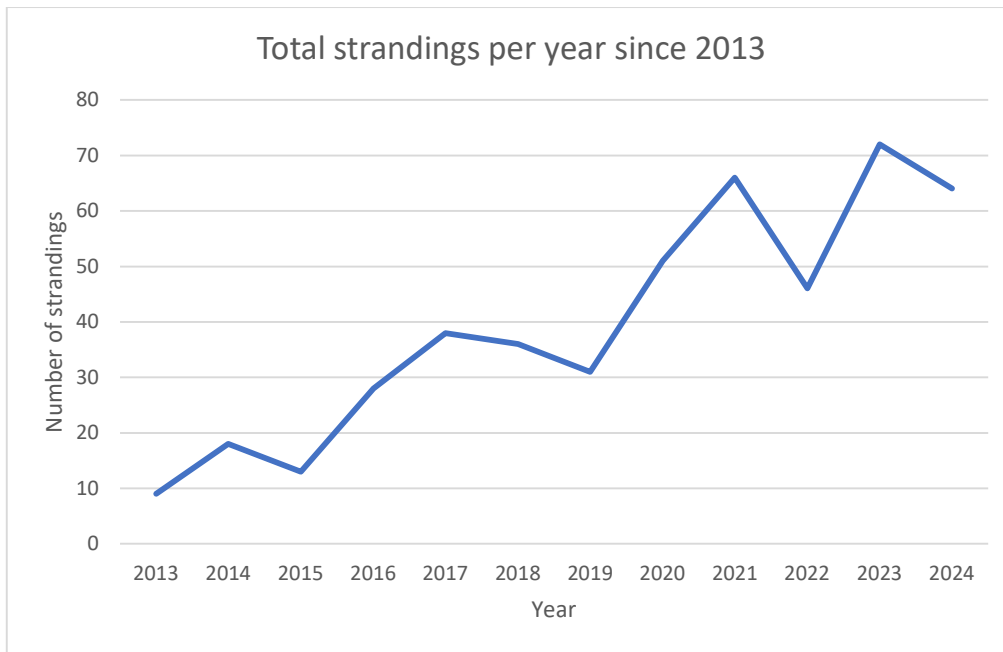


Figure 12 – Number of strandings reported each year since monitoring began in 2013.

The location of stranded individuals recorded was unremarkable in that there were no recorded concentrations of strandings in any particular area, however locations are likely related to the geographical suitability of the terrain for stranding, public access, prevailing wind directions, combined with the direction of the incoming and outgoing tides and localised wave patterns, particularly those following high-tide when strandings most frequently occur (Appendices 1 & 2).

It is unsurprising that the majority of strandings were either grey seal (56.25%) or harbour porpoise (15.62%) as these are the most common species of pinniped and



cetacean, respectively, occurring in Manx waters. This trend is confirmed by the reports of previous years, for example in 2023, 60% of total strandings recorded were grey seals and 22% of total strandings recorded were harbour porpoise.

The majority of strandings (61%) occurred during the autumn and winter months, between September and February. Adverse weather conditions typically occur during this period and thus it is possible that greater wind/wave action during this period resulted in a greater number of carcasses washing ashore. Increased storminess, as a result of climate change, may result in more strandings washing up in future. Furthermore, autumn coincides with grey seal pupping season where there is a greater chance of mortality during their initial months (as a consequence of usual infant mortality rate). Also pups are less adept at swimming than adults, are more susceptible to drowning or death from exhaustion, exposure and malnutrition.

Except for the Cuvier's beaked whale and the Risso's dolphin, there was no substantial, abnormal evidence of trauma or injury that were thought to extend beyond the level expected for washed-up marine megafaunal carcasses.

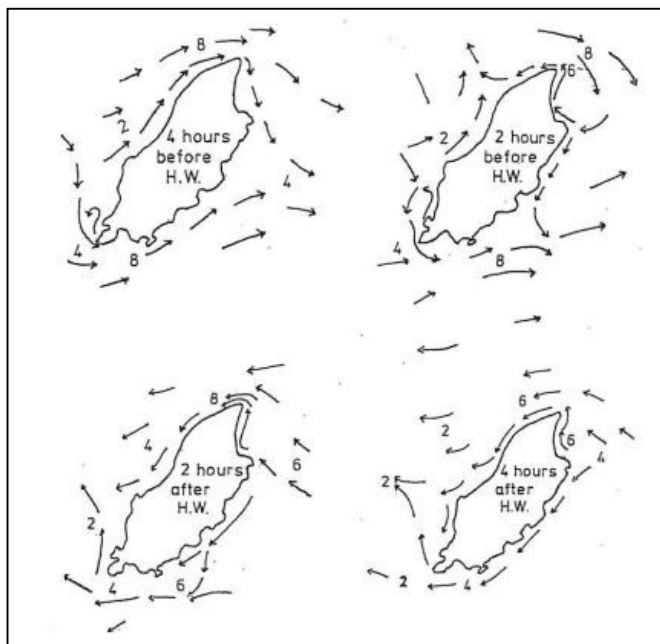
Despite world-wide reports of some marine mammal species fatally contracting the H5N1 strain of avian influenza experienced internationally in 2023 and 2024, there was no evidence to suggest that the Isle of Man's population were directly affected. However, no samples were collected to confirm this (as individuals were generally not fresh enough).

The findings from this year's annual report are consistent with numbers and distribution of stranded individuals from previous years. However, the trauma suffered by the Risso's dolphin and the Cuvier's beak whale raised concerns as to how these animals sustained their injuries and how a deep diving species would wash up here. Thankfully these appear to be isolated cases.

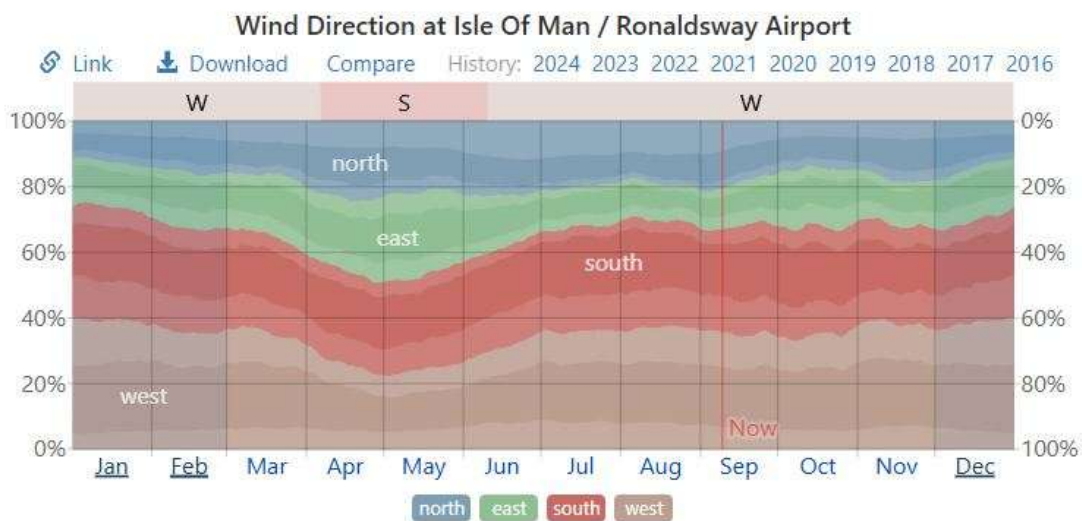


Appendices

Appendix 1: General Tidal flow around the Isle of Man (Brown, 1951).



Appendix 2: The average prevailing wind direction for the Isle of Man (Ronaldsway Airport).



The percentage of hours in which the mean wind direction is from each of the four cardinal wind directions, excluding hours in which the mean wind speed is less than 1.6 kph. The lightly tinted areas at the boundaries are the percentage of hours spent in the implied intermediate directions (northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest).



Appendix 3: Seal stranding recording form.

Seal Stranding Recording Form			
Please remember your own health and safety is paramount: watch for the tide, always wear gloves and do not lift heavy weights.			
Reported by:		Recorded by:	
Telephone:		Telephone:	
Date/Time:		Date recorded:	
Location:		Grid ref:	
Alive when stranded?		yes	no
Species (see id notes below):		grey	common harp hooded
Sex (male, female or unknown):		male	female unknown
Age (adult, juvenile, pup or unknown):		adult	juvenile pup unknown
Is carcass complete (head, tail, all flippers present):		yes	no
Carcass condition (e.g. fresh, decomposed or advanced decomposition):		fresh	decomp adv decomp
Obvious traumas other than scavenging (e.g. gunshot, net marks, etc.):			
Identifiable markings (scars, patterns on coat, missing claws, digits, etc.):			
Flipper tags, or hole between digits where tag may have been (if so please note which flipper, tag colour and any number or address):			
Hat tags (colour and number):			
Body Measurements: (cm)			
1. Head – hind flipper. Tip of the nose to the end of the hind flippers.			
2. Head – tail. Tip of the nose to the end of the tail.			
3. Girth. Taken beneath the flipper pits around the body.			
4. Head. Tip of the nose to the back of the head.			
5. Partial digit. Measured on the leading digit from the joint below the claw to the knuckle.			
Photos: If possible please take photos (digital are ideal) of the whole body and also close-ups of the left and right hand side of the head. If there are any unusual traumas such as gunshot, net marks, missing head, etc., please photograph those too. Seal Species Identification: There are two resident species of seal in the UK, the common seal and almost exclusively encountered around the Cornish coast, the grey seal. It is the head shape and its characteristics that offer most easily recognisable features: The common seal has a small head with rounded crown and a blunt nose which is sloping forming a concave bridge between the forehead and nose. The nostrils form a V shape, joining at the base. The grey seal has a large head with flattened crown and a straight long roman nose which offers a straight or convex profile. The nostrils are parallel and do not meet. Occasionally other species such as harp or hooded seals visit our waters. For identification of these and other species use a reliable reference book or id chart.			
Please return this form and your photos to:			
Strandings Records Coordinator, c/o Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Five Acres, Allet, Truro TR4 9DJ Email: records@cwstrandings.org Website: www.cwstrandings.org			
CORNWALL WILDLIFE TRUST WORKING IN ASSOCIATION WITH C-SMOG, THE NATIONAL SEAL SANCTUARY AND THE GODREVY SEAL GROUP			



Appendix 4: Stranded whales/dolphins/porpoise recording form.

This form should be filled in and posted, immediately after telephoning or sending a fax, to:

Department of Zoology,
The Natural History Museum,
Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD
Tel: 0207 942 5155 Fax: 020 7942 5054



Stranded Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises

Note: Rubber gloves should be worn when handling cetaceans, alive or dead.

Place and date where carcase first seen
The position of a locality not likely to be given on an OS map should be indicated by its relation to some better known place, bay or headland.

Place

County Grid ref.

Name of Finder

Date

Is the tail horizontal? If the answer to this question is 'No', it is not necessary to fill up the rest of this form as the animal is therefore not a whale, dolphin or porpoise.

Yes ☐ No ☐

Is there a hole ('blowhole') on the top of the head? Yes ☐ No ☐

Is it a single hole or a pair of holes? Single ☐ Pair ☐

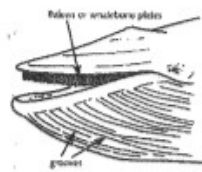
Does the mouth contain teeth/tooth sockets or baleen/whalebone plates? Teeth ☐ Baleen ☐

If neither teeth nor baleen can be found, state whether the two halves of the lower jaw are:

(a) Arched outwards and widely separated half way back (In which case the specimen is a Whalebone Whale, and the baleen has been washed out); (a) ☐

(b) Close together in front, where the jaw is accordingly narrow (A Toothed Whale in which the teeth are concealed beneath the gum). (b) ☐

Whalebone Whales if baleen present, state:



(a) The colour of the baleen plates. If not everywhere alike indicate the arrangement; e.g. 'white for ... cm at front end of right side, the rest as stated'

(b) The colour of the hairy fringes of the plates

Grooves Is the throat marked by numerous deep grooves? Yes ☐ No ☐

Grooves Is the throat marked by a pair of grooves? Yes ☐ No ☐

Toothed Whales if teeth are present, state:

(a) Whether they occur in both jaws or in the lower jaw only. Both ☐ Lower ☐

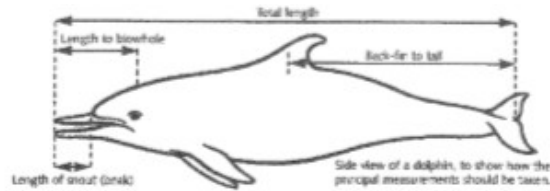
(b) The number of teeth and empty sockets of one side of the upper jaw. Teeth ☐ Empty sockets ☐

(c) The number of teeth and empty sockets of one side of the lower jaw. Teeth ☐ Empty sockets ☐

(d) If only few teeth & sockets present, their position in the jaw. Front ☐ Middle ☐ Back ☐

(e) The diameter of one of the largest teeth. Diameter

(f) Whether teeth spade-shaped or conical/needle-shaped. Spade-shaped ☐ Needle-shaped ☐



Total length of the animal measured in a straight line (preferably in metric units)

Length from the tip of the snout to the blowhole.

Length from the middle of the base of the back-fin to the middle of the tail

Length of one of the two flippers.

Length, in the middle line, of the snout or beak if present

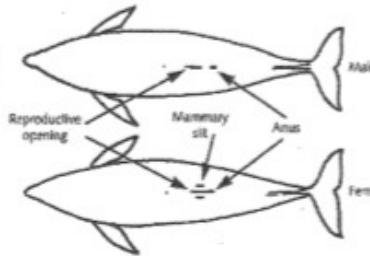
Vertical height of the back-fin if present.

Is the animal male or female? (In male, penis may be extruded. In female, mammary slits usually visible).

Male ☐

Female ☐

Length of gap between Reproductive opening and The anus.

 cm


Shape of the head (for instance, 'beak absent' or 'beak six inches long, forehead much swollen').

Colour of the skin, calling attention to the position of any white parts or stripes observed.

Condition of the animal when first seen:

Live ☐

Dead ☐

Fresh ☐

Uncertain ☐

Decomposed ☐

Comments on condition (e.g. smelly, leaking body fluids, bones visible, penis extruded, small cuts, big wounds).

Is it lying in such a position that it could be secured for the Museum if wanted, either entire, or its head, flippers or complete skeleton?

Additional Comments (if tangled in netting, please keep a sample).

Name and address (please print).

Tel. nos

Fax. nos



Appendix 5 – Basking shark stranding recording form.

Basking Shark Stranding Recording Form

Reported by: Telephone: Address:	Recorded by: Telephone: Date recorded:
Date first seen: Time first seen: Alive when stranded? ☐ YES ☐ NO	Location: Grid ref:

Total length:	m	Claspers present? ☐ YES (male) ☐ NO (female)
Snout to 1 st dorsal length:	cm	Gill rakers present? ☐ YES ☐ NO
1 st dorsal to caudal:	cm	Food in back of throat (orange paste)? ☐ YES ☐ NO
Snout to 1 st gill slit:	cm	Tissue samples taken (*where requested):
1 st dorsal height:	cm	Muscle for genetic analysis? ☐ YES ☐ NO
Pectoral length:	cm	Fin sample? ☐ YES ☐ NO
Girth (half way around x2):	cm	Skin sample? ☐ YES ☐ NO
Caudal height:	cm	Photos taken? ☐ YES ☐ NO
Natural scars/markings (take photos if possible):		By-catch evidence (take photos if possible):

Please return this form and your photos to:

Strandings Co-ordinator, Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Five Acres, Allet, Truro TR4 9DJ
Email: coordinator@cwtsstrandings.org Website: www.cwtsstrandings.org



CORNWALL WILDLIFE TRUST IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE MARINE BIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

