



# Dolphins of the Kelp Update: Exploration of West Falklands

THE cetacean team at the South Atlantic Environmental Research Institute (SAERI) recently returned from a voyage of discovery around the west coast of West Falklands as part of ongoing research into Commerson's and Peale's dolphins.

The survey aimed to identify key habitats of the two dolphin species in areas which were previously unexplored, in order to gain a better understanding of their distribution and habitat use.

The trip involved a nine-day vessel survey on the *Condor* from Carcass Island and explored the coastal habitat of West Falkland in addition to the waters around New, Beaver and Weddell Islands before returning to Carcass. The team on board consisted of the captain, Mike Clarke with first mate, Jan Hoekstra and the SAERI cetacean team, including Project Manager Dr Marina Costa, Project Officer Dr Maria Garcia and interns Connor Bamford and Lorna Hamilton.

The weather permitted eight days of surveying in which over 300 sightings were recorded.

A sighting was made when an observer spotted a dolphin or whale or a cue (for example, a splash or blow at the surface) and subsequent information on group size and composition was gathered once we approached the animals, or they approached us.

We estimated that a total of 680 Commerson's dolphins, 505 Peale's dolphins and approximately 100 Sei whales were sighted throughout the voyage.

In addition to the target species we came across a male killer whale who was identified by Drs Filippo Galimberti and Simona Sanvito, the researchers on Sea Lion Island, as Alberto, a trans-

**Observers Lorna Hamilton and Dr Marina Costa of the SAERI Cetacean Team onboard the *Condor***



Peale's dolphin sighted during the *Condor* survey. *Condor*, provided and captained by Mike Clarke

sient killer whale seen for the first time at Sea Lion Island five months ago (October 2016).

This new information on cetacean hotspots is vital in determining where to focus future research. The team was also successful in gathering genetic data which will be used to examine how these groups of dolphins relate to each other around the Falklands as well as their relation to populations elsewhere in the Southern hemisphere.

The team was given a warm welcome on New Island by Charlene and John Rowland midway through the survey where they enjoyed a stretch of the legs ashore when the weather was not suitable to survey.

We would also like to give a special thanks to Mike and Jan for navigating and facilitating the survey on board the *Condor* and to Rob and Lorraine McGill for the hospitality we received on

return to Carcass Island - dinner at the lodge was a welcome treat after nine days at sea.

The cetacean team is now preparing for the island-wide aerial surveys which will take place in March of this year. These surveys aim to estimate the total number of Peale's and Commerson's dolphins around the whole of the

Falklands Islands, providing a baseline status of these animals in order to aid future conservation efforts. This project has been grant aided by the Darwin Initiative through UK government funding.

**Maria Garcia  
Project Officer  
Darwin Cetaceans**

**Killer whale identified as Alberto by the researchers on Sea Lion Island, Drs Filippo Galimberti and Simona Sanvito.**



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