

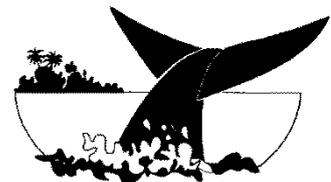
WHALE & DOLPHIN WATCHING TRIP REPORT



Spotted Dolphins

MALDIVES EXPLORER NORTHERN ATOLLS CRUISE 20 April to 1 May 2015

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TROPICAL DOLPHINS AND WHALES

MALDIVES EXPLORER

M.V. *Hope Cruiser*, 20 April to 1 May 2015

SUMMARY

A marvellous trip to the northernmost atolls of the Maldives on MV *Hope Cruiser*, during which we enjoyed almost continuous flat-calm seas, fabulous cetacean sightings and superb snorkelling. Among the many cetacean sightings (84 encounters with over 2100 individuals of 9 different species.), highlights included the hundreds of **Spinner Dolphins**, three encounters with **Pilot Whales**, exuberant **Striped Dolphins**, dozy **Dwarf Sperm Whales**, snorkelling twice with **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** and a classic encounter with **Rough-toothed Dolphins**. In addition to all the cetaceans we enjoyed plenty of snorkelling. The **reef fishes** were always excellent, with astonishing colours, numbers and diversity on every snorkel. The **corals** were absolutely outstanding in many locations, while **Hawksbill Turtles** were encountered during several snorkelling sessions. But the snorkelling highlight was undoubtedly the **Manta Rays**. And in addition to this there were flying-fish aplenty, several island visits, the spectacular night sky, and the care and attention of the *Hope Cruiser* crew.

ANCHORAGES

Day 1	20 April 2015	Olhuhali	(North Malé Atoll)
Day 2	21 April 2015	Thulaadhoo	(Baa Atoll)
Day 3	22 April 2015	Hulhudhufaru	(Raa Atoll)
Day 4	23 April 2015	Goidhoo	(Shaviyani Atoll)
Day 5	24 April 2015	Uligamu	(Haa Alifu Atoll)
Day 6	25 April 2015	Innafinolhu	(Haa Alifu Atoll)
Day 7	26 April 2015	Kelaa	(Haa Alifu Atoll)
Day 8	27 April 2015	Kulhudhuffushi	(Haa Dhaalu Atoll)
Day 9	28 April 2015	Dolhiyadhoo	(Shaviyani Atoll)
Day 10	29 April 2015	Kanifushi	(Lhaviyani Atoll)
Day 11	30 April 2015	Gaafaru	(North Malé Atoll)
Day 12	1 May 2015	Hulumalé	(North Malé Atoll)

Day 1, Monday 20 April 2015

We all met at Malé airport, and were soon on the *dhoni* for the short transfer to the safari boat anchorage and *Hope Cruiser*. Following welcome drinks and a briefing, there was time to unpack in the cabins, and slap on some sun cream before coming back on deck. Then we were off, heading north, up through North Malé Atoll. Almost immediately there was a sighting of **Spinner Dolphins**, spinning obligingly alongside the boat. That was immediately followed by another more distant sighting of another school of **Spinner Dolphins**. Then after lunch we had a close encounter with a small pod of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**. There was also a sighting of a **Green Turtle** at the surface and numerous **Brown Noddies** and **Black-naped Terns**.

We anchored in the sheltered lagoon adjacent to Oluhali island, with plenty of time for a snorkel on the nearby reef. Although the reef itself was a bit sandy and rubbly, it had a dramatic drop-off, and the fishlife was stunning. Highlights included several **Clown Triggerfishes**, **Spotted** and **Yellow Boxfishes**, **Maldive** and **Clark's Anemonefishes**, a **Moray Eel** and a **Hawksbill Turtle**. Back on board there was time for a shower before cold drinks on the deck watching the sunset.

Day 2, Tuesday 21 April 2015

With a wide channel to cross today, we set off early. It was calm but overcast: ideal viewing conditions, which made it easy for us to spot a large piece of drifting bamboo. Underneath were a **Dolphinfish** (Dorado or Mahimahi) and several **Tripletails**. However, we were almost across the main part of the channel before we spotted our first cetaceans. Some distant jumping led us to two large schools of **Spinner Dolphins**. The first seemed quite sleepy, but the second was more active, and many rushed in to bowride. There was also much spinning and other energetic activity. After nearly an hour with these dolphins it was time to move on, but it was not long before our next sighting.



In the distance some large fins had revealed the presence of **Pilot Whales**. They were idling in the channel between Goidhoo and Baa Atolls, with 25 or so active **Bottlenose Dolphins** in attendance. At first the Pilots seemed completely uninterested in us. But after some time we parked the boat upwind of a subgroup of seven, and slowly drifted downwind towards them. In this way we were able to have some wonderful close views, including numerous spy-hops (left) as they took as much interest in us as we did in them.

While all this had been going on, there had been some interesting bird action too. Highlight perhaps was a pale-phase **Arctic Skua**, with pointed tail projection, which flew right over the boat. In addition to the ubiquitous **Noddies**, there were also **Lesser Crested Terns**, a single **Tropical Shearwater**, a small flotilla of five **Flesh-footed Shearwaters**, and, a bit later, a **Lesser Frigatebird**.

As we rounded the outside of Baa Atoll we came into some ocean swell, which made spotting a bit difficult. But we did find a nice group of **Spinner Dolphins** heading out for their night's feeding, as we were heading in. And that brought us up to afternoon teatime, when birthday cake was served for Tim.

Soon after that we were anchored in the sheltered lagoon of Thulaadhoo island, and piling into the *dhoni* for our evening snorkel on the nearby reef. Here the corals were delightful, with many massive **Table Corals**. There was also one **Hawksbill Turtle**, and a great diversity of fishes, including **Maldive Anemonefish** and a massive school of **Powder-blue Surgeonfish**.

Evening slide show: Spinner, Bottlenose and Risso's Dolphins.



Giant Sea Anemone with Maldivian Anemonefish



Happy Birthday!

Day 3, Wednesday 22 April

The sea was mirror calm when we woke, and we were soon heading off on the *dhoni* for our morning snorkel. This was adjacent to Muthafushi island, where the reef dropped steeply away from a very shallow reef flat, thick with corals, to the deep blue depths. Off the slope were dense schools of fishes: **Blue Fusiliers**, **Schooling Bannerfish**, **Anthias**, **Humpback Red Snappers** and **Four-spot Snappers**. There were also numerous **Maldivian Anemonefish** amongst the brightly coloured **Giant Sea Anemones** along the reef edge, and a nice school of **Reef Squid**.

Hope Cruiser had moved up behind us, so we were quickly back on board. During breakfast we continued northwards inside the atoll, before cruising out into the ocean. With such calm conditions we were expecting some good cetacean sightings, but all we encountered was one small group of **Spinner Dolphins**, which raced in to ride on our bow,

By now a squall was threatening offshore, so we turned in to the Hani Kandu, the deep channel between Baa and Raa Atolls, and crossed over to the eastern side of the atolls. The rain did catch us, and we had a brief downpour, but after that it was dry and calm again.

On passage up past Raa Atoll there were plenty of **Noddies**, but cetacean-wise only a glimpse of a couple of fins. However, we did have time for an excellent evening snorkel. We left *Hope Cruiser* before our anchorage, transferring to the *dhoni* next to the island of Gaudhoodhoo. Our snorkel here did not start well. The swell from offshore was pushing water through the lagoon, and this water, heavily laden with sand and silt, was pouring out over the reef just where we jumped in. Visibility rapidly dropped to nothing. But a few fin strokes carried us through the white-out, and we were soon in clear water over a dramatic drop-off. There were nice corals on the top, schools of fish in the deepwater, and two **Hawksbill Turtles**.

Evening talk: Spotted Dolphins and tuna fisheries, on the fore deck, with the crescent moon and Venus setting directly in front.

Day 4, Thursday 23 April

Another wonderfully calm morning. We started with a walk on the pleasant local island of Hulhudhufaru, after the shortest of trips ashore in the dingy. The island itself was remarkably well vegetated, with numerous fruit trees, breadfruit trees, and flowering plants in many yards. The clean sand streets were being swept by some of the women, and children in bright white uniforms were making their way to school. There were a few nice birds too, with an **Asian Koel** calling and on show, an **Indian Pond Heron** in breeding plumage, and two **Maldivian Little Herons** on the harbour wall.

As soon as everyone was back on board, we were off. And just outside the harbour we spotted a school of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**. They swam right under our bows, and through the clear, calm water we could clearly see the characteristic spotting on the bellies of two of the larger individuals.



Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins

Out in the open sea with such calm conditions we were expecting interesting sightings, and it was not long before we spotted a **Dwarf Sperm Whale** logging at the surface. It soon dived, but reappeared again, repeating this several times. Although we were not able to get particularly close, it was close enough for some excellent views with binoculars. And while waiting for it to reappear one time, a **Sea Skater** obligingly skated past the boat.

After leaving the Dwarf Sperm Whale we headed across to Shaviyani Atoll, where we planned our late morning snorkel. The chosen reef proved to be an excellent one: the water was clear, there were abundant corals, and the seabed seemed alive with fishes. Of particular note were two **Nurse Sharks**, resting under two separate coral bommies, and a passing **Whitetip Reef Shark**.



Nurse Shark tail



Nurse Shark under a coral bommie

Through lunch we continued northwards inside Shaviyani Atoll, before heading back out into the ocean during the afternoon. Here we encountered **three groups of Spinner Dolphins**, a leaping **Sailfish**, and a big flock of **Lesser Noddies** and **Bridled Terns** being harried by two **Arctic Skuas**.

Finally heading back into the atoll, we jumped onto the *dhoni* for our afternoon snorkel while *Hope Cruiser* anchored. The snorkel was again wonderful, with massive **Porites corals** dominating parts of the reef, fishes everywhere, and plenty of **Sea Cucumbers** and **Cushionstars**.

Evening talk: Stars, on the top deck.

Day 5, Friday 24 April

With a long way still to go, we departed early this morning. As we left the atoll there were **Spinner Dolphins** heading in, although we stayed with them for only a short time. But there were more **Spinner Dolphins** on the outside, and we spent a bit more time with these ones. After a couple of hours heading north we stopped for our late morning snorkel. This was in the channel just to the north of the tiny island of Kanamana. As we approached the island, the shallow waters were glowing a radiant turquoise under the bright sunlight. Even more arrestingly, there was a small group of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** heading our way. We quickly got ready and slipped into the water ahead of them. They soon changed course but nevertheless most people got at least a glimpse of them underwater.

We were now scattered along the channel, but soon regrouped on the northern side. Here, in shallow water, was the most glorious coral garden, densely populated with **table corals** and **branching corals**. And in amongst the corals were a myriad small reef fishes. It really was quite superb. Meanwhile, out in the channel bigger things were passing by, including **Spotted Eagle Ray**, **Whitetip Reef Shark** and **Hawksbill Turtle**.

Back on board *Hope Cruiser*, it was not long before we came across an enormous school of **Spinner Dolphins**. They were in playful mood, with much bow-riding, spinning and general rushing about. We stayed with them for over an hour, before finally succumbing to our, now late, lunch.

Later, as we approached Ihavandhippolhu Atoll, the northernmost outpost of the Maldives, we encountered many **Lesser Noddies**, a couple of **Great Crested Terns** and a resplendent **White-tailed Tropicbird**, as well as a small group of **Risso's Dolphins**. By now it was getting late and as we headed towards our anchorage afternoon tea and coffee was served. This included a rather delicious birthday cake for Anne.

At Uligamu, while *Hope Cruiser* headed into the harbour, we went off on the *dhoni* for a late snorkel. The reef here was different from any we had visited before, with numerous coral rocks scattered across a deepish white sand bottom. There were plenty of attractive fish, but star of the show was undoubtedly a large **Hawksbill Turtle**, which swam peacefully below us for many minutes.

Evening talk: Spotted, Striped and Fraser's Dolphins



Hawksbill Turtle

Day 6, Saturday 25 April

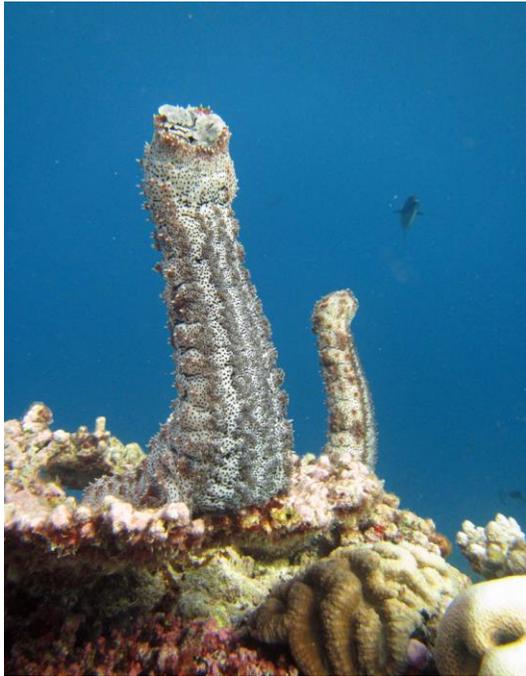
We started today with an early walk ashore on Uligamu, which proved to be a delightful island. Its massive minaret, standing boldly near the landing beach, is a close copy of the one in Malé. The islanders were particularly friendly, with many wanting to pass a few words in English. Back at the harbour *Hope Cruiser* was ready to set off.

We headed straight out to sea, into the deep Eight Degree Channel. There was some breeze when we started but this soon died down, and viewing conditions were ideal. But there was little to see. Several **Lesser Noddies** flew by. There was a glimpse of what might have been three dolphins. But it was not until late in the morning that we found an energetic school of **Striped Dolphins**. They were happy to bowride, and were also jumping and somersaulting nearby, so we were content to spend nearly an hour with them.

In the middle of watching the Striped Dolphins, a **Bulwer's Petrel** appeared. Later we spotted a smaller **Wilson's Storm-petrel**, pattering for food along a current line. At this same spot was one of two big splashes which may have been Manta Rays, although we did not get good views of the animals concerned.

Eventually our big ocean circuit brought us back to the atoll, and we headed in for our afternoon snorkel. This was on the reef of Vagaaru Island, and was a snorkel of three parts. We started over a section of sand and rubble with large coral outcrops. The former was home to a vast meadow of **Garden Eels**, while much of the latter appeared to be carpeted with fish. The second part was a stretch of white coral sand, cascading down from the beach. Here some spotted a **Giant Barracuda**, as well as another species of **Garden Eel**. Then the third part was a section of reef, with rich coral growths, and numerous fishes. But the major highlight for most was a school of **Spinner Dolphins** swimming by. Although we could not see them underwater, at the surface we could hear their breathing, and see them spinning. Another memorable sight for some was the spawning of **Sea Cucumbers** as the light dimmed.

Evening talk: Atolls of Maldives, on the top deck under the stars, after a dramatic sunset.



Sea Cucumbers spawning



Striped Dolphins

Day 7, Sunday 26 April

We awoke to another mirror calm sea, and it stayed calm all day. We left our anchorage early, heading to a nearby reef for our morning snorkel, but we never made it. Some movements at the surface caught our attention: **Mantas!** There were three of them, feeding in a line of plankton. We quickly transferred to the *dhoni*, and were soon in the water. We edged slowly closer and there it was, a Manta Ray, gliding past underwater. It moved along the current line, and we followed. Then a second Manta Ray appeared. At this point we decided to stay put, and let the Mantas come and go as they pleased. Which they did, giving us numerous views as they swam by, either singly or in pairs. Beautiful! And while we were mainly engrossed with the Mantas, there was time to note the tiny but dazzling electric blue planktonic shrimps, appropriately called *Sapphirina*.



Feeding Manta

When we finally got back onto the *dhoni*, dolphins appeared. There was a large group of **Spinner Dolphins**, including two mothers with young calves, accompanied by a smaller group of **Indo-pacific**

Bottlenose Dolphins. They were all swimming in relatively shallow water, so were backlit with gorgeous turquoise light reflecting off the sandy bottom.

Back on board *Hope Cruiser*, breakfast was ready, and we were soon heading out into the ocean. A spate of **Dwarf Sperm Whale** sightings followed. There was then a lull until after lunch when we had a marvellous encounter with **Striped Dolphins**. They were as energetic as ever, charging through the ocean, and racing in to bowride. But they eventually became bored with our plodding progress, and sped away. In amongst the various cetaceans were some interesting seabirds including a hat-trick of **Wedge-tailed, Flesh-footed** and **Tropical Shearwaters**.

Our afternoon snorkel was in the channel on the approach to our anchorage at Kelaa Island. The tide was coming in, so we had an exciting drift. This started over a stretch of reef dominated by spur-and-groove formations, testament to the sea's potential power, although it was flat calm today. Among the fishes were numerous **Palette Surgeonfishes**, as well as species typical of exposed reefs, including **Surge Damselfish, Surge Wrasse, Reef Picasso Triggerfish** and **Zebra Dartfish**. In deeper water there was also a large **Napoleon Wrasse** and a frisky **Grey Reef Shark**.

By the time we returned to *Hope Cruiser*, now anchored near Kelaa the sun was about to set. However, there was just time for some jumping from the top deck into the luxuriously warm lagoon for the young at heart.

Evening talk: Kelaa island, seasons and mantas, on the top deck under a brilliant moon.

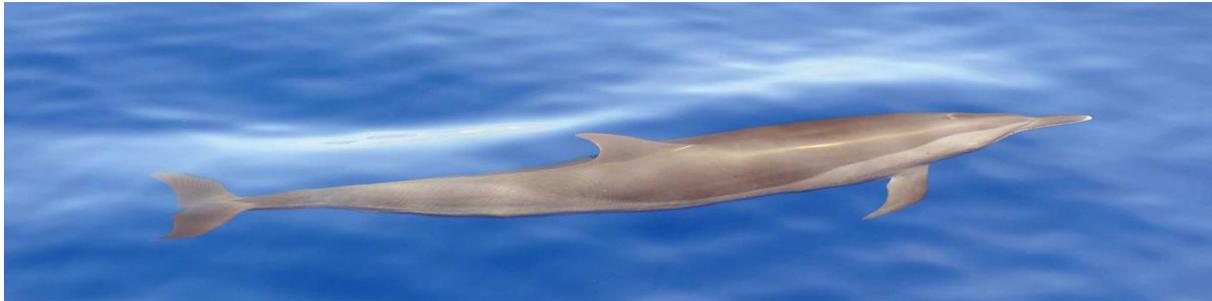
Day 8, Monday 27 April

Yet another flat calm sea greeted us this morning. As we set off from Kelaa, **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** and **Lesser Crested Terns** were hunting in the lagoon adjacent to the island. Out at sea, we soon came across a large school of **Spinner Dolphins** heading in towards the atoll. We turned to travel with them, and soon had 20-30 riding along under our bows, all beautifully visible in the clear blue water. We spent some time with this obliging group, but no sooner had we moved on than we found another equally cooperative school of **Spinner Dolphins**. We spent more time with these dolphins, but after moving on, decided to bypass the next two schools of **Spinner Dolphins** that we could see in the distance.

By now we were approaching the island of Filaadhoo. A couple of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** put in a brief appearance, just before we set off on the *dhoni* for a snorkel on the outer reef. This proved to be a snorkel of two halves. We first moved into the shallows, near where the ocean swell was breaking. The surge pushed us in and out over the spurs-and-grooves, which were alive with fishes. Then later we moved out to the reef edge, where visibility increased to 30m, allowing us to float high over the corals admiring them as if in flight. Among the highlights: a giant **Napoleon Wrasse**, two **White-tailed Stingrays** and a **Nurse Shark**.

Returning to *Hope Cruiser*, we were soon showered and changed, and ready for lunch. And not long after that we spotted some dolphins splashing just off our course. As we approached they gave some characteristic high leaps, which told us they were **Spotted Dolphins**. Once again, with the calm clear water, we had superb views as they came in to bow-ride. There were larger, mature, freckled individual, as well as mothers with unmarked youngsters. Again we spent plenty of time with this

group, which seemed quite content to have us along. We even sent a few folks out in the launch to get some underwater footage, although they were pleased when they returned to the shade of the main boat!



Spotted Dolphin alongside

In between the cetacean sightings there were some nice seabird sightings too. There were great flocks of **Lesser Noddies**, a steady stream of **Flesh-footed** and **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters** heading north, as well as a **Tropical Shearwater** and **White-tailed Tropicbird**.

As we approached Kulhudhuffushi there were sightings of distant **Risso's Dolphins** and **Spinner Dolphins**. But we pressed on as we were all looking forward to our afternoon reef snorkel. The structure of the reef here was again different from any we had encountered before, with overgrown spur-and-groove formations in shallow water and a wide plain of mixed corals and rubble in slightly deeper water. As ever, the fishlife was entrancing.

Evening: option for a walk ashore on Kulhudhuffushi before dinner.

Day 9, Tuesday 28 April

What a fantastic day! It was calm and sunny again, all day. And the cetacean sightings were superb. We started with **Spinner Dolphins** and **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** as we left Kulhudhuffushi. Soon after that we had a nice encounter with a small group of **Risso's Dolphins**. That was soon followed by an active group of **Striped Dolphins**, which were trailing a **school of tuna**, which were also being followed by a large flock of seabirds, including **Bridled Terns**, **Sooty Terns**, **Lesser Noddies**, two gorgeous **White-tailed Tropicbirds**, and three **Flesh-footed Shearwaters**. The Striped Dolphins seemed keen to bowride, and gave us some excellent photo opportunities. When we finally moved on it was still only time for breakfast!

Even breakfast was cut short by another sighting, this time of **Rough-toothed Dolphins**. They were a bit shy, ducking behind our boat whenever we approached, but we spent some time with them, and with patience we got close enough for some wonderful photo opportunities.

When we finally reached the site for our morning snorkel, it was nearly midday. But we had one more cetacean sighting before getting into the water – a **Dwarf Sperm Whale**, rather closer than any we had seen so far. The snorkel itself was a delight, with warm clear water, and just the gentlest of drifts along the reef. As ever, there was a nice selection of corals, plenty of reef fish, and also a Turtle.



Rough-toothed Dolphins

During the afternoon we continued our way southwards, and had more sightings of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**, **Dwarf Sperm Whales** and **Risso's Dolphins**. The latter were particularly obliging, and obliged us with some lovely close views.

As we neared our anchorage at Doliyadhoo we transferred to the *dhoni* for our afternoon snorkel. This was on the island's reef, which had plenty of robust corals and a diverse selection of fishes. Highlights included a **Spotted Eagle Ray**, a **Giant Moray Eel**, and a frisky **Blacktip Reef Shark**. We also spotted a lone **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphin**, and it was probably this same individual that we could hear puffing around our anchored boat later in the evening.

Evening slide show: Beaked Whales

Day 10, Wednesday 29 April

Yet another day of flat calm seas. There were **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** feeding around the boat as we left our anchorage this morning. And **Spinner Dolphins** enroute to our snorkelling spot, about an hour away. Then at the reef where we snorkelled there were still more **Indo-pacific Bottlenose**, one passing by just after we jumped in, giving wonderful underwater views to most. The remainder of the snorkel was spent with one eye on the deep water, in case it returned. But there was plenty of time to admire the corals and fishes.

Heading on we came across a very relaxed group of **Risso's Dolphins**. Then later there were two separate groups of **Striped Dolphins**. Having spent some time with the first of these, two of us set off on the launch to try our luck with some underwater filming. But we were waylaid by a curious **Hawksbill Turtle**, which circled the launch several times

Later still there was a **Dwarf Sperm Whale** and more **Spinner Dolphins**, before we arrived at our anchorage in Lhaviyani Atoll. Here we quickly transferred to the *dhoni* for our afternoon snorkel, on what proved to be a fabulous reef. There were magnificent stands of coral, a wonderful diversity of fishes (including streams of **Neon-streak Fusiliers**, and a hungry gang of **Powder-blue Surgeonfishes**) in addition to chattering flocks of **Noddies and Terns** feeding on **Silver Sprats** over the reef flat.

Evening talk: Islands and Dragonflies, on the top deck under the moon and stars.



Hawksbill Turtle



Corals



Powder-blue Surgeonfish

Day 11, Thursday 30 April

We departed early from our anchorage at Kanifushi, heading across the atoll to the small island of Olhugiri, where we planned to take our morning snorkel. But we arrived to find that the island had washed away, and the reef was largely covered in sand! No problem, we moved along a bit to the island of Meedhahura, and enjoyed a fabulous snorkel there. Highlights included a wonderful sighting of a **Porcupine Stingray**, and drifting in clear water over coral bommies alive with **Red Snappers**.

Back on board *Hope Cruiser* we were soon back on course, and heading south across the Kaashidhoo Channel. This deep waterway is usually a good area for cetacean sightings, but not today. Nevertheless, we did have an enchanting encounter with **Spinner Dolphins** next to Kaashidhoo Island. This school included perhaps half-a-dozen small calves, all of which seemed to be practicing their jumps and spins. All this against the backdrop of the palm-fringed island and its impossibly turquoise lagoon.

As we left Kaashidhoo, an impressive squall passed through – quite a change after many days of calm weather. The sea was whipped up within minutes, although it had calmed right down again by the time we entered Gaafaru Atoll. There were **Black-naped Terns** and **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** in the channel. Further inside a small fishing *dhoni* had come out to lead us through the maze of reefs to a safe anchorage not far from the island of Gaafaru. As it was quite a tight spot between the reefs, the Captain decided to put down all three anchors, and laying them securely kept us all entertained for some minutes.

Then it was time for our afternoon snorkel, which was a cracker! We headed out through a different, nearby, channel, to the outer reef. The water was clear, the corals were spectacular, the fishlife was diverse. Among the particularly memorable species were a large **Honeycomb Moray**, two **Hawksbill Turtles** and a **Napoleon Wrasse**.

Seabirds today included impressive numbers of **Lesser Noddies** in Lhaviyani Atoll, and of **Black-naped Terns** in Gaafaru, as well as **Flesh-footed Shearwaters** flying northwest on migration.

Evening talk: Reef fishes. Followed by a splendid Maldivian buffet dinner.

Day 12, Saturday 22 November

A wonderful final day. The sea was calm again this morning as we departed early from Gaafaru. And we soon had our first cetacean sighting – a rather drowsy group of **Spinner Dolphins**, which bowrode very briefly but were not too keen to engage after what may have been a long night fishing.

Not too long later we stopped at Kassanfaru reef, for a snorkel. The visibility when we dropped in was stunning. There was a nice selection of corals on the shelving slope, and the usual abundance of fishes. But particular highlights here included a **Spotted Eagle Ray**, a **Blacktip Reef Shark** and a very obliging **Hawksbill Turtle**, which spent ages patiently feeding on a lump of sponge beneath us. Here we also saw the beautiful but uncommon **Blue Starfish** (*Linkia laevigata*) for the only time.

As we were clambering back onto the *dhoni*, a message came from *Hope Cruiser* that they had seen some whales nearby. Sure enough, a pod of **Pilot Whales** was charging northwards a bit further offshore. We approached in the *dhoni*, and soon had them swimming alongside. They were also bow riding on *Hope Cruiser*. The views from the *dhoni* were wonderful, but eventually we moved ahead and slipped into the water in the hope of a glimpse of the Pilots underwater. They, however, had other ideas and dived deep beneath us, out of sight. Nevertheless we did hear their wailing calls in the water, which was in itself a magical experience.

A bit later, as we continued southwards around the outside of North Malé Atoll we spotted a group of dolphins making their way along the reef. We approached and soon had magnificent views of a dozen or so **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**, in the reef shallows.

Our next sighting was a distant one of **Spinner Dolphins** in one of the reef channels we were passing. But as we approached Malé things got a lot more interesting. First some distant splashing attracted us to another large group of **Spinner Dolphins**. As we left them we spotted some more splashing. This was a group of **Pilot Whales**, with yet more **Spinner Dolphins** in attendance, some of them bow-riding on the Pilots! A wonderful finale to a wonderful trip.

Not long afterwards we were secure in our anchorage near the airport, with time to pack before dinner. Then farewells and all too soon it was time to disembark.



Pilot Whale with Spinner Dolphins

CETACEAN SUMMARY

Over our twelve days we recorded a splendid total of over 2100 individual cetaceans of 9 different species, from 80 sightings (which made 84 records since some species were seen together on three occasions):

Species	Scientific Name	No. Sightings	Est. no. Individuals
Spinner Dolphins	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	39	1650
Spotted Dolphins	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>	1	60
Striped Dolphins	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	5	150
Risso's Dolphins	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	5	42
Common Bottlenose Dolphins	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	1	20
Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>	13	80
Rough-toothed Dolphins	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>	1	25
Shortfin Pilot Whales	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	3	39
Dwarf Sperm Whale	<i>Kogia sima</i>	8	14
Unidentified dolphins		7	35
Unidentified cetaceans		1	2
		84	2117

BIRDS

1	Tropical Shearwater	<i>Puffinus bailloni</i>
2	Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus pacificus</i>
3	Flesh-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus carneipes</i>
4	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>
5	Wilson's Storm-petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
7	Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>
8	Maldivian Little Heron	<i>Butorides striatus didii</i>
9	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus coromandus</i>
10	White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>
11	Lesser Frigatebird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>
12	Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>
13	Great Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bergii</i>
14	Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>
15	Sooty Tern	<i>Sterna fuscata</i>
16	Bridled Tern	<i>Sterna anaethetus</i>
17	Brown Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>
18	Lesser Noddy	<i>Anous tenuirostris</i>
19	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
20	Asian Koel	<i>Eudynamys scolopacea</i>
21	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens maledivicus</i>

Twenty-one species of birds is a reasonable total for the Maldives in April. It was good to see such large numbers of both Brown and Lesser Noddies, as well as all the other terns. And the steady stream of (mainly) Flesh-footed Shearwaters heading NW across the Indian Ocean, from their breeding islands off SW Australia to their non-breeding grounds off Arabia, was also a delight. Our sightings of Wilson's Storm-petrel and Bulwer's Petrel were particularly noteworthy. But bird of the trip must be the gorgeous White-tailed Tropicbird.



Coral reef



MV Hope Cruiser

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