

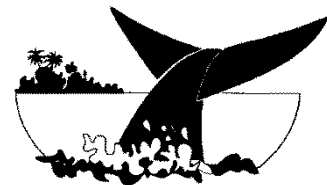
WHALE & DOLPHIN WATCHING TRIP REPORT



Killer Whales off Thaa Atoll

MALDIVES EXPLORER CENTRAL ATOLLS CRUISE 6 to 17 November 2016

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TROPICAL DOLPHINS AND WHALES

MALDIVES EXPLORER

M.V. *Hope Cruiser*, 6 to 17 Nov 2016

A memorable trip, with excellent weather, cetacean sightings and snorkelling. The island scenery as we made our way south to Thaa Atoll was delightful, and we had many days of flat calm seas, making cetacean-spotting a joy. Among our many sightings were hundreds of Spinner, Spotted and Bottlenose Dolphins, as well as 12 sightings of the normally elusive Dwarf Sperm Whale. Eight other cetacean species were spotted (for a total of 12 species from 78 encounters), including Pilot Whale, Sperm Whale, Cuvier's Beaked Whale, and a most impressive pod of Killer Whales. We snorkelled on many wonderful reefs, enjoying superb corals and reef fishes, as well as good numbers of turtles and rays. Particular snorkelling highlights included a night dip with a Whale Shark, and a most memorable evening excursion with dozens of chunky Nurse Sharks.

Day 1, Sunday 6 Nov 2016

Once we were all on board MV *Dive Master* there was an orientation and safety briefing, before very late lunch, followed by fuelling. After that we were expecting to set off, but there was a problem with the starter battery and a delay as we waited for a new one. This allowed plenty of time for looking out over the lagoon, where there was a surprising diversity of life on show, including a couple of **Green Turtles** that kept popping to the surface, a busy school of **Indian Mackerel** feeding at the surface, and a selection of birds including **Maldivian Little Heron**, **Maldivian House Crow** and **Great Crested Tern**. Before we knew it the remainder of the afternoon had slipped by, and it was time for complimentary sunset drinks.

Day 2, Monday 7 November

The day dawned much brighter than yesterday, ideal for our morning snorkel, on the reef of Kurumba Island. It was calm, and under the morning light the reef fishes looked magnificent. Among the highlights: **Blacktip Reef Sharks** (up to three seen by some), numerous **Maldivian Anemonefishes**, enormous

schools of blue **Fusiliers**, **Unicornfishes**, and a **Hawksbill Turtle**.



Powder-blue Surgeonfish

Back on board, breakfast was soon ready, and then we were off. We motored around the north end of Hulumalé Island, and out into the Indian Ocean. Here we were on the sheltered side of the atoll, so we had calm conditions, and were expecting some quick cetacean sightings. We did have several likely splashes, but nothing more definite than that, until after lunch when some more splashing, this time with obviously leaping animals, drew us to a wonderful school of **Spotted Dolphins**. There were perhaps 150 in all, including several mothers with small calves, all heading resolutely south-westwards. We turned to travel with them, several rushing in to ride on

our bows. One particular individual, with a distinctively truncated dorsal fin rode alongside for ages. When we joined the Spotted Dolphins there was a single **Great Crested Tern** chirruping overhead, but within minutes six more had appeared, as if from nowhere, searching for fish ahead of the dolphins.

Eventually leaving the Spotted Dolphins we turned back on course, along the outside of Vaavu Atoll. There were dozens of **Lesser Noddies**, and some more splashing, but no definite cetaceans.

As we approached Keyodhoo Island it was time for our afternoon snorkel. We jumped onto the *dhoni* and headed across to Keyodhoo Reef. The corals here were reasonable, the reef fishes as diverse as anywhere, but what really made this site stand out were the millions of **Silver Sprats**, in great swirling masses that carpeted vast swathes of the reef. It was a quite astonishing spectacle. Especially when **Little Tunas** (aka Kawakawa) starting charging through, feasting on the masses.

By the time we finished our snorkel, the light was fading, especially as a storm front was approaching. *Dive Master* had anchored some way away, and the (surprisingly cold) rain caught us just before we got back. More welcome, the front also brought a large Yellow-underwing moth on board.

Evening slide show: Commoner Dolphins

Day 3, Tues 8 November

Our morning snorkel on the nearby reef was a delight. The reef front dropped steeply away, with numerous overhangs and small caves, offering plenty to see for those who could dive down that far. For the rest, the top of the reef was wonderful, with plenty of massive corals, numerous species of reef fish (a **Giant Moray** being a highlight for some) and once again

millions of **Silver Sprats**, at times being attacked by **Bluefin Jacks** and **Little Tunas** But the biggest of all were three **Whitetip Reef Sharks** and a **Guitar Shark**.

Back on board, the main anchor was firmly stuck and would not come up. The *dhoni* set off for the nearby islands, and we contented ourselves with watching a passing pod of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**, regularly surfacing **Green Turtles**, and a **Mobula Ray** which jumped twice. The *dhoni* soon returned with five young Maldivian divers on board. As soon as the *dhoni* was alongside they launched themselves into the sea and disappeared down the anchor chain. After just a few minutes of billowing bubbles, they reappeared at the surface, all smiles, job done.

We were soon off, across the mirror calm atoll lagoon. There were some **Noddies** flying by, and also a sighting of what was most likely an **Amur Falcon**, heading WSW on its long trek across the Arabian Sea to its wintering grounds in southern Africa.

In such calm conditions it did not take long for our first sighting: a much larger group of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**, perhaps 20-strong. They were rather spread out, but within subgroups of 6 or so there was some clearly frisky behaviour going on. And they also allowed us to approach unusually close, for some excellent views.

We were finally drawn away from the Bottlenose by two distant **Sailfish**. We could see them at the surface, sails fully raised, apparently herding smaller fishes. But as we drew close they disappeared, not to be seen again.

However, once again it did not take us long to find more cetaceans, this time **Spinner Dolphins**. We first spotted a small group, which were definitely not interested in us, but a bit further away was a second, much larger group of **Spinner Dolphins**, and these ones

seemed keen to interact. Groups were lining up ahead of us to ride on our bows as we approached, even at slow speed. And all around there was jumping, spinning, and much frisky behaviour.

Eventually leaving the Spinners, we headed out into the deep Watteru Channel. The calm conditions prevailed, even offshore. This was **Dwarf Sperm Whale** weather, and sure enough one soon popped up. We slowed to a halt, and watched it for many minutes as it lay at the surface (like the classic upside-down surf board), rolled slightly and disappeared, before resurfacing to breathe a bit more. Not quite a Humpback Whale breaching, but perhaps a more precious sighting!

A bit later we had a sighting of a large **Manta Ray** at the surface. And as we approached Meemu Atoll, there were **Spinner Dolphins** pouring out of the channel heading offshore for their night of feeding.

We were soon anchored off Raiymandhoo Island, and into the *dhoni* for our evening snorkel. This was on a broad, sandy reef, with plenty of live massive corals, wonderful reef fishes, the usual accompaniment of **Silver Sprats**, and a couple of **Whitetip Reef Sharks**. Plus plenty of tiny stingless jelly plankton, in drifts just under the surface.

Evening talk: Blackfish (and off the stern deck after dinner, a large **Stingray** being laboriously hauled up, and cut loose)

Day 4, Wed 9 November

What a fantastic day! We set off early, with flat calm seas, expecting to have a snorkel in the mid-morning. Inside the atoll we had a brief sighting of four **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**. Once outside the atoll we could see some local tuna fishing boats offshore, so we headed out to see what they were up to. They were fishing for **Skipjack Tuna**, using the

traditional pole and line technique. The boats that got in the best position on the school were pulling in tunas by the dozen.

Curiosity satisfied we turned back towards the atoll. But we were soon distracted by some distant splashing. Heading in that direction we passed a couple of small cetaceans which were probably **Dwarf Sperm Whales**. But getting closer to the source of the splashing, we could see that it was caused by high-leaping **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**, which were travelling in company with **Pilot Whales**. We soon had the Pilots riding alongside, but at this point we noticed another, much larger animal in the middle distance: a **Sperm Whale**. It was a solitary animal, and very large (perhaps 15m or more in length), so presumably a mature male. We turned towards it immediately, and were close when it slowly lifted its flukes high into the air and dived.



Pilot Whales

Back with the Pilot Whales, we positioned our boat so that she was running alongside. Travelling at the same speed, and in the same direction as the Pilots, they were happy to ride alongside, giving some fabulous views. Meanwhile the Bottlenose Dolphins were splashing about nearby, and some appeared to be short-snouted (well spotted Cait!). It took some time to get another good view, but sure enough there were some smaller, short-snouted, small-dorsal-finned animals in amongst the Bottlenose: **Fraser's Dolphins!** We spent over an hour and a half with this group, so it was past midday when we finally left, all chance of a morning snorkel gone! So

we decided to press directly on towards Thaa Atoll. And a good thing we did, for there was plenty more to see, with two more **Dwarf Sperm Whales**, then a frenetic school of **Striped Dolphins**, followed by a large school of **Spotted Dolphins** all in quick succession. Which brought us to the channel into Thaa Atoll. On the inside large splashes drew our attention to some **Spinner Dolphin**, our ninth cetacean species for the day!



Fraser's Dolphins

But there was much more to come. We were soon anchored near Kalhufahalfushi, at four miles in length, the longest island in the Maldives. We headed in for our evening snorkel. The water was rather murky and the reef was not the best, but it was refreshing to be in the sea, there were some nice large corals, a good selection of reef fishes, and a couple of **Hawksbill Turtles**.

Back on board, we were just finishing dinner when a cry went up from the stern platform: '**Whale Shark!**' as one rose right up from the depths, to take a mouthful of plankton that had been attracted by our stern light. We all watched entranced for a full hour, as it slowly came around and around, feeding on the aggregated plankton and small fish. Then there was time for those who wanted to don mask and snorkel and slip quietly into the water for a close underwater view. Wow!

The Whale Shark hung around for 2½ hours, and it was getting late, so most people drifted

off to bed. But for those who were still awake after midnight, another call brought us to the stern again. The same **Whale Shark** was back, but so too was a second slightly larger one.

Evening talk: Whales of Maldives



Whale Shark under the stern

Day 5, Thurs 10 November

Another superb day for marine wildlife, with calm seas throughout. We started early, moving *Dive Master* to a small reef well inside the atoll (passing through a large group of **Spinner Dolphins** en route). At 'Rainbow Reef' our morning snorkel was wonderful. Clear blue water, with sunlight streaming down, plenty of corals, myriad reef fishes, both **Hawksbill and Green Turtles**. But the main attraction for many was on the upstream side, which even with only a very slight current had attracted hundreds of blue **Fusiliers**, which in turn attracted the attention of several predators, including large **Groupers, Red Snappers** and a lethal **Dogtooth Tuna**, which sent the Fusiliers into a panic every time it appeared.

After breakfast we headed out into the deep Veimandhoo Channel, and almost immediately we spotted **Killer Whales**. There were eight of them cavorting together, with much splashing. As we got closer still we could see that there was one big male, with a huge dorsal fin, receiving much attention from three females.

And all were slowly moving to the southwest. So we went with them, keeping at a reasonable distance. After over an hour of this, they split into three subgroups, and sped up. Again we travelled with them, having more wonderful views and photo opportunities. At one point, six came together, and moved right up under our stern. Then two peeled off from the group and came right alongside, before swimming down to the stern and under our launch which was being towed behind. A magnificent finale to two hours of some of the best whale-watching ever for many of us.



Killer Whales

Turning offshore, we soon spotted a large group of dolphins. They were mostly **Spotted Dolphins**, perhaps 300 in all, with a much smaller number of **Spinner Dolphins** travelling with them. There were **Yellowfin Tunas** too, with several large individuals jumping at the head of the school.

Not long after leaving these Dolphins we spotted **Pilot Whales** ahead (well done Nicolas). There were ten or more heading very slowly south. We had spent some time with these pilots when a handful of **Bottlenose Dolphins** suddenly appeared on the bows.

There were more cetaceans further offshore, and we headed off in that direction. Sure enough another group of over thirty **Pilot Whales**, in line abreast. We changed speed and course to travel alongside, and it was quite clear that they were as interested in us as we were in them. Several came in to ride near the

bows, and an extraordinary number were spy-hopping to get a better view of us, including one right under the bows.



Pilot Whale spy-hopping

By now it was well past mid-afternoon, and time to head back towards the atoll. But we were almost immediately distracted by an enormous, and very well spread out, school of **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**. As we sailed through them some rushed in to bowride briefly, while all around others were breaching.

Our anchorage for the night was off Kanimeedhoo Island. And once the anchor was down we jumped into the *dhoni* for a late snorkel on the island's house reef. This had clearly been impacted by the recent coral bleaching, but there were still plenty of fish to be seen.

Evening talk: Corals and coral bleaching

Day 6, Friday 11 November

Another windless day, with wonderful sea conditions. We started with another snorkel on the reef of Kanimeedhoo Island, a bit further down from where we went in last night. The island itself had a classic palm fringed white sand beach. And now, at a different state of the tide there was clear blue water, so under the morning sunlight everything looked bright and alluring. Amongst the bigger animals spotted:

Hawksbill Turtles, Blacktip and Whitetip Reef Sharks, Napoleon Wrasse and White-spotted Eagle-rays.



Kanimeedhoo Island

Out in the ocean there was some low swell, but no wind. So it was not long before our first sighting, some cetaceans rolling at the surface in the distance. They were clearly beaked whales, and we had a good idea of where they dived, but the chances of seeing them again did not seem high. Nevertheless we waited, scanning the ocean in all directions. And 25 minutes later, they popped up barely 100m astern of us. There were six, large beaked whales, and we had wonderful views, which should have allowed identification. But they were heading directly towards us, so we could not see the profile of the head. Their size, and the colouration that we could see suggested that they were one of two species. But they dived before we could make a definitive identification. 24 minutes later they surfaced again, this time a bit further away, and facing away. They dived before we could get a clear view. So we waited again, and 20 minutes later they surfaced again, fairly close. Manoeuvring the boat at slow speed allowed us to see and photograph their goose-beaked profile before they dived again: **Cuvier's Beaked Whales**.

We waited for one more surfacing (in the meantime spotting one **Common Tern**, one **Tropical Shearwater** and one **Keyhole Glider Dragonfly**, *Tramea basilaris*), but did

not see the beaked whales again, so we eventually moved on. Next up, a nice mixed group of **Pilot Whales** and **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**. The Pilots were heading southwest in stately formation, with the Bottlenose cavorting ahead. Three **Tropical Shearwaters** were in close attendance, searching for scraps of food.

When we finally left the Pilots we still had a long way to go to our night's anchorage. As we pressed on, our only sighting was of three dark grey-brown animals logging at the surface, which we took to be Dwarf Sperm Whales. But they stayed at the surface for an inordinately long time, and allowed an unusually close approach, at which point we realised they were in fact juvenile **Risso's Dolphins**.

Not long after this we entered Thaa Atoll, and anchored adjacent to Hirilandhoo Island. The *dhoni* was waiting for us, and we still had time for a snorkel on the nearby reef, which lasted until sunset. Among the highlights: **Whitetip Reef Shark, Napoleon Wrasse**, a large **Stingray** and some delightfully good corals.

Evening talk: Beaked Whales

Day 7, Sat 12 November

Today was another day of mirror calm seas, but it started for many with a walk ashore on Hirilandoo Island. This was a chance to stretch the legs, to see something of a traditional Maldivian fishing island, and to admire the many flowering shrubs and trees. There were also a few birds, including **Asian Koel, Common Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper** and **Barn Swallow**.

Then there was a snorkel on the reef of Hirilandhoo, which proved to be very productive. Among the many reef fishes were a magnificent **Stonefish** (found by Peter), **Lionfish, Black-tailed Snapper** and a single

Checkered Snapper (only the third record of this species for the Maldives).



Stonefish, imitating a stone

Back on board *Dive Master*, breakfast was ready, and then we were off, out into the open ocean. We headed offshore to start with, but apart from a sighting of a pair of **Dwarf Sperm Whales**, there were no cetaceans. However, there were some interesting seabirds, including a possible **Tahiti Petrel**, some **Sooty Terns**, **Tropical Shearwaters** and a **White-tailed Tropicbird**, as well as several sightings of **Sailfish**.



Tropical Shearwater

Eventually we turned north, and then the sightings picked up, with half-a-dozen **Dwarf Sperm Whale** sightings, and one of **Striped Dolphins**. The dolphins charged in to bowride, giving superb views, not only as they porpoised alongside, but also as they swam beneath the boat in the clear blue oceanic water. A single **Tropical Shearwater** was busily following the dolphins, settling on the

water and sticking its head below the surface in search of titbits.

As we approached the atoll there were dozens of **swimming crabs** (*Charybdis smithii*) at the surface, cunningly masquerading as baby turtles. We anchored for the night next to the delightful tiny island of Kandufushi (home to just 18 coconut trees). A school of **Spinner Dolphins** swam by as we anchored, and then a small group of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** appeared as we set off on the *dhoni* for our evening snorkel. Kandufushi reef proved to be a delight, with plenty of nice corals and reef fishes, including on **Blacktip Reef Shark** and hundreds of **Damselfishes**.

Evening talk: Atoll formation, in the front deck, under the nearly full moon.

Day 8, Sun 13 November

Yet another flat calm day. We started with a snorkel on the reef of the idyllic island of Kandufushi. And what a delightful spot! Some went ashore in the dingy, with the possibility of a brisk walk right around the beach, or a more leisurely exploration of the vegetation and dragonflies. There were also a few birds including **Intermediate Egret**, **Maldivian Little Heron** and an LBJ, possibly an *Acrocephalus* Warbler. Others opted to snorkel directly from the *dhoni*, where amongst all the corals and fishes was an unmistakable Crown-of-thorns Starfish, in its bold black and purple Indian Ocean form.

Setting off as breakfast finished, we sailed out of the atoll past Kandufushi, the morning light showing it to its very best. Out at sea there was some low swell, but not a breath of wind. In such conditions we expected plenty of cetacean sightings. But it was not to be. Nearly 7 hours of searching produced one small and shy group of **Risso's Dolphins**, and three sightings of **Dwarf Sperm Whale**. Perhaps the Killer Whales had passed this way, scaring

everything away. But there were some nice birds, including a **White-tailed Tropicbird**, a **Pomarine Skua**, a flock of **Sooty Terns** and both **Lesser and Brown Noddies**.

With relatively few sightings we decided to cut our losses, and turned in to the atoll a bit earlier than usual, allowing more time for our evening snorkel. This started on the house reef of Vommuli Island, which until recently was uninhabited, but is now developed as a resort. Despite keeping to the edge of the reef dropoff, a boat came out from the resort and asked us to move. It was not such a good reef anyway! The reef we moved to was more exposed to the tidal current, but proved to be a much better snorkel site. There were plenty of living corals, and a wonderful diversity of fishes, including great school of **Fusiliers** and **Rainbow Runners**, being eyed up by a huge **Dogtooth Tuna**, an impressive **Giant Moray**; **Hawksbill Turtle**, and much much more besides. We finished as the sun set, returning to our boat in the orange evening glow.

Evening talk: the Maldivian seasons, on the wheel-house deck under the full-moon



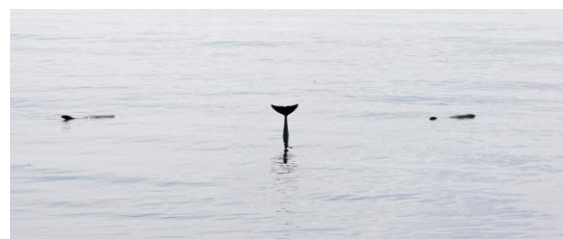
Giant Moray

Day 9, Monday 14 Nov

Another calm day, starting with a sighting of **Spinner Dolphins**, for those who were up with the sunrise at 0550. This was followed, a

little later, by a snorkel on the same reef that we had visited yesterday. Both the light and the current were from the opposite direction, so we jumped in on the opposite side. And it proved to be a delightful snorkel, with clear blue water, plenty of live corals, and superb reef fishes, including swarms of **Lined, Blue-streak and Lunar-tailed Fusiliers, Rainbow Runners** and bright orange **Fairy Basslets**. And for some lucky snorkellers there was also the distinctive sound of dolphins whistling in the distance.

Having set off, we headed north outside the atoll. The sea was calm, and even the swell had died down. There were some good bird sightings, including a **Flesh-footed Shearwater, Tropical Shearwaters** and **White-tailed Tropicbird**. But no cetaceans. So we decided to turn a bit further offshore, and almost immediately found an enormous school of **Risso's Dolphins**. They were heading very slowly northwards, but taking plenty of time for socialising, as well as breaching, head-banging and raising their flukes vertically out of the water. In amongst all the Risso's there was a handful of **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**, two of which came in to bowride (one showing two distinctive **Cookie-cutter Shark** bites). We spent over an hour with these dolphins, travelling at slow speed amongst them, admiring all their antics. Eventually it was time to move on, but only a short while later we came across another big school of **Risso's Dolphins**. We spent a short while with this group before moving on again.



Risso's Dolphins

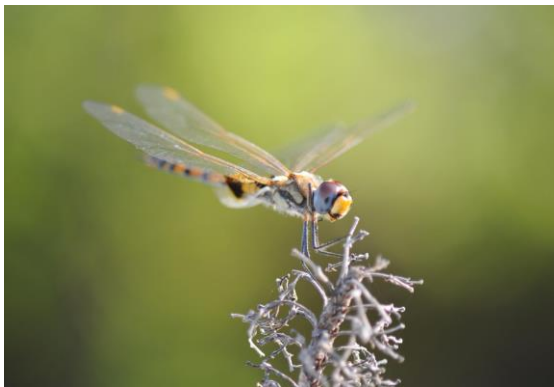
And it was not too long after that that a beaked whale surfaced just in front of us. It was

clearly a male, from the numerous white scratches covering its back. Its patterning (light chocolate brown, with a pale on the head extending well past the blowhole, and two faint but distinct dark vertical bars, also well behind the blowhole) showed that it was a **Cuvier's Beaked Whale**. It rolled several times at the surface before diving. We waited, and 29 minutes later it resurfaced, perhaps 500m away. After it dived again we waited again, but after 40 mins it had not reappeared, so we turned in towards the atoll, passing a school of **Spinner Dolphins** on the way in.

We anchored near the uninhabited island of Minimasingali, and were soon into the *dhoni* for our afternoon snorkel. The reef we chose was thronged with reef fishes, favourites including both **Blotched and Spotted Porcupinefish**, a **Whitetip Reef Shark** and four species of **Angelfish**, as well as a **Green Turtle** for some.

Evening talk: Dragonfly migrations (with one migratory **Globe Skimmer Dragonfly** turning up on cue during dinner).

www.ted.com/talks/charles_anderson_discover_s_dragonflies_that_cross_oceans



Migratory Keyhole Glider Dragonfly

Day 10, Tues 15 November

It rained in the early morning, and was still overcast and dull when we set off for the reef of Minimasingali Island. So our morning snorkel was rather sombre to start with. But then the

sun came out, and the reef was transformed. The fishlife, as ever was superb, with six **White-spotted Eagle Rays** being the main highlight, but there were also huge **Red Snappers**, plus plenty of **Sea Cucumbers**.

Back on board, as we set off **Spinner Dolphins** were spotted off to one side. But we continued on across the atoll, exiting near the fishing island of Feeali, where we were visited by a small flock of **Lesser Crested Terns**.



Snorkelling off Minimasingali

The crossing to Vaavu Atoll usually produces several dolphin sightings, but this time we had to wait until we were all the way across. Then we ran into a large school of **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**, which were travelling purposefully to the west. We turned to go with them, and had them under the bows and alongside for the best part of an hour.

When we finally left the Bottlenose we continued out into the deep Watteru Channel. There was a glimpse of what might have been a **Dwarf Sperm Whale**, and then some splashing that might have come from some

Spinner Dolphins, but that was all we saw (apart from both **Lesser and Brown Noddies**) until we turned back into Vaavu Atoll. Then we found a large and active school of **Spinner Dolphins** which were happy to cavort alongside and under our bows.



Bottlenose Dolphin

We finally anchored near the tiny island of Anbara. A falcon was flying back and forth about the island, settling occasionally on the tree tops. It later proved to be a **juvenile Amur Falcon**, on its epic migration from NE Asia to Southern Africa.

Our evening snorkel was on the reef of Anbara, which possibly had more live coral than we had so far seen anywhere else. The fish life was also wonderful, with more **Spotted Eagle-rays**, **Lionfish** and scores of **Damselfishes**. Not to mention both **Silver Sprats** and **Silversides** being hunted by **Bluefin Jacks**.



Red Swimming Crab

After dinner, off the stern fishing platform, two **Nurse Sharks** were pulled in (and

immediately cut loose); so fishing was suspended after that. Instead we watched **Red Swimming Crabs** swarming off the stern.

Evening talk: Cetacean interactions with Indian Ocean tuna fisheries, on the wheel-house deck.

Day 11, Wednesday 16 November

Another grey, overcast morning. The rain started as we jumped in on Anbara reef for our morning snorkel. Which made for a novel, and surprisingly soothing, experience. We missed the bright sunlight, but the corals were still thriving, the reef fishes as magnificent as ever, and the two **White-spotted Eagle-rays** which visited were a real treat.

Dive Master set off as we were finishing breakfast, finding a large school of **Spinner Dolphins**. We turned and spent some time with them, as they made their way in to the atoll. The sun was out by now, and the reef was a gorgeous turquoise as we finally left the atoll. Once out in deep water it was not long before we had a good sighting of two **Dwarf Sperm Whales**. Followed almost immediately by two **Manta Rays**, flapping at the surface. But then things quietened down, and apart from a selection of seabirds (**Brown Noddy**, **Lesser Noddy**, **Common Tern**, **Saunders's Tern**), we did not see anything for most of the time we were working our way around the outside of the atoll. However, as we on our way back towards the reef we spotted some glistening ahead: two beaked whales at the surface. They dived before we could see what they were, but we waited near the spot where they dived. And 35 minutes later they reappeared. They were some way off, but close enough that we could approach before they disappeared again. This allowed us to get a good view of their heads, and see that they were again **Cuvier's Beaked Whales**. We waited for one more surfacing (32 minutes)

and although we did see them again they were a bit further away and against the light.

It was now time to anchor, and we headed in towards the nearby resort island of Alimatha. We chose this spot for its snorkelling potential. The *dhoni* was soon alongside, and we set off for the resort house reef. After a thorough briefing we jumped in and drifted down towards the jetty. Those who went over the deeper water could see a group of divers far below, surrounded by impressively large **Nurse Sharks**, perhaps 10 to start with, but numbers swelling to 20 before too long. Meanwhile at the jetty there were **more Nurse Sharks** plus chunky **Blacktip Reef Sharks** and a single **Black-blotched Stingray** in the shallows. The Nurse Sharks were particularly impressive, with a few individuals up to about 8' long. Wow! We all returned to the *dhoni* as the sunset, fizzing with excitement. And this was not the end of our shark encounters, as six turned up around the stern of our anchored boat during the course of the evening.

Evening talk: Bryde's Whales and Indonesia



Nurse Shark

Day 12, Thursday 17 November

Our final day started with calm seas and a glorious sunrise. Then the anchor was up (**Spinner Dolphins** appearing briefly alongside as we left) and we moved up to Fulidhoo Island. Here we visited the outer reef, which provided us with a wonderful final

snorkel. In the shallows, which were calm today but are subject to strong swells in the rough season, there were fishes specialising in this habitat, which we had not seen before: **Surge Damselfish**, **Surge Wrasse** and **Surge Hawkfish**. In intermediate depths were surprising numbers of young massive corals. While off the drop-off were great schools of **Red-tooth Triggerfish** and **Black-pyramid Butterflyfish**, large gnarly **Hawksbill Turtles**, **Eagle Rays**, and clouds of bright iridescent blue and burnished copper ***Sapphirina* copepods**.

As we finished our snorkel, clouds were gathering and the wind and rain started just as we got back onto *Dive Master*. The rain soon passed, we got underway, and it was not long before we spotted a large group of **Pilot Whales** and **Bottlenose Dolphins** heading towards us. We turned to go with them, and enjoyed some marvellous views of the Bottlenose bowriding, and the Pilots swimming alongside and astern. However, they were clearly on a mission and so we eventually left them and turned back on course.

Next up a large group of **Spinner Dolphins**, which were heading roughly in our direction, so they seem happy to bowride and spin alongside. By now the wind was starting to pick up, which made spotting cetaceans rather difficult. We did have a couple of glimpses of jumping animals, but that was that. We entered North Malé Atoll next to heavily built-up Malé island itself. The many buildings, and many boats, seemed jarring after being out in the sticks for so long. We were soon anchored in Hulumalé lagoon, and the first people disembarked to the airport for resort transfers. For the rest of us there was time for packing, farewells, and transfers to the airport after dinner.

CETACEAN SUMMARY

During our cruise we recorded a very respectable total of 12 different species, from 70 sightings (which made 78 records since two or more species were seen together on several occasions):

Species	Scientific Name	No. Sightings	Est. no. Individuals
Spinner Dolphins	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	21	1285
Spotted Dolphins	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>	3	570
Striped Dolphins	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	2	42
Risso's Dolphins	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	4	289
Common Bottlenose Dolphins	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	8	349
Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>	7	41
Fraser's Dolphin	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>	1	12
Shortfin Pilot Whales	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	5	104
Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	1	8
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	1	1
Dwarf Sperm Whale	<i>Kogia sima</i>	12	19
Cuvier's Beaked Whale	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>	3	9
Unidentified dolphins	Delphinidae	4	15
Unidentified cetaceans		6	9
		78	2753



Exuberant Striped Dolphins

BIRDS

Maldives does not have a great abundance of birds, so anything more than 20 species for a trip is a good result. We spotted slightly more:

1	Tropical Shearwater	<i>Puffinus bailloni</i>
2	Flesh-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus carneipes</i>
3	Probable Tahiti Petrel	<i>Pseudobulweria rostrata</i>

4	Possible Black-bellied Storm-petrel	<i>Fregatta tropica</i>
5	White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
7	Maldivian Little Heron	<i>Butorides striata didii</i>
8	Intermediate Egret	<i>Mesophoyx intermedia</i>
9	Amur Falcon	<i>Falco amurensis</i>
10	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucas</i>
11	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>
12	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>
13	Saunders's Tern	<i>Sterna saundersi</i>
14	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
15	Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>
16	Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>
17	Great Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bergii</i>
18	Brown Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>
19	Lesser Noddy	<i>Anous tenuirostris</i>
20	Sooty Tern	<i>Onychoprion fuscatus</i>
21	Asian Koel	<i>Eudynamys scolopacea</i>
22	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
23	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens maledivicus</i>

To this may be added the sighting of a warbler, possibly *Acrocephalus* sp., seen on the uninhabited island of Kandufushi, and one Petrel which was either Jouanin's or Bulwer's.

ANCHORAGES

Day 1	6 Nov 2016	Hulumalé	(North Malé Atoll)
Day 2	7 Nov 2016	Keyodhoo	(Vaavu Atoll)
Day 3	8 Nov 2016	Raiymandhoo	(Meemu Atoll)
Day 4	9 Nov 2016	Kalufahalafushi	(Thaa Atoll)
Day 5	10 Nov 2016	Kanimeedhoo	(Thaa Atoll)
Day 6	11 Nov 2016	Hirilandhoo	(Thaa Atoll)
Day 7	12 Nov 2016	Kandufushi	(Thaa Atoll)
Day 8	13 Nov 2016	Maadheli	(Dhaalu Atoll)
Day 9	14 Nov 2016	Minimasgali	(Faafu Atoll)
Day 10	15 Nov 2016	Anbara	(Vaavu Atoll)
Day 11	16 Nov 2016	Alimatha	(Vaavu Atoll)
Day 12	17 Nov 2016	Hulumalé	(North Malé Atoll)

CONTACT DETAILS

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