WHALE & DOLPHIN WATCHING TRIP REPORT



WhaleShark

MALDIVES EXPLORER

11-23 November 2014

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TROPICAL DOLPHINS AND WHALES MALDIVES EXPLORER M.V. Hope Cruiser, 11-23 November 2014

Summary

A wonderful wildlife cruise to Thaa Atoll in the central-south Maldives. We enjoyed calm sunny conditions, idyllic island scenery, and a plethora of cetacean sightings. In all we recorded over 3500 individual whales and dolphins of 10 different species, with particularly large numbers of Spinner, Bottlenose and Risso's Dolphins. We also recorded a nice selection of birds, including nationally rare Bulwer's Petrel, Ferruginous Pochard, Crab Plover, Brahminy Kite and Red-throated Pipit. The corals in the southern atolls are extraordinarily luxuriant, and as a result the snorkelling was truly superb. The reef fishes were always excellent, with astonishing colours, numbers and diversity on every snorkel. And there were bigger creatures too, with four species of shark (incldung Whale Shark), five species of ray (including Manta Ray), plus two species of turtle. And all the while, the crew of MV *Hope Cruiser* looked after us diligently, and fed us indulgently.

Day 1, Tuesday 11 November 2014

We all met at the airport, and were soon on the dhoni heading for the safari boat anchorage and Hope Cruiser. Following welcomes 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 south past the airport and Malé, and on towards South Malé Atoll. First sighting was of two fins, which promptly disappeared. But a bit later we had an excellent encounter with Spinner Dolphins, which span and bowrode. And as we came in towards our anchorage we could see some action ahead, which proved on closer approach to be Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins - noticeably chunkier than the Spinners.

In addition to the dolphins, we also had some good Tern sightings today. As we left our anchorage there were both **Black-naped** and **Whiskered Terns**. Out at sea there were **Great Crested** and **Lesser Crested Terns** as well as **Brown Noddies**. We anchored in the sheltered lagoon of Rihiveli Island, just in time for a snorkel on the nearby reef as the sun set. Nice corals and fishes, plus two **octopuses**. Back on board there was time for a shower and a cold drink, before the delicious dinner prepared by our Sri Lankan chef.

Day 2, Wednesday 12 November

After early teas and coffees we piled onto the *dhoni* for our snorkel, on the nearby reef. In the bright morning light, the coral growths and reef fishes looked gorgeous. Among the highlights: a large gang of **Ringtail** and **Powder-blue Surgeonfishes** raiding Damsel-fishes' algal gardens.

After breakfast we set off, into the ocean, south and eastwards. There were no cetacean sightings until we entered Vaavu Atoll, when we found a small group of **Spinner Dolphins**. But we were here for something else – **Mantas**! There were two at the surface in the channel, and we were soon in the water too. But they moved off, and all we saw was a

single Whitetip Reef Shark. So it was back onto the *dhoni* to try again. We moved down to the next reef channel, near Alimatha tourist island, where we had a lot more luck. There were another two Mantas here, and when we jumped in we all got to see at least one of them, with some also spotting a smaller Mobula Ray.



Manta Ray

There were also dozens of birds around: both **Brown** and **Lesser Noddies**, as well as **Lesser Crested**, **Great Crested**, **Saunder's** and **Black-naped Terns**, all feeding on Silver Sprats over the reef.

It was now lunch, after which we moved further offshore. And here we found a group of Pilot Whales, accompanied by an active school of Bottlenose Dolphins. We spent a lot of time watching the Pilots, but they were also curious about us, spy-hopping many times (and up to three at the same time) to get a better view. Meanwhile the dolphins zipped in and out, apparently trying to get our attention. Coming into our evening's anchorage near Fotheyo, we could see Spinner Dolphins jumping in the distance. As we headed over towards them in the *dhoni*, we were treated to a fabulous display of spinning and bowriding. They were heading out to sea for their night's feeding, while we stayed by the reef for our sunset snorkel. A large Spotted Eagle Ray was the highlight for some, while others enjoyed the fishlife and the emerging nocturnal creatures, including Featherstars and Lionfish.



Pilot Whale spy-hopping

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

Day 3, Thursday 13 November

What a fabulous day! It was flat calm when we woke, and stayed calm all day making for marvellous viewing conditions. Those who were up earliest not only spotted Spinner **Dolphins** swimming into the atoll, but also a Brown Booby. The rest of us started with a snorkel in the channel. With a slight in-current bringing clear oceanic water, and the bright morning sunlight, this was a snorkel to relish. In addition to the corals and general reef fishes, the big attraction were the Spinner Dolphins, which appeared towards the end of our time in the water. We could hear their whistles, and on looking up could see them swimming into the channel. Several of us swam out into the deep water and were rewarded with the beautiful sight of dolphins swimming by beneath us.



Spinner Dolphins

Travelling out into the ocean it was just minutes before our first sighting – a pair of Beaked Whales. We waited, and they surfaced right alongside, so close indeed that we heard them before we saw them. With their distinctively sloping foreheads, they were a couple of juvenile **Cuvier's Beaked Whales**. We stayed for another surfacing, and were rewarded by another close sighting. Just as we were leaving, more Cuvier's Beaked Whales, adults this time, were spotted further off.

Off the corner of Fotheyo reef some splashing revealed a small group of **Spinner Dolphins**. We had just a quick look before continuing on southwards. And more sightings followed: a whole run of **Dwarf Sperm Whales** (perhaps nine in all), then three more **Cuvier's Beaked Whales** (including a large male with a glaringly white body), and yet more **Spinners**. A bit later, as we were crossing between Vaavu and Meemu Atolls, we had a wonderful encounter with **Striped Dolphins**; leaping and bowriding, these most attractive of dolphins were bursting with energy.

Approaching Meemu Atoll we could see a large group of **Spinner Dolphins** making their way out for their night's feeding. A much more unexpected sighting as we entered that Atoll was a duck which flew past. We saw it again as we anchored, and it turned out to be a **Ferruginous Pochard**, only the third record for the Maldives. A late snorkel followed on a nearby reef. There were nice corals and fish again, as well as a sizeable **Whitetip Reef Shark**, while in the gathering gloom sea cucumbers were spawning and featherstars and lionfishes were starting to appear.

Evening slide show: Striped Dolphins, Spotted Dolphins and Fraser's Dolphins

Day 4, Friday 14 November

Another wonderfully calm day. We started with our morning snorkel on a nearby reef. On first jumping in it seemed a bit lifeless, but that soon proved to be wrong. Along the edge the reef we found an astonishing variety of fishes, while further in was a luxurious coral garden. And among the bigger inhabitants were a couple of **Spotted Eagle Rays** and one **Porcupine Stingray**.



Porcupine Stingray

Outside the atoll the sea was flat calm, and we were full of anticipation for numerous cetacean sightings. But although we had leaping yellowfin tuna, plenty of flying fish, a couple of turtles, a **Wedge-tailed Shearwater** and a **Tropical Shearwater** among numerous **Noddies**, there were no cetacean all morning. But at noon that all changed. We had a rush of **Dwarf Sperm Whales**, a couple of groups of **Spinner Dolphins**, more **Dwarf Sperm Whales**, some **Striped Dolphins**, and another group of **Spinners**. So by the time we anchored in Meemu Atoll, we had actually had a very productive time indeed.

And there was still time for a snorkel on the nearby reef. The water was green, but the corals and fishlife were again entrancing. As dusk gathered, both featherstars and lionfish started to appear. While along the reef a veritable orgy of fish spawning was taking place, with Goatfishes, Surgeonfishes, Whitespotted Boxfishes and Double-saddled Butterflyfishes all busy

Evening talk: Blackfish



Yellowfin Tuna

Day 5, Saturday 15 November

Another superb day! With a long crossing ahead of us, we departed early this morning. As we left the atoll there were Spinner **Dolphins** heading in, but we tarried only briefly. After about an hour heading south we stopped for our morning snorkel. This was on the outer reef, and exposed to the full force of the open ocean. Even on a calm day like today, the surge in the shallows was impressively powerful. The scoured reef below was testament to the power of the sea during rougher weather. Key attractions here were the specialist outer reef fishes: Surge Damsel, Hawkfish and Wrasse as well as Wedge-tailed Picasso Triggerfish. This snorkel was also memorable for **Blacktip Reef Sharks**, Hawksbill Turtles and the millions of tiny fish larvae swarming over the reef.

Next cetacean sighting: **Pygmy Killer Whales**! There were five of these rare blackfish, and although they were rather shy we managed to get good views and some reasonable photos. That really got us fired up, and we were all eagerly looking for other cetaceans. Some fins caught our attention, but proved difficult to track down. When we finally caught up with them, they were three **Bottlenose Dolphins**. Not too exciting, but in following them we had noticed some dramatic splashing way off in the distance. This turned out to be an enormous mixed school of **Bottlenose Dolphins** and **Fraser's Dolphins**, several hundred strong.



Fraser's Dolphins bow-riding

We spent nearly an hour with these animals, as they bowrode and leapt all around us. Finally we turned back on course, skirting around the outside of Thaa Atoll. As we approached the reef channel, hundreds of **Spinner Dolphins** were pouring out into the ocean. An amazing end to the day ... apart from a final glimpse of **Indo-pacific Bottlense Dolphins** as we came in to our anchorage.

The cetaceans had been wonderful today, but the seabirds were good too. Highlights included **Bulwer's Petrel** and two **Tropical Shearwaters**. There were also several **Globe Skimmer Dragonflies** (*Pantala flavescens*) spotted around the boat at various times, and one **Bee Hawkmoth** (*Cephonodes picus*) at dinner time.

Evening talk: Maldivian seasons, on the top deck, by moonlight.



Bee Hawkmoth

Day 6, Sunday 16 November

Today was not our best day for cetaceans. But we more than made up for that in several other ways. The snorkelling, at both the start and the end of the day was superb. Our morning snorkel, on a small patch reef well inside the atoll, was stunning. The whole reef was carpeted with luxuriant coral growths, better than any we had seen so far. There were Blacktip and Whitetip Reef Sharks, a giant Stingray, and plenty of other fishes. But the most memorable sighting for some were the Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins which had been feeding nearby when we arrived, and zipped past when we got in. Those who chose to go ashore to the local island of Madifushi also had a memorable time. In addition to seeing something of local island life, some birds were spotted including a Red-throated Pipit.

We had seen some **Spinner Dolphins** on the way back from our snorkel, but once we got out to sea we were not so lucky. There were several seabirds, and we were also visited by several **Globe Skimmer Dragonflies**, quite unconcerned with being miles offshore. But it was not until we returned to Thaa Atoll that we started seeing cetaceans again. First, a single dolphin, which we could not track down. Then, right on cue, **hundreds of Spinner Dolphins**, bursting out into the ocean.



Spinner Dolphin

We had to leave them and head in, towards a reef for our evening snorkel. Once again the

corals were superb, so much so that it made looking at anything else difficult. Finally back on the *dhoni* we returned with the sun setting behind us to the *Hope Cruiser*, anchored off Kalhufahalafushi, the longest island in the entire Maldives.

Evening slide show: Whales of Maldives.

Day 7, Monday 17 November

An early-ish start as we moved *Hope Cruiser* from our anchorage, to our snorkelling spot about 4 miles away. There was a rainbow over the reef as we approached, which we took as a good omen, and we did indeed have a superb snorkel. The corals were again superb, and the fish life was magical. There were **Whitetip Reef Sharks** again, but a first for this trip was a frisky young **Grey Reef Shark**.

We sailed slowly southwards during breakfast, so that by the time we were finished we were passing out into the deepwater Veimandhoo Channel. To start with things were very slow indeed, but as we reached the western side of Thaa Atoll things warmed up considerably. A glimpse of a single fin led us to a small group of Risso's Dolphins, which proved to be the first of a whole cavalcade of cetaceans. Soon afterwards we found some Pilot Whales (which rode alongside) with **Bottlenose** Dolphins, then more Risso's, which the Bottlenose appeared to be seeing off. Then more **Pilots** (or perhaps some of the same ones again as they were moving along the atoll slope fairly swiftly). They were followed by a single Dwarf Sperm Whale, which allowed a remarkably close approach.



Dwarf Sperm Whale

After which there were two more lots of **Risso's Dolphins** (several breaching and raising their flukes) and two schools of **Spinner Dolphins**.

It was a fabulous afternoon, and it took us right up to the reef channel leading to our anchorage at Hirilandhoo island. Here we transferred to the *dhoni* for our late snorkel on the nearby reef. Once again there were great corals, but the main attraction was the fishlife, with Fusiliers streaming along the reef, Sweetlips in abundance, and a quite enormous Napolean Wrasse.

Evening talk: Cetaceans and tuna fisheries



Risso's Dolphin

Day 8, Tuesday 18 November

We started today with a choice of a snorkel or a visit to the local island of Hirilandhoo. Those who chose the snorkel were in for a treat – the reef we visited had the best corals we had seen so far. They were growing in such profusion that it was nearly impossible to find a gap to swim through from the drop-off onto the reef flat. This really was a magical experience.

As we headed out of the atoll after breakfast, we stopped for a group of **Spinner Dolphins** heading in after their night in the ocean. For us, conditions on the outside appeared ideal for spotting cetaceans. Our first sighting was of four **Beaked Whales**. They were some way off, but we were able to get closer before they surfaced again. We were still not close enough for a positive identification, so we waited and were lucky to spot them again when they resurfaced a long way to the south. Guessing that they would continue travelling south, we moved ahead of them in that direction, but unfortunately our cunning plan failed to pay off, and we did not see them again.

The *dhoni* had rendezvous-ed with us at this time, returning Steve in time for lunch. He had had a successful morning's fishing, landing a nice jack as they left the atoll. Back on course, our next cetacean sighting was of Risso's **Dolphins**, hanging out very close to the outer reef. One did breach, but they were not a particularly active group. By now we were getting close to our planned anchorage, so we turned in towards the idyllic islet of Kandufushi. Here there was the chance to go ashore for a (short) walk right around the island and/or a snorkel. On the island there were numerous Globe Skimmer Dragonflies and a good number of Fruit Bats (Pteropus giganteus ariel, an endemic Maldivian subspecies). For the snorkelers, the reef here was again crowded with luxuriant coral growths, although this time in patches interspersed with bright white sand, giving the reef an even more attractive appearance than the one this morning. The fishlife here was wonderful too, with highlight perhaps being a large Black-blotched Stingray.



Kandufushi Island

While we had been enjoying our snorkelling, the crew had been busy setting up a beach BBQ. Soon after darkness fell, with the stars glinting overhead, we were ferried across to the islet, which was now outlined with flaming torches. A sand-sculpted dolphin formed our dining area for a tasty and most memorable evening meal.

Later that night, back on board, those of us who were still up were entertained by a pair of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** puffing away as they fed around the anchored boat.

Day 9, Wednesday 19 November

The day started rather abruptly at 0415, with the crew banging on cabin doors. A **Whale Shark** had appeared behind the boat, and was feeding on the plankton and tiny fishes attracted by our stern light. He stayed for some time allowing wonderful views, as he circled around again and again.

A little later, some were up for an early snorkel, while others stayed in bed a bit longer for a snorkel at the normal time of 0730. For this second group there was a real treat in store: just after we jumped in the *dhoni* crew spotted a **Whale Shark**. Their shouts alerted us and we sped over to where they were pointing. And there he was, a young individual, perhaps 4.5m long, cruising slowly by. Well, slowly for him! We struggled to keep up, but several of us swam alongside him before he eventually sank slowly into deep water and out of sight. Wow!



Whale Shark

Back on the reef, with the morning light the corals and fishes were again magical. And then, to cap it all when back on the boat, there was a **Crab Plover** in plain view on the sand promontory at the end of the island.

After breakfast we headed out into the ocean, making our way around the outer reef of Thaa Atoll. There were dozens of **Risso's Dolphins**, with sighting after sighting. We saw breaches, tail-ups, white heads and grey heads. There were so many Risso's they must have displaced all the other cetaceans from the area, because we did not see another species until after returning to our anchorage at Kandufushi, when we saw some **Spinner Dolphins**.

Two elected to go ashore to photograph the **Fruit Bats** and **Crab Plover**. For the rest of us, it was now time for our evening snorkel, and we all eagerly piled into the water. It seems repetitive to keep going on about how magical this reef is ... but it is!

Evening slide show: Maldivian reef fishes



Featherstar

Day 10, Thursday 20 November

The day started early for some, with an 0630 snorkel. The rest of us joined them at 0730. Once again the corals and fishes had us agog. No fewer than three species of ray were seen this morning: **Spotted Eagle Ray**, **White-tailed Stingray** and **Fantail Stingray**. It is a measure of the quality of the snorkelling here that even those who had had two full hours in the water were reluctant to come out!

As we set off after breakfast, past the idyllic island of Kandufushi, a small school of **Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins** swam by. Out at sea we did not seen any cetaceans until we approached Dhaalu Atoll. Then we found some **Risso's Dolphins**; then some more; then still more. I counted roughly 280, spread out over several miles of ocean. Most were quietly logging, or heading slowly south, but we did see tails-up, tail-slapping and breaching.

In the midst of all the Risso's we had a birding interlude, with a **Brown Noddy** which had flown on board. It was resting and when it finally flew, it followed us closely for several mintues. Other birds around at the time included **Lesser Crested Terns** and **Tropical Shearwaters**.



Brown Noddy

The **Risso's Dolphins** continued all the way up Dhaalu Atoll, but no further. We finally headed in towards Faafu Atoll, where we anchored in the huge lagoon of Nilandhoo Island, just as the sun was setting. A night fishing excursion then left, returning later with several Red Snappers and Emperors.

Evening slide show: Dragonfly migration across the Indian Ocean

Day 11, Friday 21 November

Three elected to go ashore to Nilandhoo this morning, where they enjoyed a walk on the very pleasant island, even helping the local women with their weekly island sweeping. The rest of us set off to a ring reef inside the atoll for our morning snorkel. It was a long ride, but well worth it. The reef was superb, with thick coral growths. There was a lovely selection of reef fishes, including sparkling schools of Silver Sprats, an enormous mixed school of marauding Surgeonfishes, and a couple of Whitetip Reef Sharks.



Powder-blue Surgeonfish

Hope Cruiser picked us up directly from the reef, and then we were off, across the atoll and up the western side. We had high hopes for cetacean sightings in the good viewing conditions, but perhaps all the Risso's Dolphins had pushed everything else away. Nevertheless, we did have a nice sighting of a **Sailfish**, and off the southern end of Ari Atoll, we spotted a couple of **Turtles**.

As we made our way into the atoll, Tim spotted a distant bird of prey. It was flying over one of the islands, being mobbed by House Crows. We turned to get a nearer view, and as it landed in some large bushes we could finally see that it was a **Brahminy Kite** – only the third record for the Maldives.

It was now time to anchor, in the enormous lagoon of Dhigurah. Then off for a snorkel on the nearest reef. Once again the corals were lovely, and the fishes were delightful. As dusk gathered, Featherstars and Lionfishes started to appear. Evening talk: formation of the Maldivian atolls.

Day 12, Saturday 22 November

A full final day today, starting at 0640 with our departure from Dhigurah lagoon. Almost immediately a radio call from the *dhoni*, which had left just a few minutes earlier, alerted us to a Whale Shark nearby, although it had dived by the time we arrived. We did, however, have an intriguing view of a dark, long-winged **Falcon**, flying westwards across the sea some distance ahead. It was too far away to be able to identify, but was quite possibly a male Amur Falcon, on its epic migration from the Russian Far East to southern Africa.

The crossing to South Malé Atoll was punctuated by several sightings of **Spinner Dolphins**, mostly heading eastwards. There was also one large group of Bottlenose Dolphins, which bowrode as they too headed east. On reaching South Malé Atoll it was time for our final snorkel. The corals here were not as luxuriant as we had become used to, but the reef was still a delight, with myriad reef fishes, including an impressive Giant Moray, and the tiny endemic Maldive Triplefin. Another endemic was the Maldives Sponge Snail (*Coriocella hibyae*).

As we made our way across the atoll, we spotted a final group of **Spinner Dolphins**, and the sky got darker. A storm was brewing, and broke as we made our final approach to Malé, with torrential rain. A dramatic ending to a fantastic trip. Although it was not quite the end, as the crew laid on a splendid Maldivian buffet for our final dinner. After that there was a heartfelt 'thank you' to the crew for looking after us all so well. Then sad farewells, and transfers to the airport.



Table Coral

CETACEAN SUMMARY

Over our twelve days we recorded a fantastic total of over 3600 individual cetaceans of 10 different species, from 99 sightings (which made 103 records since some species were seen together on four occasions):

Species	Scientific Name	No. Sightings	Est. no. Individuals
Spinner Dolphins	Stenella longirostris	31	2364
Striped Dolphins	Stenella coeruleoalba	3	78
Risso's Dolphins	Grampus griseus	25	425
Common Bottlenose Dolphins	Tursiops truncatus	6	510
Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins	Tursiops aduncus	7	35
Fraser's Dolphins	Lagenodelphis hosei	1	120
Shortfin Pilot Whales	Globicephala macrorhynchus	2	25
Pygmy Killer Whale	Feresa attenuata	1	5
Dwarf Sperm Whale	Kogia sima	12	28
Cuvier's Beaked Whale	Ziphius cavirostris	3	7
Unidentified Beaked Whale		2	8
Unidentified dolphins		4	29
Unidentified cetaceans		6	8
		103	3642

BIRDS

There were also some interesting captive birds seen on some of the islands, including a probable Heuglin's Gull on Hirilandhoo and an Intermediate Egret on Nilandhoo.

1	Ferruginous Pochard	Aythya nyroca
2	Tropical Shearwater	Puffinus bailloni
3	Wedge-tailed Shearwater	Puffinus pacificus
4	Bulwer's Petrel	Bulweria bulwerii
5	Unidentified Storm-petrel	
6	Brahminy Kite	Haliastur indus
7	Unidentified Falcon	
8	Brown Booby	Sula leucogaster
9	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea
10	Maldivian Little Heron	Butorides striatus didii
11	Crab Plover	Dromas ardeola
12	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucas
13	Black-naped Tern	Sterna sumatrana
14	Lesser Crested Tern	Sterna bengalensis
15	Great Crested Tern	Sterna bergii
16	Saunders Tern	Sterna saundersi

Sooty Tern
Whiskered Tern
Brown Noddy
Lesser Noddy
Asian Koel (heard)
House Crow
Red-throated Pipit

Sterna fuscata Chlidonias hybridus Anous stolidus Anous tenuirostris Eudynamys scolopacea Corvus splendens maledivicus Anthus cervinus

ANCHORAGES

Day	1	11 Nov 2014	Rihiveli	(South Malé Atoll)
Day	2	12 Nov 2014	Fotheyo	(Vaavu Atoll)
Day	3	13 Nov 2014	Dhiggaru	(Meemu Atoll)
Day	4	14 Nov 2014	Naalaafushi	(Meemu Atoll)
Day	5	15 Nov 2014	Madifushi	(Thaa Atoll)
Day	6	16 Nov 2014	Kalhufahalafushi	(Thaa Atoll)
Day	7	17 Nov 2014	Hirilandhoo	(Thaa Atoll)
Day	8	18 Nov 2014	Kandufushi	(Thaa Atoll)
Day	9	19 Nov 2014	Kandufushi	(Thaa Atoll)
Day	10	20 Nov 2014	Nilandhoo	(Faafu Atoll)
Day	11	21 Nov 2014	Dhigurah	(Ari Atoll)
Day	12	22 Nov 2014	Hulumalé	(Malé Atoll)

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