

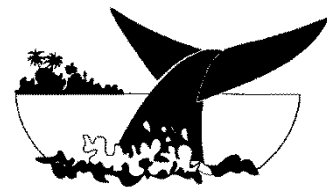
WHALE & DOLPHIN TRIP REPORT



Blue Whale

MALDIVES CENTRAL ATOLLS CRUISE 7-14 April 2019

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TROPICAL WHALES AND DOLPHINS

MALDIVES CENTRAL ATOLLS

M.V. *Keana*, 7-14 April 2019

Our week-long wildlife cruise took us around the north-central atolls of the Maldives. Calm seas throughout provided an ideal stage for some quite stupendous cetacean sightings. Highlights included thousands of Spinner Dolphins; large numbers of other dolphins including Common Bottlenose, Indo-pacific Bottlenose, Spotted, Striped, Fraser's and Risso's; Pilot Whales, Killer Whales and Dwarf Sperm Whales; both Cuvier's and Deraniyagala's Beaked Whales; and a magnificent Blue Whale. The snorkelling was superb, with many wonderful coral reefs, a surfeit of colourful reef fishes, several sharks and a spectacular Manta Ray encounter. All from the safety and comfort of MV *Keana* and her attentive crew.

Day 1, Sunday 7 April 2019

We met at the International Airport, and were soon transferred to our home for the next week, MV *Keana*. Once we were all on board there was an orientation and safety briefing before everyone was shown to their cabins. Then just before lunch we were off, heading north, in deep water outside the eastern side of North Malé Atoll. By Thulusdhoo Island we cut into the atoll, and crossed over towards the western side. On the way a small pod of four **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** was spotted. Unusually for this species, they approached our boat and bowrode, giving everyone excellent views.

As we approach our anchorage near Makunudhoo Island, everyone got themselves organised for our first snorkel. And it was a good one, on the island's house reef. The corals were excellent, with plenty of large **Porites** bommies, as well as two sharks (**Whitetip Reef Shark** and **Nurse Shark**) plenty of colourful reef fishes (including Oriental Sweetlips, Imperial Angelfish, Scorpionfish and both Maldives and Clark's Anemonefishes sharing a single anemone). But star of the show was a chilled **Hawksbill Turtle**, feeding peacefully on the reef and completely ignoring us all. As we returned to *Keana* the sun was about to disappear from the

perfect orange sky, with the new moon poised just above.

Evening talk: Dolphins of the Maldives. After dinner there were squid and murmuring schools of small fish off the stern platform.

Day 2, Monday 8 April 2019

The sea was mirror-calm first thing, and stayed calm all day. We started with a wonderful snorkel on the northern side of Makunudhoo house reef. In the bright morning sunlight the clear blue water was a delight. Fishy highlights included **Blacktip Reef Shark**, **Whitetip Reef Shark**, **Nurse Shark** and **White-tailed Stingray**. There were also several **Hawksbill Turtles** as well as dense schools of Black-pyramid Butterflyfish and Yellow-lined Goatfish.

Back on board *Keana*, breakfast was ready, and we were soon heading out of the atoll, into deep water. With such calm sea conditions, it did not take us long to find our first cetaceans: a school of **Bottlenose Dolphins** heading slowly northwest. And immediately afterwards we found a second, much larger and more boisterous group, which readily bowrode. This group appeared to include both **Indo-pacific Bottlenose** and **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**.



Common Bottlenose Dolphin

When we finally left these dolphins, lunch was nearly ready. And that was followed by an even more impressive school, of perhaps 300 **Spinner Dolphins**. There was much spinning, bowriding and general cavorting, which kept us enthralled for nearly an hour. This was thrilling enough, but to add to the excitement we also had a **White-tailed Tropicbird** fly over and a **Marlin** alongside.

Pushing onwards we found more **Spinner Dolphins** and **Bottlenose Dolphins** as we approached Goidhoo Atoll. Once anchored inside, we were into the *dhoni* for our afternoon snorkel on the nearby reef. The patchy corals supported a good diversity of fishes, as well as many Cushion Stars and purple knobbly snails (*Coriocella*).

Evening talk: Atoll formation, on the top deck under the stars, in the very place from where the word atoll was adopted internationally. After dinner a small **Flying Squid** was found on the stern deck.

Day 3, Tues 9 April 2019

An extraordinary dolphin day! There was just the faintest breeze first thing, and even this died away, leaving a mirror-calm sea. And with such excellent viewing conditions, it was not surprising that we reaped a bumper crop of sightings. These started as soon as we departed from Goidhoo Atoll, with a small school of **Spinner Dolphins** heading in from their

night's fishing. The Spinners were followed in quick succession by schools of **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**, more **Spinner Dolphins** and then **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**. After this we started a run of **Risso's Dolphins**, beginning with just a couple of small pods, and then a very much larger group of perhaps 150 Risso's, spread over a wide area of ocean. This was a mix of both grey and white individuals, mostly just quietly logging, but with breaching, head-slapping, tail-slapping and tail-raising all on display. We stayed with this mega-school for 45 minutes, before moving on towards the atoll for our late morning snorkel.

The clear blue water and vibrant reef around the uninhabited island of Muthafushi looked so inviting under the midday sun. Most obvious were the many schools of fish along the reef drop-off, including Schooling Bannerfish, Black-pyramid Butterflyfish, Gold-lined Emperors, Fusiliers of five different species and, on the reef top, a dense gang of Convict Surgeonfish. We also spotted a Snowflake Moray Eel and a **White-spotted Eagle-ray**.

Back on board *Keana*, our late lunch was waiting for us, as we continued northwards outside the atoll. There were more **Risso's Dolphins**, a glimpse of a **Dwarf Sperm Whale**, a couple of leaping **Sailfish** (and later another one alongside) and then a brief encounter with **Spotted Dolphins**, which sauntered towards our boat and briefly bowrode. These were followed by a most exuberant school of **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**, which charged in to bowride, leaping high into the air just ahead of us. We thought this would be the day's cetacean highlight, but very soon afterwards we spotted a couple of animals with enormous dorsal fins: **Killer Whales** (also known as Orcas). We spent the next 1½ hours trailing this pair, trying to edge closer but always being outwitted as they changed direction underwater. Nevertheless we all enjoyed

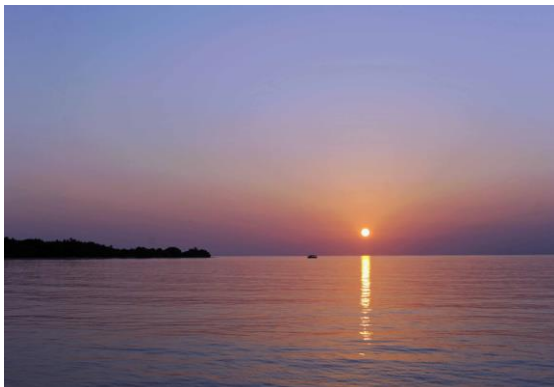
several thrilling views of these magnificent animals, under perfect viewing conditions. While with them, we saw a logging **Dwarf Sperm Whale** and a school of **Spinner Dolphins**, both of which appeared totally unaware of the potential danger so nearby. We also spotted a **Wedge-tailed Shearwater** heading south, a **Pelagic Seasnake**, and several **Black-naped Terns**.



Killer Whale

As evening approached, we turned in towards the atoll anchoring near the island of Fares just as the sun set. A glorious end to a magnificent day.

Evening talk: Blackfish (on the top deck).



Baa Atoll sunset

Day 4, Wed 10 April 2019

Today was another day of calm seas and wonderful cetacean sightings, which started first thing, as soon as we left our anchorage. As we were exiting the atoll, two large groups

of **Spinner Dolphins** were entering. Both readily bowrode, with several individuals spinning alongside.

Out at sea the mirror calm conditions allowed us several sightings of **Dwarf Sperm Whales**. And it was easy to spot seabirds too, with sightings of **Sooty Tern**, **Brown Noddy** and **Lesser Noddy**.

We arrived at our snorkel site in southwest Raa Atoll by 0900. This was on an outer reef usually frequented by Manta Rays, although unfortunately not today. There were plenty of schooling fish, both bright yellow (Kashmir Snappers and Yellow-lined Goatfish) and ruddy-coloured (Hunchback Red Snappers). And there were other people too, both divers and snorkelers. So we decided to move on, to a site inside the nearby channel. It was a delightful reef, with excellent hard corals on top, and plenty of reef fishes including **Titan Triggerfish**, one **Hawksbill Turtle**, and many red **Featherstars** (a speciality of the northern atolls).



Kashmir Snappers



Featherstar

Back on board, we headed across Raa Atoll, passing two large schools of **Spinner Dolphins** and then an unusually active school of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**, which bowrode before porpoising off to join another pod.

As we left Raa Atoll we spotted some **Pilot Whales** way ahead. There turned out about 50 of them, spread out in four different sub-groups, the first with a couple of **Risso's Dolphins** in attendance. As we approached we slowed right down, and several Pilot Whales approached *Keana*, riding alongside or just ahead of the bows. As we watched them they were clearly watching us, with several spy-hopping alongside. And we could clearly hear them whistling under the bows. It was all very relaxed, and we enjoyed being with them for 1½ hours.



Pilot Whales

Having left the Pilot Whales it was a quiet crossing to Lhaviyani Atoll, where some distant **Spinner Dolphins** were spotted off to the south. As we entered, dozens of **Black-naped Terns** were feeding over reefs. We anchored near Kanifushi Island, and were soon in to the *dhoni* for our evening snorkel on the nearby reef. This was a delight, with excellent massive corals around the reef edge, and a wonderful diversity of reef fishes. Among the many species seen: **White-spotted Eagle-ray**, **Grey Reef Shark**, black Common Lionfish, numerous Rockmover Wrasse, schools of blue Fusiliers, and some massive Parrotfish. Followed by another glorious sunset.

Evening talk: Beaked Whales (on the top deck).

Day 5, Thurs 11 April 2019

Another wonderful day, with calm seas, plenty of good cetacean sightings, and starting with a Manta snorkel. Leaving *Keana* in the *dhoni*, we headed to the nearby channel, which is a well-known site for Mantas. We searched slowly along the length of the channel, without any sighting, but then just before the end: **Manta!** A single Manta Ray was feeding at the surface, on a current line. Everyone had excellent views of it at the surface, before we moved the *dhoni* up-current and got ready to slide into the water. The water was gloriously clear blue, and we could see the bottom way below. Blue iridescent flecks of **Sapphire Copepods** glistened in the bright sunlight, while schools of Halfbeaks, Fusiliers and plantivorous Surgeonfishes, as well as the odd Rainbow Runner, searched for food. And then there it was, a magnificent Manta Ray, swimming slowly and gracefully past us all, mouth agape. By now we had drifted right out of the channel, so it was back into the *dhoni* for one more try. No luck this time, but it was still nice to watch the other pelagic creatures, before moving across to the outer reef to finish our snorkel. Here we found good corals, **White-tailed Stingray** and **White-tip Reef Shark**, and plenty of colourful reef fish including Palette Surgeonfish, Napoleon Wrasse, Red Snappers and Yellow-margined Moray.

Keana had moved out to join us, so we were soon back on board, and enjoying breakfast as we sailed around the outside of Lhaviyani Atoll. The deepwater Baraveli Channel was flat calm, and it was not long before our first sighting: a single **Beaked Whale**. It dived, but we approached the spot and settled down to wait. Although we did not see the Beaked Whale again, we did see three **Dwarf Sperm Whales** that surfaced not far ahead of us,

another **Dwarf Sperm Whale** at the surface much further astern, a **Green Turtle** that popped up briefly and a **Lesser Crested Tern** that came for a look at us as it flew by.



Lesser Crested Tern

Having waited 50 minutes we decided to move on. In these calm conditions, more **Dwarf Sperm Whales** were spotted, as well as the first of several **White-tailed Tropicbirds**. Then we found an exuberant school of **Striped Dolphins**, which rushed in to bowride, leaping high out of the water ahead of us. But they soon tired of our slow progress, and shot off on their own.



Striped Dolphins under the bows

We moved on too, continuing further east outside the atoll. Not long after we spotted some distant cetacean bodies glistening in the bright sunlight. There seemed to be about 20 of them (later shown by drone to be 24). They appeared all dark, and it was not at all obvious which species they were, especially as they moved away however slowly we approached. But with persistence we got some good views (including of their creased foreheads and

inconspicuously scratched flanks), and finally realised that despite first appearances, these were **Risso's Dolphins**. It was a nursery group of 12 females, each with a calf close alongside, in long line abreast. An extraordinary sighting!

After we finally moved on, we had two more sightings of **Dwarf Sperm Whales** (with three **White-tailed Tropicbirds** circling overhead while we waited for one to resurface - well spotted Debbie). And then a sighting of **Spinner Dolphins** just before we turned in to anchor inside the eastern side of the atoll. Here we enjoyed an excellent snorkel, on the unusual and particularly rugged lagoon reef of Selhifushi Island. The fishlife was again excellent with many species, including both Spotted and Blotched Porcupinefishes, Madras Snappers and Pipefishes, as well as some noticeably large Sea Cucumbers.

Evening talk: Seasons in the Maldives, on the top deck under the half moon and stars.

Day 6, Friday 12 April 2019

One of my best day's cetacean-watching, ever! There were hundreds of **Spinner Dolphins** coming into the atoll as we departed at 0630. But we did not tarry long, as we were keen to get out into deeper water. And our enthusiasm was not misplaced, for as soon as we cleared the channel and got out into the ocean, we spotted a pair of **Beaked Whales** ahead. They were at some distance and silhouetted against the low morning sunlight so we had no idea which species. But we positioned the boat slightly further out, and waited for them to reappear. 22 minutes later they popped back up, inshore of us, and beautifully lit. These were medium-sized Beaked Whales, uniformly grey-brown, with just a suggestion of paler colouration on the head, which was sloping, not with a prominent melon/crease/beak. This combination of size, colouration and head shape ruled out Cuvier's and Longman's Beaked Whale, but still left two *Mesoplodon*

species as possibilities. So we waited. In all we saw them at the surface six times, never very close to the boat, but never very far away either. Slowly we built up a picture of these animals, which included pale mottling around the lower jaw and posterior part of upper jaw; limited, relatively inconspicuous scratching on one individual, and confirmation of the sloping head shape. All of which pointed to these being **Deraniyagala's Beaked Whales**, a species only recognized in 2014. In all we spent 2½ hours with these animals, which must have been feeding in one area of deep reef, as they kept surfacing in the same area time after time. And during this time we also spotted another distant pair of **Beaked Whales** a **White-tailed Tropicbird** soaring overhead and a single **Wedge-tailed Shearwater** heading south, against the expected flow of migration. When we finally left whales, we assumed that we had had our best sighting of the day.



Blue Whale

However, just minutes later we spotted a massive blow ahead: **Blue Whale!** It was a huge animal, but very chilled, moving very slowly at the surface, and then diving languidly. We followed it for five surfacings, between which it dived for 11-13 minutes each time. The whale was very relaxed and allowed us to follow, so that we had wonderful views of it at the surface, and of its massive flukes when it dived. While this was going on we also saw a **Mobula Ray** off the stern and our first **Great Crested Tern** for the trip.

When we finally moved on, we had travelled just one mile, in the wrong direction, in over 4 hours! Now we needed to make up time, so it was full steam ahead and southwards. We hardly paused for two schools of **Risso's Dolphins**, but as we approached Kaashidhoo Island, splashing ahead indicated some serious dolphin action. It was a massive mixed school of **Common Bottlenose Dolphins** and **Fraser's Dolphins**. They were in high spirits, leaping about and bowriding in numbers. Whenever we slowed, the Fraser's that were bowriding waited just ahead of us until we speeded up again so they could restart their fun. A wonderful display!

Now we transferred to the *dhoni*, for a mid-afternoon snorkel on Kaashidhoo's outer reef. In the wonderfully clear water, we drifted gently along the reef. There were many parrotfish, including large numbers (50+) of massive **Bumphead Parrotfish**, numerous surge zone species including Reef Picasso Triggerfish, Surge Hawkfish and Surge Damselfish, and a **Porcupine Stingray** seen by some.

By now time was getting on and we needed to push on towards North Malé Atoll, passing a distant pair of **Cuvier's Beaked Whales**, and three separate groups of **Dolphins**. We finally anchored by Kagi Island just as the sun set, at the end of a superb day.

Evening talk: Blue Whales and fisheries.

Day 7, Sat 13 April 2019

Our final snorkel on the house reef of Kagi Island proved to be a great one. The incoming tide was bringing clear blue oceanic water and drifted us gently down the reef. The reef itself was a delight, with rugged topography and such a diversity and abundance of reef fishes as to give the impression that we were swimming through an overstocked aquarium. Among the highlights: Giant Moray Eels and

numerous small Giant Clams on the coral bommies,

Keana was ready to leave as soon as we returned, and we cleared the atoll as breakfast was called. Out at sea the calm conditions meant that we did not have long to wait for our first sighting. A distant rolling shape drew us offshore to the spot where Beaked Whales had dived. We waited, and up popped five **Cuvier's Beaked Whales**. There were two white males and three brown females. They appeared to be cavorting, and surfaced in almost the same spot five successive times. Which gave us some splendid views of this normally elusive species.



Cuvier's Beaked Whales

We had spent a full two hours with the Beaked Whales and needed to push on. But when we encountered a massive school of **Risso's Dolphins**, we had to slow for a look. They were raising their tails, breaching, head-banging, and generally having a wild time. Mixed in with them were several **Common**

Bottlenose Dolphins, which rushed in to bowride (one mother bringing her tiny, newborn calf), and also a good number of **Fraser's Dolphins**, which were also eager to bowride.

As we approached the channel back into North Malé Atoll, we encountered some **Spinner Dolphins**, and thought this would be our last cetacean encounter. But after anchoring in the lagoon of Hulumalé, two **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins** swam by, for a gentle finale.

Evening: Trip highlights and trip video by Alex.



Risso's Dolphins

Day 8, Sun 14 April 2019

After breakfast there were sad farewells and two transfers to the airport by *dhoni* at different times.

CETACEAN SUMMARY

During our cruise we recorded an excellent total of 13 different species, from 64 sightings (which made 69 records since two or more species were seen together on several occasions):

Species	Scientific Name	No. Sightings	Est. no. Individuals
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	1	1
Spinner Dolphins	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	19	1243
Spotted Dolphins	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>	1	10
Striped Dolphins	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	1	30
Risso's Dolphins	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	9	462
Common Bottlenose Dolphins	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	5	115
Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>	4	46
Fraser's Dolphin	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>	2	340
Shortfin Pilot Whales	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	4	45
Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	1	2
Dwarf Sperm Whale	<i>Kogia sima</i>	9	12
Cuvier's Beaked Whale	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>	2	7
Deraniyagala's Beaked Whale	<i>Mesoplodon hotaula</i>	1	2
Unidentified Beaked Whale	Ziphiidae	2	3
Unidentified Dolphins		8	158
		69	2476



Pilot Whales

BIRDS

Maldives does not have a great diversity of birds, so our total of just a dozen species was a bit disappointing but not unreasonable (especially in April, after northern winter migrants have departed):

1	Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus pacificus</i>
2	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
3	White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>
4	Saunders Tern	<i>Sterna saundersi</i>
5	Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>
6	Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>
7	Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>
8	Great Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bergii</i>
9	Brown Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>
10	Lesser Noddy	<i>Anous tenuirostris</i>
11	Sooty Tern	<i>Onychoprion fuscatus</i>
12	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens maledivicus</i>

ANCHORAGES

Day 1	7 April 2019	Makunudhoo	North Malé Atoll
Day 2	8 April 2019	Goidhoo	Baa Atoll
Day 3	9 April 2019	Fares	Baa Atoll
Day 4	10 April 2019	Kanifushi	Lhaviyani Atoll
Day 5	11 April 2019	Selhifushi	Lhaviyani Atoll
Day 6	12 April 2019	Kagi	North Malé Atoll
Day 7	13 April 2019	Hulumalé	North Malé Atoll
Day 8	14 April 2019	Disembark	

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