

# A wee bit of maritime history... 39

FREE



## *Squiggle and Squashie, the bottlenose dolphins*

The arrival of two bottlenose dolphins in Strangford Narrows in March 2023 has caused great excitement. They obligingly appear for visitors, the press and TV cameras. As of March 2026 they remain in the area.

From their dorsal fin markings they have been named *Squiggle* (see pic) and *Squashie* and are young adult males. While we don't have details of *Squashie's* travels, we do know a bit about *Squiggle*.



He was born in 2016 (*Squashie* is probably a little younger) as part of a pod of five dolphins in the Moray Firth on the east coast of Scotland. The pod stayed there until early 2020 and then passed up and along the north coast before passing down the west coast to

the Firth of Clyde. *Squiggle* had a habit of heading off on his own and was last sighted on the west coast in January 2023.

*Squiggle* then teamed up with *Squashie* and they appeared in Strangford Narrows two months later. While it has remained their base, they have been sighted inside the lough at Killyleagh and outside as far away as Donaghadee.



**Why did they come?** - Their travels are dictated by food availability, competition with other dolphins and seeking a mate. When they first arrived they followed the ferry a lot implying they were feeding. It may be that the turbulence it creates stirred up their food or that they were hitching a ride on its wake while hunting or that they were simply hunting.

**Distinguishing bottlenose dolphins from harbour porpoises** - adult bottlenose dolphins are over twice as long and much more sociable. They have a snout (beak), while porpoises have a rounded, blunt face. Their dorsal fin is sickle-shaped whereas that on a porpoise is triangular. They remain on the water surface for longer when coming up to breathe.

### **Interesting bottlenose dolphin facts**

They are cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises)

Distribution - worldwide except for Arctic and Antarctic

Weight = av. 300kg (660 lb)

Can reach length of >4 m (13 ft)

Dark grey on the back and lighter on the sides with pale underbelly

Life expectancy - ♂ up to 50 years, ♀ up to 60 years

Age at sexual maturity - ♂ 9-13 years, ♀ 5-12 years

Calving frequency - 1 every 2-3 years

Calf weaning - nurse for 12-18 months, remain close to mother for 3-5 years

Av. dive duration 20-40 secs

Average swimming speed = 3-4 miles/hour (5-6 km/hour). Higher when breaching

Can jump 6 metres (20 feet) out of the water

**Behaviour** - inquisitive, coming up close to boats. Rarely injure humans but have been recorded

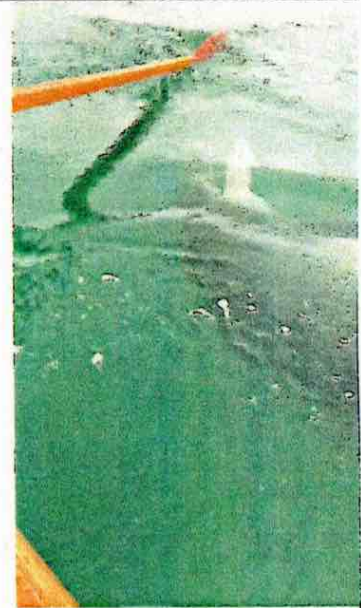


injuring porpoises (including in Strangford Narrows), sometimes fatally, even though they are not one of their prey.

They breach (leap out of the water) at times.

**Diet** - Varies, depending on location, with an Irish study identifying

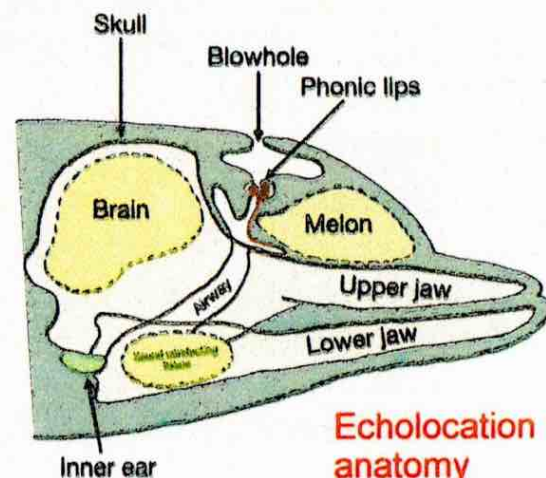
squid, cuttlefish, pollock, saithe, haddock, horse mackerel, conger eel, dogfish and flatfish. Have been spotted eating sea trout. Need daily food intake of 8-15 kg.



**Echolocation** - They use this remarkable technique to map their underwater surroundings and navigate.

It involves sending out high frequency clicks which bounce off objects and are reflected back as an echo. The clicks are created by 'phonic lips' situated in the airway below the blowhole. They are then guided through nearby fatty structures into the melon, a larger fatty structure, situated in the angle between the front of the skull and the top of the upper jaw. It enables the clicks to be directed a bit like someone sweeping a torch.

The returning echo passes along the lower jaw via the middle and inner ear to the hearing centre in the brain for processing. It enables the clicks to be directed a bit like someone sweeping a torch. The returning echo passes along the lower jaw via the middle and inner ear to the hearing centre in the brain for processing. From this they can work out the size, shape, structure, composition, speed and direction of an object.



**What keeps them here?** - It could well be that the protected status of the lough has resulted in more food being available making it attractive to them so we should all look after our wonderful lough.

**Precautions** - Entanglement in marine litter and ghost fishing gear is a threat to all marine mammals so why not clear up old fishing gear washed up on the beach?

If you meet dolphins whilst at sea, stay at least 100m away, especially when there are calves present. If the dolphins approach you, maintain a constant speed and allow them to interact on their own terms and leave at will. Do not enter the water with them.

If you find a stranded bottlenose dolphin (dead or alive), please report it to DAERA on 028 7082 3600.

**Squiggle and Squashie** - bring joy to all who see them, whether from the ferry, from rowing skiffs and other boats or from the shore. Let us enjoy and respect them while they remain here.

**Find out more at:**

<https://www.hwdt.org/news/dolphindetectives> or <https://www.bbcearth.com/factfiles/animals/mammals/dolphin> or [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bottlenose\\_dolphin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bottlenose_dolphin) or <https://nmmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/AMMPA-DolphinFactSheet-FINAL-Web.pdf>

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