

Orca Watch 2026: A Landmark 15th Anniversary Celebration of Citizen Science

The northern shores of Scotland once again became the epicentre of marine conservation as the Sea Watch Foundation hosted Orca Watch 2026. Marking its 15th Anniversary, this year's event blended vital citizen science, public education, and an unforgettable community spirit.



With an unprecedented surge of interest drawing over 200 applications, the final team on the ground consisted of 82 dedicated volunteers - including official photographer Mike Robinson and videographer Joel Holmes. Together with the public and local groups, they transformed the rugged coastlines into a powerhouse of cetacean monitoring. This year, Fraserburgh was also included as a watch site, kindly run by Nick Connor and Shaun Sim, with sightings also being reported by our regional coordinator, Karen Hall, from Shetland and Orkney local groups.

A Busy Year on the Waves: Sighting Highlights

If Orca Watch 2025 was a triumph, 2026 raised the bar. Orcas were spotted almost every single day of the event, culminating in a spectacular 44 orca sightings, compared to last year's 14 sightings! A total of 243 cetacean sightings were reported, and included seals and basking sharks. Overall, we had 455 sightings at the whole event.

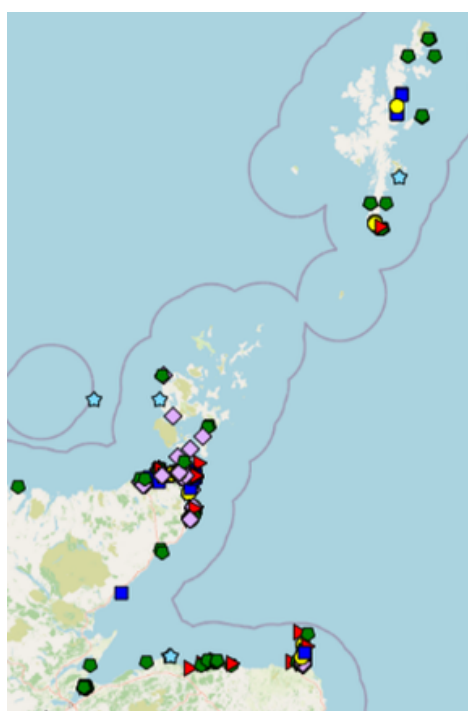
- **The Epic Voyage of Summer and Úlfur:** The standout headline of the week occurred on Day 7. The well-known orca pair, Summer and Úlfur, were first spotted from John o' Groats before moving around to Duncansby Head. Photo-identification and tracking data revealed this dynamic duo had travelled an impressive ~122 miles in just 38 hours!



'Summer' and Úlfur' seen on the 31st at Duncansby. Photo credit: H Goodchild



Species	Total sightings	Total number of
Risso's dolphin	61	316
Killer whale	44	82
Harbour Porpoise	42	113
Bottlenose Dolphin	39	184
Minke whale	34	40
Humpback whale	8	14
Common dolphin	1	5
Atlantic white-sided dolphin	1	2
Unknown dolphin	11	20
Unknown large whale	2	2
Cetacean total	243	778
Grey seal	164	290
Harbour seal	42	77
Basking Shark	6	10
Grand Total	455	1 155



Symbol	Group Name	
▲	Baleen whale	Minke, Humpback
■	Toothed whale	Orca
●	Dolphin	BND, Risso's
●	Porpoise	Harbour porpoise
◆	Seal	Grey, Harbour
★	Other	Basking shark, otter

Expanding Horizons: Surveys from Land and Sea

This year's monitoring efforts achieved brilliant coverage thanks to strategic partnerships and a focus on inclusivity:

On the Water with Pentland Ferries

For a second successful year, Orca Watch partnered with Pentland Ferries to bridge the gap between mainland Scotland and Orkney. Fifty volunteers took to the sea, conducting valuable marine surveys from Gills Bay to St Margaret's Hope, utilising the Sea Watcher App. Simultaneously, the public joined in on the excitement, with official event wristband holders enjoying discounted passage across the legendary Firth.

Accessible Watching for All

Believing that the magic of the ocean belongs to everyone, Orca Watch continued its Inclusivity & Accessibility Initiatives. By establishing alternative, highly accessible watch sites, the event ensured that volunteers and members of the public with diverse mobility needs could fully immerse themselves in the sightings and community atmosphere.



Left: Nick Connor and Shaun Sim – Fraserburgh, Right: Our first group at John o'Groats

Community Spirit and Evening Events

Behind the scenes, the Orca Watch Team kept operations running seamlessly.

The Orca Base, generously hosted by Claire Webster in the library of the **Together Travel Inn**, served as the daily hub from 8 am to 5 pm (frequently punctuated by "mad orca dashes" down to the pier when blows were spotted!).

SAT 23 6:00 PM	Meet the team @ John O'Groats
SUN 24 6:00 PM	Roundup/welcome – Online (Free)
MON 25 7:00PM	Quiz and pizza night held at Windhaven Campsite
TUES 26 11:00 AM	Beach clean with Caithness Beach Cleans, Broadhaven Beach (Wick)
TUES 26 6:30 PM	Online Talk Evening -Tickets donation based (Eventbrite)
THU 28 6:30 PM	Hybrid Talk Evening (Lyth Arts Centre or online) -Tickets online £15 (Eventbrite)
SAT 30 6:30 PM	Whaley Ceilidh (Old Mill, JOG) -Tickets £15 (Eventbrite)
SUN 31 6:00 PM	Final Online Roundup + Prize Draw (Free to attend, raffle tickets £1)

An Evening of Expert Talks

The hybrid lecture series returned to audiences, featuring insights from an esteemed line-up of marine scientists and conservationists:

Dr. Chloe Robinson: *To Catch a Killer (Whale): Leveraging Non-Invasive Techniques to Close Knowledge Gaps on Killer Whales*

Ellie MacLennan: *Disentangling a Whale of a Problem - Bottom-up Approaches to Entanglement Mitigation in Scottish Waters*

Dr. Filipa Samarra: *On The Run: Interactions Between Killer Whales and Pilot Whales*

Sadie Gorvett: *The West Coast Community of Killer Whales*

Dr. Leigh Hickmott: *Tales from the Frozen South: Killer Whales – Antarctica's Apex Predator*

Series of nature videos including: Anthony Rigell, and official Orca Watch photographer **Mike Robinson**

The "Whaley Ceilidh"

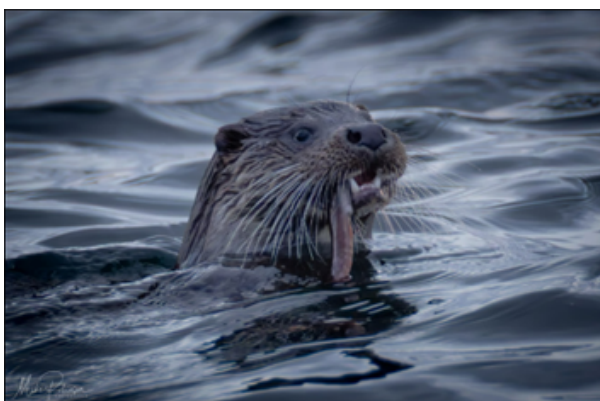
To celebrate the 15th Anniversary in true Scottish style, a brand-new Music & Arts Night was launched at the Old Mill in John o' Groats. The exclusive "Whaley Ceilidh" saw volunteers, wristband holders and public dancing the night away to local music, celebrating a week of hard work and incredible sightings.

Looking Ahead

From the Grand Raffle—featuring generous prizes such as Opticron, Sea Natura, 8doorsdistillery, and John o' Groats Brewery and the local community—to the final virtual round-up on May 31st, Orca Watch 2026 proved that the collective power can achieve remarkable things.

A full report detailing all sightings, effort data, and environmental insights will be available later this year, and will be available on our website.

Thank you to our volunteers, partners, and the local community. We are already looking forward to seeing you back next year!



Left: Otter, Right: Puffin. Photo credit: Mike Robinson