



British Divers Marine Life Rescue

Medic Reports

on the

Mass Stranding of Common Dolphins in the Percuil River, Cornwall

9 June 2008

Jun 09, 2008

Report re Mass Stranding from On-Call Coordinator

At 09.00 on Monday 09/06/08 I received a report from a member of the public about a live dolphin stranded in Cornwall I passed the information on to Dave Jarvis, not realising it would turn out to be the start of one of the busiest two days for the BDMLR.

I was then called by two of our Community Wardens to a seal that had hauled itself out onto a wall by steps leading to the beach by the harbour in Bridlington and realised it would need to be 'encouraged' back into the sea because, if left, it would have been 10 foot above the beach and I don't think seals have learnt to fly yet.

This was done with much towel waving and eventually it flopped back into the sea, 'nil pointe' for artistic impression but more graceful than a 10ft drop onto the sand.

We observed the seal and hoped it would head back out to sea with the out going tide but, oh no, (why do seals make it more difficult for themselves and us!!) it took a right turn instead of a left (sat nav out of sync obviously) and swam into Bridlington harbour Marlene and I raced round into the harbour as it made a bee line to more steps but I beat the seal to it and it was confronted with the mad blonde doing her impression of 'dancing like your dad' on the harbour steps waving a towel, seal had a rethink, thought better of it and swam off as fast as its flips would take it out of the harbour and into safer waters!!

When I got home the first reports of the dolphins were coming in and I realised it was going to be a major incident. I contacted HQ for an update and prepared myself for a busy night.

As soon as Sue handed over to me the calls started to come in from the media and the public.

The media were great and I know they can sometimes come in for a lot of flak but all the journalists I spoke to were sympathetic and wanted to help and pass on any information. I passed these calls onto Dave and his team (mind you I did get some funny remarks about my being involved living in Yorkshire, one journalist asked if I could do a live interview in Devon in half an hour and I told him that would be pushing it from Yorkshire!!)

The members of the public were also brilliant offering help and wanting to know more. I referred those members of the public wanting to know more to our website.

On a personal note may I say a very big 'well done' to the team in Cornwall and to all the other agencies involved in the rescue I hope we never have to deal with something on that scale again. I hope, in a very small way, I was of some assistance to you all, keep up the good work!! and I am proud to be part of such a fantastic organisation as BDMLR.

Lesley Salisbury
Marine Mammal Medic

Jun 09, 2008

A Vet/Medic Report - Mass Dolphin Stranding

On my arrival at Froe Creek I was directed to the pair of stranded common dolphins on the north bank. The other veterinary surgeon in attendance, Darryl Thorpe, having triaged them and moved over to the south bank before I arrived. Once I reached the location I found 2 RNLI lifeboatmen and a handful of medics doing a sterling job at keeping the animals supported and wet in the water.

My first task was to examine the animals and try to assess whether it would be appropriate to refloat them, and if it was, what treatment was needed before that could be done. The first animal I examined was breathing very rapidly, a sign of stress, and the RNLI and medics had attempted to refloat her several times already using a tarpaulin but each time she stranded again. The animal was obviously in distress and suffering so sadly I had no choice but to euthanase her. Although this was upsetting for all involved (myself included), especially since we had all seen the large number of dead dolphins stranded in the creek, it was in the animal's best interest.

More happily was what happened with the other common dolphin entrusted to my care. We successfully refloat this animal using a tarpaulin and supported her down the creek to the level of the south bank dolphin. The other team had already used the dolphin pontoons to refloat their animal, so we were left with the whale pontoons. These were inflated and attached to a RIB belonging to the very helpful Ian from Percuil Boatyard. We transferred the dolphin into the pontoon sling still in the tarpaulin. Since the pontoon was a lot bigger than the animal we had to support her to stop her blowhole from going under the water and from slipping out the back of the sling. The sight of Phil, Tim, Tamara and I sat in the pontoon holding up the dolphin must have made an amusing sight!

As the 2 boats with attached dolphins made their way up the river we collected the unstranded and previously refloat animals and herded/encouraged them towards the Fal Estuary with the help of the Falmouth lifeboat, the Fire Service RIB, a RIB full of TV camera men, a group of people in sea kayaks and assorted other boats.

There was one moment when it seemed like the mission was doomed to failure. A television helicopter came over the creek and started making passes in various directions overhead. This seriously upset both the animals in the pontoons and the free swimming dolphins that were moving with us. After much waving and some not quite so polite hand signals from Darryl and I, the medics and lifeboatmen it took the intervention of the coastguard I understand to get the message across to leave us alone.

We plodded our way down the river, about a mile and a quarter in the end, to the Fal Estuary. We decided to release the dolphins from the pontoons by the lighthouse beach. The dolphin from our pontoon had a wobbly misdirected start, which had us worried initially, but she soon got her bearings and took off after the others. The sight of a large group of dolphins swimming out into the estuary was amazing and something I'll never forget.

Once we'd watched our dolphins disappear we turned around and headed back up river. The lifeboatmen returned to the lifeboat and Ian took us to his boat yard as the falling

tide meant we couldn't get back where we'd started. We packed away the pontoons and Ian ran us back to our cars and a waiting Dave in his pick-up.

On returning to the start point it became apparent that we were not in the only hotspot of stranding activity. My car was parked at the edge and hence I was the only person not blocked in, so I headed off towards a report of strandings on the Helford River. After crossing the King Harry Ferry and making it out onto the main road I was called by the office to tell me that I should turn around as there was another reported stranding at the National Trust's Trewithen estate and I was the nearest medic to it.

On arrival at Trewithen the National Trust staff seemed to have no idea we were coming, but after a quick discussion we had worked out our destination by process of elimination. When we reached the mudflats the dolphin was stranded on the far side of the bay but was still in the shallow water. After checking that the dolphin was the one in question, and there wasn't another hiding around the corner we made our way, with the help of Tom from the NT around the edge of the mudflats to the location of the dolphin.

When the medics I was with and I made it down to the dolphin it was in a bad way, it had beached itself on the mud/gravel bottom and wasn't keeping its head up above the water so that it could breathe. The medics lifted it up and supported it in the water whilst I conducted a physical exam. By this time the cavalry had arrived in the form of Phil, Darryl and others.

The breathing was erratic and there were some very sudden sharp but not particularly effective breaths, if you can imagine a dolphin sneezing then that's what it looked like. There was also a significant amount of discharge from the blowhole. Darryl and I decided that given the poor respiration, the discharge and the fact that the animal could not support itself in the water, the dolphin was not going to be refloated successfully. After coming to this conclusion we had no option but to euthanase the dolphin.

A sad end to the day especially since we were all very tired both physically and emotionally but I'm clinging to the sight of those dolphins going out into the estuary and the knowledge that we saved lots of lives however grim the TV news is making it out to be. I think BDMLR proved its worth and it was so nice to see people in general willing to give up their time and energy. A good job was done by all involved, in extreme circumstances, lets hope they were a one-off however I think we'd all do it again tomorrow if we needed to.

Sean Langton BVetMed MRCVS
Veterinary Surgeon and Marine Mammal Medic

Jun 09, 2008

Report from Monday 9th June

I received a call from Dave Jarvis at about 9.30am saying there was a mass stranding of dolphins on the Roseland in a creek just off the Percuil River.

I took down all the details and after checking with work that I could leave spoke to Leanne Birtles (A new medic who had completed the course on the 1st June) who works at the practice and had just finished the night shift. We set off armed with lots of maps!!

We arrived at Froe creek at 10.15am we were met in the car park by a member of the coast guard who directed us through a garden to the edge of the creek, there were bodies everywhere. A boat was waiting to take us and two other medics out into the creek; we were told that people were supporting 3 live dolphins on the waters edge. As the boat took us up the creek there were two medics supporting two dolphins on the right and a lone dolphin was on the left, Dave Jarvis was with this, along with a member of the public. Myself and Leanne took over looking after that dolphin while Dave went to coordinate other medics still arriving.

We put the dolphin onto a body bag for support (given to us by the RNLI) the tide was rapidly going out and the creek bed on our side had large stones and rocks so we were unable to dig the trenches for her pectoral fins. So using the body bag to protect her body I put her head and upper body on my legs with her fins on either side this kept the weight off her fins and was also a little comfort, for me and her! Leanne put seaweed on her body as we didn't have sheets and Leanne and M.o.P used hands and a bucket to keep her wet. Phil Jarvis arrived with another medic and a tarpaulin, we used this to erect shade as it was getting hotter. Phil also collected seaweed and packed a lot under her body again because of the rocks on our side. Her breathing was monitored on average every 5 mins and had gone from 20bpm when we arrived to about 8-10 bpm (breaths per min).

Two more boats arrived, one with medic Caroline Curtis and Vet Darryl Thorp the other boat had a camera crew and poss. M.o.p. At this point she started to get agitated as more people arrived (not to mention a vet) and her breathing went up to 20. This decreased to 10-14 as the area quietened down. I told Darryl what had been happening while Caroline helped Leanne put water on her (nicknamed Lady).

Phil Jarvis arrived with the dolphin pontoons so that we could try and support her in the water. As we tried to move her she started to thrash around which made positioning her on the pontoons difficult after two attempts we got her into the correct position and inflated them. We moved her out into waist high water, and started to restore equilibrium, at this point she was bringing her head out of the water on her own to breath.

I was then told that vet Sean Langton was going to euthanase one of the dolphins on the other bank and would need help. The RNLI boys literally hauled me onto the boat (very unlady like) to cross the creek. I helped Sean euthanase the dolphin (a male). The second dolphin -also male- was put onto tarpaulin and floated out into the creek by the medics. (Tamara, Tim etc) I walked a little way up the creek with the others before again being hauled onto the RNLI boat to go back to the female.

The pontoon was strapped to the side of a RIB (owned by Mark of St Mawes sit on kayaks) Darryl, Caroline and I kept an eye on the dolphin while we moved forward at tick over speed. By this time the other boats in the creek (Falmouth fire brigade boat, RNLI, coastguard and other small boats) had formed a "barrier" to prevent the 7 free swimming dolphins from going further up the creek. We waited for the 2nd dolphin to be put onto the whale pontoon that was strapped to another boat (? Fire brigade boat) our dolphin was calling most of the time so Caroline suggested that we turn the female to face the pod to hopefully keep them moving in the right direction.

Then a helicopter appeared and started to hover fairly low over us, this frightened the 7 dolphins back up the creek and also upset our dolphin in the pontoon. After a while the RNLI managed to contact the pilot of the helicopter and asked him to move away.

The people on the boats that were part of the barrier had to use paddles and their hands to slap the water to make the dolphins in the water turn round; again Mark turned the boat so that our female was facing the pod. They came back and circled our boat, at this point we could see they looked healthy and there was even a mom and calf.

We set off again towards the Percuil River, 2 ribs with bright yellow pontoons attached and about 5-6 other boats forming "the barrier" all going at no wake speed. At the end of the creek we needed to turn the pod to the left to enter the river. Again Mark moved the boat so that our female, still calling, faced the pod. Two boats moved into position to block the other end of the river off, the pod moved into the main river. The pod picked up speed here as the water was deeper, our female also made more of an effort to go and it took all 3 of us at times to keep her in the pontoon (I made the cardinal sin, had my head at times over the blow hole) Caroline had the tail end making sure she didn't go off the back, Darryl had the middle keeping her in an upright position, Me at the head bringing her forward if she went too far back.

At the mouth of the river it was noted that there was a large pod of approx 30 dolphins very close to the other shore near St Anthony's head. There were medics and M.o.P on the beach. Again we stopped as the "barrier" of boats (there were now more, as well as kayakers) moved very quietly round the outside to block a second creek and to coax the pod back into deeper water, again Mark moved the boat so our female was facing the pod, They started to move towards us.

At this point the RNLI boat had gone a few yards away to rescue a man clinging to the side of his boat, he had tried to get a better view of what was going on and fell in!! A lone dolphin was spotted way out in front of us and as we made our way out into the main bay followed by many boats the large pod including our 7 swam quickly out and could be seen breaching out of the water.

The RIBs were put side by side with the pontoons together. The two dolphins were released at the same time; the female seemed a little unresponsive to begin with but swam off strongly in the direction of the main group. The male swam about the boat moving off a lot slower but also headed in the direction of the main pod.

Mark took us back to the creek, we had to walk some of the way as the tide was right out, we arrived back to see the very sad sight of lines of dead dolphins.

Jenny Haley

Central Cornwall Assistant Coordinator
British Divers Marine Life Rescue

Jun 09, 2008

Common dolphin mass stranding, Fal Bay

My first direct involvement with the mass stranding incident came later in the day once I had finished work at the National Seal Sanctuary. Coordinator Dave Jarvis tasked myself and other members of the Animal Care Team with going to Gillan, at the mouth of the Helford Estuary, to check on reports of 6+ dolphins close to the shore that were in danger of becoming stranded. We loaded up a van with rescue equipment and then headed out.

Arriving at Gillan, we met up with Medics Caroline Curtis and Cheryl Mills with Kent and Sarah Harvey. They had just received word that the dolphins had now moved further offshore and no longer required monitoring or assistance, so we all turned around and went to Falmouth Harbour where the last large group of dolphins was still amongst the boats in the marina, having been there for most of the afternoon since an earlier herding attempt proved too difficult.

When we got to Falmouth, we met up with a number of other Medics that were monitoring about 8 dolphins, mostly younger animals and one small calf, in the marina adjacent to the National Maritime Museum. A very large crowd of people lined the seafront watching them and there was some activity in the water with various boats and kayakers in use nearby. There were also reports of small groups or pairs of dolphins out in the main river channel and out in the estuary channel as well. After watching the animals immediately below us, and based on the accounts of the Medics that had been watching them earlier, it appeared that they had been confined to the same small area for some time, refusing to dive under the boats to get away to a deeper, safer place behind the marina. Inspecting the geography of the immediate area it was obvious why they were apparently unable to find their way out, as the location was approximately rectangular in shape and the only exit was in a corner that would be difficult for them to find. Beyond this was where the majority of water-based activity was taking place, so essentially the dolphins were stuck, thus it was decided that the dolphins needed to be encouraged towards the exit and out towards the main channel so they could then find their own way to safety.

Several Medics, led by Caroline and myself, made their way down into the marina and set about commandeering small boats and tenders to begin a herding attempt. However, it was quickly ascertained that the spaces between the boats were too easy for the dolphins to get through, so a group of nearby kayakers and a couple more small boats were asked to assist, while Medics in drysuits entered the water to help fill in any remaining holes.

As one, the carefully coordinated formation slowly moved forward and the dolphins responded positively, moving together straight towards the exit point. They did once again try to turn back as they approached the corner, but then they seemed to realise there was a way out and they quickly headed along the seafront and into a more open area away from the marina. At this point all swimmers left the water or were hauled aboard the flotilla of small boats for safety reasons, and because they were unable to keep up!

As the dolphins were now heading upstream, more boats ahead of the dolphins were coordinated to head them off, diverting them out into the yacht mooring area and closer

to the main channel. A short game of plugging holes between moored yachts then ensued, which turned out very successfully for the flotilla as the pod moved into a deeper area behind the marina next to Falmouth Dockyard, which is also right next to the main channel. Some of the dolphins later noticed that they could swim underneath boats, and part of the group dived, resurfacing on the other side of the marina pontoons and moored boats back where they started, although a short while later they reappeared back where they had been herded to. Everyone agreed that now they were in a better location with a much greater chance of escaping the river, that the flotilla should discontinue their efforts and leave the dolphins to do their own thing.

The majority of Medics were stood down with the onset of darkness and arrangements were made to check the river, estuary and surrounding coastline early next morning for any further strandings or sightings. Myself, along with Medics Clare McGowan, Rebecca Allen and Jason Birt stayed on to continue with monitoring, and saw one of the smaller dolphins breach fully from the water a few times before settling down with the others again.

I wish to thank all the Medics involved in the numerous rescue attempts throughout the day for their exceptional efforts, despite some of them having been 'on the go' since the original strandings at Froe. Also thanks must go to the numerous boat owners that allowed us to get in with them at Falmouth to help with the herding attempt along with the kayakers - it really is incredible what determination and good planning can achieve in situations like this, and the number of animals that were rescued altogether is just brilliant. Finally, thank you to the people behind the scenes – there was National Coordinator Trevor Weeks and Administrator Sue White at BDMLR Head Office who did a great job of calling out a large amount of Medics and directing them to the various locations; Tony Woodley for dealing with the huge amount of media interest; and to all the people on the BDMLR Forum for all their morale-boosting support during the incident and afterwards.

Well done everyone, you should be very proud of everything you did that day.

Dan Jarvis

Marine Mammal Medic
British Divers Marine Life Rescue

Jun 09, 2008

Dolphin Mass Stranding - A Medic's Report

I was given the job of checking the Percuil River & nearby areas, with Debs Wallace, a Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network volunteer & Helmsman Dave Nicoll on the RNLI inshore lifeboat, to see if there were any other animals in need of rescuing, swimming off shore, or dead. We found no bodies or other stranded animals, but came across a pod of about 25 common dolphins swimming around the mouth of the creek. We watched them for a while & noted that they were in no immediate danger, so we came back down the creek still checking for any further strandings, finding a further group of about five that were free swimming near the animals being rescued by medics. We then began to collect up some of the dead bodies that were floating in the water & moved them back up to the quayside for later collection.

The lifeboat then received a message to advise that a pod of dolphins had been seen near the shore at Place. It appears that these were the same group that we had seen earlier. The animals were vocalising a lot, circling but in deep water & other people in boats were watching them. A further call was then received from Falmouth Harbourmaster that dolphins were now also close in to the Bosun's Locker area of the Falmouth Harbour, so we went over to check on them as well. On arrival, we saw medic Lisa Clarke, with the Harbourmaster, watching the animals from his boat, which was moored nearby. We saw approximately 10 dolphins, including a very young calf, all of which seemed to be confused & circling. Lisa advised that a couple of them had tried to beach themselves on a small area of mud & seaweed. I told Lisa that I would get more medics to come & help her & to continue monitoring them & report if the situation got worse. We then returned to the Percuil River to check on the progress of the animals that were being rescued, noting that the dolphins at Place were still in a satisfactory location, but still very noisy, as we passed them.

An urgent call was then received that one of the animals at Place was attempting to strand, so I transferred into a smaller boat, with Gary Hawkins, returned to the quayside to collect more equipment, lifejackets & two additional medics, before heading back up the creek to meet the Cornwall Fire Service boat that was going to take us back to Place. The boat carried medics Lissa Billington, Nikki Kelman, Gary & myself, as well as Jenny, a CWT volunteer. When we got there it was clear that the dolphins had moved much closer to the shore, although none were on the beach, but acting strangely because they were tail slapping, leaping sideways, continuing to swim in circles & vocalising. A boat was quite close to them & it was instructed to move away. Shortly afterwards, we saw medics on the beach, then the Devon BDMLR Ambulance & then three or four other boats arrived, so Gary did an excellent job in organising the positioning of the boats & we gently herded the dolphins out back towards deeper water. The team on the shore followed us round on the rocks to make sure that none of the animals stranded. By coincidence, a bit further out to sea, the boats with the rescue pontoons came past, with the five free swimming dolphins from the Percuil River. When the animals we were dealing with noticed the others they all took off after them & made for the sea.

Following the successful release of the animals in the pontoons, two boats, including ours went back over to Falmouth Harbour to check on those creatures. We found them still in the same location & behaving as before. It was decided in conjunction with the Harbourmaster, to try to herd them out using four boats & two medics in kayaks, but the dolphins would only go so far before splitting up & returning to their original position. As there was a young one involved, the attempt was discontinued & the animals were to be monitored from land, by the team on the quayside. Therefore the fireboat returned us to the head of the Percuil River to drop us off & because there was no water left, we walked back to Froe with the equipment.

I would like to thank Dave Nicholl of the RNLI, the crew of the Cornwall County Fire Service boat, the Harbourmasters & all the individual boat owners for all their skill & determination in the rescue of these animal, also Gary Hawkins for organising all of the boats & all the medics & CWT MSN volunteers for dealing with everything that was thrown at them. I would also like to especially thank Conrad Birnie for his patience & assistance with everyone involved. Although an horrific incident it was an absolute pleasure to work with such determined & dedicated people.

Medic Lesley Jarvis
Cornwall Area

Jun 09, 2008

Mass Stranding – Percuil River, Cornwall

On arrival at the scene I boarded a boat that took me to the right hand side bank, where two dolphins were being cared for by members of the RNLI & staff from Gweek, keeping them supported in the shallows & being kept wet & shaded. The breathing rates were also being monitored. A refloat had been attempted before I arrived, but they had restranded. One was more distressed & quiet audible & we waited for Sean Langton, the Veterinary Surgeon to arrive. Jenny Haley & Phil Jarvis were on the other bank with one dolphin supported in the small pontoons.

When Sean arrived one of our dolphins was diagnosed as poorly & it was decided to euthanse it. I then collected the large pontoons from the other bank with help from Percuil Boatyard who were on standby in a RIB & our dolphin was placed in the pontoons & strapped to the side of the boat, as was the one from the other bank & we headed off slowly down the river. Soon we found a small pod of dolphins that had been in the area, so other boats including the RNLI, Fire Service & a film crew managed to corral them & got them to head down the river. A film crew helicopter appeared overhead which caused some disturbance among the pod, but after some friendly had gestures & a call to the Coastguards by the RNLI it backed off.

Further down the river we encountered another larger pod of about 20 – 30 in the shallows. Again the boats & teams on shore managed to get them back into deeper waters & moving down the river. Nearer to the open sea, as we approached the Lighthouse, it was decided to try a release. Ours listed slightly, but then regained it's composure & continued with the rest of the pod heading out to sea. The boats came to a stop & watched until they were out of sight. We then returned back up the river to sort the kit & deal with the dead ones.

Tim Bain
Cornwall Area Co-ordinator

Jun 09, 2008

Mass stranding of Common Dolphins

Darryl Thorpe and Jenny Haley with Common dolphin before its releaseMy day started as usual with walking the whippet at 7.00 before breakfast. If I'd known how the day was going to unfold I would have had a huge breakfast. I was rinsing my drysuit after the rescue demo we'd done on Looe beach for World Oceans Day on Sunday, (where I was greatly helped by the Jarvis family & Medics Peter Carthew & Michele Wright from Looe) when at 9.30 I got the call from Dave Jarvis. A mass stranding of dolphins on the Roseland peninsula- but this doesn't happen in UK with dolphins! While I packed my gear into the car, my partner Joan made butties (I'm a Northerner- we don't eat "sarnies") & I was on the road by 9.45 having had a quick look at the map as I was unfamiliar with the area.

I knew I was in the right place when I saw Dave's car, the ambulance trailer and the Land Rover from the National Seal Sanctuary at Gweek. Dave took me through a garden to a stone jetty at the head of the creek where I was met by the chilling sight of many dead dolphins floating in the weed at the side of the river with others on each bank. I could see a team on each side working on live strandings. I was taken in a small RIB with Caroline and Gary Curtis to the two dolphins on the east bank and as soon as I identified myself the Medics gave me an update on the animals breathing rate, any injuries etc- they were really following their training to the letter.

I had a look under their sheets to confirm that both dolphins were in good body condition; one had a respiratory Rate (RR) of 9bpm* but the other was up at 30. We then went across to the single dolphin on the west (sunny) bank. This was being sheltered from the sun by a tarp being held by Seth and another volunteer- sorry I never got your name. Jenny Haley Vet Nurse and North Cornwall Assistant Co-ordinator, was comforting the dolphin by talking to it and resting its head on her leg- which she did for at least two hours to my knowledge. Other Medics were cooling it with weed and buckets of water. When I arrived it was breathing at about 10bpm but increased as I arrived! Animals always seem to sense a vet! So I stayed behind its field of view and just observed everyone carrying on doing a brilliant job.

We all had a democratic chat and decided we needed to get all three dolphins in the water to calm them and assess their stability etc before we lost the water- we were about 1.5 hours past High Water. Meanwhile Sean Langton, vet from St Columb Major, was re-assessing the two across the river and after phoning to James Barnett (BDMLR's Chief Veterinary Consultant) it was decided to euthanase the one with distressed breathing. We called Dave for the dolphin pontoon and by about midday had her supported and gently rocking in knee deep water. At this stage her breathing settled at 9-14bpm.

During all this, about 20 meters upstream was a pod of seven dolphins circling, which Caroline thought were juveniles because of their size. So it was decided to move the two live ones downstream while using various RIBs (mostly Coastguard & RNLI) and boats to persuade the pod to follow us down. Caroline suggested we try to keep our dolphin pointed to the pod as much as possible so they all knew each other were there. Our RIB driver (I think Mark from the Kayak firm) was brilliant at following Caroline's directions and we were able to keep our dolphin pointed at the pod and they began circling our RIB & coming close to check her out. She was also vocalising and clicking to the pod while we circled as the other team got their dolphin into the Whale pontoon in an airbed. Then we set off slowly downstream with the other RIB & dolphin with the rest of the RIBs and boats gently "herding" the small pod behind us. Caroline Jenny and I had to lean over the pontoon to ensure the dolphin stayed upright and able to breathe. We had a few worrying minutes when a (media?) helicopter began hovering around and I have no doubt this did worry and disorientate the swimming pod, as they tried to turn back upriver and it also distressed our dolphin in the pontoon. I seem to remember this was also a problem during the rescue of the Thames Whale. They ignored our vigorous signals but a message from the RNLI RIB finally got their attention and they backed off. Thanks guys!

As we approached the beach near St Antony, we saw other volunteers on the beach and another pod of about 30-40 dolphins so we stopped for fear of driving them onto the beach or upriver. The other boats quietly positioned themselves to prevent this and to be

able to herd this new pod downriver, at this point our small pod joined them. We continued to point our dolphin at them and as the boats (including some “kidnapped” kayakers) herded them, they gradually came closer and some circled our 2 RIBs and pontoons checking out our patients. One single dolphin went far in front of all this and it was tempting to think it was, perhaps, an older one leading the way. As we got nearer to the sea our dolphin made stronger movements and also the pod of dolphins passed through us and went about 100 meters ahead and some were breaching. As we drew level with St. Mawes Castle we decided we were near enough the sea and each RIB gently pushed its dolphin out of the pontoons. Ours surfaced and appeared to swim strongly towards the large pod and we thought we saw her join them. Our elation was tempered by the thought of all those which hadn't survived this strange event.

We then returned upriver and as far up the creek as the tide allowed, then walked along the muddy bank carrying the deflated pontoon. When we reached “Base Camp and Control centre” at the top of the creek we saw media vans and cameras filming the lines of dead dolphins which had been tagged and measured by Cornwall Wildlife Trust volunteers and were waiting for Post Mortem. It was a sight which stopped me in my tracks- I felt numb & speechless.

After a quick drink and some butties, we went off to Trelissick via the King Harry Ferry which kindly let us cross free of charge, to meet with Sean and his team who were dealing with a single stranded Common dolphin. Its breathing rate was 10bpm but it had white froth or pus coming from the blowhole and it's breaths seemed shallow. We had no phone signal so couldn't contact James Barnett, so Sean, I and Lissa Goodwin (Devon Co-ordinator) discussed the options, bearing in mind Sean saw the animal restrand after refloat. It was then that at about 6pm we decided on euthanasia rather than risk the dolphin restranding elsewhere and dying a slow death.

Thanks to all those who helped me; Jenny Haley, Caroline and Gary Curtis, Phil Jarvis, and those helping on all three live ones on the shore whose names I didn't get. Heartfelt thanks to the RNLI and Coastguard without whom we could not have carried the animals down to the sea. To the Harbour Master at Trelissick for transporting us to the dolphin in his boat and taking it back to a location where it was collected for PM. To Sean Langton for helping with the two on the east side and with the single Common at Tresillick- his was the onerous task of euthanasing two animals that day. Also thanks to Lissa Goodwin for advice and the benefit of her experience in marine mammals. And to Michelle Robinson, Assistant Co-ordinator from North Devon, for her help. And a massive thanks to Dave Jarvis for running round all day with a redhot phone, co-ordinating and dealing with the media. Apologies if I've left anyone out.

Darryl Thorpe BVSc, MRCVS
Vet & BDMLR Assistant Co-ordinator for SE Cornwall

Jun 09, 2008

Dolphin Mass Stranding – Falmouth Bay

Mass dolphin stranding At approximately 08.20 hrs medic Lesley Jarvis received a telephone call from the Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network to advise that a report had been received from the Maritime & Coastguard Agency Headquarters, Falmouth to advise that they had received a report of something ‘thrashing around’ in the

Percuil River & that they had mobilised a team to investigate & would report back as soon as information was received. Lesley immediately passed the message on to husband & Cornwall Area Co-ordinator Dave Jarvis, who alerted the other Area Co-ordinator Tim Bain to the situation to ask him to endeavour to make his way to the scene while Dave commenced loading equipment into his car. Nothing was heard for 15 – 20 minutes so Dave made direct contact with the MCA & was stunned to be advised that there were several animals in the river '11 dead 3 alive'. They also advised that boats were already making their way there. Because of the time of day, Dave had already elected to leave a message on the Head Office answerphone to provide continuity in controlling the incident, but on receiving the update immediately re-contacted Uckfield & spoke with Charity Chairman, Alan Knight to appraise him of the situation. He then also rang Senior Veterinary Consultant James Barnett, Assistant Area Co-ordinators Darryl Thorpe, Jenny Haley & Michelle Robinson, together with experienced medics Caroline Curtis, Gary Hawkins, Phil Jarvis, as well as advising the RSPCA and the National Seal Sanctuary, who sent Animal Care Supervisor Tamara Cooper and Marketing Assistant Rachael Vine. In addition to this he also gave feedback to the CWT MSN Co-ordinator Maddie Precious, in order that she could organise a team to deal with what was apparently going to be some form of major incident. Tim Bain then rang Dave to advise that he would soon be en-route to the incident, together with a call from Sue White at Head Office to say that both Sue & National Co-ordinator Trevor Weeks would now be taking over the mobilisation of medics using the new mass SMS text message system.

Medics attending to dolphins Just after 10.00, having collected the Cornwall Rescue Trailer Dave & Lesley battled through the last of the morning rush hour traffic to a place called Froe, on the Roseland Peninsula, which the MCA had advised as the access location for the incident. The car park of a private house had been commandeered by the MCA as a rendezvous point & having parked they rushed down to the banks of the creek to make contact with Station Officer Allan Collins of Porthscatho MCA Team & St Mawes Asst Harbourmaster Peter Buckle.

They were confronted by a scene of carnage, with numerous dead dolphins floating in the water all around the creek. S.O. Collins immediately pointed out locations further up the river where animals were apparently still alive & people tending to them. By radio, he then contacted the ILB, which was in attendance & being driven by Coxwain Dave Nichol of RNLI Falmouth to advise of BDMLR's arrival. The boat was brought back to the quayside for Dave & Lesley to get aboard & have a briefing of the situation. Several animals had already been successfully re-floated by the RNLI personnel & members of the public, but 4 animals still remained in 3 locations along both banks in very shallow water, on a now falling tide. It was observed that several animals were also free swimming in the main body of water. Whilst making their way down to these animals a message was received that other medics had now arrived, so Dave requested that a further boat be sent to collect them & immediately bring them out to the strandings. Each of the locations was then visited by Dave & Lesley in turn, at which the following were found;

- Left bank – 1 animal being attended by 1 member of RNLI team. Animal apparently showing signs wanting to join the main group.
- Left bank – 1 animal being attended by 1 member of the public. Animal listing heavily to one side & due to depth of water blowhole becoming immersed below water from time to time. Animal also had various superficial injuries. A boat with BDMLR personnel arrived with Asst Area Coordinator Jenny Haley plus one

medic, who disembarked to provide assistance in moving the animal above water level & to stabilise it.

- Right bank – 2 animals being attended by 1 member of RNLi team. As Dave & Lesley approached, it was noted that the member of the RNLi team from location 1. had now joined his colleague, since his animal had now swum off. Both animals were still partially in the water, but showing little interest in leaving the location. 3 medics were now tasked to join in with these animals to stabilise them.

Dolphins in Falmouth Harbour Dave was then returned to the quayside to establish a control point & set up liaison with the other agencies, whilst Lesley stayed on board the RNLi boat, which was providing a co-ordination point on the water. Just as they got to shore Asst Area Co-ordinator Darryl Thorpe, who is also a Veterinary Surgeon, arrived so Dave requested him to immediately proceed to the single animal left on the left hand bank to begin assessment, but also ensuring that he took any necessary equipment to cover for the various possible outcomes. Shortly afterwards Veterinary Surgeon Sean Langton also arrived at the scene so he was requested to proceed to the pair of animals on the right hand side of the river. Area Co-ordinator Tim Bain was also there at about the same time & he immediately went down the creek to oversee the rescue operation. As various other medics arrived they were assigned tasks to help move rescue pontoons and associated equipment to both incidents. The MCA again were of great value by assisting with communications & health & safety.

Due to the isolated location, communications were irregular & by this time the media had become aware so numerous calls were being received by Dave Jarvis requesting information, as well as from incoming medics, thus making it impossible to use the satellite phone, but even so a steady stream of communications was maintained between the scene & Head Office. Soon afterwards reports began to be received that another group of about 25 animals had been seen at a fourth location a short distance away very close to shore at Place, near St Anthony's Point. Six medics were despatched to the location with instructions to report back to Dave on the situation, but shortly afterwards Devon Asst Area Co-ordinator Dave McDonald arrived & he was therefore asked to oversee this sector of the incident & to which he immediately responded, together with the Devon rescue trailer.

The incident in the Percuil River appeared to be progressing satisfactorily, although unfortunately a decision was made to euthanase one of the animals at Location 3. Both of the remaining animals, on opposite sides of the water, had been stabilised & placed into pontoons, with the intention of moving them out in deeper & more open water. Although a problem occurred when a helicopter arrived which not only disrupted all forms of verbal communication, but also frightened the animals in the pontoons & caused the free swimming animals to turn back into danger.

By early afternoon a fifth location involving approximately 10 animals in potential difficulties was identified as Custom House Quay, Falmouth & although not in any immediate danger of stranding in this location, medics were initially sent, followed soon afterwards by Devon Area Co-ordinator Sue Davie, who was placed in charge of this location. An attempt was made to herd the animals out with boats, being overseen by medics Gary Hawkins & Lesley Jarvis, but after a few tries it became reasonably apparent that there would be little chance of success as the animals tended to split into smaller groups & evade the boats.

At Froe, volunteers from the CWT MSN organised the removal of the numerous bodies that were now either still in the receding water or left up on the river banks, assisted by the MCA personnel, various workmen & members of the public. Asst Area Co-ordinator Michelle Robinson & Devon Area Co-ordinator Dr Lissa Goodwin were in attendance as this macabre operation was in progress.

At around the same time news was received that not only had the two animals in the pontoons been successfully released, but that the free swimming animals in the same location, together with a further 25 animals that had been attempting to strand at Place, had followed the boats to a safer location off shore. Dave McDonald confirmed that the dolphins had moved away from his location, so Dave Jarvis requested that he ask some medics to remain there to ensure that creatures did not return & that Dave join Sue Davie in Falmouth to assist in monitoring that situation.

As the medics that had been involved in the various boat operations in the rescue of the two animals & the herding attempt in Falmouth Harbour were dropped off at the mouth of the Percuil & walking back to Froe, carrying the all rescue equipment, due to it being low water, Area Co-ordinator Dave Jarvis began to receive messages of a sixth incident at Gillan in the Helford Estuary, involving 6 dolphins & a seventh location near Trelissick Gardens, just south of Truro, which apparently involved a single animal. One team, under the leadership of Jenny Haley immediately set out for Gillan, with further assistance requested from other medics & more members of the Animal Care Team at the National Seal Sanctuary, including Dan Jarvis, who was asked to locate sufficient tarpaulins in case they were required. A second team headed up by Lissa Goodwin, Michelle Robinson & Darryl Thorpe went to Trelissick Gardens.

This animal was located and Sean Langton was already in attendance, and as a 2 vets were now on the scene, James Barnett advised that he would proceed to the Gillan incident. Tim Bain & Lesley Jarvis collected together the rest of the BDMLR equipment left at Froe, whilst Dave dealt with the continuing deluge of press interest. As they left the location Paul Jepson & Rob Deaville from the IoZ arrived to commence their post mortem examinations on the bodies that remained on the bank, others having already been transported to the VLA at Polwhele. Dave decided to make for Gillan, as this was potentially the more serious incident, but shortly afterwards Jenny Haley was in contact, firstly to ask for better information on the exact location & then to advise that the animals had apparently been in shallow water & had been assisted out by members of the public. Therefore they now made for the rendezvous point at Trelissick Gardens & upon arrival immediately met up with James Barnett, who had also diverted there once it had been ascertained that there was no longer a problem at Gillan. Unfortunately, news was then received that the animal at this location had had to be euthanased & that it's body was being transported along the river to the access point at the King Harry Ferry. James asked us if it would be possible to take the body to VLA Polwhele for post mortem, so the equipment in the rescue ambulance was re-arranged to accommodate it & the journey arranged.

It was now early evening & animals were still present in the Falmouth Harbour area, which continued to be under the supervision of Sue Davie & Dave McDonald. As medics were still available following the Gillan incident, some of them made their way to this location & a second attempt was made to herd the animals out into a less exposed location close to the main estuary channel by using a number of carefully coordinated

smaller watercraft and kayakers, with some success. A call was also received by Dave Jarvis from 'on call' Co-ordinator Lesley Salisbury to advise that a report had been received of a group of animals of Port Pendennis, so Dave McDonald was once again set on the mission to investigate this, but this thankfully proved to be the same pod that were in the Harbour area.

Following delivery of the body of the dolphin to Polwhele, the rescue trailer was returned to Dave Jarvis' home where, once the other pieces of equipment that had been moving around the County in various vehicles, had all been collected together & brought back by Dan Jarvis, the ambulance was prepared for the following day & operations were suspended at 23.00 hrs.

Dolphin stranding casualtiesAs the press had requested early morning interviews back at Froe, Dave & Lesley Jarvis made their way back there at 06.30 hrs the following morning. En-route, messages were received that the medics that had been tasked with checking the locations could find no trace of the animals in Falmouth Harbour, although BBC Radio Cornwall did advise that a listener had reported a solitary animal free swimming in the Helford. As the day progressed, reports were received of a couple of sightings near Trelissick Gardens of groups of free swimming animals, but no strandings. Nothing further was reported until a dead animal was called in, floating off the Helford River mouth during the afternoon of the 11th.

The press have reported that 26 animals died, but of these only 2 were 'lost' during the rescue effort & over 40 animals were either rescued, assisted to safety, or monitored, not only by BDMLR, but also by various other agencies & members of the public. Thanks should be extended to the other agencies involved;

- RNLI Falmouth
- MCA Portscatho
- MCA HQ Falmouth
- Cornwall County Fire Service
- Harbourmasters at St Mawes, Truro and Falmouth
- Conrad Birnie and Seth Neill
- Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network
- National Seal Sanctuary
- RSPCA
- King Harry Ferry
- National Trust
- Mary Pollard and friends
- All the boat owners who provided transport for personnel and equipment around the rivers and helped with herding animals to safe locations away from the shore. Kayakers at various locations who assisted with herding efforts.
- Members of the public who assisted with stranded animals and herding.
- Finally, not forgetting all of the Marine Mammal Medics who came from far and wide to help the animals.

This was an extremely difficult incident, not only because of the numerous locations and animals, but also the hot weather that the teams of medics were working in, at times with little opportunity for refreshment & every single member of the team deserves commendation for their efforts, including staff at Head Office & on call Co-ordinator, &

without whom none of what was achieved would have been possible. It is hoped that the other 'team leaders' will be contributing more detailed reports on the incidents that they were dealing with in the near future.

Dave Jarvis

Director and Cornwall Area Coordinator
British Divers Marine Life Rescue
