

# News of the Earth



Conservationists fear the bottlenose dolphins' liking for fish farms will fuel a future conflict between cetacean and man.

Bruno Diaz Lopez



## The dangers of a cetacean takeaway

**Louise Murray** reports from the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas annual science conference.

The first ever study of how wild dolphins interact with a fish farm has shown that females with young are likely to be the most frequent visitors because they can easily increase the amount of food they eat for relatively little effort.

Carried out in the Golfo Aranci in Sardinia by the Bottlenose Dolphin Research Institute, the long-term study has revealed what happens when you place such a potentially rich source of food in an area of the sea commonly used

by cetaceans.

Bruno Diaz Lopez, who has been leading the research, described the fish farm as being like a free takeaway. "Fish food drifting from the farm attracts shoals of other fish around the nets, which in turn attracts hungry dolphins," he said. "The numbers of dolphins using the area has increased, particularly in the autumn and winter when natural food is scarcer and heavy marine traffic in the area in the summer

has subsided. Females with young are the most frequent visitors, who can feed effectively for low effort."

Lopez's research, which began in 1991, has also revealed how the seeds of a predictable future conflict arose after fish farm workers started feeding dead fish to the animals. Wild dolphins do not normally eat dead fish, but these have made an exception, and this led to them attempting to break into the fish farm cages for the first time in 2004, to get

at their preferred living food. The animals have been biting through the nets, mutilating farmed fish and causing mass escapes.

To date, the fish farm has responded with restraint, double netting the cages to reduce the risk of escapes and increasing a deterrent human presence.

### More information

Find out more about the Bottlenose Dolphin Research Institute at [www.geocities.com/B\\_D\\_R\\_I;0039\\_3460815414](http://www.geocities.com/B_D_R_I;0039_3460815414)

### OF DOGFISH AND ORCAS

● Deep-sea sharks such as the leaf scale gulper shark and the Portuguese dogfish are being killed in their millions by a little-known gillnet fishery operated by Spanish-owned but UK-registered boats. The sharks are targeted for their



Portuguese dogfish are being targeted for their liver oil.

valuable liver oil, which is used in cosmetics and health products. Numbers have crashed by an estimated 80 per cent in the past 10 years, with an estimated 3.75 million sharks killed each year.

● A satellite tracking study has shown orcas change course to intercept herring fisheries up to 18km away. The continual noise of the pumps lifting herring from the nets seems to be the dinner bell. But while the spillage offers a free snack, there really is no such thing as a free lunch: 20 per cent of orcas have scars from the seine nets.



Orcas are drawn to the easy food around the nets of the herring fisheries – but at a cost.

Louise Murray

## The crane and the plane

**USA** New routes planned for avian ultralite scheme.

The pioneering scheme to employ ultralight aircraft as surrogate parents to whooping cranes – one of the most bizarre spectacles in the skies above America – is so successful it could be expanded.

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, which uses ultralight aircraft to teach juvenile cranes migration routes, may soon create another aircraft-assisted flock.

Since 2001, 55 young birds have set out from Wisconsin to follow the ultralights to Florida. Forty-two have survived, making the return journey and subsequent migrations unaided. Breeding, the key step to making the flock self-sustaining, has been attempted, and could succeed next year.

A further 21 juveniles learnt to migrate with aircraft last autumn, and



Juvenile whooping cranes learn migration routes from the 'parent' microlite.

www.operationmigration.org

four more will be released to follow adult birds in the new flock, a development which may gradually displace the ultralight – which could then be released to start work on another route.

The whooping crane is among the world's rarest birds. In the 1940s, fewer than 50 flew in the last migratory flock, which winters in Texas,

and breeds in Canada.

Conservation has more than quadrupled this population.

"Whooping cranes are now thriving again in the

Midwest," said George Archibald, co-founder of the International Crane Foundation.

**Paddy Woodworth**

### Further information

www.operationmigration.org

### THE CLASS OF 2001

- Eight juvenile whooping cranes made history by following ultralights from Wisconsin to Florida in 2001. Two were lost en route, to a bobcat and a power line collision. A bobcat killed a third after arrival.
- Two males have pair-bonded with females from other years, resulting in one unhatched egg so far. One other male died last spring. Neither remaining female has pair-bonded.



Dentia Deilmont/Alamy

## Want to buy a wildlife island?

**UK** Wildlife Trust given first refusal on important conservation site.

Skokholm Island, off the Pembrokeshire coast, is to be sold to the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales for £750,000 by the estate that has owned it since 1646. A trustee of the estate said that the trust had been given first refusal because of its careful management of the island during the past five years.

Skokholm is internationally recognised for its wildlife value, designated as a Site of Special



Jean Guichard/Corbis

Skokholm is home to storm petrels, puffins and Manx shearwaters.

Scientific Interest and is part of the Pembrokeshire Marine Special Area of Conservation (SAC). With the adjacent islands of Skomer and Grassholm, it is one

of Europe's most valuable seabird breeding sites supporting 45,000 pairs of Manx shearwaters, several thousand pairs of storm petrels and strong populations of puffins

### DRC

Poaching is wiping out hippos in Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They are being targeted for their canine teeth, which end up in the illegal ivory trade, and the population has dropped from an estimated 29,000 individuals in 1974 to fewer than 1,000 today. WWF warns that their decline is affecting fishermen around Lake Edward, where hippo dung provides vital nutrients for fish. More at [www.panda.org](http://www.panda.org)

### UK

An ancient British water meadow and threatened fauna and flora will be hit by plans for a gas pipeline between Wales and England, says the Countryside Restoration Society. It describes the pipeline as "environmental and political madness" and says it will damage Herefordshire's Golden Valley.

### SCOTLAND

Plans to shoot hedgehogs that pose a threat to birdlife on North Uist have been postponed. The Uist Wader Project wanted to use dogs to hunt down those hedgehogs not already culled, but UK law requires animals caught in such circumstances to be shot. Scottish Natural Heritage said it was "uncomfortable" with the notion of shooting hedgehogs, and would seek an alternative legal method to

Credit

and other birds. Additionally, the island has 25 nationally scarce insect species, rare plant communities and seal colonies.

Trust chief executive Dr Madeleine Havard said: "We are absolutely thrilled to be offered the chance to buy Skokholm. As we are a charity, we will need to raise £750,000 to fund the purchase and future care of the island. We are asking anyone who really cares about nature and this very special part of Wales to send us a donation." **Tim Deere-Jones**

### Further information

Donations to Skokholm Appeal, WTSWW, The Nature Centre, Fountain Road, Tondy, Bridgend CF32 0EH; 01656 724100 [www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/wtsww](http://www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/wtsww)



Shark attacks, including some by the great white (inset) have prompted calls for a cull and greater safety measures for those using the water (left).



Seafile.com

## Great white frenzy

**AUSTRALIA** Attacks lead to calls for cull of iconic shark.

Marine scientists and conservationists have rejected growing calls for a cull of great white sharks, saying such a move would be scientifically misguided and pointless. Demands for a cull have followed in the wake of 36 attacks on surfers and divers in Australian waters in the past two years – including five fatalities. Despite legal protection, senior marine scientists say they have reports that some local farming and fishing communities along the coasts of South Australia and Western Australia that have lost relatives to shark attacks, have flouted the law and carried out illegal killings of great whites. Humane Society International campaigner Nicola Beynon said that sharks were effectively culled on Australia's east coast in lethal shark control nets, but that South Australia and Western Australia had always been good at resisting the pressure for culls. One of Australia's top shark researchers, Barry Bruce, of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, told BBC Wildlife that while the fatalities were "tragic and horrendous"; a cull made no sense.

"You would have to ask what would a cull achieve. Is it going to make it safe? Is there evidence of a sudden explosion in sharks that are going to kill people? Is a shark more likely to bite somebody again if it's done it in the past? The answer to all of these is no." Great whites have a complex set of behaviors, but if when, in hunting mode for their natural prey, they encountered people, "that's a very dangerous situation," he said. "Sharks have no hands, if they want to know what something is they bite it," Bruce said. While some victims demand action, the parents of two shark victims, the majority of the public and most local authorities oppose a shark cull. **Guy Healy**

### GREAT WHITE TRUTHS

There have been 25 recorded fatalities from shark attacks off Australia in the past 20 years, an average of just 1.25 per year, mainly in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. Of the 36 attacks in the past two years, only 10 are blamed on great whites, including four fatalities. Many attacks occur after sharks are harassed.

### Fungus fears

A fungus that is a major killer of amphibians worldwide has been found wild for the first time in the British Isles. The chytrid fungus *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* was discovered in American bullfrogs in two small lakes on the Kent-East Sussex border. Conservationists think they have eradicated the bullfrogs, removing more than 11,000 animals. Tests are being conducted to see if the disease has infected native British amphibians and has become established in the UK. Dr Andrew Cunningham, of the Zoological Society of London, called the discovery "pretty bad news".

### Basking in success

The Wildlife Trusts says 172 of 180 basking sharks spotted over a 10-week period this year around the UK coast were in Scottish waters. Zoologists suspect the slight increase in sea temperatures has raised the water's plankton content, with climate change the probable cause. Last year's survey found 106 sharks off Scotland, of 120 sighted. Basking sharks are the world's second largest fish, known occasionally to reach 13m in length.

### Not so bird-brained

Bigger brains appear to improve the survival prospects of many British farmland birds. Data collected by the British Trust for Ornithology found great tit populations have increased on farmland by about 75 per cent and magpies by 80 per cent. But two species with smaller brains, the

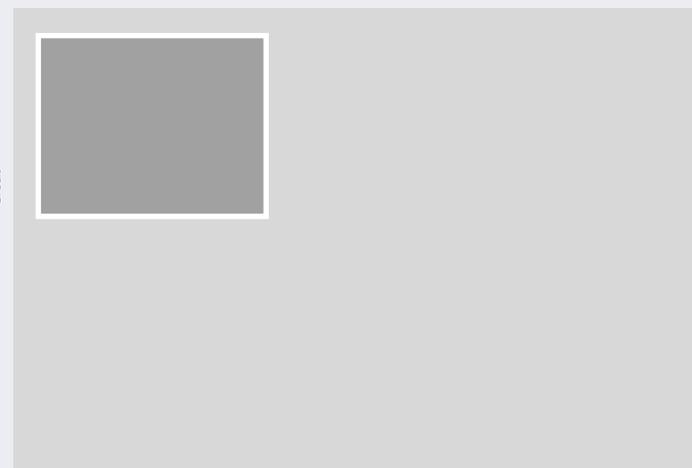
grey partridge and the lapwing, have declined by 75 per cent and 40 per cent respectively. One researcher said the "brighter" species "have more opportunity to be flexible and adapt to changing situations." British farmland bird populations have been falling for 50 years, with intensive farming usually blamed.

### Fuelling the debate

Saving wildlife and saving the planet don't always go together. To avoid using fossil fuels, many countries grow 'biomass' – crops such as oilseed rape, elephant grass and coppiced willow – to replace coal and oil. But experts say there is insufficient land in the UK and in other European countries to do this without destroying hedgerows, using huge amounts of fertiliser and growing single crops over wide areas, which is wildlife-unfriendly. Grain harvests might suffer, too. One expert said: "You can either feed humans or cars, but not both."

### Chick catastrophe

Parts of Scotland's east coast saw a better breeding season for seabirds this year than last, but failures in the west have made 2005 one of the worst years recorded. A Tře colony normally boasting 1,500 guillemot chicks had four. Eggs 5,000 kittiwakes fell to 15. On St Kilda, 26 per cent of puffin burrows produced chicks, down from 71 per cent. The RSPB's Dr Euan Dunn blames warming seas and says: "I'm not very optimistic year on year. Something's systematically going wrong, and I think we're in for a long haul of bad years."



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Credit

The great tit (inset) is well named, say scientists. Its larger brain has allowed it to adapt to change while the less intelligent lapwing has struggled.

**Alex Kirby** is the BBC's former environment correspondent.