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Common dolphins *Delphinus delphis* in Norwegian waters

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ABSTRACT

We present distributional maps of incidental sightings and strandings/bycatches of common dolphins in Norwegian and adjacent waters. Most common dolphins are seen in these areas in the period June to September. A slight increase in number of observations may have taken place after around 2000 but common dolphins are at most occasional visitors in these waters with on average 3-5 observations per year.

SHORTBEAKED COMMON DOLPHINS, DISTRIBUTION, NORWEGIAN WATERS

INTRODUCTION

In the North Atlantic, the shortbeaked common dolphin, *Delphinus delphis*, is considered to be associated with warm temperate and tropical waters, and its northern boundary in the eastern North Atlantic seems to be west and southwest of the British Isles and occasionally entering the North Sea. Nevertheless, the species is recorded also in Norwegian waters. Haug et al. (1981) described two incidences from northern Norway, one dolphin caught in a cod gillnet in 1976 and one dolphin trapped in ice in April 1981 and eventually drowned (Haug et al. 1981). The latter was also at the time the northernmost record (70°02'N, 19°03'E) of the common dolphin in the North Atlantic. Further back, Jonsgård (1962) had made a review of observations off northern Norway of the four species generally known under a generic term equivalent to "jumpers", namely the white-beaked and white-sided dolphins, the bottlenosed dolphin and the common dolphin. His conclusion was that although all these species had been recorded from those areas, only the white-beaked dolphin had been conclusively identified and probably was the only commonly occurring species off northern Norway. From southern Norway, published information on occurrence of the common dolphin is lacking. Here we give a summary of information on common dolphins in Norwegian waters.

DATA

Several sightings surveys have been conducted in Norwegian and adjacent waters over the period 1984 to present. However, no certain identification of common dolphins has been made on effort during these surveys.

At the Institute of Marine Research, information on incidental sightings of cetaceans have been collected from various sources since 1968; research vessels, reports from fishing and whaling vessels and, especially in recent years, reports from coastguard vessels. These reports include date and position of the observations, school size and more irregularly, comments about for example behaviour. It is important to note that these records are not associated with effort and thus not feasible to use for consideration of absolute or relative abundance as such.

During the years many strandings of cetaceans have occurred and dolphins and porpoises have as well drowned in fishing gear over the region comprising Norwegian waters. However, no official reporting system of such incidents exists and no sample collection program has been established, so the information available is incidental. Occasionally, additional data like date and location, estimates of the length and condition of the animal are given.

INCIDENTAL SIGHTINGS

There are 77 records of common dolphins in Norwegian and adjacent waters in the incidental observations database. One has to bear in mind that the certainty of the species identification may be questioned since reports are from sources with a variable background with regards to species knowledge of marine mammals, and we have not put a status to this other than recording the source. In some cases photographic evidence is available but this is rather an exception than the rule. Since about 1990 this database has received a relatively equal number of approximately 800-1000 records annually, and having this in mind, the distribution of common dolphin sightings over the years seems to have been slightly increasing after about 2000 (Figure 2). There is a very evident peak in 1998, but the cause of this is unknown.

Most of the common dolphins have been recorded in the months June to September, as more than 70% of the observations have been made in that period (Figure 3).

The incidental sightings have been plotted in Figure 1. As is seen, over time it has been recorded from all along the Norwegian coast, from Oslofjord via the North Sea to the south-eastern Barents Sea. Some association with continental slopes may be inferred. There are also several records from the Barents Sea proper, but few of them can be considered undisputable. One record was made by a whale observer during the joint Norwegian-Russian ecosystem surveys in 2006, at the position 72°09'N, 44°02'E, and may be considered the northernmost record in these waters at present.

RECORDS OF STRANDED AND BYCAUGHT COMMON DOLPHINS

Over the period 1976-2008, we have recorded seven incidences of stranded or bycaught common dolphins (Figure 1). In these cases the species identifications have been confirmed. They support the general pattern of distribution as revealed by the incidental observations.

CONCLUSION

There are relatively few records of common dolphins in Norwegian waters and the species must be considered a rare species in those areas. There seems to be a slight increase in number of observations after around 2000. Common dolphins are supposed to be associated with warmer waters than usually found along the Norwegian coastlines, so one interpretation may be that influx of warm water have resulted in more occasional visitors of this species.

REFERENCES

Haug, T., Gulliksen, B. and Chrsitensen, I. 1981. Observasjoner av delfin i Nord-Norge (Observations of the common dolphin *Delphinus delphis* L. in North-Norway). *Fauna 34:97-100.*

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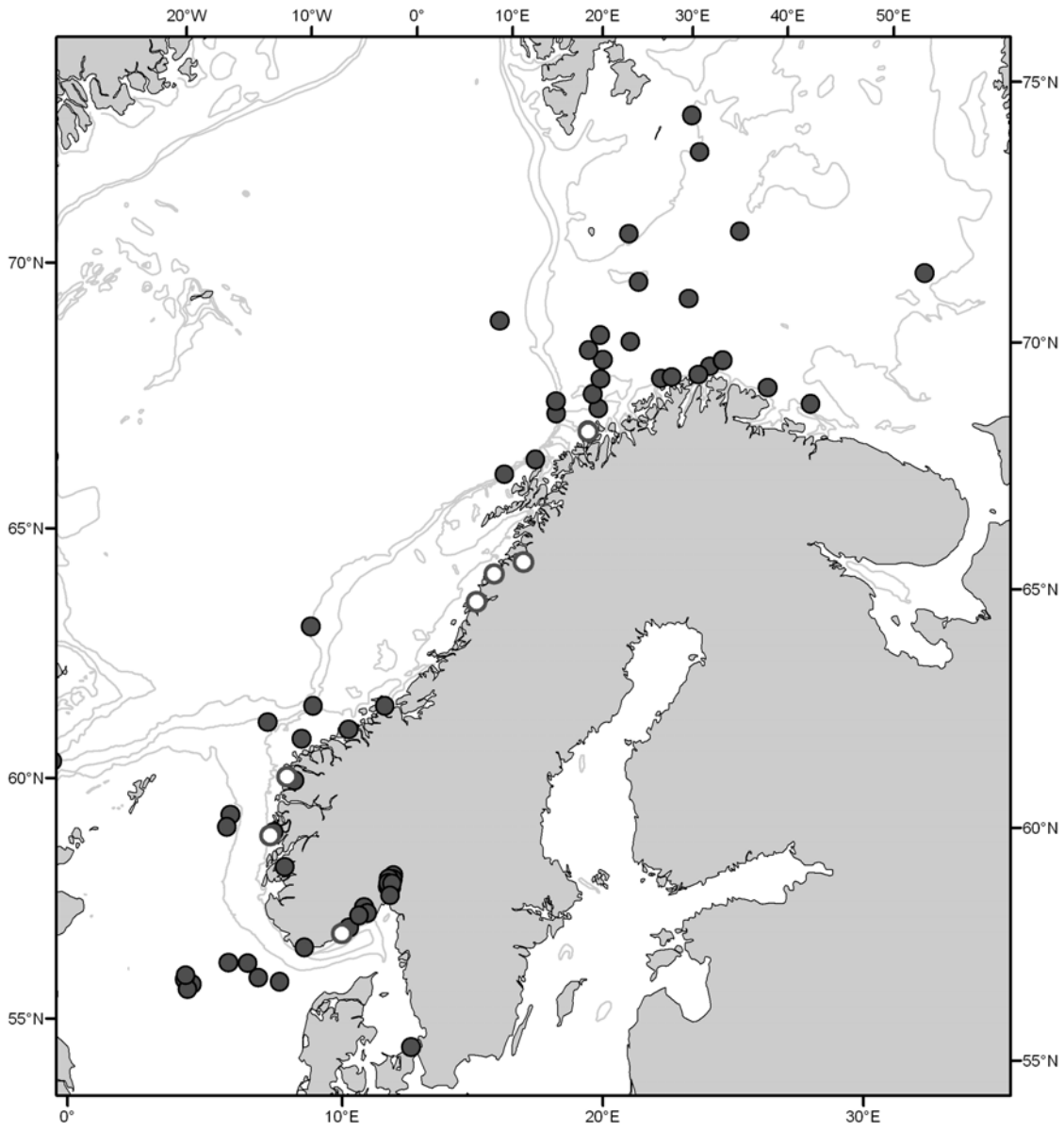

Figure 1. Distribution of incidental sightings (filled circles) and strandings/caught in gillnets (open circles) of common dolphins over the period 1976 to 2008.

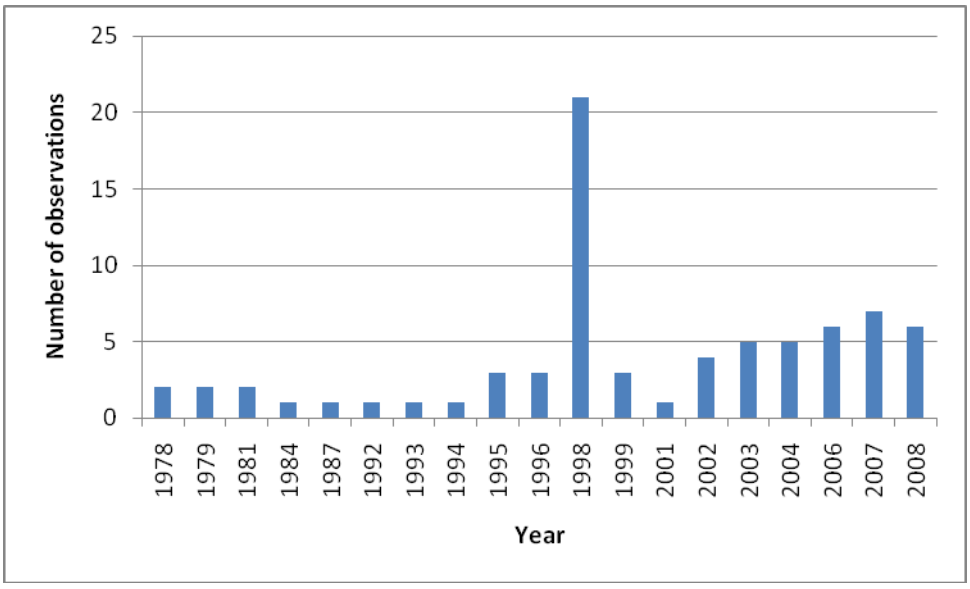

Figure 2. Number of incidental sightings of common dolphins by year.

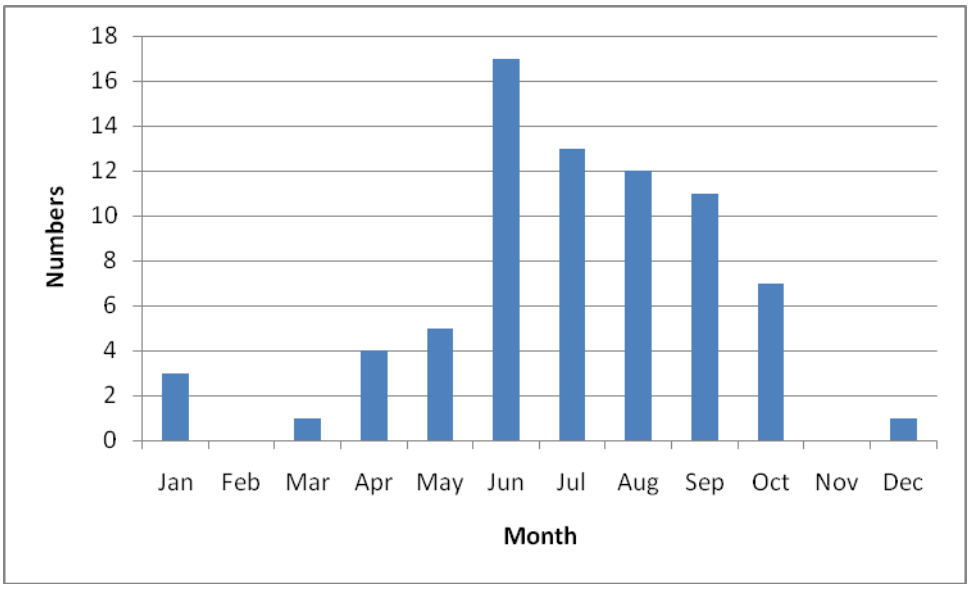

Figure 3. Distribution of incidental sightings of common dolphins by the month seen.