Wildlife Guide for The Tall Ships Races Aberdeen 2025

Ian Hay and Lauren Smith, East Grampian Coastal Partnership

Welcome to Port of Aberdeen

Harbours are where worlds meet, visitors on board cruise, or tall, ships, goods from all corners of the world and food from our seas reach the land at our major ports. However, the port of Aberdeen is also where the natural and human worlds meet. Indeed, this busy industrial port in the centre of a major city is also probably the best urban wildlife watching site in Europe thanks to a top predator that uses these waters as a key hunting ground.

Around three thousand years ago the first humans started using the sheltered waters at the entrance to the River Dee to access rich fishing and early trade. At this time the river would have been full of salmon with wolves and bears hunting the wooded riverbanks. Since these early days things have changed rapidly, and the wolves and bears are no more. The sandy beaches of the estuary have been replaced with the port walls that have brought prosperity to the city and region. But the salmon remain, and where large numbers of fish must pass through a confined area, opportunists will find a meal.

From the land to the sea and back

The Dee is one of Scotland's four great salmon rivers along with the Tay, the Spey and the Tweed. From its source at the Wells of Dee, high in the Cairngorm Mountains, it passes through a u-shaped glacial valley that forms this famous glen with its strong royal connections.

These cold waters are where each spring millions of salmon eggs hatch. Young salmon spend between 3 and 5 years growing in the rivers feeding on flies, insect larvae and other small fish before they develop a silver sheen and migrate to the sea as smolts.

Smolts are between 10cm and 15cm in length when they leave the river, they spend between 1 and 5 years feeding at sea before returning to the same river to breed having grown rapidly. Three to ten kilograms is normal, more than twenty kilograms is possible, and an angler's dream.

To get to the river they must pass through the harbour channel. In addition, Port of Aberdeen's North Harbour entrance is a clear dividing line that can be seen from above. Salty sea water and river waters are slow to mix, this boundary can mark a rapid change in temperature which can shock the fish, all of this makes the returning salmon an easy target for hunting dolphins.

Guide to other river runners

- Sea trout are the same species as brown trout but lead very different lives. Brown trout are a common member of the same family as salmon. They are found in fast well oxygenated rivers and lakes. But they have distinct types of behaviour. In deep lakes some will grow very big turning into ferocious predators, this ferox type can grow to over fifteen kilos. Most are much smaller living in rivers with one kilogram being a large fish. In some places these river fish head out to sea for its rich feeding, these are known as sea trout. Sea trout turn silver, and like salmon, they returning to the rivers to breed, they differ from salmon in that they commonly live in local coastal waters.
- Sea lamprey are ancient, simple fish that have been around since before the dinosaurs roamed the earth. They have an eel-like body with inward pointing teeth that they use to bite fish drinking their blood, because of this they are sometimes known as vampire fish. They can grow to over one metre in length and are a regular food for otters.
- Nearly all species of eel that pass between rivers and seawater are born in rivers then head out to sea to feed before returning to freshwater to complete their lifecycle. The common eel does the opposite. Born deep in the seas close to the Caribbean the small glass like Eels make the massive journey of up to 3,000

miles, (4,800 kilometres) to our rivers where they will spend many years feeding before returning to salt water to breed. European eels are common no longer and are now classed as critically endangered,

Where to see salmon

The Falls of Feugh lay close to the town of Banchory and are a natural barrier to salmon heading up to spawning grounds, but not an insurmountable one as fish can be seen leaping the white water. Autumn is the best time to look, especially after heavy rain.

The hunters

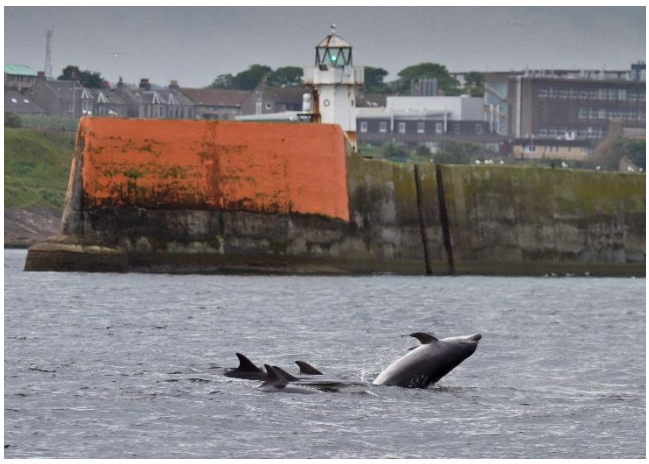
Bottlenose dolphins are one of the widest ranging species on earth. They can be found from Australia and New Zealand in the South to the North of Scotland and almost every area in between. While they are all the same species there are differences. In the tropics they tend to feed on small fish, and the warm water means they remain small and rather slim with a large male being up to three meters in length. In Aberdeen they are much bigger reaching four meters, this is as long as a VW Polo or five door Mini. They are also much heavier and look like body builders compared to their tropical relatives, weighing over 500kg.

Dolphins are remarkably intelligent, have a wide range of senses such as a form of sonar, any they work as a team. In fact, seeing over 30 bottlenosed dolphins in Port of Aberdeen is not unusual.

The hunt

Bottlenose dolphins tend to live in loose family groups with the core made up of the females and young. When travelling they tend to stay in a close group. In human terms these appear like a group of VIPs, outside of this group will be the big males. These almost appear like a protection team, with a couple checking the route ahead, and others around the outside of the group.

If you are watching the entrance to the Port of Aberdeen North Harbour looking for them it will generally be one or two big adults that arrive first followed by the main family group. At this point the hunt will begin. Dolphins will generally start by checking the area between the outer breakwaters along the dividing line between the river and the sea water before some begin heading up into the shipping channel. They will often remain like this, well spread out before the seam to disappear for a couple of minutes. Then the actions start as they come together to take on a shoal of salmon. Major tail slaps, leaps and sometime thrown fish can be seen.



Once the hunt is over it is often time for socialising with high leaping. Often the young calves join in. These are smaller and much lighter in colour, the very young ones have vertical stripes. These stripes are known as fetial folds and are like stretch marks as the young grow rapidly.

The dolphin directory (all images credited as Charlie Phillips Images)

Scientists have been studying bottlenose dolphins in Aberdeen since the late 90s using photographs of the distinctive marks and scratches on the animals to identify individuals. Using this technique they have built up a directory of our regular visitors.

'Trail Scoop' ID748

One of the Big Boys, more often seen on the coast around the black Isle.

'Spirit'

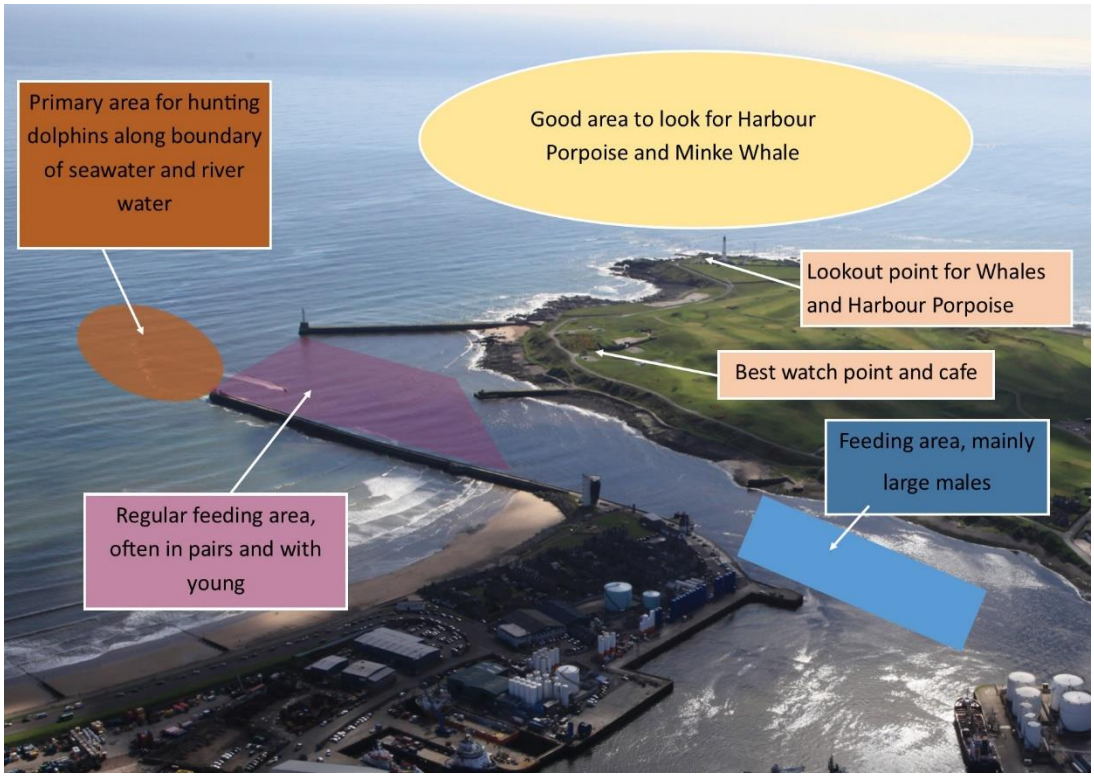
A great mum with six offspring to date, and now a grandmother.

'Sunshine and rainbow'

Sunshine is the five year old daughter of Rainbow. Rainbow is one of our oldest mums being well into her forties.

Where to watch dolphins in Aberdeen

The best place is the Torry Battery and the car parks below. This gives a wide view and there are often other watchers around who can share sightings. You can also watch in comfort at the café. Please note for your own safety much of the harbour is out of bounds so do not try to access the breakwaters beyond the fences.



Guide to other marine mammals

Bottlenose dolphins are not the only species that uses the Port, harbour porpoise, minke whale and even humpback whale have been seen in the port, these sightings are rare, however if you move to the headland at Girdleness on a nice calm day a wide range of species can be seen

Harbour porpoise

These are our smallest cetacean, and while they are common, on a transect survey between Aberdeen and Peterhead researchers spotted over 100 in 3 hours, they are not easy to see unless conditions are perfect.

Harbour porpoises are shy, with very good reason. Unfortunately, they face attacks from bottlenose dolphins and are hunted by orca.

They are best seen by looking out to sea on a very calm day, they are often on their own but larger groups are possible.

Minke whale

Minkes are small by whale standard, but noticeably long and sleek compared to dolphins. As with all species a calm day is best, look for large groups of feeding seabirds, minkes often join in the feeding frenzy.

Classically a minke whale will surface showing its beak first followed by a long body with the tall dorsal fin at the very back.

White beaked dolphin

Until around 15 years ago white beaked dolphin were very common off Aberdeen in the summer, however they are a cold-water species and it may now simply be too warm for them due to the effects of climate change.

White beaked dolphins look like miniature orca; they are very fast moving and can be seen in pods of up to forty.

Orca

Pod of orca (credit Tim Marshall)

What to say about orca, they are without doubt the ultimate predator hunting everything from herring to whales, and even great white sharks.

Orca are becoming much more common in our waters with two pods, the 27s and the 169s being seen most years and sometimes for extended periods, 2025 has been a notable year with regular sightings on the coast of Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

The 27s are a pod that included two large males, two adult females, three young adults and a small calf. They are commonly seen around Shetland, Orkney and the outer moray firth. In 2022 they were seen just outside of the Port of Aberdeen.

The 169s are a pod of five that are often seen in the spring around the Fraserburgh area including in 2025 when they have been seen close to the Port. They are veracious hunters of seals although in winter herring make up a large part of their diet.

Humpback whale

The giants are returning. Humpback whales are the largest whale that we regularly see on our coast. They are returning as they recover from the effects of the whaling industry.

Grey Seal

The grey seal is a very common aquatic mammal that can be seen hunting in Port of Aberdeen and in the River Dee almost as far inland as Banchory. They mainly eat small fish and discards thrown from fishing boats, but some do specialise in Salmon.

Seals can be seen hauled out on the island near the bridge over the River Don, or at the Mouth of the Ythan which is Scotland's largest haul out site.

Otter

The otter is a large member of the weasel family that hunts the waters of the River Dee including the port. They are fast and agile appearing to be slightly manic when hunting, they spend long periods under the water. If you are looking for dolphins make sure, you keep an eye on the shoreline as the action may be happening under your feet.

The bird seasons

At the south side of Port of Aberdeen is the headland of Girdleness. This is an important area for birds, some live here year-round, others just visit for the summer or winter, others are just passing through.

Summer

What would make a bird leave the warmth of the tropics to come to Aberdeen to breed and raise its young. The answer is simple, daylight. With over 20hours of useable light in the summer Aberdeen offers birds the chance to raise a family in record time before heading south when daylight hours diminish and the cold returns.

Sandwitch terns

Breeding at the Ythan Estuary 10 miles north of Aberdeen the elegant sandwich tern is a common and noisy bird that can be seen feeding at the port mouth. They winter in west Africa.

Arctic tern

Arctic and common tern are very difficult to tell a part. Arctic terns love daylight and rarely see the night sky; they summer in the far north and winter in the far south spending much of the year in 24hour daylight. Common terns are city nesters breeding on the roofs of buildings in Aberdeen's industrial estates.

Herring gulls

The herring gull is a large, familiar seabird commonly seen around coasts, inland towns, and urban areas. It is easily recognised by its grey back, white underparts, and loud, distinctive call. While often perceived as abundant—particularly in cities—their overall population has declined significantly.

Autumn

Shearwaters (credit Tim Marshall)

In the late summer you may be lucky and see shearwaters from Girdleness. The most common species is the Manx shearwater, but you might spot a Sooty, these breed in the Southern Ocean coming to Scottish waters in our summer/ the southern winter.

Short eared owls

The sight of a large owl flying in from the sea on a stormy autumn day may bring images of Hogwarts, however these birds summer in the high arctic then winter in the warmer UK with some passing through Aberdeen on route. Many spend the winter on golf courses, the Kings Links in Aberdeen is a great place to look.

Robins

The robin may be one of the most common garden birds, but it is also a winter visitor with hundreds of thousands migrating here from northern Europe. Girdleness is to them like a motorway service station, a good place to refuel ready for the next part of the journey. You may also see other species such as the tiny goldcrest, redwings and even woodcock passing through.

Winter

Divers

Divers are ancient waterbirds from the north that use the port to catch small fish in the winter. They come here because the Scandinavian lochs where they breed will be frozen during our mild winters.

Eiders

The stunning black and white male eiders are ever present at the port along with the brown females. They have a comical call sounding almost like they have heard a great piece of gossip.

Purple Sandpipers

These are another bird that breeds in the far north and winters at the port. This is one of the best places to see them in the UK as over 200 regularly roost on the Inner South Breakwater when the high tide cuts them off from the rocky shores where they feed.

Rockpool guide

The rocky headland of Girdleness hosts many rockpools that are filled with a wide variety of life.

Seaweeds

There are over 650 species of seaweed found in UK waters, with many thriving along the Aberdeen coastline. These seaweeds are broadly classified into three main colour groups: green, brown, and red. In coastal rockpools, some of the most commonly encountered species include bladder wrack, serrated wrack, gutweed, oarweed, and coral weed. Like land plants, seaweeds undergo photosynthesis to produce energy, but unlike plants, they do not have roots. Instead, they use a specialized structure called a holdfast, which allows them to anchor securely to rocks and withstand the force of waves.

Common limpet

The common limpet is a familiar sight on rocky shores around Scotland and is easily recognized by its conical, dome-shaped shell. These hardy marine molluscs cling tightly to rocks using a powerful muscular foot, helping them resist strong waves and avoid predators. Limpets graze on algae using a specialized tongue-like organ called a radula, scraping food from the surface of rocks. They are remarkably territorial and often return

to the same spot, known as a "home scar," after foraging. Their strong attachment and unique adaptations make them an important part of the coastal ecosystem.

The common periwinkle

The common periwinkle is a small marine snail found along rocky shores and tidal pools. It has a sturdy, spiralled shell that varies in colour from greyish brown to black and typically grows to about 1–2.5 centimetres in length. This hardy mollusc plays an important role in coastal ecosystems by grazing on algae and biofilms, which helps prevent algal overgrowth.

Beadlet anemone

The beadlet anemone is a common and striking marine creature, it appears as a smooth, jelly-like blob when out of water but transforms underwater by extending its vibrant, deep red stinging tentacles. These tentacles surround a central mouth and are used to capture small prey such as plankton and tiny fish. Beadlet anemones have a

ring of bright blue beads just below the tentacles—specialised structures called acrorhagi used for defence against other anemones. They attach firmly to rocks and can retract their tentacles to protect themselves during low tide, making them well-suited to the changing conditions of the intertidal zone.

Common starfish

The common starfish is a well-known marine animal, often seen clinging to rocks or moving slowly across the seabed. Typically, orange or pale brown in colour, it has a classic five-armed shape, though individuals with more arms can occasionally be found. The underside of each arm is lined with hundreds of tiny tube feet, which help it move and grip surfaces. A skilled predator, the common starfish feeds mainly on mussels and other bivalves by prising open their shells and everting its stomach to digest the prey externally. Its ability to regenerate lost arms makes it a resilient and fascinating part of the rocky shore ecosystem.

Green shore crab

The green shore crab is one of the most widespread and easily recognised crabs found along Scottish coastlines, particularly in rockpools and under seaweed. Despite its name, its shell—called a carapace—can vary in colour from green to brown or even orange, especially after moulting. Green shore crabs are opportunistic scavengers and predators, feeding on small invertebrates, dead animals, and plant matter. They have five pairs of legs, with the front pair adapted into strong pincers used for feeding and defence. These crabs are highly adaptable and can tolerate a wide range of salinities, making them successful inhabitants of both sheltered estuaries and open rocky shores.

Hermit crab

Hermit crabs are fascinating and unusual crustaceans commonly found in rockpools and shallow waters. Unlike true crabs, hermit crabs have soft, spiral-shaped abdomens that lack a hard shell for protection. To stay safe, they inhabit empty snail shells, which they carry around and switch as they grow. Their front claws help them grip and defend their borrowed homes, with one claw often larger than the other for added protection. Hermit crabs are omnivores, feeding on algae, detritus, and small bits of animal matter. Social and active, they are often seen scuttling across the seabed or competing for the best available shells.

Common shanny / blenny

The common shanny, is a type of blenny, and sometimes called a “Sea Frog”. They have an elongated eel-like body and can reach a length of 17cm with a blunt head and distinctive large lips, the males are usually a dark grey colour, and the females often display mottled shades of brown and green. Common shannies are well adapted to life in the intertidal zone and can survive out of water for short periods by hiding under rocks or seaweed to stay moist. They are omnivorous, feeding on small invertebrates, algae, and detritus.

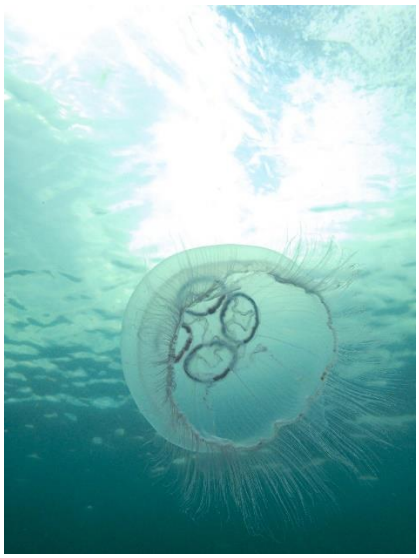
Under the sea

The waters in and around the Port of Aberdeen are full of wildlife with some surprising sea creatures calling this area home.

Long-spined sea scorpion

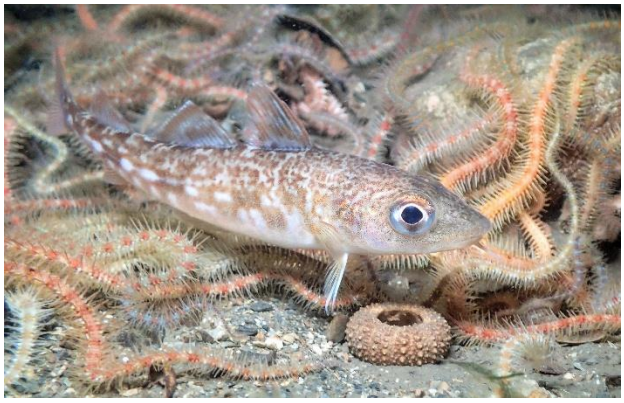
The long-spined sea scorpion is a small, bottom-dwelling fish found in the rocky coastal waters of the northeastern Atlantic, particularly around the British Isles and northern Europe. It is easily recognised by its large head, wide pectoral fins, and striking mottled colouration that provides excellent camouflage against rocky the seabed and kelp. Long-spined Sea scorpions are ambush predators, feeding on small crustaceans, fish, and other invertebrates.

Moon jellyfish



The moon jellyfish is a translucent, saucer-shaped marine animal commonly found in our coastal waters. Recognisable by its bell-like body and four distinct, circular-shaped gonads visible through its bell, the Moon Jellyfish can grow up to 40 centimetres in diameter. It drifts gracefully with the currents, using rhythmic pulsations for limited directional movement. Moon jellyfish feed mainly on plankton, which they trap with their mucus-covered tentacles. Despite having stinging cells, their sting is typically harmless to humans. These jellyfish are a vital part of marine food webs and are often studied for their simple anatomy and regenerative abilities.

Juvenile cod

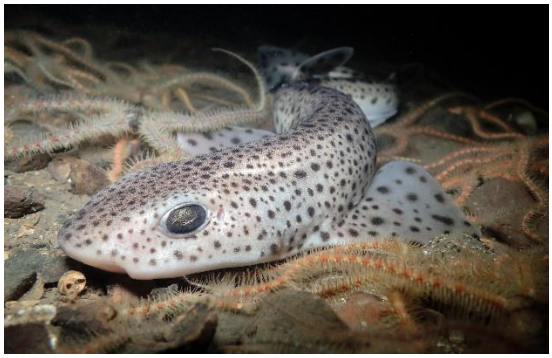


Juvenile cod are an important developmental stage in the life cycle of the Atlantic cod. After hatching from eggs, these young fish begin life as planktonic larvae before settling to the seafloor and transitioning into bottom-dwelling juveniles. They typically inhabit shallow, coastal waters with sandy or muddy substrates, where they can find shelter and ample food such as small crustaceans, worms, and other invertebrates. Juvenile cod grow rapidly during their first few years, gradually developing the characteristic elongated body and barbel on the chin seen in adults. Their survival is influenced by environmental conditions, predation, and food availability, making them key indicators of cod population health and marine ecosystem dynamics.

Plaice

Plaice is a type of flatfish commonly found in the sandy bottoms of the northeastern Atlantic Ocean and parts of the Mediterranean Sea. Recognisable by its distinctive orange spots and smooth brown skin. As a demersal species, it plays an important role in marine ecosystems and is also subject to fishing regulations to help manage sustainable populations.

Small spotted catshark



The small-spotted Catshark, also known as the lesser spotted dogfish, is a slender, bottom-dwelling shark commonly found in the shallow coastal waters of the northeastern Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. It typically grows to about 60–100 centimetres in length and is easily identified by its elongated body, blunt snout, and distinctive pattern of small dark spots scattered over a pale brown or greyish background. This catshark favours sandy or gravelly seabed, where it feeds on a variety of prey including crustaceans, molluscs, and small fish. It is a slow-moving, nocturnal hunter that spends much of the day resting on the seafloor. The species reproduces by laying tough, egg cases—often called "mermaid's purses"—which are commonly found washed up on beaches.

Monitoring a changing world

Port of Aberdeen may at some point also host less welcome wildlife. Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) are creatures that have reached our shore accidentally and found that

they like it here, very much. In fact, many of these species will have no native predators so they can rapidly take over an ecosystem creating massive biological and economic damage. In parts of the world millions of pounds have been spent trying to remove non-native species such as rats from seabird breeding islands.

To monitor the possible occurrence of Invasive Non Native Species, Port of Aberdeen has teamed up with the East Grampian Coastal Partnership to look these creatures in our waters. Thankfully none have been found to date, but we remain vigilant.