

# SEA WATCH FOUNDATION, HEBRIDEAN WHALE AND DOLPHIN TRUST, AND IRISH WHALE AND DOLPHIN GROUP

## News release

**Embargoed for:** Immediate release

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## **Famous killer whales ‘John Coe’ and ‘Aquarius’ back in Hebridean seas after being spotted off the English coast for the first time!**

Much loved whales *John Coe* and *Aquarius* from the West Coast Community of killer whales were spotted on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> May near Porthgwarra by Will McEnergy-Cartwright from the Minack Theatre in Porthcurno, West Cornwall.

Nine days later on the 14<sup>th</sup> May, the pair were seen back in the Hebrides by Anthony Rigell from Waternish Point, Isle of Skye around 550 miles north of Porthgwarra, and on the 17<sup>th</sup> May they were spotted off Lochboisdale, South Uist from the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust’s research vessel, *Silurian*.

Thanks to the brilliant photographs captured by Will, and his efforts to report and share the sighting, the Sea Watch Foundation, Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust and the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group have confirmed that this is the first sighting of this famous pair of killer whales off England and the most southerly point they have ever been recorded in the five decades that movements of this small and unique group of killer whales have been tracked by the charities.

*Will shared this notable encounter with us, and added “This is a once in a lifetime event. I am so happy and proud to be part of this historical moment. To see these fantastic creatures is one thing, but to photograph them is just breathtaking!!”*



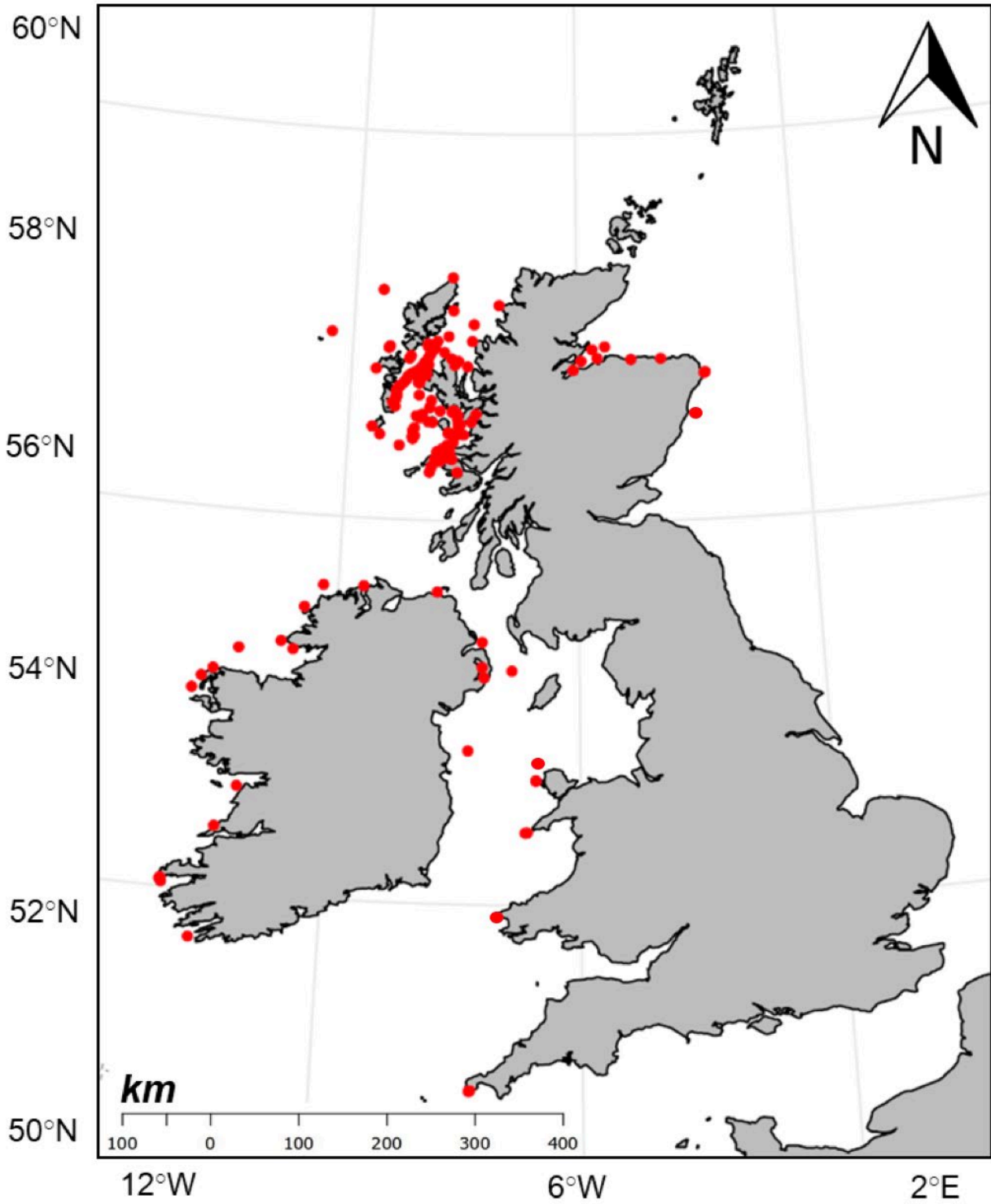
*The most southerly sighting of Aquarius (left) and John Coe (right), Cornwall 5<sup>th</sup> May 2021*  
©Will McEney-Cartwright, Instagram: [mc\\_naturelife](#)

*John Coe* is one of the most distinctive killer whales seen around the British Isles with a deep nick near the base of his dorsal fin and fluke.

*"Many people ask how John Coe got his name" says Dr Peter Evans, Director of Sea Watch Foundation who has been tracking sightings of killer whales around the British Isles since the 1970s. "It is the name of a character in a book called "Mile Zero" by Thomas Sanchez about a freed slave who became a student of the sea. It seemed a fitting name for this great wanderer of the ocean who must know the waters around Britain and Ireland better than most."*

These animals truly are a West Coast Community, with sightings recorded largely along the west coasts of Scotland and Wales and all around Ireland. Most sightings have been recorded in the Hebrides off the Scottish west coast, although John Coe has also occasionally been seen even off the north-east coast of Scotland.

The previous confirmed sighting of the pair was reported off Skye in the Inner Hebrides in October 2020, whilst in Ireland, *John Coe* was last seen off the coast of Co. Donegal in August 2020. The lockdown during the winter months has meant that fewer people than normal were out at sea and around our coasts and as a result the charities have received a smaller number of sightings from the public than normal in the last 18 months.



*Confirmed Sightings of John Coe reported to the Sea Watch Foundation, Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, and Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, 1980-2021*

Dr Lauren Hartny-Mills, Science and Conservation Manager at the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, monitors sightings of the group off the west coast of Scotland:

*“We are all absolutely thrilled that John Coe and Aquarius have been seen again! Will’s recent sighting off Cornwall really highlights how crucial public sightings data are in helping us monitor the movements of individual animal’s year after year. It shows how much we still have to learn about their movements, and it is fascinating to be able to add another important piece to the puzzle. Most of what we know about animals like John Coe and Aquarius is thanks to dedicated members of the public who send in their sightings and photographs of whales and dolphins to citizen science sightings schemes run by regional charities like Whale Track by Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust.”*

During the 1980s, *John Coe* was spotted within groups that numbered up to twenty individuals. That has since dwindled. In the 1990s, the largest group in which *John Coe* was seen was fourteen, and in the subsequent decades this declined further, going from ten down to eight in recent years following the death of two of the individuals. Since 2016, these two individual males *John Coe* and *Aquarius* have not been seen with any other killer whales, and no calves have been recorded in recent years. Killer whales continue to be threatened in particular from pollutants. Tragically, this unique group of killer whales may well die out in our lifetime.

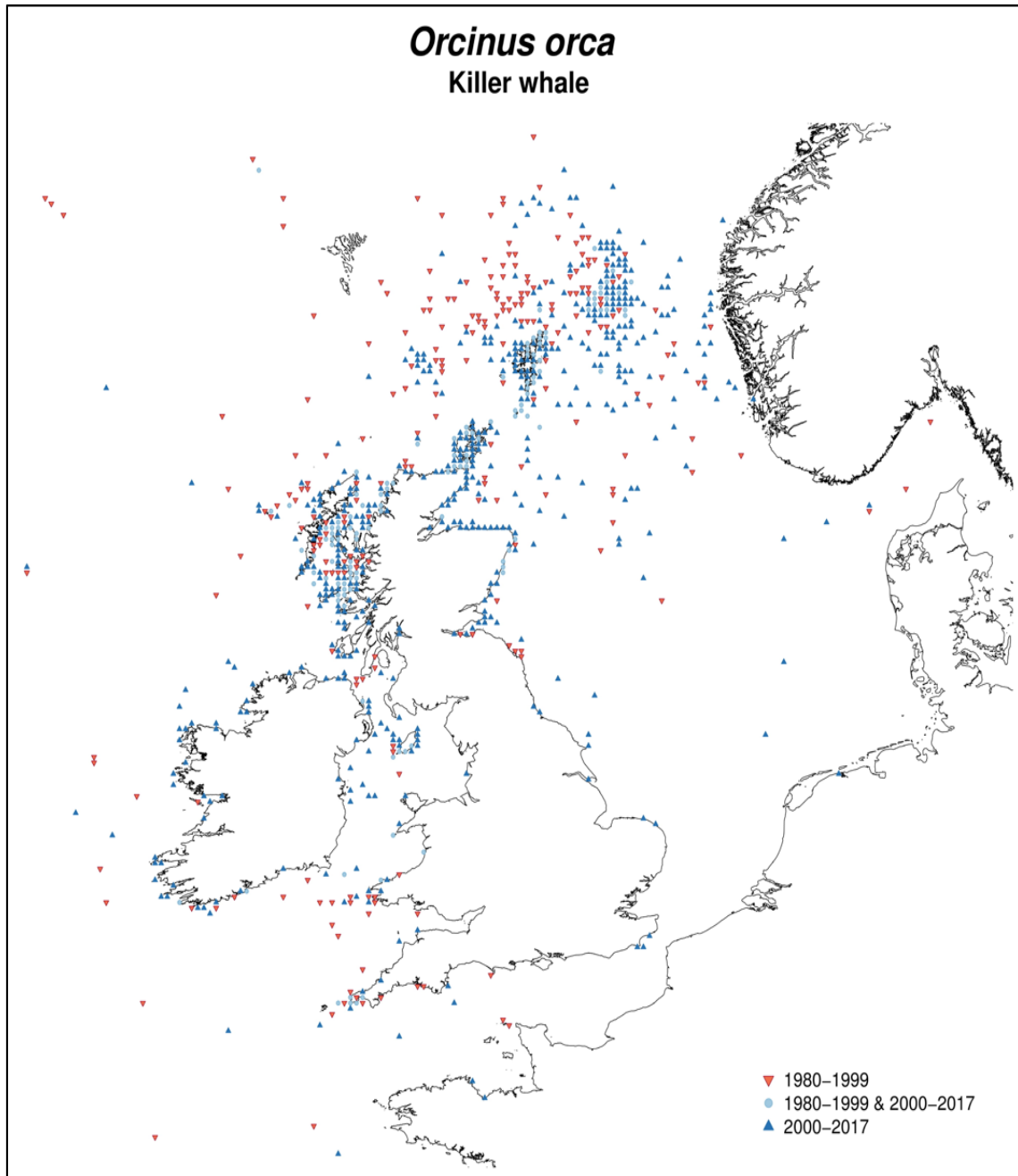
These are not the only killer whales seen in British and Irish waters though, and sightings of other groups and individuals have been recorded in English waters. A number of groups of killer whales are frequently seen in Scottish waters, as depicted in the recently published [Scottish Killer Whale Photo-Identification Catalogue 2021](#). This fantastic resource has been compiled by five passionate and dedicated naturalists – Andrew Scullion ([Orca Survey Scotland](#)), Hugh Harrop ([Shetland Wildlife](#)), Karen Munro (NatureScot), Steve Truluck ([Steve Truluck at Sea](#)) and Dr Andy Foote (Norwegian University of Science and Technology).

Pádraig Whooley, Sightings Officer at the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG), monitors sightings of the killer whale group in Irish waters:

*“In an average year, around 50% of Irish killer whale sightings are confirmed by IWDG to be of John Coe and others from this remnant group. Seeing this apex predator in local waters is always special, but encounters with the West Coast Community Group stand out, because of their long history around these isles. John Coe is a symbol of both the Oceans’ power and fragility, and their declining numbers reminds us that we need to do much more to protect our marine ecosystems.”*

Dr Peter Evans adds *“Together we make a plea for members of the public to send us photographs of any killer whales they see around Britain and Ireland so we can continue to track individuals. If you have seen John Coe or any other orcas around Britain and Ireland, do let us know. The three organisations work closely together to study and conserve all cetacean species in the region in collaboration with citizen scientists everywhere.”*

With marine mammals at risk from human activities including climate change, entanglement, pollution, underwater noise and habitat degradation, ongoing and long-term research is crucial to improve understanding of the impacts on cetaceans, and how to protect them.



*Killer whales can be seen over a wide area of British and Irish waters but mainly in the north and west (from Evans & Waggitt (2020) in the Atlas of the Mammals of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).*

Anyone can get involved to help track the movements of individuals like John Coe and Aquarius and contribute to marine conservation efforts by sending in sightings and photographs of whales, dolphins, porpoises and basking sharks. For the west coast of Scotland report to the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (<https://whaletrack.hwdt.org>), for Ireland to the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (<https://records.iwdg.ie/sighting.php>) and to Sea Watch Foundation (<https://www.seawatchfoundation.org.uk/sightingsform/>) for all areas around the British Isles.

*We would like to thank Will McEnery-Cartwright for sharing the sighting and photographs for use in HWDT's West Coast Community Photo-Identification Database.*