

Risso's Dolphin stranding at Burray, Orkney

On Monday, 13 May, the British Divers Marine Life Rescue area coordinator in Orkney was alerted to the presence of two Risso's dolphins close into Churchill Barrier 4 near the village of Burray. Medics were called to monitor the animals and carry out some community outreach as the animals were close to the main road and attracting a lot of attention. Video and photos taken showed that the two animals were of similar size allaying early concerns that this was a mother/calf or mother/juvenile pair. However, there is no way to know whether the two animals are related or just socially bonded. Medics continued to monitor the animals over the following days. Whilst the animals appeared to be exhibiting normal behaviour, there were concerns that one in particular was more lethargic and spending more time logging at the surface. It also appeared to potentially be underweight.

On Saturday 18 May, it was thought that the pair had gone back out to sea, but were relocated by a member of public in the bay at St Margaret's Hope in South Ronaldsay close to shore. An alert was put out to all medics as the weaker animal appeared to have deteriorated badly and both animals were now at risk of stranding as the tide fell. One dolphin (the one which appeared underweight) did briefly strand at low tide in shallow water, but refloated just as kit and a vet arrived on scene. It was observed being assisted by the second animal who was attempting to push it back into deeper water. As the tide rose and with medics monitoring in preparation for it stranding again, the pair of animals relocated back to Barrier 4 where they remained all day on Sunday 19 May. Again, the healthy animal was seen to be stopping the weaker individual from stranding.

On Monday 20 May, Medics checked the situation first thing and found that the healthy animal had disappeared overnight. The other dolphin was 3 metres from shore hanging low in the water and struggling to maintain itself upright. Medics quickly responded and a vet was called in anticipation of the animal stranding as the tide dropped. After consultation with veterinary experts, the decision was made to euthanise the dolphin on welfare grounds. Medics retrieved the carcass and it has been transported south to the Scottish Marine Animal Strandings Scheme hub near Inverness for full necropsy.

We would like to thank all our team that attended this prolonged incident, the Orkney residents who supported medics on site in both St Margaret's Hope and at Burray and kept them going with supplies of tea, biscuits and some amazing cake! It was very much appreciated on a dull and chilly weekend. We would also like to thank Flett & Carmichael vets for their continued support and swift response on Monday.

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