

The Ambassador Abroad... Around the World in 152 Days (Part 5)

In this issue, Sea Watch Ambassador Robin Petch completes his account of his adventures as onboard naturalist and guest lecturer on the brand new Viking Neptune as she sailed around the world!

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Colombo was our home from March 25th until our departure on 27th and there were frequently birds around the harbour area including spotted pelicans, the occasional white-bellied eagle and grey heron, numerous house crows and a few common terns.



Spotted pelican

As we headed towards Cochin, India, we encountered many fishing boats of all shapes and sizes and guests reported whale blows and groups of 30 or more “small dolphins” on at least two occasions which based on their descriptions were probably spinners.

India

As we sailed in to Cochin/Kochi we had Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins alongside briefly and groups of 20-30 were seen during the harbour cruise tours. Seabird sightings included Brahminy and black kites, great egrets and oriental darters. Small groups of up to 5 or 6 Indo-Pacific humpbacks were again seen during sail away that evening and a flock of at least 100 common terns fed in our wake a little further offshore.



Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin



Brahminy kite

March 30th was a sea day with breezy conditions and just a few flying fish and a distant bird although a large sea turtle was spotted by one of the guests.

Goa was our next port and once again Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins were seen around the harbour along with the inevitable house crows and both brahminy and black kites. Occasionally a white-bellied sea eagle could also be spotted and later there were lesser crested terns on the channel buoys. The best sightings were on a crocodile safari through the mangroves where in addition to the mugger, or marsh, crocodile we saw there were sandpipers, little and great egrets, Indian pond herons, little cormorants, white-breasted waterhens, white-breasted and common kingfishers, grey langur monkeys and much more besides!



Mugger (aka marsh) crocodile

Approaching Mumbai on 1st April we saw our first brown-headed gulls feeding alongside and in the wake and dolphins were spotted by guests off the port bow but they were more interested in an outbound container ship. Once again, kites, egrets and crows, as well as pigeons and some pretty large rats kept us

company whilst in port. Great-crested terns and more brown headed gulls followed us during our sail-away on 3rd April.

The following sea day brought a small pod of striped dolphins (at least 6 but probably more) a couple of miles off the starboard bow and later to port but it was 5th that was the best day for a while.

Our new friend Daryl started the day at 0655 with a dozen striped dolphins and we saw 12-15 ourselves at 0950 as well as a couple of masked boobies.

Our other friend Roger also photographed 2 Longman's beaked whales resting at the surface far away to starboard at around 1305.



Longman's beaked whales

Another 20 or so dolphins were seen over 2 miles to starboard at around 1320 and by this time we were frequently seeing flying fish with up to 6 masked boobies gliding with us and peeling off to hunt.



Flying fish

The sightings came to a close with what was probably another Longman's resting at the surface a mile away to starboard and then at 1715 another 12-15 very active dolphins away to starboard.

At this point in our voyage, the anti-piracy measures on board were being completed as we approached the coasts of Somalia and Yemen. For the next few days we had razor wire all around Deck 2, a lookout at

the stern and ex-soldiers on the upper decks with access to weapons if needed. All the mother ships and small skiffs we did see were apparently engaged in fishing fortunately!

April 6th turned out to be pretty good too with Daryl starting the proceedings with 10+ very active dolphins moving from bow to stern at 0535. There were again lots of flying fish and the occasional flesh-footed shearwater and some large, probably great crested, terns.

At 1215, we photographed a group of 6-8 sperm whales about a mile to starboard and then at 1219 the self-appointed Deputy Dolphin Spotter, my Aussie friend and colleague Geoff Peters, spotted a sperm whale nursery pod about 2 miles to starboard. A wonderful sighting for sure! Not far away were also a couple of very tall blows, probably from one or more blue whales!

After lunch, at around 1415 a small pod of pilot whales passed very close to the starboard side and then a big group of dolphins at 1430 completed our day!

The sightings continued on 7th with two large groups of spinner dolphins off the port side, the first at 0815 totalling 50+ photographed by Roger and the second of at least 30+. Throughout the morning, large schools (or should that be flocks) of up to 50 flying fish could be seen gliding away from us.

Cetacean activity began again at 1643 with Roger spotting 10-12 spinners surfing and spinning aft of the ship. At the same time, we saw 8-10 more to starboard with more arriving at the bow. Another group was later seen aft at around 1705. These small dolphins are so agile and spectacular to watch, especially when they choose to live up to their name!

From 1735, for just over 5 minutes we were treated to leaping and surging striped dolphins racing across the bow from the starboard side with two much larger animals in amongst them. These turned out to be false killer whales!



False killer whale

This clarified the erratic and high speed movements of the dolphins which were charging in all directions and were very difficult to count but numbered probably 12 to 15. Later, at 1803, 6 or more dolphins again leaped across the bow from the starboard side to close our day.

More spinners graced us with their presence at 0920 on 8th April as we sailed the Red Sea towards Jeddah. Daryl counted at least 20 but Geoff sighted probably 50 or so. We also had the magnificent sight of an Osprey travelling above us for a while and there were



Osprey

glimpses of greater crested terns and shearwaters which we believe were flesh-footed. Our final sighting of the day was a solitary dolphin, drifting on and off the bow but there were presumably others around.

The next day saw us docked in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, with yellow-billed kites and pigeons around the port area and a few greater crested terns in the approaches. We also briefly saw dolphins during sail-in which were probably bottlenose.

April 10th in the Red Sea, provided views of grey herons flying over, a pallid harrier and a group of 6-8 Risso's dolphins, some of whom were indulging in an unusual head-standing behaviour being studied in that part of the world!



Risso's Dolphin

Aqaba, Jordan and Safaga, Egypt were our home for the next two days with house crows onboard and around the harbours and swallows or martins buzzing around the ship. A slender-billed gull was photographed by Roger, a species I have not seen before.



Slender-billed gull

We were back in the Red Sea, and Gulf of Suez, on 13th April with sooty gulls much in evidence and a few large terns occasionally which we believe to have been Caspian. On the following day there was a glimpse of a small pod of 5-6 bottlenose dolphins shortly after we entered the Suez Canal and many birds on the banks and flying over including little egrets, a pallid harrier, Caspian and slender-billed gulls and common terns.



Bottlenose dolphins

Haifa was our home for the next two days with ring-necked parakeets, laughing doves and hooded crows our land-based wildlife and cattle egrets our main sighting as we crossed the Mediterranean to Rhodes.

Rhodes and the Kusadasi brought mainly yellow-legged gulls but sailaway from the latter on 19th April added Scopoli's shearwaters to our bird list for the cruise. Our only cetaceans were statues and sculptures, displaying the Ancient Greeks' close affinity with *delphinia*.



April 20th brought us to the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara and another new bird species, the Yelkouan shearwater. Sandwich terns, white storks and great cormorants also appeared regularly and we enjoyed sightings of both common and bottlenose dolphins.



Common dolphins

Indeed the latter were in evidence all the way into the harbour at Istanbul and we continued to enjoy their activity during our stay the following day, despite the incredibly busy harbour traffic. Ferries and private boats would sometimes divert the dolphins from a particular location and their feeding activity but they would quickly return, often surrounded by yellow-legged gulls. There is clearly enough food present to compensate for the noise disturbance!



Bottlenose dolphin

We sailed the Sea of Marmara and Dardanelles once again on 22nd, eventually entering the Aegean late in the day. Two separate encounters with bottlenose dolphins again delighted us all, especially the second group of 10-12 which featured some of the most spectacular and sustained leaping I have ever witnessed! Further flocks of Yelkouan shearwaters

and occasional yellow-legged gulls were also part of the day's sightings, along with an osprey.

Sail-away from Athens on 23rd produced more bottlenose dolphins but only briefly, shortly after leaving the harbour at Piraeus and Roger photographed striped dolphins the following day, along with Scopoli's shearwater.

April 25th and 26th were once again port days, Messina and Naples with regular sightings of yellow-legged gulls but I did manage some nice photographs of the 6+ striped dolphins we saw when leaving the latter.

Civitavecchia and Monte Carlo were also notable primarily for yellow-legged gulls despite hopes of fin and sperm whales in the Pelagos Sanctuary although guest Len Ruhland took a lovely photograph of a sailfish amongst the expensive yachts in Monte Carlo!



Sailfish

We began seeing striped dolphins early in the morning of 29th, initially in 2s and 3s with 7-8 being seen at 0937 and 15-20 more at 1220. I was absolutely delighted to take some of the best photographs of the species I have managed in the last 30 years during these encounters!



Striped dolphin

Fin whale sightings began at 1112 and were seen on at least 12 occasions through until 1640. I managed some photographs of these too although many were quite distant but fortunately my wife Kris took some much better ones! This was a great cetacean day and

it amazed many guests that there was so much in the Mediterranean but there was more still to come!



Fin whale

Striped dolphins, at least 5, were seen leaving Barcelona the following day, as well as a couple more fin whales and of course yellow-legged gulls were ever present. These undertake the duties of the herring gull around the Mediterranean although these are sometimes seen here as vagrants too, just as yellow-legged are in our part of the world!

Dolphins were seen 3 times in the vicinity of Cartagena on May 1st and thrice more on May 2nd but never positively identified although 5-6 common dolphins were also identified and photographed by Daryl as we approached Gibraltar.

Departure from Lisbon on 3rd May saw us accompanied by yellow-legged gulls and gannets and some big blows out at sea suggested fin whales in the vicinity. My birthday, on Star Wars Day, featured 10-12 common dolphins leaping to the bow and alongside as well as gannets wheeling around us and more dolphins in the afternoon. May the Fourth Be With You!



Our last cetacean encounter, common dolphin

May 5th was our final sea day, and my final official Wildlife Watch. Gannets and great black-backed gulls, an occasional fulmar and even a curlew flew with us. A resident barn swallow buzzed the foredeck! At 1159, just as I was formally wrapping up the event and

our great adventure, 4-5 common dolphins leapt from the waves to the starboard bow. A great finale!

The voyage was not quite over however, with visits to Le Havre and Dover before arrival in Greenwich on 8th May and the departure of most passengers on 9th. Herring gulls, lesser and great black-backed gulls and a few cormorants, as well as a seal reported to me in Le Havre were our only recorded sightings before London and coots and Brent Geese were added in the Thames. Some were staying on for a voyage to Bergen and even a transatlantic extension but for most of us, the 152 day adventure was over, but never to be forgotten. I hope you have enjoyed hearing about it.

I would like to thank the many guests onboard Viking Neptune for their contribution to the Sightings Record and their company on this amazing ocean voyage. In particular the photographic generosity of Roger Strom and Daryl Golinsky, the superb spotting skills of Jesse Boone and the friendship of all three, and their spouses, added so much to the experience.



The Three Wise Watchers (not necessarily in the right order!) – (l-r) Roger Strom, Daryl Golinsky and Jesse Boone

My indebtedness to my wonderful wife Kris Simpson for so much should also be acknowledged here. And finally, a huge thank you to everyone at Viking Ocean who provide us with the opportunity to sail as guest lecturer/onboard naturalist on their superb fleet of identical ships. It is no surprise they are consistently voted best for ocean, river and expedition.

Longman's beaked whales, Suez Canal bottlenose dolphins: Roger Strom

Risso's dolphin: Daryl Golinsky

Sailfish: Len Ruhland

Fin Whale: Kris Simpson

All other images: Robin Petch