WHALE & DOLPHIN WATCHING TRIP REPORT

MALDIVES EXPLORER
CENTRAL ATOLLS CRUISE
9 to 20 November 2015

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November is supposed to be one of the calmest months in the Maldives, but the brewing El Nino brought wind and rain for much of our trip. Despite this, we enjoyed a very productive 12-day wildlife cruise, which took us all the way south to Thaa Atoll, well beyond the normal tourist areas. We had plenty of time to visit a number of beautiful and little-visited islands, both inhabited and uninhabited. Cetacean sightings were good, with a respectable nine different species being recorded. These included a run of Pilot Whales at the start, and a rush of Cuvier’s Beaked Whales and Dwarf Sperm Whales on the very last day when the wind finally died and the sea became flat calm. The snorkelling was fantastic throughout. The corals were magnificent, particularly in Thaa Atoll. The reef fishes were overwhelming in their abundance, diversity and brilliant colouration. But fishy highlights were undoubtedly swimming with Manta Rays and a Whale Shark. Hawksbill Turtles were seen regularly, but there were also sightings of a Green Turtle and a rare, giant Leatherback Turtle.

Day 1, Monday 9 Nov 2015

We all met at the airport, and were soon on the dhoni heading for the safari boat anchorage and Hope Cruiser. Following welcomes and a briefing, there was time to unpack in the cabins, and come back on deck for a look around before lunch.

Immediately after the tasty meal prepared by our Sri Lankan chef, we were off. As we left the anchorages Spinner Dolphins appeared (well spotted Doug), with one giving an energetic display of spinning.

Out in the ocean, conditions were good, so we felt sure that something would be seen. And sure enough, Pilot Whales were soon spotted (well done Rod and Mike). They gave us the slip to start with, but eventually surfaced. We slowly manoeuvred into a position just upwind, cut the engine, and drifted quietly down amongst them. Soon we had Pilot Whales surfacing alongside and in front of us, close enough that their puffing breaths were clearly audible.

By now it was getting late, and time to turn in towards our anchorage at Gulhi Island. On the way in we spotted a resort boat watching dolphins, so we diverted to look for ourselves. We got close enough to see that they were Spinner Dolphins, but they were swimming determinedly in the opposite direction to the one we wanted, and we were sure to see many more in the days ahead, so we left them and went back on course.

Seabirds today included both Great and Lesser Crested Terns, Brown Noddy, Saunders Tern and Black-naped Tern. And as we came in to anchor at Gulhi Island there were Fruit Bats flying above the coconut trees.

At dinner time, off the stern, a squadron of Reef Squid was patrolling, causing numbers of Silver Sprats to leap up onto the stern platform.

Day 2, Tuesday 10 November

A brighter morning than yesterday. After early teas and coffees we piled onto the dhoni for our snorkel, on the reef behind Gulhi. There
was a medium current, which carried us effortlessly down the length of the reef, admiring the corals and reef fishes as we drifted. Off the slope in the current there were schools of Fusiliers and dense banks of Silver Sprats as well as many Unicornfishes. Along the reef edge were several Giant Sea Anemones with resident Maldives Anemonefish, while over sections of the reef were carpets of Humpback Red Snappers. As we drifted we encountered a school of Spinner Dolphins heading in through the reef channel, and soon had them bow-riding.

After breakfast, heading out towards the ocean, we passed another school of Spinner Dolphins swimming in. There were plenty of birds too, with Maldivian Little Heron flying off the island, and numerous Black-naped Terns as well as Brown Noddy and a single Lesser Noddy feeding over the reefs, on the Silver Sprats chased up by Bluefin Jacks.

Out in the ocean conditions were reasonable, and it was not too long before we had our first sighting – some distant fins. These turned out to belong to Pilot Whales.

There were about eight of them, moving steadily southwards. We went with them, and soon had them riding alongside us, surfacing nearby with loud puffing breaths. Two of the Pilots were big males, with especially impressive dorsal fins. They were a different group from the one we saw yesterday – they had distinctive and different fin markings. In addition, this group was travelling in company with Bottlenose Dolphins. The dolphins seemed delighted to join us and bow-ride.

When we finally left the Pilots and Bottlenose it was nearly time for lunch. There had been some swell as we passed the channel between South Malé and Vaavu Atolls, but during the afternoon sea conditions improved a lot. We were expecting good cetacean sightings, but there were none all afternoon. We finally arrived at Fotheyo and sailed in to our anchorage. Then it was into the dhoni for our snorkel on the nearby reef (while two went ashore to the sandbank by the dingy). There were some nice corals on the reef, as well as Cushion Starfishes, Sea Cucumbers and a good selection of reef fishes. Later off the stern of the boat during dinner we also saw a Snake-eel and half-a-dozen Squid.

Evening slide show: Spinner, Bottlenose and Risso’s Dolphins

Day 3, Wed 11 November

We started this morning with a choice of snorkels. Some headed in to the sandbank by dingy (where they spotted a Manta Ray). The rest headed out into Fotheyo Channel on the dhoni, passing Spinner Dolphins on the way. And as we jumped in on the channel reef, a Whitetip Reef Shark swam underneath. The reef itself was generously lined with corals, and there were numerous reef fishes too, including some particularly large ones in the deeper water of the channel. We drifted slowly in with the current, until the tide changed, and then we drifted back again. At this point a second group of Spinner Dolphins swam by – seen by those on the dhoni and heard by some still snorkelling.

After breakfast we set off, out through the channel and into the open sea. Mike was on the dhoni for some fishing along the outer reef, the rest of us on Hope Cruiser a bit further out. Rounding Fotheyo Muli, the eastern most
point of the Maldives, we found our third pod of Pilot Whales. There were about 8-10 individuals, all heading slowly southwards in line abreast. We turned the boat to go with them, and soon had them alongside. A radio call to the dhoni brought Mike back to see the Pilots, with his catch of Barracudas and Jacks. We were with the Pilot Whales for a full hour before we moved on.

By now it was nearly lunch time, and we were close by the reef as we rounded the southern corner of Fotheyo Muli. Here we found a large group of Spinner Dolphins, some of which rushed in to bowride. However, this was the middle of their night and most just ignored us. It is remarkable how Spinners use this site for daytime resting: they must have a very clear idea of the local geography, and know that it is a long, long way to the nearest channels into the atoll.

We pressed on without any further cetacean sightings until we approached Rakeedhoo Island, when we found a school of Spinner Dolphins rushing out for their night’s feeding. And there was another school of Spinner Dolphins on the inside, which gave their position away with a fine display of spinning.

Anchoring in the narrow lagoon at Bodumohora took some time, but then we were off. Some headed by dingy to the island (where birds spotted included Asian Koel and Greenshank, and in addition a young White-spotted Eagle Ray was also seen). Others took the dhoni out to the nearby coral garden for an enchanting snorkel. The corals were superb, and in the gathering twilight nocturnal fishes (Squirrelfish, Soldierfish, Bigeyes and Cardinalfishes) appeared in increasing numbers.

Evening talk: Spotted, Striped and Fraser’s Dolphins

Day 4, Thursday 12 November

Today was rough. Unseasonally and seriously rough. Although the day did not start too badly. In fact conditions were quite good for our morning snorkel on the nearby coral garden. It was overcast, so a bit dull, but our snorkel was a delight. The corals were magnificent, and the fishlife diverse: Yellow Boxfish, Neon-streak Fusiliers, Tubelip Wrasse, Double-barred Soapfish, and much more.

Back on board, after breakfast, the weather was still reasonable. So the anchors came up, and we were soon off towards Meemu Atoll. As we entered the wide and deep Watteru Channel, dark rain clouds were gathering ahead. Drizzle started and the wind picked up a bit. At this point we sighted Spotted Dolphins. Some smaller individuals rushed in to bowride, while others further out gave a good display of typical Spotted jumping: energetic high leaps ending with a flop. But the rain was increasing and the wind picking up. In no time at all it was pouring and becoming rough. The captain turned towards the reef of Meemu Atoll, where we expected some shelter. But as we got nearer, the wind continued to increase, so it was not until we got very close to the reef that we got some shelter. As we continued eastwards along the outer reef a large dolphin was seen jumping ahead, but in the prevailing conditions, we
were unable to locate it. We continued all the way to the NE corner of the atoll, expecting to continue on and follow the outer reef southwards, but it was too rough ahead, and we had to turn back. We entered Meemu Atoll near the fishing island of Dhiggaru and cut across the inside of the atoll. The conditions inside were also very rough, but we plodded on, eventually reaching the shelter of the lagoon at Naalafushi where we anchored. It was time for tea and coffee, with cake, which was much appreciated by all, especially the dhoni crew.

There was still time for a snorkel. The outer reef was too rough, but the inner reef, with wide seagrass patches provided a pleasant and different opportunity. There were Cushion Stars, Sea Cucumbers and small green fishes in amongst the Seagrass. And on the way back to the main boat a small Eagle Ray swam by the dhoni.

Evening talk: Blackfish

**Day 5, Friday 13 November**

It was still rather windy this morning, too windy to attempt the crossing to Thaa Atoll. So Hope Cruiser stayed put while we went ashore on the nearby island of Naalafushi for a walk through the local village. The people were delightfully friendly, mothers were sitting out with young children, while older women were sweeping the white sand streets. As expected, there were many coconut trees, as well as breadfruit trees, sugar cane, crab apples and more. The local wildlife included two Common Sandpipers, several large black Carpenter Bees and numerous Globe Skimmer Dragonflies.

Back on board breakfast was soon ready, and then we set off, to search for cetaceans outside Meemu Atoll. We first headed north, eventually stopping at 11:30 for a snorkel on the outer reef. Here the surf was breaking in the shallowest waters, so we kept to the edge and the middle depths, but even here were great grooves gouged out of the reef by surge during the rough season. In one of these grooves was a very smart White-tailed Stingray. The reef also proved to be an excellent site for Hawksbill Turtles: everyone saw at least two, with a maximum count of eight. In addition there was a flighty Whitetip Reef Shark, numerous surge-zone fishes, and good selection of corals, which all looked resplendent in the midday sun.

Back on board Hope Cruiser we headed southwards outside the atoll while lunch was served. We travelled a fair distance, but the storm clouds were once again gathering ahead, and as the wind picked up during the early afternoon we eventually had to turn back. We searched for another hour before the worst of the weather caught up with us, when we decided to call it a day and head back in. Despite all our searching, much of it in relatively good sea conditions in the lee of the atoll, our only sighting was one Tropical Shearwater.

As we turn in to the atoll, a double (briefly triple) rainbow appeared behind us, the outer arc with its colours reversed. Back at the same anchorage near Naalafushi island the last of the rain passed as we enjoyed afternoon tea and cake. Then some headed across to Naalafushi for a walk (and to see the Fruit Bats), while others headed off in the dhoni for
a choice of snorkels: on the sea grass beds or the reef. The latter proved to be a bit choppy, but the corals and the reef fishes were lovely.

At night, after dinner, while admiring the fishes off the stern, a large shark (almost certainly a Lemon Shark) swam through.

Evening talk: Beaked Whales.

Day 6, Saturday 14 November

The weather seemed finally to be improving this morning. The wind had dropped, the clouds had thinned out considerably, and the sun was shining. We took advantage, setting off early. And we soon had our first cetacean sighting of the day: a small but fast-moving group of Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins. They slowed as we approached, and even bowrode briefly, but then moved off. We were keen to press on.

As we approached the southern end of Meemu Atoll we could see splashing ahead. It was a huge school of Spinner Dolphins, just inside the atoll. They were jumping and spinning, and rushing around in small groups, and generally appearing to be having a very social time. We spent nearly 30 minutes with them, enjoying their antics, before moving on.

The crossing to Thaa Atoll was uneventful, and once across we were ready for a midday snorkel on the outer reef. The water here, in the lee of Vilufushi Island and reef, was calm and clear. In the shallow water were great grooves gouged out during the rough season, and a host of surge fish species and specialist surge sea urchins, each in its own self-made burrow. In slightly deeper water was a surprising diversity of stocky corals as well as schools of Parrotfish, Gold-lined Emperors, and numerous Clown Triggerfishes. There were also several Hawksbill Turtles, with everyone seeing at least two. Out on the drop-off large Jacks were patrolling, and two Spotted Dolphins put in a brief and unexpected appearance.

Lunch was ready soon after we got back on board, and Hope Cruiser continued southwards while we ate. Two local tuna fishing boats were in view far ahead, and it soon became clear that they were hand-liners fishing for Yellowfin Tuna. We headed their way, and soon had Spotted Dolphins in sight. They were all around the two fishing boats, rushing up behind them to take some bait, moving ahead for a brief spell of bow-riding, and charging along in between. We had plenty of time with them, until it was time to turn towards our anchorage at Dhiyamigili Island. There were Spinner Dolphins racing out of the Atoll as we headed in. And along the harbour breakwater as we entered were a Maldivian Little Heron and two Common Sandpipers. Once Hope Cruiser was secured, most people went ashore for a walk around the island. Two headed out on the dhoni for a snorkel on the nearby reef, which produced Blacktip Reef Shark, Whitetip Reef Shark, Napoleon Wrasse, schools of Fusiliers and Midnight Rabbitfish, plus plenty of Featherstars.

Evening talk: Great Whales.

Day 7, Sunday 15 November

The snorkellers departed early this morning, out from the harbour at Dhiyamigili, heading through the atoll channel to the outer reef. Just as we were about to jump in, a large school of
**Spinner Dolphins** appeared, swimming along the reef. We piled in and spread out, and one lucky snorkeller saw eight Spinnners speeding by underneath. Then it was back to the reef itself. There were precipitous spur-and-groove formations in the shallow water, a nice selection of corals at intermediate depths, and a steep drop-off. A **Blacktip Reef Shark** put in a brief appearance, and there were plenty of other reef fishes, including great schools of blue **Fusiliers** and of **Humpback Red Snappers**, a **Surge Surgeonfish** (only normally found on outer reefs in the southern Maldives) and several **Vagabond Butterflyfish**. All this with a continuous background snap-crackle-pop of thousands of **Pistol Shrimps**.

Just as we were getting out of the water the crew spotted some more, larger dolphins. We hurried back on board and motored over: it was a school of **Risso’s Dolphins**, clearly showing their scratched backs, white heads and tall fins. And four individuals gratuitously raised their flukes in synchrony. They were close, and did not appear to be moving much, so we slipped our snorkelling gear back on and slid into the water. Needless to say, the dolphins moved away, for the most part keeping just out of view, but one did zip by underneath with the range of visibility.

Back on board **Hope Cruiser** we enjoyed breakfast next to the atoll reef, before moving back into the Veimandhoo Channel to search for more cetaceans. There was a swell from the SW, augmented by the westerly wind which picked up a bit as the day progressed. There were a couple of cetacean bodies and splashes which we could not find again. But we did find a particularly cooperative school of **Risso’s Dolphins**, which approached our bows and swam alongside for some time. This school was trailed by three **Tropical Shearwaters**, a regional endemic which breeds in the Maldives and spends much of its time following cetaceans to pick up faeces and other scraps of food.

By now the afternoon was wearing on, with little to show for our searching. We decided to turn in a bit early, and it proved to be a good choice. Just inside the atoll a large and very active school of **Spinner Dolphins** was heading out for their night’s feeding. They were jumping and spinning and cavorting, allowing plenty of good viewing and photographic opportunities.

We finally anchored in the wide lagoon of Kimbidhoo Island. Some went ashore in the dingy for a walk around the delightful village. Amongst the wildlife spotted were **Fruit Bats** and both male and female **Asian Koel**. Others set off on the **dhoni** for a snorkel on a nearby reef. A **Whitetip Reef Shark** greeted us soon after we jumped in. There were numerous massive **Porites** coral boulders, many festooned with bright **Christmas Tree Worms**. There were **Reef Squid**, **Giant Clams**, a dozing **Turtle**, and a plethora of schooling fish, including **Sergeant Majors**, **Black-pyramid Butterflyfish** and purple-and-gold **Anthias**.

**Day 8, Wednesday 16 November**

We left our anchorage a bit early this morning, and headed back to the reef channel where we had seen so many Spinner Dolphins last night. They had to come back in the same way this morning, although at what time we did not...
know. So we waited, but the Spinners did not appear and eventually we had to move on, although it was a delightful spot, between two lush islands.

Out at sea, the wind was lighter than yesterday, although there was still some swell. But that did not stop Mike spotting some splashing, which turned out to be a group of **Risso’s Dolphins**. They were moving slowly westwards, and we were able to travel alongside them for some distance. At one point one individual breached three times, and a bit later another started tail-slapping. A **Tropical Shearwater** flew by, giving the Risso’s a glance, but did not stop.

Eventually the Risso’s moved off, and we pressed on around the atoll, where we were soon in for an unexpected surprise. An enormous **Leatherback Turtle** surfaced ahead of us, and stayed up for several leisurely breaths, giving us all splendid views. This is an extraordinarily rare animal in the Maldives, and we were all buzzing after this encounter.

By now it was past midday, and we turned in towards the atoll, passing a large and active school of **Spinner Dolphins** (which bowrode a dozen at a time) in the channel. We were taking advantage of the calmer atoll waters to take our lunch, and also following up on a tip from local fishermen that there were Whale Sharks in the area. In the event we did not find any Whale Sharks, but we did have an excellent snorkel on a small coral reef. The corals were superb, with a garland of large **Table Corals** all the way around the reef edge, as well as many **Giant Sea Anemones**, each with a small family of **Maldive Anemonefish**. There were plenty of other fishes too, with great schools of **Silver Sprats**, as well as blue **Fusiliers**, yellow **Goatfishes**, and two **Whitetip Reef Sharks**. There were also many well-camouflaged **Spider Shells** in the shallows.

Back on board **Hope Cruiser**, tea and cake was waiting as we cut across the atoll towards our night’s anchorage off the uninhabited island of Kandufushi. A single **Spinner Dolphin** rushed in to bowride as we approached the island, before racing back to join the rest of its school.

Once anchored, there was time for those that wanted to enjoy a second snorkel. The reef here had especially rich coral growths, as well as plenty of fishes.

**Day 9, Tuesday 17 November**

We started with a run ashore in the dingy to the delightful tiny uninhabited island of Kandufushi. On the island itself there were **Fruit Bats**, both **Grey and Maldivian Little Herons** and a **Cattle Egret**, as well as a few dozen **Globe Skimmer Dragonflies**. Off the beach was a delightful shallow reef, the corals and reef fishes gleaming in the bright morning light.

Out at sea we headed out into deep water, but the SW wind was still blowing more strongly than we would have liked. So as we approached Dhaalu Atoll we changed course to take advantage of the shelter of the reef. Almost immediately we spotted some distant **Spinner Dolphins**, but they must have been heading away, into the atoll, so we let them go.
Sailing up the outside of Dhaalu Atoll we were treated to a glorious vista of palm-clad islands and turquoise waters, with the occasional Grey Heron standing in the shallows. We were heading for a particular channel where Mantas often occur, and on arrival we all transferred to the dhoni for a search up and down the channel. Unfortunately no Mantas were around, but we still enjoyed an excellent snorkel on the nearby outer reef. Highlights included a Whitetip Reef Shark, a small Nurse Shark resting under a Table Coral, and a splendid Stonefish, living up to its name. There were also a couple of dozen Black-naped Terns on the adjacent coral islet, and a small flock of Lesser Crested Terns patrolling overhead.

Late lunch was ready as we continued our journey northwards. Just as we were finishing, splashes were spotted ahead – a large and active school of Spinner Dolphins. We spent some time with these dolphins, which readily bowrode in large numbers (up to 20 at a time), in addition to porpoising and spinning alongside.

The afternoon was getting on, so we pushed on towards our anchorage at the very north of the atoll, past more islands and turquoise reefs. We finally anchored just before sunset. Mike went off in the dingy for night fishing with two of the crew, returning happy having caught a Red Snapper.

Evening talk: the Maldivian seasons, on the top deck under the stars and half-moon

**Day 10, Wednesday 18 Nov**

We left our anchorage early this morning, and were soon out in the deep water channel between Dhaalu and Faafu Atolls. It did not take long to cross, and we ducked into Faafu Atoll to eat breakfast, and enjoy the island and reef scenery. Then out again into the ocean, where we found a small pod of Risso’s Dolphins. We turned a few times to get alongside them, but they were not interested in us, so after a few photos we continued on our way.
We had planned to take our first snorkel late in the morning. And at 10:45 we anchored off the idyllic island of Minimasgali, and soon after were being ferried ashore in the dingy. There was time to walk around the island and to enjoy a snorkel on the reef. In the shallows were notable numbers of Cushion Stars and Humbug Damsels. The bright sunlight shining through the blue water really brought out the colours of the corals and reef fishes.

Continuing northwards, we had lunch before leaving Faafu Atoll and setting out across the next Channel. As we headed northwards we encountered a great cavalcade of Bottlenose Dolphins heading south, so we turned to go with them, and soon had several charging in to bowride. They were magnificent animals, powerful and full of energy. But eventually we had to leave them and turn back on course.

We were heading for the southern end of Ari Atoll, an area where Whale Sharks are often seen at this time of year. Arriving off the reef we could see another dhoni on site. And they had three snorkellers in the water. We approached and could soon see what they were following: a Whale Shark!

Our snorkellers were already kitted up, and were soon in the water. The Whale Shark was perhaps 20 feet long, and slowly making its way along the reef. Well, slowly for him – we had to swim hard to keep up. The other snorkellers had already dropped back, so we had the Whale Shark all to ourselves, for as long as we could keep with it. It briefly came up towards the surface, but then moved deeper and deeper over the edge of the reef, eventually disappearing from sight. Wow! What a fantastic encounter. Not long afterwards we were back on Hope Cruiser for a shower and afternoon tea with local pancakes.

We continued northwards, finally anchoring in the large lagoon of Dhigurah Island. This is a good spot for Manta Rays, and as the dusk drew in there we had a quick search, but the Mantas were not to be seen.

Evening talk: Bycatch in Indian Ocean tuna fisheries

Day 11, Thursday 19 November

What a great day! It was windy in the night and grey first thing, but the morning soon improved dramatically. The sky cleared, the wind moderated, and we were keen to search again for Mantas. Sure enough, on the way out to our snorkel a Manta jumped. We homed in on the spot, and within a couple of minutes were in the water with two Manta Rays. They were swimming over the white sand bottom of the lagoon, beautifully outlined below us. We swam with them, and they eventually led us to a third individual. By this time some snorkellers had dropped behind, but the dhoni quickly picked them up and dropped them back on the Mantas. It was a fabulous encounter, especially when the Mantas swam up towards us, mouths agape.

And that wasn’t even our main morning snorkel, for which we moved out onto the
outer reef of Guraidhoo. The water was rather murky where we first jumped in, but cleared dramatically as we moved down the reef. In the shallowest waters were typical surge fishes, including many Surge Damsels and Reef Picasso Triggerfishes. In the mid-depths were numerous robust Pocillopora corals. While along the edge were large boulders attracting plenty of fishlife, as well as two patrolling Whitetip Reef Sharks. By this time Hope Cruiser had joined us on the outside of the island, with all on board also having seen three Manta Rays.

Breakfast was taken as we started the long crossing from Ari to South Malé Atoll. And not long after breakfast we had our first sighting of a large school of Spinner Dolphins racing to the southwest, directly towards us. We turned to have them bowriding briefly, but they were clearly on a mission and soon lost us. Not long after this we saw another large school of Spinner Dolphins charging resolutely in the same direction. Later still we encountered a third group of Spinner Dolphins doing exactly the same thing. At this time of year Spinner are normally heading NE across this channel, not SW. Another result of El Nino?

But the most intriguing sighting of the crossing was a couple of tall, vertical, distant blows. We approached the spot where they were seen, and did see another couple of big disturbances, but could not find the animal involved. The size of the vertical blow strongly suggested that this was a Blue Whale, but even such a big animal is surprising easy to lose track of in the open sea.

As we approached South Malé Atoll we could see dozens of birds on and over a small sandbank. This was perhaps the largest concentration of birds we had seen all trip, consisting of Black-naped Terns and a mix of Lesser and Brown Noddies.

Crossing South Malé Atoll was uneventful, and there were no cetaceans to be seen when we looked outside the atoll on the other side. So we anchored up near Guraidhoo Island (passing big schools of Blue and Gold-backed Fusiliers on the way in) and set off for our afternoon snorkel in the nearby channel.

The current was going out when we jumped in, quite swiftly to start with, but it soon settled down to a much more genteel pace. A large White-spotted Eagle Ray put in a brief appearance at the start. Out in the channel were great schools of Unicornfish and Black-
**pyramid Butterflyfish**, while in the shallows there was a good diversity of corals. By the time we hauled ourselves out the light was fading and **Lionfishes** and **Featherstars** were starting to appear.

Evening talk: Dragonflies and Indonesia. Followed by a magnificent Maldivian buffet.

### Day 12, Friday 20 November

Our final, full day, and what a fabulous one! The sea was calm when we awoke, which made a pleasant change. The anchors soon came up (and a **Whimbrel** flew by), and **Hope Cruiser** moved to the nearby reef and sandbank known locally as ‘Sexy Beach’.

There were dozens of seabirds resting on the sandbank, and as we anchored a small swarm of **Globe Skimmer Dragonflies** descended around our stern. This was a particularly welcome and well-timed appearance, following the talk on their extraordinary trans-oceanic migrations last night.

Some headed to the sandbank itself to swim from the beach; others went on the **dhoni** to the snorkel directly on the reef. All had a wonderful time in the water, with the diversity and abundance of reef fishes being particularly noticeable. Other highlights included a close encounter with an **Octopus**, several **Reef Squid** and a **Hawksbill Turtle**.

Back on board **Hope Cruiser**, breakfast was soon ready, and then we were off, heading across the atoll towards the open sea. By the time we passed through the atoll channel, we had already seen three schools of **Spinner Dolphins**. But with flat calm conditions we were hoping for other species today. And we did not have to wait long before our first sighting – a pair of small cetaceans diving. We waited, and 23 minutes later not two but three **Dwarf Sperm Whales** resurfaced. They did not stay at the surface for too long, so we edged a bit closer and waited again. Sure enough, after 24 minutes they surfaced again, giving us all good views of these normally elusive animals.

**Meanwhile**, while waiting for the Dwarf Sperm Whales to reappear, we spotted a distant pair of **Cuvier’s Beaked Whales**. They were at some distance, but the distinctive rolling motion at the surface, and the bright white of the male made identification straightforward. As soon as the Dwarf Sperm Whales dived, we moved up to the spot where the Cuvier’s had dived. As the boat moved we were slightly distracted by the appearance of four more **Dwarf Sperm Whales**. But we kept a good look-out, and spotted the male and female Cuvier’s Beaked Whales surfacing relatively close-by. They had been underwater for 25 minutes, so when they dived again we moved closer to the spot and settled down for another wait. And after exactly 25 minutes they popped up again. They were close enough for good views with binoculars, but not for photographs, so when they dived again we edged a bit closer. And this time when they surfaced, after 26 minutes, they were less than 400m away, and coming closer. We had wonderful views of both the male (white-bodied and heavily scratched) and the female (pale-headed but brown-bodied) as they rolled several times at the surface before disappearing again.

While we had been waiting for these two Cuvier’s to surface the last time, another three **Cuvier’s Beaked Whales** (one male and two females) were spotted off in the distance, apparently heading south.
Now, as we left the original Cuvier’s and headed north, late lunch was ready. Malé city appeared ahead of us, and then yet another pair of Cuvier’s Beaked Whales surfaced in the distance. Today must have been a major migration day for this species. Coming in towards Malé and the airport we passed three more schools of Spinner Dolphins. But time was getting on so we pressed on towards our anchorage.

After anchoring at Hulumalé there was time to say a genuine ‘thank you’ to the crew for looking after us all so well. Then packing, sad farewells, and transfers to the airport after dinner.

**CETACEAN SUMMARY**

Over our twelve days we recorded a respectable total of 8 different species (plus a probable Blue Whale), from 51 sightings (which made 54 records since two species were seen together on three occasions):

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>No. Sightings</th>
<th>Est. no. Individuals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spinner Dolphins</td>
<td><em>Stenella longirostris</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spotted Dolphins</td>
<td><em>Stenella attenuata</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Risso’s Dolphins</td>
<td><em>Grampus griseus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Common Bottlenose Dolphins</td>
<td><em>Tursiops truncatus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins</td>
<td><em>Tursiops aduncus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shortfin Pilot Whales</td>
<td><em>Globicephala macrocephalus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dwarf Sperm Whale</td>
<td><em>Kogia sima</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuvier’s Beaked Whale</td>
<td><em>Ziphius cavirostris</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unidentified Dolphins</td>
<td>Delphinidae</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unidentified Baleen Whale</td>
<td><em>Balaenoptera sp.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unidentified cetaceans</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Cuvier’s Beaked Whales*
**BIRDS**

Eighteen species of birds is a reasonable total for the Maldives.

1. Tropical Shearwater *Puffinus bailloni*
2. Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
3. Maldivian Little Heron *Butorides striata didii*
4. Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coramandus*
5. White-breasted Waterhen (heard) *Amaurornis phoenicurus*
6. Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*
7. Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucas*
8. Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*
9. Saunter’s Tern *Sterna saundersi*
10. Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
11. Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana*
12. Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis*
13. Great Crested Tern *Sterna bergii*
14. Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*
15. Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*
16. Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*
17. Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*
18. House Crow *Corvus splendens maledivicus*

To this may be added the sighting of a possible Purple Heron, seen from our anchorage near the airport before we set off.

**ANCHORAGES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Anchorage</th>
<th>Atoll</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9 Nov 2015</td>
<td>Gulhi</td>
<td>(South Malé Atoll)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10 Nov 2015</td>
<td>Fotheyo</td>
<td>(Vaavu Atoll)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>11 Nov 2015</td>
<td>Bodumohora</td>
<td>(Vaavu Atoll)</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>12 Nov 2015</td>
<td>Naalafushi</td>
<td>(Meemu Atoll)</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>13 Nov 2015</td>
<td>Naalafushi</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>14 Nov 2015</td>
<td>Dhiyamigili</td>
<td>(Thaa Atoll)</td>
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<td>Kimbidhoo</td>
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<td>16 Nov 2015</td>
<td>Kandufushi</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>Dhigurah</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>20 Nov 2015</td>
<td>Hulumalé</td>
<td>(Malé Atoll)</td>
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</table>
CONTACT DETAILS

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