

Sea of the Hebrides

Marine Protected Area



Giants of Scotland's seas

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Scotland's seas are home to some of the biggest marine life on the planet. The Sea of the Hebrides Marine Protected Area (MPA) on Scotland's west coast plays a particularly important role in the lives of two of the world's super-sized swimmers, the basking shark and minke whale.



Cool, nutrient-rich water mixes with shallow warmer water within the MPA generating an area of high productivity known as a front. Fronts concentrate nutrients and plankton to create a feeding ground that attracts predators of all shapes and sizes. Basking sharks are the second largest fish in the world, growing up to 10 m long. While similar in length to a basking shark, and weighing up to nine tonnes, minke whales are the smallest members of the baleen whale family found in UK waters.



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Location: 56° 45.376' N 6° 51.595' W

Area: 10039 km²



A minke whale breaching

Protected Features

Biodiversity

Basking shark, minke whale, fronts.

Geodiversity

Marine Geomorphology of the Scottish Shelf Seabed.

Conservation Objectives

The aim is to conserve these features in order to make a long-lasting contribution to the MPA network.

The distinctive slender head of a minke has a prominent ridge running between the snout and twin blowholes and all minke whales in the northern hemisphere have white coloured bands on their flippers. A minke whale's dorsal fin is relatively small and curved and located two thirds down its back. This makes them easily distinguishable from other whales found in Scottish waters.

Like all baleen whales, minke whales feed by engulfing large volumes of water before sieving it out through hundreds of baleen plates in their jaws. Minke whales mainly feed on sandeels and shoaling fish including mackerel, whiting and herring.

Basking sharks are filter feeders, living entirely on a diet of zooplankton. They migrate into the Sea of the Hebrides during the summer and can be seen feeding at the surface between June and October each year. They gather in large numbers, sometimes hundreds, and may remain within the MPA until late October before many head south for the winter or into deeper water. Basking sharks are easily identified by their unmistakable large and rounded dorsal fin, bulbous snout and sweeping tail often visible above the water when feeding, where they look like they are 'basking' in the sun, hence their name. Recent surveys in the MPA have recorded sharks swimming together nose-to-tail, side-by-side and breaching, thought to be courtship-like or mating displays.

Further Information

Further information on MPAs, the wider network and protected areas management is available at www.gov.scot/policies/marine-environment/marine-protected-areas

For MPA site documents and more on the fascinating range of marine life to be found in Scotland's seas, please visit

www.nature.scot/mpas - for territorial waters

jncc.gov.uk/advice/marine-protected-areas - for offshore waters

sitelink.nature.scot - for site specific information

A basking shark feeding



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