

The Flora and Fauna of Westray, Orkney

PART FOUR
Westray Mammals

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HEDGEHOG

(*Erinaceus europaeus*)

Absent from the Westray fauna until the late 1940's when some were taken from Netherbutton, Holm, and released on the island. More were said to have been taken there in 1969-70. The species is now established on Westray and litters of young are seen each year from mid-July onwards. As elsewhere, road casualties are a common sight.

PYGMY SHREW

(*Sorex minutus*)

Local name *Nebbit moose*

This unobtrusive species, much more often heard than seen, is present throughout the island in roadside verges, old grassland and moorland. Said elsewhere in Orkney to enter houses and sometimes falling victim to mousetraps.

BAT

There are several old records but none of an animal identified to species level.

RABBIT

(*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)

Very common on Westray, and to pest status where easy burrowing is achieved in sandy soil. Myxomatosis arrived in Orkney in 1954 and was quickly spread through the islands. This caused a very high mortality amongst the Rabbit population, though the offspring of survivors appear to have a degree of resistance to the disease. Colour variants are occasionally reported.

ORKNEY VOLE

(*Microtus arvalis orcadensis*)

Local name *Volder*

This unique native species is well distributed in Westray and found from low-lying grassland to at least half way up the hills. It is active in daytime and their 'runs' (neat tunnels in the vegetation) are easily found in autumn and winter. There are no estimates on population size for the island but it appears to occur in all suitable habitat. Occasional colour variants are seen; black and piebald being two extremes reported.

Orkney Voles from Westray were introduced to Eday in 1987 and 1988 where they now appear to be thriving.

LONG-TAILED FIELD MOUSE

(*Apodemus sylvaticus*)

The occurrence of this rodent has been well described to me and it is certain that it exists on Westray. This would be contra Booth&Booth 1994 who state it is absent from the island. Nothing is yet known on its distribution over the island.

HOUSE MOUSE

(*Mus domesticus*)

Common around human habitation

BROWN RAT

(*Rattus norvegicus*)

Never established on Westray, this unusual situation was threatened in 1992 when several were found in imported straw in 1992. They were quickly killed.

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BLACK RAT

(*Rattus rattus*)

A German grain ship, the “Borkum”, ran aground at Aikerness in 1939 and Black Rats made their way ashore. The ship had been loaded in South Africa but it is not known when the rats arrived on board. They became established particularly at the north end of the island and around Pierowall. It was, for a time, a common sight to see them crawling in and out of the holes in the pier. They became a pest on some farms i.e. Noup Farm. They failed to thrive long term and the last confirmed record was in 1968 though it is possible that they hung on for a few years after this. It seems certain that the Black Rat is now extinct in Westray.

OTTER

(*Lutra lutra*)

It is my experience that the north isles present the best opportunities to see Otter in Orkney; and that the best chances are on Westray. They are distributed around and through the island, most often being seen at the coast and in the lochs. A well defined ‘run’ can be seen near Trenabie Mill. Though there is no single site which can reliably be viewed in the hope of seeing this elusive mammal, the new Rapness Pier is locally thought to offer the best chance.

COMMON SEAL

(*Phoca vitulina*)

The Westray population is of unknown size but this animal is by no means scarce, possibly 500-1000 individuals. Several small colonies exist around the coast with greatest numbers occurring at Sponess and on the Holm of Aikerness. The Bay of Swartmill is a common summer haul-out. Pups are born in June to mid-July and these can swim soon after birth. Many adults are ashore in August when they moult.



GREY SEAL

(*Halichoerus grypus*)

A small breeding colony of perhaps 100 adults exists at the Point of Weatherness, some 25 minutes walk from the Rapness Quarry. Pupping takes place in October-November and the young remain ashore for up to a month while they moult the whitish coat they are born with. A large haul-out can be seen at low water on the Skerry below Noup Head. Typically this species prefers more isolated and exposed breeding and loafing sites than its’ smaller cousin above.

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FIN WHALE

(Balaenoptera physalis)

One struck by a fishing boat, the FV "Alma", off Westray in 12th September 1981. It subsequently stranded alive on Papay and died soon after coming ashore. It was unsexed and measured 13.7 metres in length.

HUMPBACK WHALE

(Megaptera novaengliae)

Seen almost annually at the North Shoal in several years of the 1980's, G. Costie pers comm.

MINKE WHALE

(Balaenoptera acutorostrata)

Recorded sparingly offshore, particularly off Noup Head and along the west cliffs. In the rest of Orkney, this species is commonest from July to October, though can be encountered at any time of year.

SPERM WHALE

(Physeter macrocephalus)

There is a record of a male which had been dead some time, washing ashore on 25th November 1988. It measured 14.3 metres in length.

HARBOUR PORPOISE

(Phocoena phocoena)

Local name Pallo

This is the commonest cetacean seen around Orkney and it can be found in small numbers around Westray, especially in areas of strong tidal flow, i.e. Weatherness, Papay Sound.

The peak time for sightings in Orkney is in July-August.

WHITE-BEAKED DOLPHIN

(Lagenorhynchus albirostris)

This is the commonest dolphin recorded around Orkney in recent years. Sightings in summer and autumn off Orkney's west coast strongly imply that there are opportunities to see this robust dolphin off the Westray coast.

KILLER WHALE

(Orcinus orca)

Occasionally seen offshore, and sometimes from land; especially in late spring and summer. Pods of up to 12 animals have been seen around Orkney at this season in recent years.

LONG-FINNED PILOT WHALE

(Globicephala melas)

The status of this species offshore is unclear but there are records of two mass live strandings. On 14th March 1955, some 67 animals stranded at Point of Cott. Of these 54% were females. On 12th May 1983, 36 stranded at Twiness; containing a proportion of 62% females.

RISSE'S DOLPHIN

(Grampus griseus)

It should be possible to see this large dolphin off Noup Head in August-September. There is one record of a live animal found stranded on Westray on 19th November 1983. It was towed into deeper water.