

Friends of Penzance BSAC Conservation Officer's Report February 2013



A whale that is almost unknown to science has been seen for the first time after two individuals, a mother and her male calf, were stranded and died on a New Zealand beach. These carcasses offers the first complete description of the Spade Toothed Beaked Whale (*Mesoplodon traversii*), a species previously known only from a few bones. This discovery is the first evidence that this whale is still with us, and serves as a reminder of just how little we still know about life in the ocean. The findings also highlight the importance of DNA typing and reference collections for the identification of rare species, for when found they were first identified as the much more common Gray's Beaked Whales. Their true identity came to light only following DNA analysis, which is done routinely as part of a 20 year program to collect data on the 13 species of beaked whales found in New Zealand waters. This is the first time this species - a whale over 5 metres in length - has ever been seen as a complete specimen. Up until now, all that was known about this species was from three partial skulls collected from New Zealand and Chile over a 140 year period.



Scientists have recovered from the Nevada desert a fossil marine predator measuring 8.6 metres in length (about 28 feet) representing the first top predator in marine food chains feeding on prey similar to its own size. The 244 million year old fossil, named *Thalattoarchon saurophagis* (lizard - eating sovereign of the sea) is an early representative of the ichthyosaurs, a group of marine reptiles that lived at the same time as the dinosaurs and roamed the oceans for 160 million years. It had a massive skull and jaws armed with large teeth with cutting edges used to seize and slice through other marine reptiles in the Triassic seas. Because it was a meta - predator, capable of feeding on animals with bodies similar in size to its own, it was comparable to modern Orca Whales.



The republic of Congo has declared a new national park that protects a core population of the 125,000 western lowland gorillas discovered in 2008. Called Ntokou-Pikounda National Park, the new protected area spans some 4,572 square kilometres (1,765 square miles) and contains 15,000 gorillas, 800 elephants, and 950 chimpanzees. The new park adds to Congo's impressive list of protected areas that safeguard large populations of gorillas and wide expanses of pristine habitat. The park was created on December 28th 2012 when the Congolese Ministerial Council adopted the "Decree Establishing the Ntokou-Pikounda National Park.



There were 19 reported sightings of marine wildlife during January, 11 of which were of Bottlenose Dolphins. 7 of these reports were from St Ives Bay area, 2 were from Trenow Cove area just east of Marazion, one of a pod of ten off Porthgarra and another a pod of 7 off Penlee Point. The 10 off Porthgarra was the largest pod, the other pods ranged from 4 to 7. There were 6 sightings of Harbour Porpoises seen from Porthgarra to St Ives Bay. The largest number was of 20 to 30 off Porthgarra on the 23rd, these were scattered in small groups. The other two reports were of 6 Common Dolphins off Penberth and 2 or possibly 3 Risso's Dolphins near the Cowloe, Sennen. The 7 reported sightings of Bottlenose in the St Ives area were from a survey team who spent a week recording sightings of seabirds and other marine life. They saw Bottlenose every day they were there, at the end of that week they moved for a one day watch at Porthgarra and saw Bottlenose Dolphins and Harbour Porpoises there. It just goes to show that if you watch the sea carefully you are very likely to see something interesting. There is a lot of marine life out there, I think if you watch from any headland in Cornwall on a reasonably calm day one would almost certainly see some marine wildlife.

