

Expeditions to study health of whales in Hebrides using pioneering laser photography

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Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust has announced details of its 2018 surveys, in which volunteers and marine scientists will carry out pioneering research into the health of whales, dolphins and porpoises off Scotland's west coast using photogrammetry – the science of making measurements from photographs.

The trust has been collecting data on cetaceans – the collective name for whales, dolphins and porpoises – from its specialized research yacht Silurian for 15 years. Photo-identification research over this time has catalogued 230 minke whales, some of which have returned to the same feeding grounds every year for over a decade.

This year, new laser photogrammetry equipment used by the crew will enable volunteers participating in the surveys to help collect vital new information to assess the overall health of whales in the Hebrides.

The bespoke equipment made for the conservation charity works by placing two dots of light – of a known distance, typically around 10 centimetres – onto the body of an animal at the same time a photograph is taken.

The technique will be used to measure the length of the animals – helping to determine numbers of young whales, assess body conditions for parasites such as sea lice, and classify marks and scars from interactions with marine plastic and fishing gear.

“Monitoring by volunteers onboard Silurian has shown how Scotland's west coast is an important feeding ground for migratory minke whales. This new equipment will help build a greater understanding of individual whales' movements, behaviour and overall health, and help us evaluate their interactions with manmade items in the marine environment,” said Becky Dudley, Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust's Marine Biodiversity Officer.

“All of our research expeditions depend on volunteers. We offer the opportunity of a lifetime to contribute to a better understanding of cetacean health, whilst enjoying the beautiful scenery of Scotland's west coast and experiencing some exhilarating sailing.”

Volunteers live, work and sleep on Silurian for up to 12 days, receiving training and working with the trust's scientists to conduct visual surveys, acoustic monitoring using specialist equipment, and identify individual animals through dorsal fin photography. The data collected using each of these research techniques also helps to assess impacts and threats caused by human activity.

Volunteers also help run Silurian – giving them the chance to develop other skills such as sailing and navigation.

Surveys are partly funded by a grant from Scottish Natural Heritage, which supports the role of citizen science in better understanding Scotland's seas.

Fiona Manson, a marine specialist at Scottish Natural Heritage, said: “Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust and its volunteers are making an important contribution to marine conservation in Scotland. We're excited by the innovative techniques the trust is using to find out more about the health of wildlife in Scotland's seas.

“The data collected by Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust over the years has helped us understand more about our marine wildlife and how to look after it, and this is an invaluable way to better connect people to nature in their local area.”

Anyone can join one of the trust's expeditions for seven to 12 days, and there are still a few places available onboard in 2018. The surveys run from 15 April to the end of October, with departures from Tobermory on the Isle of Mull, Kyle of Lochalsh near Skye, and Ullapool. Participation costs cover boat expenses, accommodation, training, food and insurance, and support the trust's research. For details, email volunteercoordinator@hwdt.org, call 01688 302620 or see hwdt.org/silurian.

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Company Contact:

Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust

T. 01688 302620

E. volunteercoordinator@hwdt.org

W. <http://www.hwdt.org>

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