

# MALDIVES

**5 – 14 March 2008**

## Leaders

Dr Chas Anderson

Neil Arnold

## INTRODUCTION

This is undoubtedly the most relaxed holiday offered by The Travelling Naturalist, involving leisurely watching from the upper deck and then the opportunity to study the behaviour of, and photograph, some of the world's most active mammals. The bird-watching, though involving a very few species was equally interesting. The keenest snorkellers managed to identify over two hundred species of fish during the week. We enjoyed wonderful views of nine species of cetaceans and were lucky enough to come across two scarce species, the Rough-toothed Dolphin and the Dwarf Sperm Whale.

My thanks go to Chas for organising the trip and sharing his knowledge of a wide variety of marine creatures. I am also most grateful to the crew of the Fathima and its attendant dhoni. They looked after us with great care and contagious cheerfulness. I can't wait to get back to the Maldives next year.

Many photographs were taken but Chris was the first one to come up with a finished product; many thanks Chris.

I very much enjoyed your company and hope we will meet again in the near future.

My best wishes

Neil Arnold

Partner

The Travelling Naturalist.

## DIARY

### The Weather

The Maldives are renowned for light winds and calm seas during the month of March. It was more than half way through the trip though that we discovered this to be true, having experienced abnormally strong winds from the North East. While this did not affect our sea passage I'm sure that it must have reduced the number of cetacean species on view.

### **Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> March**

Four of us had travelled from Heathrow via Dubai and a rather hasty transfer to the onward flight to Malé arriving at about 08.00. There we met up with Fiona and Angus, who had been enjoying time at a beach resort, and with a party from the South African firm Rockjumper who were to join us on the holiday and who proved to be great company. Chas, with his wife Sue and young son Robert, then joined us and unusually we were transported from the airport by boat, the dhoni or tender, and arrived at the m.v. Fathima at 11.30, having noted a small flock of Turnstones en route. Once we had settled into our cabins, we had a hearty lunch and then sat on the top deck as we set off to the north.

During the afternoon we scanned the ocean in search of cetaceans. The Fathima moved at a steady nine knots, a perfect, quiet pace. Soon we encountered a pod of delightful Spinner Dolphins quietly 'logging' alongside the boat. As the afternoon progressed we found pod after pod of Spinners which became progressively more active, 'porpoising', fluke slapping and of course 'spinning', jumping entirely clear of the water. We were also delighted to find a pod of some 20 – 30 Risso's Dolphins. As we watched them, two of the pod tail-lobbed – raising their tails from the water and slapping them down with great force. Two more breached, – leaping clear of the water.

This was a fine start to the holiday, sitting on deck, relaxing whilst we kept a look out and then enjoying very close views of dolphins when we came into contact with them. The only birds we saw were Common Noddies and Grey Herons.

In the evening we anchored off Dhiffusti in the Malé Atoll and took our first opportunity to snorkel, boarding the dhoni, a smaller boat with a covered deck, which took us over the reef. After our evening meal an early night was in order.

### **Friday 7<sup>th</sup> March**

At 07.00 we left Dhiffusti and headed north west across an open channel to the Malosmadulu Atoll South. At this point the wind increased making the sea choppy which interfered with our ability to see whales or dolphins. We only noted a small pod of Spinner Dolphins through the morning but we did get to grips with some bird identification.

The shallow sand-bars held Saunder's, Crested and Lesser Crested Terns and Common and Lesser Noddies. Grey Herons were seen on the islands. Then we had the pleasure of a clear view of the elegant White-tailed Tropicbird.

The climax of the day came at 16.00 when we came across a pod of fifteen – twenty Short-finned Pilot Whales. They came very close to the boat, so close that we could hear them breathing. At one point two 'spy-hopped' holding themselves vertically with their heads out of the water – we were watching them and they were watching us! In the evening we arrived at the village of Eydhafushi in the Malosmadulu Atoll South and went ashore for half an hour to get the feel of a typical village. They were busily preparing for a forthcoming Presidential visit so perhaps it was not quite typical. We enjoyed good views of Flying Foxes before returning to the Fathima for a snorkelling expedition.

In the evening Chas gave us an illustrated talk on the four commonest dolphin species in the Maldives. Whilst he was doing this the crew were at the stern catching fish attracted to the bright lights. In no time they had a bucket full of Big-eyed Snappers and a squid or two which all featured for lunch the next day.

### **Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> March**

The morning started with snorkelling before we made our way along the south coast of the Atoll, hugging the shore to keep out of the strengthening wind. On one island we noted a large group of roosting Flying Foxes.

Terns and Noddies were noted en route as were four Lesser Frigatebirds. The only signs of life in the choppy water were occasional Spinner Dolphins and splendid jumping Sailfish.

In the afternoon a pod of Common Bottle-nosed Dolphins appeared, staying with us for some time and giving wonderful photographic opportunities. As we approached the Moresby channel at 16.15 we were joined by a huge pod of Spinner Dolphins, many of which were spinning merrily.

Once we were safely anchored off Madurravi in the Malosmadulu Atoll North we were able to snorkel. In the evening Chas gave another illustrated talk on further species of dolphin that we might see. The crew meanwhile caught a huge Jackfish.

### **Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> March**

The day started with snorkelling or, in the case of those qualified, scuba diving. Whilst this was happening three Spinner Dolphins swam past the Fathima!

We set off during breakfast but before we had gone very far we came across a feeding flock of terns: Common and Lesser Noddies, Black-naped Terns (30), Saunder's Terns (2), Common Terns (2) and a winter-plumage White-cheeked Tern. Later we came across both Lesser and Greater Crested Terns and then we sighted a Sailfish followed by three Manta Rays swimming just below the surface. From time to time the tips of their wings just broke the surface. A Hawksbill Turtle swam right alongside the boat and our next highlight was a passing Tropical Shearwater although we saw more later.

Lunch was postponed as Striped Dolphins were spotted. There were some 80 – 120 on a wide front, but some joined the boat, surfing on our bow-wave. More photos! One exciting moment came when a dolphin chased a flying fish. The latter immediately took flight, gliding for about one hundred yards.

The rest of the afternoon was quiet! As usual it ended with snorkelling and in the evening Chas gave a talk on 'Blackfish'; Pilot Whales, False Killer Whales, Melon-headed and Killer Whales.

### **Monday 10<sup>th</sup> March**

Once again the day started with snorkelling or scuba diving. Those not taking part watched approaching clouds and as we returned to the boat the heavens opened but the rain was over by the time we had finished breakfast. Later in the morning we headed out to deep water, moving steadily south.

Two pods of Risso's Dolphins entertained us and then before lunch Rough-toothed Dolphins appeared in a pod 25 – 35 strong. They ran the bow, swam by in a 'chorus line' - line abreast and then started breaching and 'head-slapping', bringing their heads rapidly down on the water. When their long snouts showed we were amazed to see their pink lips!

Lunch was a hand to mouth affair as a pod of Risso's Dolphins joined us and a Tropical Shearwater flew around the boat. We then had the strangest experience of the day, a dragonfly flitting around the deck. This was in fact a species, *Pantala flavescens*, that Chas has been studying for some time. It occurs in the Maldives as a migrant having started its journey in India and heading for Africa. It was one of millions which make the journey in mid-winter, this one representing the tail end of the movement.

The next climax was a pod of fifty- seventy Spotted Dolphins which joined us and were very active. The day's watch ended with sightings of Tropical Shearwater and a Sailfish. We anchored for the night at Baa Atoll and Chas gave us another talk, this time on beaked whales.

### **Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> March**

The day started at 07.00 as we set sail for the south. The North-east wind had dropped to force one, the sea was calm and the sun shone.

Before breakfast we enjoyed views of Risso's Dolphin, two Sailfish which left the water in a series of magnificent leaps revealing the whole fish and a fine White-tailed Tropicbird.

Later in the morning we were watching another pod of Risso's Dolphin when, in the distance, we could see Lesser Frigatebirds and Sooty Terns feeding over a shoal of fish. As we neared the area we could see the thrashing of Yellow-finned Tuna feeding on smaller fish. The tuna were soon joined by a school of Spotted Dolphin which were also exploiting the small fish. As we watched the dolphins came alongside the Fathima and we enjoyed the sight of their young swimming in tight formation with their mothers.

After this excitement the afternoon was a period of relaxation though we kept a watchful eye on the horizon. As we approached Ari Atoll we saw yet more Manta Rays before mooring for the night and some excellent snorkelling.

In the evening Chas gave us a talk with a difference. We all sat on deck and watched the heavens then he told us the wonderful historical story of how the word 'atoll' came to England and then how Charles Darwin uncovered the mystery of the formation of atolls.

### **Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> March**

The day dawned calm and sunny so after a snorkel, followed by breakfast, we set off heading for deep water. However, whilst we were still in the shallows we found five Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphin. In mid-morning we reached an area where a boat was fishing for tuna. It was accompanied by up to six hundred Spotted Dolphins and some three hundred Spinner Dolphins. Needless to say there were also attendant seabirds including a flock of forty Sooty Terns, four Tropical Shearwaters, two Bridled Terns and many Brown Noddies. We watched for an hour and a quarter before moving on. Just before lunch we came across more seabirds including a bigger, darker Wedge-tailed Shearwater.

Later we had a rather privileged sighting, the landing of a huge Yellow-fin Tuna by one of the local fishing boats. All the Maldivian boats catch tuna on hook and line, consequently there is no by-catch and no doubt this is one of the reasons why the Maldives have such a thriving cetacean population.

After lunch we relaxed under the awning on the top deck waiting for the next spell of action. At 15.30 Chas spotted a distant movement in the sea so we approached cautiously. When we were 800m away, two small cetaceans arched their backs and made for the deep. They were obviously Dwarf Sperm Whales, a notoriously shy species. A fishing boat chugged its way right across the area, seemingly dashing our chances of further sightings. However, soon after a Dwarf Sperm Whale bobbed up to the surface 100m in front of the boat. It 'logged' for a minute or two then slowly sank beneath the surface, repeating the process shortly afterwards. Much to our surprise, a few minutes later three Dwarf Sperm Whales surfaced about 300m on the starboard side. They were in view for a minute or so until, one by one, they dived. Then two made a brief final appearance. It was as though time had stood still. We had been lucky enough to gain close sightings (for this species!) of up to six Dwarf Sperm Whales – a shadow from the deep.

On our way back to Nika Island we found yet more Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphins.

In the evening we had a pleasant surprise, Chas had arranged for us to visit the Nika Resort Hotel – in fact the whole of the nearby island. After a walk around the resort we gathered on the lawn outside the bar and toasted the setting sun. During our stay we had recorded Asian Koel ( a rather elusive species of cuckoo), Striated Heron and a Common Sandpiper.

Back on the boat, David, an American client with the Rockjumper’s group, showed us a video he had made of his hunt for the Laotian Rock Rat. He is one of the few people to have seen this recently discovered ‘living fossil’, a shy nocturnal animal. We admired his fortitude having lived in a primitive jungle village during his quest.

**Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> March**

An early start again on a still and sunny day; we were soon watching the wonderful antics of a pod of Spinner Dolphins. Flying fish, Sailfish and Manta Rays soon added interest and more Spinners and Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed passed close by. Before lunch we found a pod of Risso’s Dolphins and then more Spinners.

The afternoon was quiet until we arrived at an area rich in small fish; up to 150 Spinner Dolphins were feeding avidly. As we watched, a high speed ferry passed by and the Spinners took to the air, porpoising rapidly away into the distance. Realising that they were alarmed we left them to their own devices.

After lunch there was time for one last snorkel before we moved to our mooring off Malé. Our last wildlife sighting was of a flock of Cattle Egrets flying to roost, the setting sun colouring them a delicate shade of pink. In the early evening we bade farewell to our friends from Rockjumper, except for one couple who shared our journey back to the UK. Fortunately we were able to relax on board until it was time to transfer to the dhoni for the short trip to the airport and our flight home.

**Friday 14<sup>th</sup> March**

We arrived back safely to Heathrow and after a short wait for our baggage, went our various ways.

**CHECKLIST**

**BIRDS**

**PETRELS & SHEARWATERS.**

Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus pacificus</i>	one
Tropical Shearwater	<i>Puffinus bailloni</i>	Fifteen records throughout

**HERONS, EGRETS & BITTERNS**

Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striatus</i>	one
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Six
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Common. Twenty-one throughout

**TROPICBIRDS**

White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	Two records
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**FRIGATEBIRDS**

Lesser Frigatebird	<i>Fregata ariel</i>	Thirteen records throughout.
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**SANDPIPERS**

Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>

**GULLS & TERNS**

Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	Common
Swift (Crested) Tern	<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Common but less frequent than <i>bengalensis</i>
Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>	Locally common
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	A migrant. Three records
White-cheeked Tern	<i>Sterna repressa</i>	One, in winter plumage
Saunders (Little) Tern	<i>Sterna saundersii</i>	Widespread, locally common
Bridled Tern	<i>Sterna anaethetus</i>	Scarce. Two records

Sooty Tern	<i>Sterna fuscata</i>	Locally common
Brown ( Common) Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>	Common
Sooty (Lesser) Noddy	<i>Anous tenuirostris</i>	Very Common
<b>CUCKOOS</b>		
Asian Koel	<i>Endynamys scolopacea</i>	
<b>MYNAS</b>		
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	
<b>CROWS</b>		
Indian House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	Common
<b><u>MAMMALS</u></b>		
<b>BATS</b>		
Indian Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus giganteus</i>	Common
<b>CETACEANS*</b>		
Dwarf Sperm Whale	<i>Kogia sima</i>	One sighting. Up to six individuals
Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Turscops aduncus</i>	Five sightings. 50 – 60
Common Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Turscops truncatus</i>	One sighting. 12
Rough-toothed Dolphin	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>	One sighting. 25 – 35
Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuate</i>	Five sightings. 330 – 470
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	One sighting. 80 – 120
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	Twenty-one sightings. 800 – 1295
Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	One sighting. 15 – 20
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	Eight sightings. 50 – 60

Total: 44 sightings of between approx. 1400 – 2100 individuals.

\* Numbers given are minimum – maximum estimations, dolphins being notoriously difficult to count.



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