Passengers from Portsmouth International Port to help in whale count

This summer passengers sailing to and from Portsmouth International Port will have the chance to contribute to a major marine wildlife survey. Holidaymakers will join marine wildlife experts to help with the second annual ORCA OceanWatch event.

Brittany Ferries crossings from Portsmouth International Port will carry ORCA wildlife officers during ORCA OceanWatch, which is scheduled for the first week of the school summer holidays. ORCA have trained bridge crews to spot and record data on whales, dolphins and porpoises (collectively known as cetaceans), and ORCA wildlife officers will help passenger to understand more about the creatures who are living in the waters around them on voyages down to Spain. Once they know what to look for, passengers will be able to contribute to the survey. It means hundreds of extra pairs of eyes will be scanning the seas, searching for whales and dolphins and collecting vital data on these fascinating animals.

The Portsmouth based marine wildlife charity is hoping to build on the success of last year's event. Nearly 2,000 individual cetaceans from 16 different species were spotted and recorded in a 9 day long period in 2015. The information has helped the charity to understand more about the habitats and distribution of these magnificent mammals.

"With more partners and vessels involved in this year's ORCA OceanWatch event, we will build up an even bigger picture of the cetaceans in our waters, as well as increasing awareness of these amazing animals which can be seen right on our doorstep. Highlights from last year included a blue whale, the largest animal on earth, seen in the Bay of Biscay, and over 700 common dolphins were sighted. We can't wait to see what this year's event brings." – Anna Bunney, ORCA's Community Wildlife Officer.

This year ORCA Ocean-Watch starts on 23 July and runs until the end of the month. For the first time a cruise ship operating from Portsmouth International Port will carry an ORCA Wildlife Officer on board, who will be showcasing whales and dolphins to passengers, and with the trained bridge crew, they will also be collecting data on these animals. Swan Hellenic's Minerva is the perfect platform with an ideal schedule. From Portsmouth it heads to the Channel Islands, then through the whale rich waters of the Bay of Biscay to Portugal and Spain before heading back to the Waterfront City.

Minerva is one of a number of new vessels taking part in ORCA OceanWatch. The charity is spreading its net wider this year, with more UK waters covered by a bigger network of companies. The aim is to build an even more comprehensive picture of where cetaceans are living, helping to protect them in the future. Ferries sailing from Portsmouth and other UK ports, will be keeping detailed records of what is seen from the bridge, as will crews onboard cruise ships operated by Saga and Carnival UK.

Martin Putman, Port Manager at Portsmouth International Port, said, "Spotting whales and dolphins from ferries and cruise ships can be an exciting part of the holiday for anyone sailing from Portsmouth. I'm delighted that ORCA OceanWatch will be even bigger and better this year, and that passengers will be able to take part in gathering vital data for the charity."

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For more information Orca Oceanwatch www.orcaweb.org.uk/get-involved/oceanwatch