

Pilots, Dolphins & Mantas – A Maldives Cruise

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 January – 6 February 2011



Tropical island in South Ari Atoll



Risso's Dolphin



Spinner Dolphin



Short-finned Pilot Whale



Striped Dolphin

Images and report compiled by Paul Marshall



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Day 1 – 2

Friday 28th – Saturday 29th January

UK – North Ari Atoll (Maldives)

Following an overnight flight from the UK, via Dubai, we arrived in Male early Saturday morning. Before long we had boarded a boat and were making our way north towards Bandos Island Resort. After a long night of travelling, a relaxing day was just what was required. Whilst checking in we had our only real occurrence of rain of the trip. Once rooms were sorted, everyone settled into life on a tropical island. Although limited, the wildlife included White-breasted Waterhens, Asian Koels, Common Mynas and Fruit Bats. The real highlight though was our first taste of the amazing snorkelling that the Maldives has to offer.

Day 3

Sunday 30th January

North Male Atoll – South Male Atoll

After a good night's sleep everybody was up early and most people took the opportunity to have a final snorkel. We all gathered at the dock late morning and Chas arrived on a dhoni (the name of the local boats). As there was a stiff northeast wind blowing we made our way to the leeward side of Bandos Island where we rendezvoused with the Ari Queen, our home for the next week. After a quick introduction to the boat we were soon heading south through North Ari Atoll. By early afternoon we were crossing the deep channel between North and South Male Atoll. Unfortunately the wind meant sea conditions were a little choppy and we failed to see any cetaceans. Once inside South Male Atoll we started to see our first Lesser Noddies. Amongst them was our only definite Brown Noddy of the trip. We also saw our first Saunder's Terns.

We navigated our way south, checking the edges of reefs for any feeding dolphins. It wasn't until late afternoon that we found our first animals, a small group of Indo Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins. This species is very similar to Common Bottlenose Dolphin but their behaviour, small size and 'inshore' location all pointed to this species.

The day ended with the first of many fantastic snorkels over a reef close to the island of K. Maddhoo, where there was a safe anchorage to spend the night. Dinner was preceded by one of the many fascinating talks from Chas, the subject of this one being the commoner dolphins of the Maldives.

Day 4

Monday 31st January

South Male Atoll – South Ari Atoll

More fantastic snorkelling before breakfast was followed by another small group of Indo Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins as we headed west. Mid-morning saw us crossing the deep water between South Male Atoll and South Ari Atoll. With a persistent northeast wind blowing it made finding cetaceans hard work and things were a little slow to start with. As we neared the eastern edge of South Ari Atoll we found our first Spinner Dolphins, a group of 20 animals heading strongly east. This was quickly followed by six Short-finned Pilot Whales. These animals lived up to their name and spent some time 'escorting' the boat before heading off north.

Once inside the calmer waters of the atoll we were able to have a break for lunch, slightly later than planned due to spending time with the Pilot Whales. The remainder of the afternoon was relatively quiet although we had our first views of Black-naped Tern, a beautiful bird restricted to tropical and subtropical areas of the Pacific and Indian Ocean. We anchored off the tiny island of Radhdhigga and were able to get ashore. Some took the opportunity to walk around the island whilst others went for a snorkel along the reef edge surrounding the island. The corals and diversity of fish here was outstanding, with the highlight for many being a Common Lionfish.

Day 5

Tuesday 1st February

South Ari Atoll – Faafu Atoll

Our early morning snorkel was slightly delayed in an attempt to snorkel with Manta Rays at a site not far from where we had spent the night. Unfortunately the current was against us and none were seen. Although we did have a nice snorkel...and en route found ourselves amongst a group of over 200 Spinner Dolphins returning from a night's fishing.

Next we headed out west from South Ari Atoll into deep water (c2000 metres). At this time of year the abundance of food to the west of the Maldives attract large numbers of cetaceans. It wasn't long before we found our first ones, a large group of Risso's Dolphins. It was difficult to estimate numbers as they were spread over a huge area, but we estimated a minimum of 300! The animals put on a great show with much breaching, spy-hopping and lob-tailing around the boat. One of the great things about watching cetaceans in the Maldives is the amazing underwater views as a result of the crystal clear waters. This fantastic experience was quickly followed by a group of distant Short-finned Pilot Whales. As we made our way towards them it became apparent there was a much larger whale amongst them. The angle of the blow immediately gave it away as a Sperm Whale.

We managed to get within a few hundred metres before the whale raised its flukes vertically and dived – always an impressive sight on such a large animal. We stayed in the area for an hour to see if it would reappear but unfortunately not. The hour wait was anything from tedious though as we were surrounded by over 50 Short-finned Pilot Whales and a small group of Common Bottlenose Dolphins. It was difficult to know which way to look!

Not that it really mattered (the beauty of travelling by boat with numerous of options of places to anchor means we had totally flexibility) but we had made little progress today and it was time to start making our way back towards Faafu Atoll. As we neared the edge of the atoll we found ourselves amongst a group of Spinner Dolphins. After a day's rest and with the prospect of a night's fishing ahead of them, many were in a playful mood, giving us a great show to end the day. Once inside the Atoll we anchored at Minimasgali, where the highlight of the late afternoons' snorkel was a Hawksbill Turtle.

Day 6

Wednesday 2nd February

Faafu Atoll – South Ari Atoll

Before breakfast we had a slight change to the morning's proceedings. We went ashore to a deserted island where there were options for a stroll around the island before snorkelling off the beach. Those strolling around the island had fantastic views of Striated Heron, Lesser Noddies and Black-naped Terns, as well as more familiar birds such as Grey Heron, Grey Plover and Common Sandpiper.

We retraced our steps from yesterday, heading north and crossing the deep channel between Faafu and South Ari Atoll. In contrast to yesterday things were rather quiet, with 'only' 12 Short-finned Pilot Whales being seen. They gave fantastic views, spending much time around the bow of the boat and in crystal clear waters. By mid-afternoon we had arrived at Maamigili at the southern tip of South Ari Atoll. This is a known spot for seeing Whale Sharks at this time of year. Cruising over the reef, just offshore on the Ari Queen, we saw the distinctive dark shadow of a Whale Shark, probably a young male. Despite this we failed to locate any more and therefore weren't able to snorkel with them. After our late afternoon snorkel we anchored in the harbour at Maamigili.

After four days of a force 2-3 northeast wind, it had today switched to a force 2-3 northwest wind. Persistent breezy conditions are unusual for the Maldives in February but northwest winds are almost unheard of. Chas likened it to seeing snow in southern Britain in June. These unusual weather conditions were being mirrored across the globe but especially in Australia and South East Asia, all as a result of La Niña. It was certainly having an effect on the distribution of Manta Rays and Whale Sharks around the Maldives and most likely cetaceans as well.

Day 7

Thursday 3rd February

South Ari Atoll

Today we woke to absolutely mirror calm seas and not a breath of wind. Upon leaving the harbour at Maamigili the effect of the calmer conditions, allowing us to see more, was immediately obvious... First off were a group of active Spinner Dolphins, a Manta Ray feeding at the surface and a group of seven mobulas cruising under the bow of the boat.

Just outside the atoll we were soon found ourselves amongst a group of 50 Indo Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins, the largest number Chas had ever seen together. This group was unusually active and gave us some great views. For those quick enough there was even chance to see the indistinct brown spotting on the underside as some dolphins leapt clear of the water. After taking our fill of the dolphins we set off north and were about to start breakfast when some small cetaceans were spotted 'logging' at the surface. Although distant their behaviour, size and shape allowed us to confidently identify them as Dwarf Sperm Whales. This shy species is relatively common in these waters but only really seen on calm days. Unfortunately they slipped away before we could get too close. But then over breakfast another three were found. These showed much better and allowed a relatively close approach giving everyone chance to study them.

We then entered a rather frustrating two hour period where we saw two different species of beaked whale. Neither sighting was particularly close but the first two were clearly a different size from the second individual. After each sighting we remained in the general area where the animals had dived but unfortunately none reappeared. Next came a group of 50 (minimum) Risso's Dolphins and a further three Dwarf Sperm Whales, taking our total for the day to eight. Then came one of the cetacean highlights of the trip, a thoroughly enjoyable hour spent with some very active Striped Dolphins. These small oceanic dolphins have a reputation for acrobatics and they didn't disappoint. One adolescent individual must have breached close to a 100 times in the hour period we spent with them.

But the day wasn't over there. Late afternoon and we headed back to the Manta Ray site near Radhdhigga, on South Ari Atoll, where we had tried to see them a few days ago. This time we were in luck! Even before we had climbed aboard the dhoni, at least three rays could be seen feeding at the surface. We were soon in the water with these amazing creatures, with everyone enjoying close and good views. Then, excited voices from the dhoni crew alerted us to a Whale Shark swimming straight for us. It was one of those "right place, right time" moments as the 20 foot fish swam right past the whole group. Without doubt the whole experience had been one of those magic life moments!

Day 8

Friday 4th February

South Ari Atoll – North Ari Atoll

The north/northwest wind had returned overnight and by the time we set off after our early morning snorkel it was a force 2-4. A group of inactive Spinners, no doubt tired after a nights fishing, were encountered as we headed out of the South Ari Atoll and into deeper water, before turning north towards North Ari Atoll. By mid-morning we came across our largest group of cetaceans of the week, a group of over 500 Risso's Dolphins. They appeared to be everywhere, covering several square kilometres of ocean. With such a large group of social animals it isn't surprising that there were a lot of behavioural antics to watch.

The afternoon was rather quiet, the highlight being a Jouanin's Petrel that spent some time with the boat before settling on the water reasonably close. We visited another known Manta Ray site and saw several at the surface but unfortunately the choppy conditions and current meant it wasn't safe to get in the water. We made our way inside North Ari Atoll and late afternoon we visited the non-tourist island of Rasdoo - a chance for us to experience how the locals live, buy souvenirs, stretch the legs and eat ice-cream. Several Barn Swallows and a Heuglin's Gull were seen at the southern end of the island.

Day 9

Saturday 5th February

North Ari Atoll

Today was our last day on the boat and after a final snorkel, where some of the group were fortunate enough to see a Porcupine Ray, we set off from North Ari Atoll of Male. The morning proved to be rather quiet as we crossed the relatively shallow waters of the atoll and into the deeper channel between North Ari Atoll and North Male Atoll. Around midday we came across the most active Spinner Dolphins we had seen so far. We spent a very enjoyable hour with them bow-riding and playing around the boat. The clear waters gave us stunning underwater views and there was much spinning, chasing and we were even able to see some mating behaviour.

Early afternoon saw us in the deep water channel at the southern end of Male. Five Sailfish showed well at the surface, and before heading to our anchorage there was time to head out into deep water east of Male. Just as we cleared the island we spotted a large blow some distance ahead. The size of the blow suggested a Blue Whale and before we could get close enough for good views the animal fluked and dived, confirming its identity. We remained in the area for a little while but unfortunately it failed to reappear.

That evening we anchored just off Male and had plenty of time to pack, relax and reflect on what had been a fantastic trip. Despite unusual weather which had resulted in less than ideal conditions, we had seen eight species of cetacean (plus two unidentified beaked whales) totalling over 1,800 individuals! We had experienced some incredible snorkelling, with a highlight being swimming with Manta Rays and Whale Shark. The boat, crew and food had been superb. Chas's excellent company, knowledge and entertaining evening talks had made the trip even more enjoyable. All capped by taking place in the stunning tropical islands and waters of the Maldives!

Day 10

Sunday 6th February

North Ari Atoll – UK

Early in the morning we transferred to Male airport and after an uneventful return flight, via Dubai we arrived in London early evening.

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Species lists

Birds (H = heard only) (✓ = recorded)

No.	Common name	Scientific name	January 2011				February 2011					
			28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Tropical Shearwater	<i>Puffinis bailloni</i>							3			
2	Jouanin's Petrel	<i>Bulweria fallax</i>								1		
3	Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>			1			2				
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	3	3	2	5	2	3	2	1	
5	White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>	✓	✓								
6	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						1				
7	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			2			1				
8	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	H					1				
9	Heuglin's Gull	<i>Larus heuglini</i>								1		
10	Brown Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>			1							
11	Lesser Noddy	<i>Anous tenuirostris</i>		c30	c15	c80	c200					
12	Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>		2								
13	Saunders's Tern	<i>Sternula saundersi</i>		6	C20					4		
14	Bridled/Sooty Tern	<i>Onychoprion sp.</i>				1			4			
15	Black-naped Tern	<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>			6	4	4	2		4		
16	Asian Koel	<i>Eudynamys scolopaceus</i>	✓	✓						✓		
17	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>								5		
18	Maldivian House Crow	<i>Corvus s. maledivicus</i>		✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	
19	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓	✓								

Whales & Dolphins

No.	Common name	Scientific name	January 2011				February 2011					
			28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>										1
2	Sperm Whale	<i>Physter macrocephalus</i>					1+					
3	Dwarf Sperm Whale	<i>Kogia sima</i>							8			
4	Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>				c20	c300		c100	c50	c250	
5	Indo-Pacific B. Dolphin	<i>Turisops aduncus</i>			6	9			c50			
6	Common B. Dolphin	<i>Turisops truncatus</i>					8					
7	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>					c400		c50	500+		
8	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>			6	c50		12				
9	Beaked Whale sp.								2			
10	Beaked Whale sp.								1			

Fish

Keeping an accurate record of all the fish seen proved rather tricky, with everyone in the group seeing something different on each snorkel. Over the course of the week we saw somewhere between 100 and 150 species.