

Shorter Contributions

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A PROBABLE NEARSHORE RECORD OF KILLER WHALE (*ORCINUS ORCA*) ON ASSATEAGUE ISLAND, VIRGINIA. — Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*) are found worldwide in oceans but are uncommon in the western North Atlantic south of Nova Scotia (Katona et al., 1988; Mitchell & Reeves, 1988; Reeves & Mitchell, 1988a, b; Hairr, 2012). There are no stranding records in Virginia (Blaylock, 1985; Potter, 1991) and only two sight records in Virginia waters: (1) at the edge of the continental shelf (36° 46' N, 74° 38' W) approximately 118 km east of Virginia Beach (Katona et al., 1988); and (2) about 35 km east of Rudee Inlet, Virginia Beach (Koonce, 2002). Here I report a probable nearshore sighting of Killer Whales from Assateague Island, Accomack County, Virginia.

On the morning of 25 November 2007, I saw a pod of cetaceans (as many as seven individuals) from the beach on Assateague Island (37° 53.05' N; 75° 20.66' W). Distance was difficult to judge, but I estimated the pod was 400-600 m offshore. Observation with binoculars revealed that the dorsal fins were significantly taller than those of Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), the most frequently observed cetacean in the coastal waters of Virginia (Blaylock, 1985). I attempted several digital photographs with a Canon PowerShot A570 camera through a spotting scope set at 20X (Swarovski HD-ATS 65), but only one photograph captured the breaching whales (Fig. 1). The image showed two



Fig. 1. Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*) photographed from the shore of Assateague Island, Virginia, on 25 November 2007.

cetaceans, a submerged individual with a triangular dorsal fin (upper panel of Fig. 1) and a second breaching individual with curved dorsal fin (upper and lower panel of Fig. 1).

I sent the photographs to James G. Mead and Charles W. Potter, cetacean specialists at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. Both concluded that the cetaceans were most likely Killer Whales, representing a male (triangular fin) and female (curved fin). I then sent the photograph to an *Orca* specialist, Robert L. Pitman (Southwest Fisheries Research Center, NOAA Fisheries Service, La Jolla, CA), who replied (pers. comm.), “I think the dorsal fin of the lead animal looks awfully heavy for a *Grampus* [= *G. griseus*, Risso’s Dolphin], and the fin of the back animal is suspiciously triangular. Also, the animals are quite black and the lead animal has what appears to be a rounded melon - I think if it was *Grampus* you could see the flatter front or even the cleft in the anterior portion of the melon. And I also agree, there could be an eye patch in there, either obscured by a bow wave or under water. I think they could be killer whales.” On the basis of the photographic evidence, the Killer Whale should be placed on the provisional list of marine mammals recorded in coastal Virginia waters.

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