

Researchers reveal first sightings of rare whales off New Zealand Coast

July 8 2016



A rare grouping of Shepherd's Beaked Whales has been spotted off the coast of Dunedin. Credit: Tom Brough

For the first time in New Zealand waters, an extremely rare grouping of Shepherd's Beaked Whales has been spotted from a University of Otago research vessel off the coast of Dunedin.

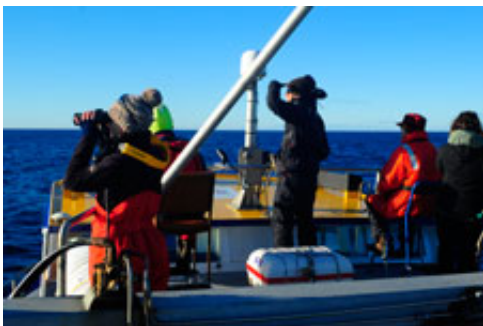
Dr Will Rayment, from Otago's Department of Marine Science, last week led a survey expedition of the submarine canyons off the Otago coast aboard the vessel *Polaris II*, and revealed the two separate sightings of the whale today. The survey team comprised researchers from Otago University, Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust, Otago Museum, Parker Conservation and the Ornithological Society of NZ.

The Shepherd's Beaked Whale, *Tasmacetus shepherdii*, is one of the least known cetaceans in the world, and was previously known from only

nine confirmed sightings in the world of live members of the [species](#), and 55 strandings of dead whales.

"There have previously been no confirmed sightings in New Zealand waters, although New Zealand is the world's stranding hotspot for the species," he says.

"On Tuesday (28 June) the team saw a group of five [beaked whales](#) in the Taiaroa Canyon, about 30 km east of Taiaroa Head. They were confident they had just sighted the unusual Shepherd's beaked whale, mostly because one of the team, Dr Trudi Webster, had recently attended a stranding on the Chatham Islands.



Crew aboard the Polaris II. Credit: University of Otago

"Amazingly, the very next day, the team made another sighting of the rare species, this time a group of three in the Saunders Canyon, also off the coast of Dunedin. Both sightings were later confirmed as Shepherd's Beaked Whales by Anton van Helden, NZ's beaked whale expert."

"The team saw a range of seabird and marine mammal species, but the highlight was undoubtedly the two sightings of this rare and elusive whale."

"Although we suspected that the Otago Canyons would be good habitat for deep diving odontocetes such as sperm whales and beaked whales, nobody had really been out to have a proper look.

"We were delighted that our suspicions were confirmed, and to make two sightings of these whales is really exciting. The species is very rarely sighted, and we saw two groups in two days! It shows that the Otago coast and the canyons just offshore is very important habitat for marine mammals."

The most recent sightings will be included in a review paper that will be produced by a collaboration of researchers from the Otago Museum, Otago University and the Department of Conservation.

Provided by University of Otago

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