

Season Report

January 2024 – October 2024

Azores Whale Watching & Wildlife Tours TERRA AZUL
Connecting People With Nature

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **2**

Welcome to Terra Azul

About this report

WILDLIFE OBSERVATIONS **5**

2024: a remarkable year

What cetacean species did we see?

Tour results: whales, dolphins or both?

Other marine life sightings

2024 SEASON SUMMARY **11**

CONCLUDING WORDS **12**

A future built together

Acknowledgements



Common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*)

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Terra Azul

TERRA AZUL is an ecotourism company specialising in whale watching and wildlife tours, situated on São Miguel island in the Portuguese Azores archipelago. Over the past 23 years, we have developed into a trusted ecotourism operator, offering wildlife experiences that prioritise education, scientific value and environmental responsibility. Our mission is clear: to provide “authentic and always better tourism experiences” in one of the world’s top destinations for marine wildlife enthusiasts. We invite you to experience our responsible whale watching adventures, to enjoy seabirds and shorebirds in their natural habitats, and to explore the eroded volcanic cone of the Princess Ring islet. Discover the island’s hot springs, botanical splendours and breathtaking landscapes – all with a warm welcome from our team in Vila Franca do Campo.

Education

TERRA AZUL envisions a future where ecotourism operates in harmony with education, sustainability, and science. We believe it is our responsibility to leave a positive impact on the planet. Central to this vision is our belief that education is a pathway to stewardship – of both the environment and biodiversity. This is why we are committed to educating the local community and our tour guests. As Baba Dioum (General Assembly of the IUCN, New Delhi, 1968) once said: *“In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.”*

Maritime Heritage

Building on the same philosophy, we are invested in the preservation of maritime heritage, by highlighting the region's transition from whaling to whale watching. One example is the transformation of *Vigia da Furada* – a historic lookout station from the 1950s – into an educational and cultural site. Another example is the restoration of *Senhora da Fátima*, an authentic whaleboat originally crafted in 1945. Further tying back to local heritage, we have our land-based whale spotters. They use techniques passed down from the whaling days to spot cetaceans, while our whale watching boats are out at sea.

Sustainability

TERRA AZUL works in partnership with research and conservation organisations, supporting vital studies on cetaceans and other marine life. Moreover, we were the first in the Azores to be certified as a responsible whale watching operator by the World Cetacean Alliance (WCA). Promoting a good code of conduct continues to be a top priority on all our tours. Finally, we strive to reduce the environmental footprint of our activities by adopting a sustainable approach. In this way, we ensure that every moment at sea benefits both wildlife and our guests.

About this report

As we wrap up the 2024 season, we invite you to look back on a season filled with nature-centred experiences. Inside this report you will find information about wildlife sightings, tour results, and updates on our social responsibility initiatives. With every detail shared, we hope to leave you with inspiration and anticipation for what is still to come.



Sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*)

WILDLIFE OBSERVATIONS

The year 2024 put a spotlight on the changes happening in the Azores' marine ecosystem, driven by atmospheric and oceanic conditions. The persistence of the Azores anticyclone and warmer-than-usual sea surface temperatures had a noticeable impact on ocean productivity and wildlife.

2024: a remarkable year

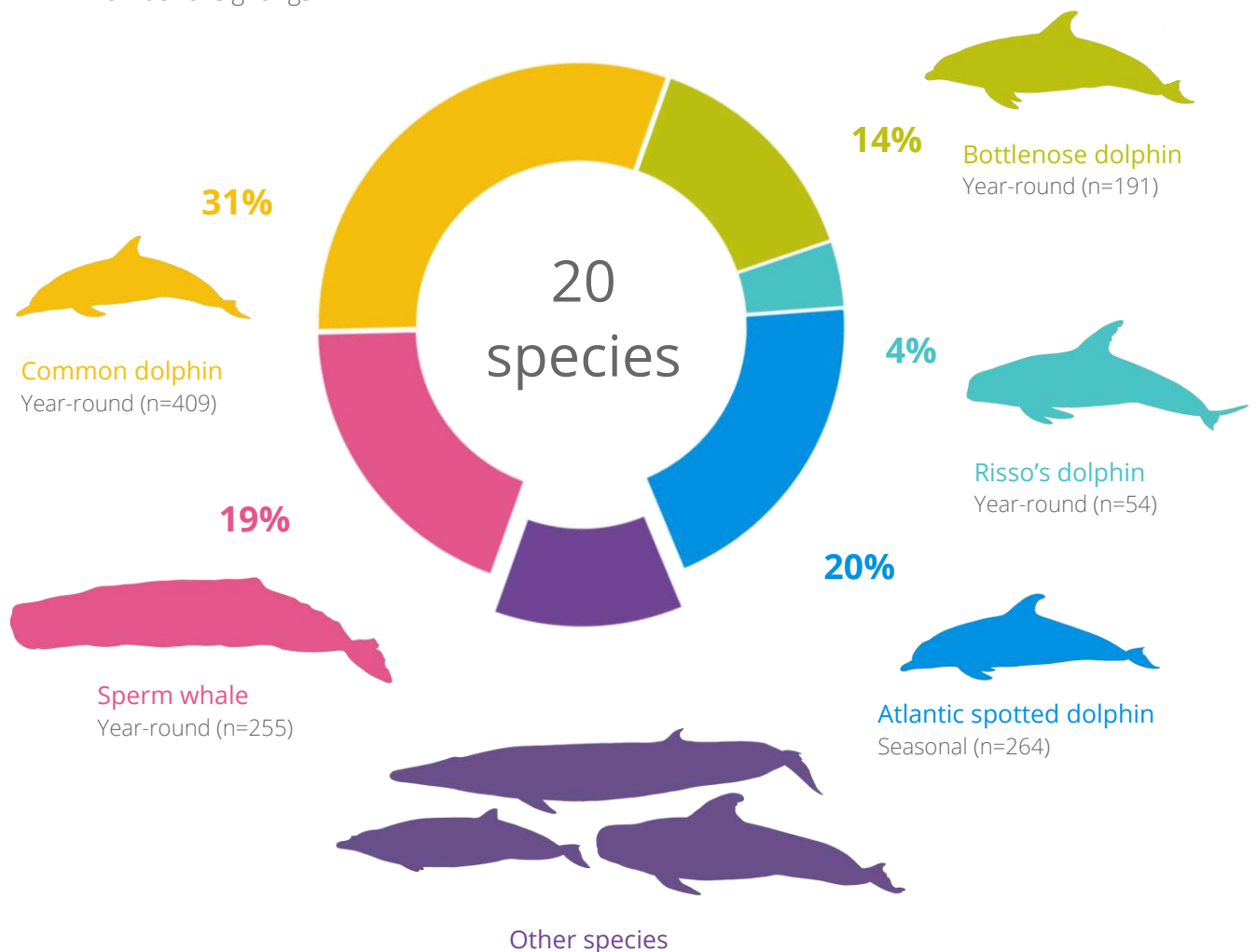
In 2024, we documented more than **1,300 cetacean sightings**, mirroring last year's count. However, it covered a broader diversity of species: **20 species** compared to 18 in 2023. The top five most frequently encountered species were: common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*; 31%), **Atlantic spotted dolphin** (*Stenella frontalis*; 20%), **sperm whale** (*Physeter macrocephalus*; 19%), **bottlenose dolphin** (*Tursiops truncatus*; 14%), and **Risso's dolphin** (*Grampus griseus*; 4%). The remaining 12% comprised a fascinating mix of other dolphin and whale species (see [Figure 1 – Page 6](#) for more details).

Spring and summer brought their share of surprises. We had a remarkable number of **leatherback turtles** (*Dermochelys coriacea*), an increased number of **whale sharks** (*Rhincodon typus*), and rare sightings of **Fraser's dolphin** (*Lagenodelphis hosei*), **Gervais' beaked whale** (*Mesoplodon europaeus*) and **pygmy sperm whale** (*Kogia breviceps*). Scarce sightings of **blue whales** (*Balaenoptera musculus*) and **fin whales** (*B. physalus*) contrasted with more frequent sightings of **sei whales** (*B. borealis*) and **Bryde's whales** (*B. edeni*), but their short presence in the area hinted at limited food availability. After a lively spring and summer, wildlife abundance saw a sharp decline as autumn approached. Even so, a wide range of species continued to be present.

What cetacean species did we see?

Figure 1. Sighting frequencies in 2024: from resident to rare species

n = number of sightings



Other dolphins (Occasional)		Baleen whales (Seasonal)	
Short-finned pilot whale	2% (n=27)	Sei whale	3% (n=35)
Striped dolphin	1% (n=15)	Bryde's whale	2% (n=23)
False killer whale	1% (n=11)	Humpback whale	1% (n=8)
Killer whale (orca)	1% (n=9)	Blue whale	<1% (n=6)
Beaked whales (Occasional-Rare)		Fin whale	<1% (n=2)
Blainville's beaked whale	<1% (n=7)	Minke whale	<1% (n=2)
Sowerby's beaked whale	<1% (n=5)	Rarities	
Gervais' beaked whale	<1% (n=2)	Fraser's dolphin	<1% (n=3)
		Pygmy sperm whale	<1% (n=1)

Tour results: whales, dolphins or both?

Our whale and dolphin watching tours offered visitors incredible opportunities to connect with marine life: **97% of tours** encountered dolphins, **64% of tours** encountered whales, and **61% of tours** featured both whales and dolphins (see [Figure 2](#))! Cetacean species diversity peaked during the summer months, with a year average of 2.6 species per tour (ranging from 1 to 6 species; [Figure 3](#)).

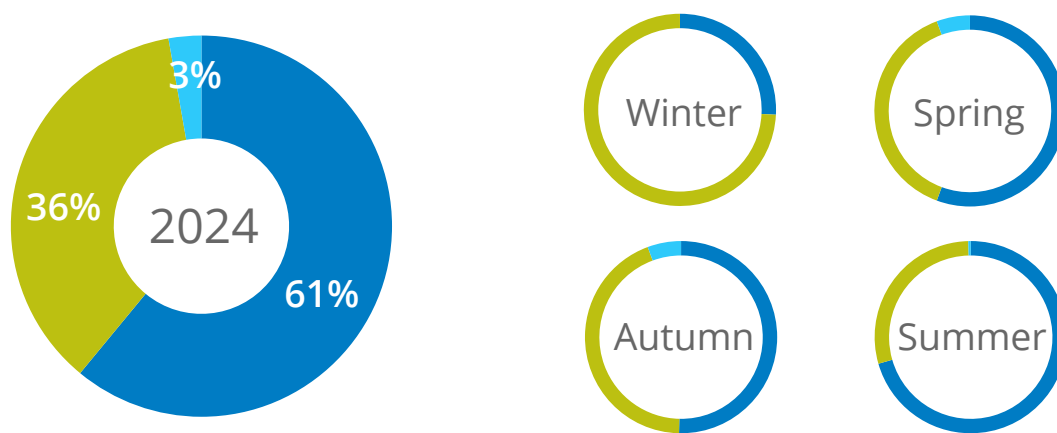


Figure 2. The percentage of tours in 2024 with sightings of ■ “whales and dolphins”, ■ “only dolphins”, and ■ “only whales”, across the year and different seasons.

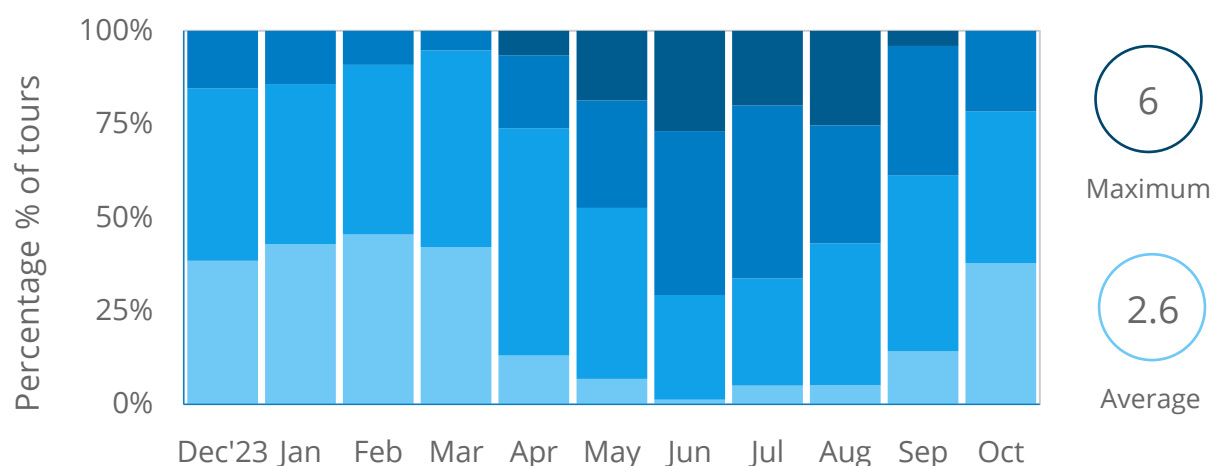


Figure 3. Monthly trends in species diversity observed on tours in 2024: ■ 1 species/trip, ■ 2 species/trip, ■ 3 species/trip, and ■ ≥ 4 species per trip.



Sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) and TERRA AZUL boat

Other marine life sightings

(Marine) Birds

Cory's shearwater
(*Calonectris borealis*)

Common tern
(*Sterna hirundo*)

Yellow-legged gull
(*Larus michahellis*)

Bulwer's petrel
(*Bulweria bulwerii*)

Great shearwater
(*Ardenna gravis*)

Sooty shearwater
(*Ardenna grisea*)

Barolo shearwater
(*Puffinus baroli*)

Manx shearwater
(*Puffinus puffinus*)

Great skua
(*Stercorarius skua*)

Parasitic jaeger
(*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

Black-crowned night heron
(*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

Ruddy turnstone
(*Arenaria interpres*)

Little egret
(*Egretta garzetta*)

Eurasian whimbrel
(*Numenius phaeopus*)

Large Fish

Blue shark
(*Prionace glauca*)

Whale shark
(*Rhincodon typus*)

Sicklefin devil ray
(*Mobula tarapacana*)

Smooth hammerhead shark
(*Sphyrna zygaena*)

Ocean sunfish
(*Mola mola*)

Bumphead sunfish
(*Mola alexandrini*)

Swordfish
(*Xiphias gladius*)

Sea Turtles

Loggerhead turtle
(*Caretta caretta*)

Leatherback turtle
Dermochelys coriacea



Bumphead sunfish (*Mola alexandrini*)

2024

Season Summary

201

days of whale watching

exploring

> 30.000

nautical miles

We obtained

APEE bronze recognition

Associação de Ética Empresarial

In the area of

Environmental Impact Management

and

Community and Partnerships



Scientific support

76 sea turtle encounters
+ 1 loggerhead sea turtle rescue

9 scientific boat trips

11 shark and ray sightings

25 biological samples
4 cephalopod remains, 18 faeces samples and 3 sloughed skin samples

1.233 cetacean records

We contributed to projects, such as **S.O.S. Cagarro**, **Projeto Arenaria**, **Projeto Baleia Jubarte**, **Ocean Azores Media House**, and attended the **35th ECS conference**

211

local students

participated in our educational programme

Rated excellent by **WCA Approved**

Operations & Management ★★★★★

Cetacean Welfare ★★★★★

Cetacean Interaction Protocols ★★★★★

Sustainability Practices ★★★★★

CONCLUDING WORDS

A future built together

TERRA AZUL envisions a future where ecotourism goes hand-in-hand with education, sustainability, and science. We are committed to protecting and learning about the Azores' unique marine environment, but we cannot do it alone. The warming of the central Atlantic is a worrying trend, with uncertain consequences for biodiversity and species abundance. It underscores the urgent need for ongoing species monitoring and environmental education.

Are you a guest on our tours, a researcher, an educator, or part of a conservation group? Your involvement matters! Our tours support wildlife research, conservation efforts, and other social responsibility actions. This year, we collaborated with MONICET, COSTA project, MONICEPH, Sperm Whale Scale, SEATIMES project, Elasmobase, Azores delphis project, World Cetacean Alliance (WCA), Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds (SPEA), but also local schools and sustainability partners. Whether you are our future guest or collaborator, get in touch – we look forward to having you on board!

Acknowledgements

This year's achievements would not have been possible without the interest and support of our community. To our guests, collaborators, partners, and team – thank you for being part of our story; and to the magnificent marine life of the Azores – thank you for sharing your world with us. Thank you for reminding us every day why our work matters.

COLOPHON

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