



Nota breve | Short note

First confirmed sighting of pygmy killer whales *Feresa attenuata* off Cabo Verde

Simon Berrow^{1,*}, Eduard Degollada², Beatrice Jann³, Edita Magileviciute⁴,
Kateline Pereira⁴, Manuel S. D. Rodrigues⁵, Pedro López-Suárez⁵, Tony Whelan¹
& Caroline R. Weir⁶

¹ Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Kilrush, Co Clare, Ireland

² EDMAKTUB Associació, Barcelona, Spain

³ Swiss Whale Society, Swiss Whale Society, Ar Inèra 9, CH-6999 Astano, Switzerland

⁴ Associação Cabo-verdiana de Ecoturismo (ECO CV), Praia, Santiago, Cabo Verde

⁵ Bios.CV, Sal Rei, Boavista, Cabo Verde

⁶ Ketos Ecology, Kingsbridge, Devon, UK

*Corresponding author e-mail: simon.berrow@iwdg.ie

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Pygmy killer whales (PKW) *Feresa attenuata* Gray, 1874 inhabit tropical and sub-tropical oceanic waters worldwide, including around volcanic islands (Baird 2018). They are naturally rare, and their ecology and distribution are poorly understood (McSweeney *et al.* 2009, Baird 2018). A live mass stranding of PKW occurred at Boavista during February 2012 (López-Suárez *et al.* 2012), but no other validated records exist for Cabo Verde. Here we describe the first confirmed sighting.

Distinguishing between PKW and melon-headed whales (MHW) *Peponocephala electra* at sea is challenging (Baird 2018). Both are

relatively small, reaching 2.6 and 2.8 m respectively, and have similarly dark body colouration, no beak, and white lips (Jefferson *et al.* 2015). However, subtle differences exist in colouration, the shape of the head, flippers and dorsal fin, and the dorsal cape pattern.

During a visual cetacean survey from a 14.3 m catamaran on 10 September 2019, a group of approximately 30 small odontocetes, including two calves, was photographed. The sighting occurred in 150 m water depth off São Filipe, Fogo Island (14.80°N, 24.38°W), approximately 1 km from shore and 1 km from the 1000 m depth contour. The animals were initially identified as MHW, but were re-

identified as PKW following subsequent examination of the photographs.

The primary feature used to identify the São Filipe animals was the cape. Compared with MHW, the dark cape was more strongly demarcated from the lighter flank, and dipped below the fin at a shallower angle with the apex of the dip located slightly further back on the body (Fig. 1). It widened forward of the blowhole into a dark crown that slanted downwards towards the mouth (Fig. 1), and

contrasted with the paler crown (and resulting masked appearance) usually apparent in MHW (Jefferson *et al.* 2008). In side profile the animals had rounded head shape (Fig. 1A), while that of MHW is typically more pointed. Additionally, the white lip colouration extended onto the face (Fig. 1A), which is more indicative of PKW. The flipper tips were rounded (Fig. 1B), rather than pointed as in MHW. In combination, these features confirmed the São Filipe animals as PKW.



Fig. 1. Pygmy killer whales photographed off Fogo Island, Cabo Verde, on 10 September 2019, showing diagnostic identification features. **A)** Rounded head with white lips extending onto the face, dark cape broadening into a crown in front of the blowhole, and prominent dorsal (photo by M. Rodrigues). **B)** and **C)** Well-demarcated dorsal cape with prominent shallow dip below dorsal fin, and flippers with rounded tips (photos from drone by E. Degollada). **D)** One of the two calves recorded in the group, exhibiting relatively smaller size and characteristic pale neonatal folds (photo by S. Berrow).

Few verified records of PKW have been documented from the Atlantic African coast. One animal was captured off Senegal during 1958 (Fraser 1960), and another landed as bycatch in Ghana during 2007 (Van Waerebeek *et al.* 2009). A photograph from Côte d'Ivoire in 2011 (Weir *et al.* 2013), is now considered by those authors to be of insufficient quality to distinguish between PKW and MHW. Consequently, our sighting

and the stranding in 2012 (López-Suárez *et al.* 2012), represent noteworthy records for the eastern Atlantic.

Given the challenges of distinguishing between PKW and MHW, even at close range and in good light, future records should be carefully assessed. Supporting material should be independently verified, and records otherwise considered unconfirmed (López-Suárez *et al.* 2012).

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