



Nota breve | Short note

## Rare sighting of pygmy killer whales *Feresa attenuata* off São Nicolau Island, Cabo Verde

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The pygmy killer whale (PKW) *Feresa attenuata* Gray, 1874 is a small pantropical delphinid, occasionally observed in subtropical and warm temperate waters (Still *et al.* 2019). It is naturally rare throughout its range (Braulik 2018) and its ecology is still poorly known (López-Suárez *et al.* 2012). The distribution of PKW worldwide overlaps with that of the melon-headed whale (MHW) *Peponocephala electra* Gray, 1846, with which it can be easily confused because of their similar external morphology. In contrast to PKW, MHW can be relatively common in some areas of its range (Kiszka & Brownell 2019).

There are a few confirmed sightings of PKW in the Atlantic Ocean off the West African coast where many records are insufficiently documented to be considered valid (López-Suárez *et al.* 2012, Berrow *et al.* 2020). In the Cabo Verde Islands, only two previously published records are unequivocal:

a mass stranding of seven individuals on the northern coast of Boavista Island in February 2012 (López-Suárez *et al.* 2012) and a live sighting of circa 30 individuals (including calves) off Fogo Island in September 2019 (Berrow *et al.* 2020). Hereafter, we report on a third, previously unpublished, record.

On 3 June 2018 at 13:30 UTC, during a catamaran cruise to Raso Islet, a group of four PKWs was opportunistically observed for 10 minutes over the continental shelf (water depth= 50 m) about 1.15 km off the coast of Barril, São Nicolau Island (16°35'01''N, 24°24'27''W; Fig. 1). The individuals were travelling 50–100 m in front of us at a relatively slow pace and were never seen lifting their heads very high above the surface. Based on their size and the presence of scars, we initially misidentified the four individuals as black subadult Risso's dolphins *Grampus griseus* Cuvier, 1812. About two hours later,

and as we were approaching the north-eastern coast of Raso Islet, a second group of delphinids was observed at relatively close (45–90 m) range ( $16^{\circ}38'21.4''\text{N}$ ,  $24^{\circ}33'01.4''\text{W}$ ; water depth= 680 m). This time, the pod was substantially larger than the

previous one, comprising an estimated 10–15 individuals, which were travelling in a more energetic manner, often lifting their heads completely clear of the water surface. A close examination of our photographs showed that this pod were all MHWs (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Pygmy killer (PKW) and melon-headed (MHW) whales photographed off São Nicolau Island, on 3 June 2018 (photos by V. Legrand / AGAMI). **A)** and **B)** Diagnostic features of the former compared to the latter include a more rounded forehead with thicker white/ pinkish lips extending onto the face, and a dark dorsal cape contrasting with the paler flanks, respectively. **C)** In contrast, MHW shows a relatively more pointed head shape with thinner white lips. Noteworthy here is also the difference in surfacing behaviour of both species, with MHW usually lifting the head completely above the surface, unlike PKW.

In contrast to MHW, which is frequently sighted in the vicinity of the Cabo Verde Islands (S. Berrow pers. comm.), PKW remains a rare encounter at this latitude in the

North Atlantic Ocean. High quality photographic documentation of PKW is also infrequent in the literature; hence those obtained during our cruise were supplied for

use in the recent Europe's Sea Mammals (Still *et al.* 2019). In conclusion, these three confirmed records of PKW (2012, 2018, 2019) suggest that there may be a small resident

population in the Cabo Verde Islands, and therefore further research should be conducted to estimate encounter rate (relative abundance) and seasonal movements.

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