

THE LEATHERY TURTLE IN BUTESHIRE WATERS

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Introduction

Recent sightings of the Leathery Turtle *Dermochelys coriacea* off Bute represent a distinct change in the status of this species, formerly considered to be a very rare visitor to Scottish waters, so it is worth while examining the known Clyde records in some detail.

Kilbrannan Sound

A Leathery Turtle was caught by the fishing-boat 'Hercules' in the Kilbrannan Sound on 11th August 1959. The turtle was taken to Calderpark Zoo, Glasgow, where it died, and the body was then taken to Kelvingrove Museum (2). A detailed report on the specimen, with a photograph, was later published in the *Scottish Naturalist* (11).

At the time this was regarded as the first fully authenticated record of the Leathery Turtle from Scottish waters, but subsequent investigation revealed another Clyde record over three-quarters of a century earlier. This record was overlooked by Stephen (10) in his paper on early Scottish turtle records, but was included by Gibson in his West of Scotland survey (1), as follows:

The *Campbeltown Courier* for 4th September 1875 contains the following paragraph: "On Monday last Mr. Dugald McCorkindale, master of the schooner Ben More, while coming down the Sound of Kilbrannan, picked up a large turtle, measuring five feet six inches long and three feet six inches broad. It was taken over to Mr. Mathieson, manager, Bulloch Lade Distillery" (1, 9).

If these measurements were correct, and there can be no real reason for thinking otherwise, then this "must almost certainly have been a Leathery Turtle" (3), and indeed this record is now generally accepted as perfectly authentic (6, 8).

Pladda

It is certainly interesting that the first two Clyde records of the Leathery Turtle came from the Kilbrannan Sound (i.e. off Arran, in Buteshire waters), and in 1961 there was an additional record off Arran, between Pladda and Ayr. The *Scottish Fisheries Bulletin* (No. 16, December 1961) reported that a "large turtle, estimated to be about six feet long by three feet across, was seen in the Firth of Clyde, between Ayr and Pladda, on 30th August 1961" (12). Another report of a turtle seen between the Mull of Galloway and Portpatrick on 28th August probably referred to the same animal (3, 12).

From the size and description given by the fishermen (observers this would appear to have been a Leathery Turtle. Unfortunately confirmation was not possible at the time (12), although there now seems to be little real doubt about the true identification.

Firth of Clyde

During the next twenty years various tenuous reports reached me of large turtles seen in various parts of Clyde, but unfortunately these reports, although sometimes of very large turtles indeed, were often second- or even third-hand and some time after the event, so that further investigation was seldom really possible; two of these, however, one off Sanda in August 1947 (*Fishing News*, 23rd August 1947, page 8) (9) and one off Ailsa Craig on 28th August 1968 (3), seemed worth while recording separately (3, 6).

It is also highly relevant to point out that a Leathery Turtle was found dead on the Island of Jura in September 1978 (4), which was incontrovertible evidence that at least one Leathery Turtle had recently been present in the West of Scotland, so the lack of an accurate description for any of the unsubstantiated Clyde occurrences was extremely frustrating.

Toward Point

In 1981, however, a fully authenticated record was reported by a careful and reliable observer (5), as follows:

"During the forenoon of 1st September 1981, Dr. A.J. Baillie and a colleague were canoeing up the Firth of Clyde when they saw a large marine creature which surfaced a few yards away from their canoe. Although they had already been paddling for several hours, the creature raised such interest that Dr. Baillie and his companion immediately turned back to follow it, even although this meant paddling against a strong tide and headwind. The creature was clearly a turtle, which was followed for about quarter of an hour during which time it surfaced at least half a dozen times. Presumably because of the silence of their canoe, Dr. Baillie and his colleague were able to approach within some ten feet of the turtle and to note the following points:

The turtle was at least six feet long, with a dark leathery grey/green carapace with several marked nobbly ridges running longitudinally, and each time the turtle dived a short sharp tail could be seen projecting at the end of the carapace. This was clearly an example of the Leathery Turtle *Dermochelys coriacea*. It was first seen roughly mid-way along a line between the Cloch (Renfrewshire) and Toward (Cowal) lighthouses, and

was swimming fairly strongly down the Firth" (5). When last seen the turtle was swimming steadily in the direction of the Island of Bute.

This was the first sight record of a Leathery Turtle which was fully acceptable. Both previous Clyde records had been based on caught specimens.

Lower Loch Fyne

In July 1983 two other authentic records of Leathery Turtles were reported. On 9th July 1983 a Leathery Turtle was seen near the entrance to Loch Fyne by Mr Andrew Pettigrew and his family, who were yachting on the Clyde. The turtle was seen in very calm conditions, and the Pettigrews changed course and sailed close to what "at first sight seemed to be a large barrel floating on the sea; then all at once we realised it was alive".

Mr Pettigrew supplied me with an excellent description which left no doubt as to the correctness of the identification (7). Furthermore, less than a week later a Leathery Turtle was again reported, from nearly the same area, as undernoted:

Kyles of Bute

On 14th July 1983 Dr A.J. Baillie, who reported the 1981 Leathery Turtle, and Mr B. McGuigan were canoeing in the Kyles of Bute when they also saw a Leathery Turtle, in the west Kyle some two miles south of Kames. They managed to approach to within a few feet, and again an excellent description was taken which left no doubt as to the identification (7).

At the time, neither Mr Pettigrew nor Dr Baillie knew of each other's sightings, and later that July I received other, less well authenticated, reports of a "very large turtle" further up Loch Fyne. It seems highly likely that these two accurate records, only a few miles apart, plus the other Loch Fyne sightings, referred to the same animal, although the possibility that there may have been several creatures around cannot be entirely discounted.

Conclusion

During the past thirty-odd years, therefore, we have had several authentic records of Leathery Turtles from the Clyde sea area, plus a number of other sightings which were quite possibly correct. In addition, there is the record of one found dead on Jura in September 1978. It is worth noting that during the past century all the authentic, or highly probable, Clyde records have come from Buteshire waters, some three off Arran and at least two from the vicinity of Bute.

It has been suggested that very slight changes in climatic conditions may account for this increased number of records of what was formerly

considered to be a very rare creature in Scottish waters. Possibly it is also significant that all the known records are in an eight-week period from July to September, and nearly all within the month of August. Nevertheless, whatever the reasons, there is certainly no doubt that we have had several perfectly authentic records within recent years, some within the immediate waters of Bute itself, so all naturalists should undoubtedly be on the alert and should keep a sharp look-out for other possible occurrences.

References

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RECORDS OF THE WALRUS IN BUTESHIRE WATERS

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Introduction

There are two records of the Walrus *Odobenus rosmarus* from the Clyde area, and both of these come from the County of Buteshire; the two occurrences are nearly a century apart, one from Bute in 1884 and one from Arran in 1981. The Walrus is an Arctic marine mammal which is extremely rare in British waters, so I was recently surprised to discover that some members of the Buteshire Society were actually quite unaware of these remarkable local events. In view of this, it is clearly important that these two most unusual records should be properly documented in the Society's journal.

The first record is noteworthy for the later zoological eminence of the observer, while the second is noteworthy for the apparent complete lack of any accredited naturalist observers at all!

Island of Bute, 1884

The distinguished zoologist, Sir John Graham Kerr, Regius Professor of Zoology in the University of Glasgow, recorded in the *Glasgow Naturalist* for 1949 that he saw a Walrus in Ettrick Bay, Island of Bute, on 8th August 1884. This is a very remarkable record, so much so that it is worth quoting Sir John's remarks in full (Kerr, 1949):

In the course of overhauling an accumulation of old personal papers I have been so fortunate as to come across the diary in which is recorded my observation of a Walrus in the Firth of Clyde in the year 1884, and in view of the comparative scarcity of records of this Arctic animal on the coasts of Scotland, it seems desirable to have it embodied in the *Glasgow Naturalist*. It is true I was a very young observer at the time, but the wording of my diary leaves no doubt as to the accuracy of my observation. The reference reads as follows:-

"August 8th (1884). In the afternoon we went over to Ettrick Bay. We saw a shoal of Porpoises and also a Walrus. We got rather a surprise when we saw the head of the latter adorned with large tusks rise in the water quite near us. It soon dived, and we lay quite still expecting it to rise again. This it soon did, and we watched it for some time."

A record of this importance, published sixty-five years after the event, would not usually be regarded as acceptable, but this one is different; not because of the later eminence of the observer, who was a very young man at the time, but because we can be certain that Sir John was only too well aware of the extreme importance of accuracy in all local recording, and so would not have permitted any record to be published about which he was not completely certain.