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Holidaymakers answer the call of the wild

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By JOHN ROSS

WILDLIFE tourism in Scotland is defying the recession as businesses report more visitors flocking to see iconic species in the natural environment.

A study by Wild Scotland, the Scottish Wildlife and Nature Tourism Operators Association, shows that 61 per cent of members reported a better year than 2008. Only 8 per cent of firms saw a drop in customers.

The survey was conducted among the as
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sociation's 80 members which together generate £9.3 million for the economy, have about 840 staff and attract an estimated 500,000 visitors annually.

The association, which holds its annual conference today, says the weak pound and the trend of "staycations" – holidaying in the UK – are helping to increase numbers. Nearly 60 per cent of businesses said they had seen an increase in British visitors this year, but the biggest change was a rise in European tourists, including German, Dutch, Swedish and Swiss.

Most operators said sightings of certain types of wildlife were about the same as last year but 32 per cent said they were better than last year.

Bottlenose dolphins, seabirds and seals were among the species where sightings have improved or stayed the same, while there have been fewer reports of minke whales and basking sharks.

Caroline Warburton, the association's manager, said: "Everyone started 2009 with a fair amount of trepidation because of the recession but the results show it has been a good season and all the hard work has paid off.

"It's clear from the figures the sector is growing. There is definitely a growing awareness of environmental issues and more people are aware, through nature programmes on TV and promotion by VisitScotland, of the great wildlife we have in Scotland and that it is accessible.

"There are more businesses getting involved so the provision allowing people to get out and experience wildlife is greater. There is a general movement with things feeding off each other."

Wildlife and bird watching tourism is worth an estimated £153m in the UK. The sector is a key strand of VisitScotland's marketing activity, including its "winter white" campaign, which highlights wildlife experiences such as whale watching off Mull and handling birds of prey in Perthshire and Fife.

A spokeswoman said there is an emerging interest in the natural history of Scotland both at home and abroad.

"The fact that we are seeing Scots holidaying at home this year means that they are looking for new and interesting things to do as they explore their own country in more depth," she said. "Bird or wildlife watching is becoming a significant must-do activity for visitors from both the UK and overseas."

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