

# MARK CARWARDINE



## SINISTER MESSAGE OF BOWHEAD IMAGE

**T**he recent sighting of a young bowhead whale in Cornwall was about as likely as a great white shark turning up in the River Thames. But photos of this high Arctic whale, more than 3,000km from its nearest home in West Greenland, just off a beach in the Isles of Scilly proved it beyond doubt. It was the first record of the species in British waters.

The big question is, why did a bowhead whale appear so far south? It is a natural inhabitant of the frozen north, and normally likes nothing more than being surrounded by ice.

Perhaps it was just a lone wanderer? But my cynical mind has been worrying about more sinister possibilities. Perhaps, instead, it has something to do with the rapidly disappearing Arctic sea-ice, and the fact that it is melting earlier and freezing later.

It's certainly not the first time that a whale has wandered off-course in recent years. In May 2010 a grey whale suddenly appeared off the coast of Israel and, exactly three years later, a second individual was seen off

the coast of Namibia. Grey whales have been extinct in the North Atlantic since the 18th century – and had never before been recorded south of the equator – so the most likely explanation is that these two whales entered the Atlantic from the North Pacific, via the Northwest Passage.

They couldn't have done that a few years ago because, quite simply,

## WHY DID A BOWHEAD WHALE – AN INHABITANT OF THE FROZEN NORTH – APPEAR SO FAR SOUTH?

there would have been too much ice for them to get through (unlike bowheads, grey whales don't like ice).

With less ice they have more options: they can expand their range, for example, or spend longer in their feeding grounds in the Arctic. But that, in turn, could have an impact on bowhead whales that, until now, have had the high Arctic pretty much to themselves.

What is scary is that, as the ice melts, we have virtually no idea about what is likely to happen.