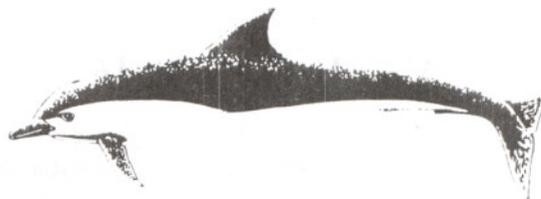


Issue  
twelve

THE IRISH  
**WHALE  
AND  
DOLPHIN**  
GROUP



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## Annual General Meeting

The IWDG Annual General Meeting was held in University College, Cork, in May 1996. We were treated to three very good talks from our visiting speakers: Sara Heimlich Boran, who talked with great enthusiasm and humour on Killer whales and Pilot whales; Ben Wilson, who spoke about Bottlenose dolphins in the Moray Firth, Scotland, and Simon Ingram, who talked about his work on Sperm whales, in relation to whale watching. All talks were interesting and highly entertaining and all those who attended were grateful to the three speakers for going to the trouble of preparing such well-illustrated talks.

After much discussion, constructive criticism and editorial work, the proposed constitution was accepted. The revised constitution will be circulated at the next meeting and with the next newsletter. The constitution will probably make the group more formal but hopefully not duller or less fluid than it has been up until now. It will provide a framework for better decision-making processes and hopefully will encourage more people to become interested and involved.

Finally, a committee was elected. A number of people went forward for election and on the day the following were elected: Jim Allen, Padraig Whooley, Terry Bruton, Johnny Woodlock, Conal O'Flanagan and

Emer Rogan. This committee had a meeting in Dublin in December. The committee decided that Emer Rogan and Terry Bruton would act as co-ordinators, that Padraig Whooley would act as secretary and that Conal O'Flanagan would act as treasurer. Jim Allen agreed to organise the next meeting for April in Portrush, Co. Antrim. It was decided that the main topic of the meeting would be the role of nature reserves in cetacean conservation. The main speakers are Martin Bradley (Dept. of the Environment, N. I.) and Padraig Whooley (see page 2). It was also agreed that the issue of disposal of stranded cetaceans should be discussed, with a view to helping to produce a set of guidelines for County Councils on disposal of carcasses.

Several topics were put forward as themes for subsequent meetings, including examining the guidelines followed by oil/gas exploration companies in relation to cetaceans, the requirements in relation to EIAs and monitoring protocols. However, if anyone would like to suggest other topics to be covered, please contact Padraig Whooley, 17 La Touche Park, Greystones, Co. Wicklow. Written contributions for the newsletter are always welcome. Articles should be sent to Emer Rogan, Dept. of Zoology and Animal Ecology, University College, Cork.

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group is dedicated to the study and conservation of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) in Irish waters

## A Salutary Tale

*Johnny Woodlock cautions care when swimming with dolphins.*

I was in Ballina doing a bit of salmon fishing recently, horrifying the experts with my cheap waders and nine-foot trout rod. I was lucky enough to enjoy a day's fishing on the Ridge Pool beat on the river Moy, generally acknowledged to be the best salmon fishing in these islands.

I actually caught my first salmon, not a big one, but a salmon nevertheless. I think I now understand why fly-fishing for salmon has always been considered more difficult and possibly more rewarding than other types of angling. This is not, however, primarily a fishing story. While in a tackle shop, the proprietor told me that he had been injured by a dolphin while swimming with a group of them.

I considered this such a rare occurrence that I put together a list of questions to clarify exactly what had happened and rang the man from Dublin, when I got home, to get the full story. The first documented case of a dolphin attacking and killing a human being happened last year in Brazil, when one man was killed and another seriously injured. But in that case the dolphin had been seriously provoked, suffering the indignity of being dragged onto a beach to have photographs taken of it.

In late July, or early August, of this year (he could not recall the exact date), while out fishing with three friends in his seventeen-foot fishing boat, they encountered a group of some twelve to fourteen dolphins about two miles off Enniscrone Pier. He did not know what species they were, but, given his description and IWDG records suggesting that there is a semi-resident group of Bottlenose dolphins in this area, it is a safe bet that this is what they were.

He went swimming with them and said that they played with him for about twenty minutes, allowing him to touch them as they swam round. After having dived with one, he was nudged hard in the back as he surfaced for air. A 'nudge' by an animal the size of a dolphin can be fatal and the man was obviously frightened. In his own words he 'took in water' and thought that his time had come. He did stress, however, that he did not think the dolphin was being aggressive. Nevertheless, he said his injuries required a trip to hospital, where he was told he was suffering from a 'displaced rib'.

As reports of dolphins injuring humans are so rare, I thought it necessary to record this incident. As we all know, dolphins are masters of their own element and when we enter it to swim with them we must remember that we are completely at their mercy and are there with the dolphin's permission.

(Details of the injured party with the author.)

## IWDG Meeting 12 April 1997

**Venue: Portrush Countryside Centre, Bath Road, Portrush, Co Antrim.**

**Tel. 01265 823600**

The centre is on the site of a marine fossil nature reserve and houses an exciting exhibition of live marine fauna and combines the local and natural history of the north coast. It is run by the Environment and Heritage agency of the Dept. of the Environment, N. Ireland.

Opening: 0930-1000

Speakers:

10.00 Martin Bradley (D.O.E. [N.I.], Environment and Heritage Agency), 'Designated coastal lands - what does it mean to cetaceans?'

10.45 Coffee

11.15 Pdraig Whooley (IWDG), 'Orca conservation in NW Canada'

12.00 IWDG business

Afternoon: Visit to Bushmills Education Centre to view unique collection of cetacean skeletal specimens collected by members of Causeway Kayak Association (c/o Robin Ruddock)

Contact Name: Jim Allen, 10 Coleraine Rd., Portstewart, Co. Derry.

01265 52181 (w), 01265 836433 (h).

*Nigel Bennett writes about his proposal to set up a junior branch of the IWDG for children and teenagers.*

I propose that a junior branch of the IWDG be set up. The aims of this group would be the same as its senior branch - the study and conservation of cetaceans.

I suggest that special weekend cetacean workshops be organised

with youth groups around the country with the initial aim of setting-up a junior branch.

Before this can happen, it has to be tested through a pilot programme. I am prepared to carry this out with permission from the committee. This proposal will need the support of the entire IWDG membership and all ideas will be very welcome

## Whaling at South Georgia

*Simon Berrow reports from his base at Bird Island.*

The first whaling stations in the Southern Ocean were established at the beginning of this century at South Georgia. The pelagic whaling, which was to bring such decimation to whale populations in the seas around the Antarctic, started from land bases here. Between 1904 and 1965, South Georgia was one of the most important places in the world for the whaling industry. Eight floating factories were based there during 1911–12, and at the peak of whaling, in the austral summer of 1917–18, six shore stations were in operation.

In 1775 Captain Cook, who discovered these unnamed islands, remarked on the abundance of whales around South Georgia, but it was not until the visit of the Norwegian, Carl Larsen, that the full commercial potential

was realised. Larsen, who came from a whaling family, first visited South Georgia in 1894 when he led an exploratory expedition in search of new whaling grounds around Antarctica. On his second visit, in 1904, he established a station at a site he had already earmarked in Cumberland Bay and called it Grytviken (Cauldron Bay), and they shot their first whale on 22 December. This was a Humpback whale and this species was to form the basis of the early industry. In their first season they killed 149 Humpback whales, 16 Fin and 11 Blue whales, as well as 7 other whales, mainly Right whales. This first season attracted a lot of interest from other whaling companies and more licences were granted up until 1911, the year which marked an end of the whaling 'gold rush'. South Georgia was administered by the Falkland Islands and, in 1900, the Governor declared that he was prepared to give a 'mining and general lease' on South Georgia for 21 years. Although a British dependency, there was no interest in taking up this lease until Carl Larsen established his whaling station. No further licenses were issued after 1911, as the Governor wished to avoid excessive exploitation of whales by limiting the number of shore stations.

The conditions of the licenses were very progressive and included full utilisation of the carcasses and protection of whales with calves. During this period there was no shortage of whales in traditional hunting areas, including the North Atlantic, but large-scale production of vegetable oils had forced down the price of whale oil, which was generally of poorer quality. Whaling companies needed new grounds with abundant whales in order to compete with agricultural production and also to find new markets for meat and guano (products of rendering blubber and bones).

During the period from 1904 to 1965, 175,250 whales were taken at South Georgia. Initially, whale catchers did not need to leave

Cumberland Bay to catch enough Humpback whales to keep the factories working flat out. In the first ten years, Humpbacks accounted for four-fifths of the whales killed, peaking at 6,197 in 1910–11. The number of Humpback whales declined after 1912–13, but the number of Blue



*Like mother, like daughter © Simon Berrow 1996*

and Fin whales in the catch increased, indicating the start of pelagic whaling, a move which signalled the death knell for whale populations. Catches were quite stable until factory ships that were independent of land steamed deep into Antarctic waters and powerful catchers could chase and kill the fast-moving Rorqual whales. The carcasses were sunk by being pumped full of air—the hole blocked with an oil-soaked rag, to prevent the Giant Petrels removing it and releasing the air—and marked with a radio transmitter for collection when there were no more whales to kill. During the 1950s and 1960s factory ships were equipped with planes to scour the oceans, radioing back the position of whales to the catcher fleet. What chance did the whales have? The pelagic nature of the whaling fleet made control almost impossible and the subsequent massive exploitation of Blue, Fin and Sei whale stocks is well known to all. After a brief interest in 1934, the Japanese showed an interest in South Georgia for whale meat and used the land stations from 1963–66. This was not successful and Grytviken was finally closed in 1962, after 58 years of continuous operation, and the last whaling station was finally abandoned in 1971.

So what can we learn about whales around South Georgia from the whaling records? Obviously, Humpback whales were abundant in bays and close to the coast, but Fin and Blue whales must have also been common close to the island. Only 577 Right whales were killed by whalers, despite being one of the most valuable species. This accounts for just 0.3% of the total number killed, so Right whales were already very scarce around South Georgia at the beginning of the century. 3,716 Sperm whales (2.1%) were taken, suggesting this species was not common, as Spermaceti was also a valuable oil, and only four Minke and one Southern Bottlenose whale was taken, but these two species were too small to be worth hunting. In 1904 and in subsequent years, whales were caught throughout the year, although in smaller numbers during the winter. Humpback, Fin and Right whales were killed during May to October, showing that not all whales migrated to more northerly breeding grounds during the winter. Since the closure of the whaling industry, there is very little information on the type and abundance of whales around South Georgia and in the Scotia Sea. It is not possible to know whether whale populations have increased since hunting finished or what species now inhabit the rich, productive waters around South Georgia.

### Whale sightings at Bird Island

Since the austral summer of 1978–79, records of whales sighted from Bird Island on the western-most tip of South Georgia have been recorded by the British Antarctic Survey (BAS), during on-going research and monitoring of the island's seabirds and seals. Although sightings are incidental, they give some indication of the whales in the region and they are the only present-day source of information on whales at South Georgia.

A total of 117 sightings have been documented by BAS since 1978. Year-round occupation of the base on Bird Island started in 1983 and has been continuous since. Nine species of whale have been recorded up to 1995 (see Table) and a Fin whale was sighted for the first time during 1996. Most sightings (52%) are of Right whales, with Minke and Humpback whales making up a further 32%. A pair of Blue whales were seen in March 1981 and there have been single sightings of Southern Bottlenose whales and a group of Pilot whales. The number of sightings each year vary from only 3 or 4 to thousands, individual records were not kept and comments such as 'Right whales seen almost daily from mid-December to the end of February' were recorded. Most sightings are during the summer and

Table 1

| Year  | Species |          |       |      |       |        |            |       |              | Total |
|-------|---------|----------|-------|------|-------|--------|------------|-------|--------------|-------|
|       | Right   | Humpback | Minke | Blue | Sperm | Killer | Bottlenose | Pilot | Unidentified |       |
| 1979  | 0       | 0        | 0     | 0    | 0     | 1      | 1          | 0     | 0            | 2     |
| 1980  | 1       | 0        | 1     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 2            | 4     |
| 1981  | 5       | 1        | 3     | 1    | 1     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 1            | 12    |
| 1982  | 1       | 0        | 3     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 1            | 5     |
| 1983  | 3       | 1        | 1     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 0            | 5     |
| 1984  | 12      | 0        | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 1            | 13    |
| 1985  | 2       | 0        | 1     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 1     | 0            | 4     |
| 1986  | 7       | 1        | 3     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 0            | 11    |
| 1987  | 2       | 4        | 1     | 0    | 2     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 2            | 11    |
| 1988  | 0       | 2        | 0     | 0    | 0     | 1      | 0          | 0     | 1            | 4     |
| 1989  | 4       | 0        | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 0            | 4     |
| 1990  | 3       | 0        | 0     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 0            | 3     |
| 1991  | 3       | 0        | 0     | 0    | 0     | 1      | 0          | 0     | 0            | 4     |
| 1992  | 0       | 2        | 5     | 0    | 0     | 1      | 0          | 0     | 0            | 8     |
| 1993  | 1       | 3        | 1     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 0            | 5     |
| 1994  | 11      | 1        | 1     | 0    | 0     | 1      | 0          | 0     | 0            | 14    |
| 1995  | 6       | 0        | 2     | 0    | 0     | 0      | 0          | 0     | 0            | 8     |
| Total | 61      | 15       | 22    | 1    | 3     | 5      | 1          | 1     | 8            | 117   |

peak in January and March. Right whales have been recorded in all months except September, but Humpbacks only during December to June, and Minke whales have not been recorded from June to September. The number of sightings are too few to make any conclusions, but certainly Right whales would appear to be one of the most abundant species around Bird Island, although the small Minke whale is probably under-recorded.

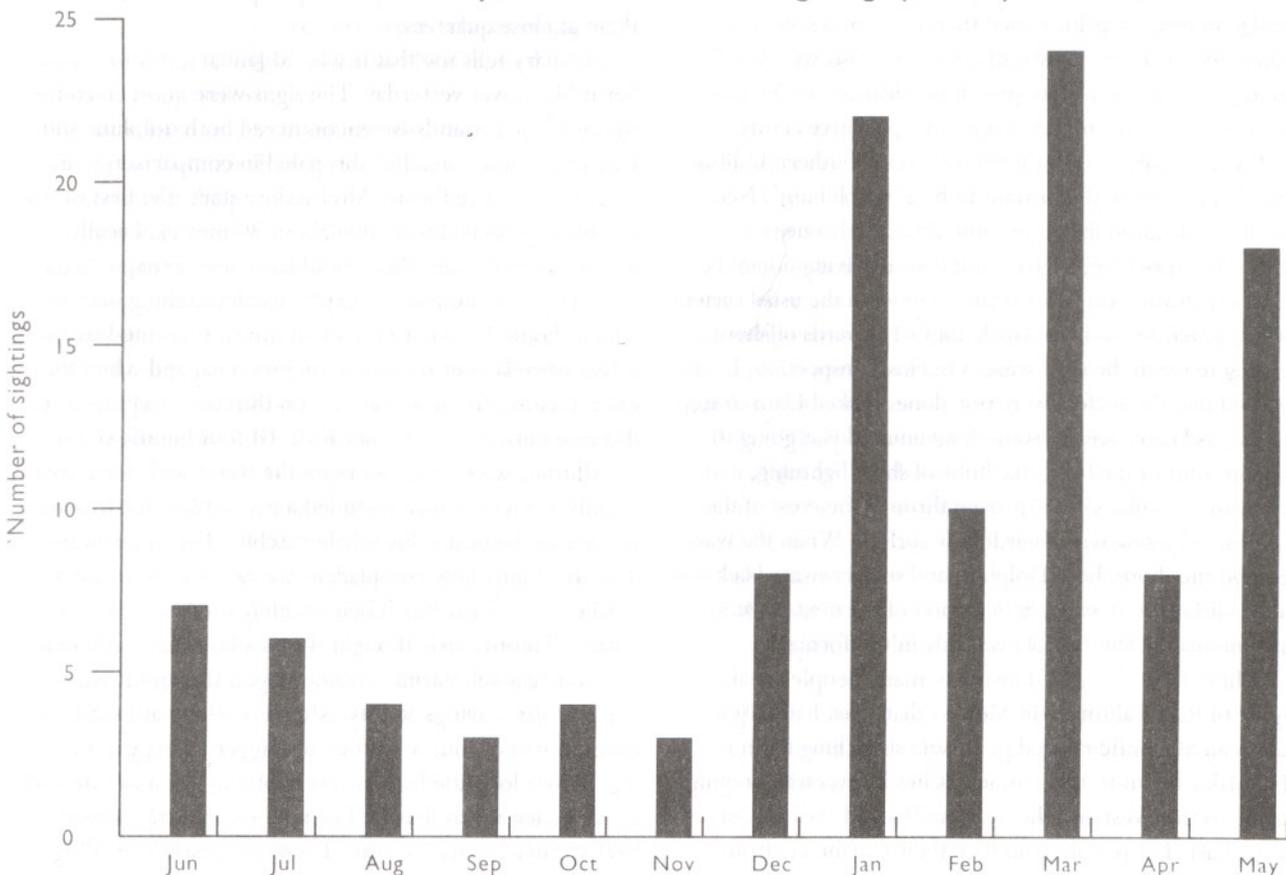
Right whales were so called because they were the 'right' whales to hunt, as their thick layer of blubber made them float when dead. They were hunted throughout their range and populations were already becoming extinct by the fifteenth century. By 1850, the species was considered to be commercially extinct and there were virtually no Right whales left to kill when twentieth-century whalers arrived in the Antarctic. During a study of Right whales around South Georgia in 1958-59, most sightings reported by whale catchers were made in water deeper than 400m and mainly off the north or north-east coast. However, a remarkable sighting in March 1984 sheds some light on the movements of Right whales at South Georgia. While working for BAS, Ben Osbourne photographed a Right whale off Bird Island. After comparing these photographs with photographs taken at Peninsula Valdes in Argentina, a match was made with a whale photographed

there in 1975. This represents a southeastward movement of 2,272km and is one of only six documented long-range movements of Right whales in the South Atlantic between South America, South Africa and the sub-Antarctic Islands. More remarkably, it is the first match that has been made for the Southern Right whale between a nursery area (Peninsula Valdes) and a feeding ground. As the saying goes 'If you don't look, you will never see'.



Winter ascent of La Roche, Bird Island

Monthly distribution of whale sightings (n = 117)



## More Tales from a Traveller

*Padraig Whooley, an active member of the IWDG, embarked on a year's travel around the world in June 1995.*

My first port of call in America was Seattle, where I linked up with Brendan Price, who was invited over as a guest speaker at an international gathering of the Humane Society, which was discussing the issue of captive cetaceans. After Seattle, I headed on down the West Coast, taking in the city of Portland and the magnificent Oregon coastline, which really should not be missed. I must say that I liked the people of Oregon, they have a healthy attitude to life, which is well summed up by a car sticker which reads: 'Welcome to Oregon, now go home'. Perhaps they are a little paranoid, but wouldn't you be if you had 20 million Californians camped on your back door.

It is easy to be cynical about California and its inhabitants, but, having said that, it has some truly amazing scenery. One of my favourites is Yosemite National Park. However, if you're planning to visit, do make the effort to lose the Japanese tourists, which shouldn't be that difficult, as they tend not to stray more than a few hundred yards from their luxury coaches. San Francisco is another great place, with something for everyone. I even spent days marvelling at what I thought was the Golden Gate Bridge before I was informed that it was miles away on the other side of town. How embarrassing! Also well worth seeing is the former State prison of Alcatraz, which has been turned into a museum and interpretative centre.

My next port of call was San Diego in Southern California, the place to go if you want to be a 'beach bum'. Needless to say, I stayed for quite some time. Early one November morning, a friend and I were driving down the coastal highway. As is the norm, there were the usual surfers sitting patiently on their boards about 100 yards offshore, waiting to catch the next wave. On closer inspection, I realised that the surfers were not alone. I asked Liam to stop the car, as I had a feeling something unusual was going to happen. Out of the blue, like bolts of sheet lightning, five Bottlenose dolphins came tearing through the crest of the wave, side by side with their fellow surfers. When the wave reached the shore, both Dolphins and surfers swam back out to the surf zone, in eager anticipation of the next wave. Imagine that, surfing dolphins. Only in California!

While in San Diego I'd heard so many people speak highly of Baja California in Mexico that I just had to go. Baja is an 800-mile rugged peninsula stretching from the US border down to the Tropics. It lies between the raging Pacific to the West and the near landlocked 'Sea of Cortez' to the East. For people who love their marine environ-

ments, this is surely the place to go. Your epic bus journey which you'll have shared with countless pigs, chickens and emigrant workers will have been worth every bone-rattling mile.

When Jacques Cousteau first visited the Sea of Cortez in the 1940s he claimed it was so teeming in marine life that it would be impossible to conceive of it ever being over-fished. Since then the fishing fleets have done their level best to prove him wrong. Yet this delicate environment remains intact, almost in defiance of man's excesses. How can I ever forget the countless days I idled away snorkelling with Bottlenose dolphins, sea turtles, sea lions and tropical fish too countless to mention?

In mid-January the opportunity presented itself to take that long bus trip South again. My going was never in question. The intoxicating lure of Baja was too much to resist. Of course I visited the Sea of Cortez again, but this time my focus was centred on the 14,000 km migration of the Grey whale from Alaska to the protected lagoons of Baja's Pacific coast.

By early January the females arrive, for the understandable reason that they don't need males getting in the way when they're calving. By mid-February the proud fathers have arrived, and the lagoons of San Ignacio and Guerrero Negro come alive with these giants. We could see the whales swimming from the shore in the shallow channels, so we were very excited by the prospect of being out with them at close quarters.

My diary tells me that it was 20 January, but I remember it like it was yesterday. The signs were good en route to the whale grounds we encountered both dolphins and Californian sea lions. But this paled in comparison with what was in store for us. After a slow start, the first of the whales approached to within about 30 metres. I really wanted to holler but that would have been a major 'faux pas'. There is, after all, a certain whalewatching protocol which should be adhered to at all times. It seemed that the calves were keener on interacting with us, and when they got too close, mum was always on the scene to put some distance between us and her little 10-foot bundle of joy.

All told, we were 3 hours on the water and, for a cost of only \$35 US (which included a packed lunch), this certainly was the best value whalewatching I've enjoyed to date. It's funny how complacent we can get about things, but I can recall my lunch being rudely interrupted by a whale who obviously thought it was a Polaris missile exiting a nuclear submarine. At one stage I thought it was going to grow wings and fly. After breaching at least four times in succession, it seemed to trigger an orgy of breaching. Before long the lagoon was bubbling like a cauldron of spuds under a peat fire. Suffice it to say that my corned beef sandwiches had to wait. Even my seasick travelling

companion momentarily forgot his medically impoverished state. Had I not spent the summer with the Killer whales of British Columbia, I think it's likely that all this excitement would have been too much for my poor little heart.

What is impressive about the set-up here is that the government has declared the whole area a 'World Heritage Site'. It follows from this that the lagoons are well protected and all whalewatching is strictly monitored. This ensures that a Dingle-type 'circus' is avoided and the whales can get on with their daily routine with a minimum of human interference. Only recently I heard of a scenario that could spell doom for this unique habitat and its whales. You see, these lagoons are right next to the world's largest salt production facility, which happens to be a badly needed cash cow for the impoverished Mexican economy. It has been leaked that the government is planning on giving the all-clear for a major expansion of the salt works. This would totally undermine the sanctity of the lagoons and presents the greatest threat to the whale's future since the days of Captain Scammon's whaling fleet.

The fact is that the lagoons represent one of Mexico's few commitments to any environmental cause. Whales generate a 'feel-good' factor, are good for tourism, and for a country which hasn't exactly won over the hearts of the international media, they bring much badly needed PR. Besides, it's not like funding for the project comes from the impoverished taxpayer or bankrupt economy; it doesn't. The running costs of the reserve are met by an amalgam of overseas charities, organisations and NGOs, so the Mexicans are in a no-lose situation.

What is hard to take about this development is that it reeks of big business flexing its corporate muscle. I'm not optimistic that the proposed expansion can be halted. If I thought for a moment that the undernourished millions would benefit one iota from this plan, that at least would be some compensation. But no, this is Mexico, and the profits will no sooner be made than they'll vanish.

This local issue is merely a microcosm of a wider global problem. But isn't it easy for us affluent folk from wealthy countries to be so 'environmentally aware', after all it's a luxury we can afford. Let's not forget that these Third World nations are where they are today because we've helped put them there and are quite happy to maintain the status quo. I just feel that we have no right to take some high moral ground on these issues, and I often wish that environmentalists would be just slightly less smug. I do hope for a satisfactory outcome to this problem, but it might be prudent for these whales to start looking for alternative wintering grounds!

Knowing that IWDG readers would feel let down if I failed to include a degree of suspense into my tale, I suppose I'd better recount the 'shark attack' incident. My first

trip to the Baja was with two friends, Kevin from California and his girlfriend Caroline from Greystones. Every day we hired a local fisherman to take us out to the best spots on the reef to snorkel, fish for Barracuda, or just to hang out on desert islands and watch the coconuts fall off the trees. Suffice it to say that this was a most pleasant time, but alas there came a point when we had to part ways. But I met up with Kevin some weeks later in San Diego and instinctively I felt something was wrong. He proceeded to tell me of that ill-fated day when El Capitan took them out to Ile de Coronada for their daily swim with the dolphins. Surprisingly, they failed to appear, but thinking nothing of this they entered the underwater world. What they didn't know was that they were sharing it with a Tiger shark!

These are a truly awesome predator and have a reputation second only to the Great White for dispatching us humans to our premature and watery graves. Apart from their nasty disposition towards almost anything that moves, there are two big problems with them. First being their size, specimens have been caught well in excess of twenty feet. Secondly is that they are territorial, which means they take offence real easy at people intruding on their home turf.

Caroline jumped in first, waited for her buddy, did the usual gear check, then they were off. Kevin, an experienced skin diver, liked to explore and could dive for impressive periods on one breath of oxygen, while Caroline stayed on the surface. Neither of them noticed that they were being circled. Kevin saw it first, but he was too far down to get Caroline's attention, besides she had attracted enough attention! The shark struck, hitting her above the knee. Man's worst primeval fear had been realised. She had been attacked by a shark. Panic followed, the shark let go of her badly bleeding leg, but maintained its menacing presence. By the time Kevin could offer assistance the water was quickly turning a sickening crimson. But luck was on her side, the shark left the area, in pursuit of fairer game, and El Capitan was quickly on the scene.

I won't keep you in too much suspense Caroline was fine and got away lightly with just six stitches to her leg. Luckily for her, the shark was a juvenile, measuring a mere five feet, so the damage was limited. In hindsight, she was probably more at risk in entering the local doctor's surgery than she ever was in the jaws of the shark. Not surprisingly, she spent the last few days of her holiday on dry land.

In late January, I flew to the tropical paradise of Fiji, en route to New Zealand, but I suppose I'd better keep something for the next newsletter.

## Carrigaholt Dolphin Survey

*Padraig Whooley reports on a recent field survey by IWDG members to gather data for a Minimum Population Estimate of Bottlenose dolphins in the Shannon Estuary.*

The second field survey of the Shannon Estuary's resident Bottlenose Dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) took place on Friday 6 September. It was something of a logistics challenge, as it required transport, accommodation and provisions for no less than 15 people. But with Conal O'Flanagan at the helm, how could things have run anything other than smoothly?

By nightfall our motley crew started arriving in the metropolis of Carrigaholt, which is located on the County Clare side of the Shannon Estuary. The meeting point being The Long Dock, which was a pub we would become quite familiar with! Among those present were representatives from UCC, the IWDG, and members of the Irish Seal Sanctuary. In fact, this proved to be quite a cosmopolitan gathering, as among our ranks were French, Australians, British and, of course, a few native Irish!

Things started out on a very professional footing, in fact I'd go so far as to say that the bar initially resembled a command and strategic centre. The whole operation was taking on decidedly military proportions, with talk of synchronising watches and of pre-dawn wake-up calls. When maps and clipboards were produced I was pretty damn sure they were going to show Iraqi tank positions and updated 'no fly zones'. Alas, a few pints later all this was well and truly forgotten.

D-Day for some started a lot earlier than it did for others, but by 9.00 a.m. most of the team had surfaced and copious cups of coffee (albeit decaffeinated) were consumed. Our briefing took a minimum of time and before long we all knew what we had to do and how we were going to go about doing it. In brief, each person was given an allocated position on the estuary where they would complete a six-hour watch. Every half hour we would do a ten-minute scan of our study zone, documenting anything of relevance we witnessed such as:

- Were Bottlenose Dolphins seen?
- How many were sighted in the group and were calves present?
- Could activities be described as foraging, socialising, resting, or travel.
- Where did these activities occur, and for how long?
- Where exactly were the animals coming from and where were they going to?

- Was there vessel traffic in close proximity to the animals?
- If so, did it induce any behavioural change, either positive or negative?
- Were any other cetacean species sighted in the study area during the day?

In comparison with other cetacean studies around the world, this one is in its infancy, hence our objectives seem basic and straightforward. At this stage the priority is to get an accurate population estimate and to establish areas which may be more frequently used by the dolphins. Drs Simon Ingram and Emer Rogan are attempting to identify the dolphins photographically. Good photos of dorsal fins and unique markings will be invaluable in gaining an understanding of the social culture of this community, its constituent pods, sub-pods and matriarchal units.

So what was actually seen on the big day? Well, as is often the case with studies of animals in the wild, activity levels were much lower than expected. Which proves how difficult field studies can be. I mean, everything was perfect, we had personnel located in key areas on both the Kerry and Clare sides, watches were synchronised (by those who had them!), heck, even the weather was on our side. There were of course people located in low activity areas, and poor Conal O'Flanagan springs to mind. Despite his best efforts, he ended up by the Aughinish Alumina plant, yet again! His chances of seeing dolphins there were only slightly better than slim. However, given that the dolphins have been sighted as far up the estuary as Limerick Docks, it was vital to have an observer in the area. I'm just glad it wasn't me.

I had an unfair advantage during the watch, as I had three extra pairs of eyes. So I'd like to thank David Wall, Eidin Griffen and Sylvie Allen. Despite initial reservations about four strong personalities sharing a precarious cliff top without adult supervision, we worked well as a team. During our six-hour watch off Dunmore point, we encountered four movements of dolphins, ranging from single animals to a group of between ten and twelve. By day's end, we were of the opinion that it had been a quiet day and wondered how the other observers had fared. Then at 17.30, on the last watch of the day, our luck seemed to change as two groups of dolphins containing about twenty animals headed into the estuary from open water. This is just so typical of dolphin activity, you simply never know when they'll appear. At least we got to finish the survey on a positive note and entered our observations on our clipboard (we were wondering if we'd ever get to use it).

With the last watch over, we headed up to Loop Head to watch the sunset. This proved to be a lucky move

because no sooner had we arrived than I saw a whale surface just off the back of the lighthouse. Not knowing whether or not my strained eyes were playing tricks on me, I called the others over, and sure enough within minutes we all saw the whale surface. Before long it became clear that we were actually seeing not one whale but two. In total we observed them surface about 25 times, often coming within a few hundred yards of the cliff. But do you think we could give them a positive identification? Not a chance! We looked at all the options, referred to the cetacean guide books, but we remained unsure, Bottlenose or Beaked whale seemed likely possibilities. We stayed on the Head, often observing the whales surface into the sun's fading reflection on the calm waters. By 21.00, light was failing us, as were our eyes, for we had by now been scanning for over nine hours. We were also starving.

This had indeed been a great day for our group of largely novice cetacean watchers. I've been sea watching since I was knee-high to a porpoise and this was my first time seeing a whale in Irish waters, well a live one anyway! So to see two whales, along with about thirty Bottlenose dolphins, was indeed a day we won't forget in a hurry. So we headed back to our 'command centre', where several things were noticeable. Firstly, we were late for dinner. Secondly, there was a degree of concern as to our whereabouts and welfare. In fact, the possibility that we could have thrown one another off the cliff had been seriously considered. Thirdly, there was an air of despondency. It was obvious that the day had been a quiet one for most of the observers. So how could we recount the day's events without sounding insensitive? Simple; we couldn't! And we just proceeded to tell it like it was.

Sunday, a day of rest, you must be joking! Still on a high from the previous day's sightings, we headed back up to Loop Head. We had a good feeling that our luck would hold out, and so it did. By 9.30 a.m. we had spotted a large group of dolphins travelling fast in very tight formation, and in a most synchronous manner. At one point we counted fourteen dorsal fins break surface tension simultaneously, which was impressive to say the least. Minimum estimate for this group was twenty animals, including two calves. We followed them until we lost them in the morning haze off Ross point.

What was disappointing about this sighting was that yet again our group was alone and it would have been nice for the others to have seen these amazing marine mammals. However, the cliché about 'the early bird catching the worm' springs to mind. During the morning, however, the extended group started to converge on the Head, on the off-chance that we weren't spinning a fishy tale about the whales on the previous evening. After about an hour of seeing nothing, the sceptics seemed to be gaining the

upper hand, but this position was soon to be reversed when a whale surfaced right in front of our combined group. The event couldn't have been better stage-managed had we engaged the services of a choreographer. It was perfect, and we were redeemed.

This sighting was similar to that of the previous day. There were two whales, which were almost certainly feeding, and they were in the exact same location. Surface patterns again were such that head, flippers and tail flukes remained out of view. They remained very close to the cliff, at one point coming so near that one could have leaned over the edge and...

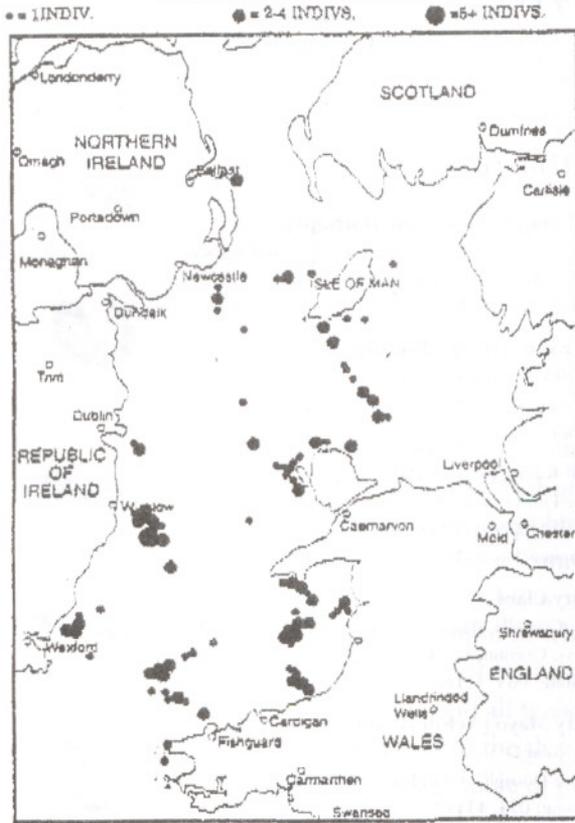
Conal was the first to put his reputation on the line and identify the animals as Minke whales. Everyone else, myself included, seemed to fall in with this diagnosis. Beaked whale, how are yah!?

For many present it was their first time seeing a whale of any description, and I suspect this encounter will not easily be forgotten. Our merry band of observers headed back to their respective necks of the wood and the whales took a series of deep dives which brought this spectacle to an abrupt end. So Simon Berrow was right after all. He once told us that he could show you whales off Loop Head on any given summer's day. As Neil Diamond says, 'I'm a believer'.

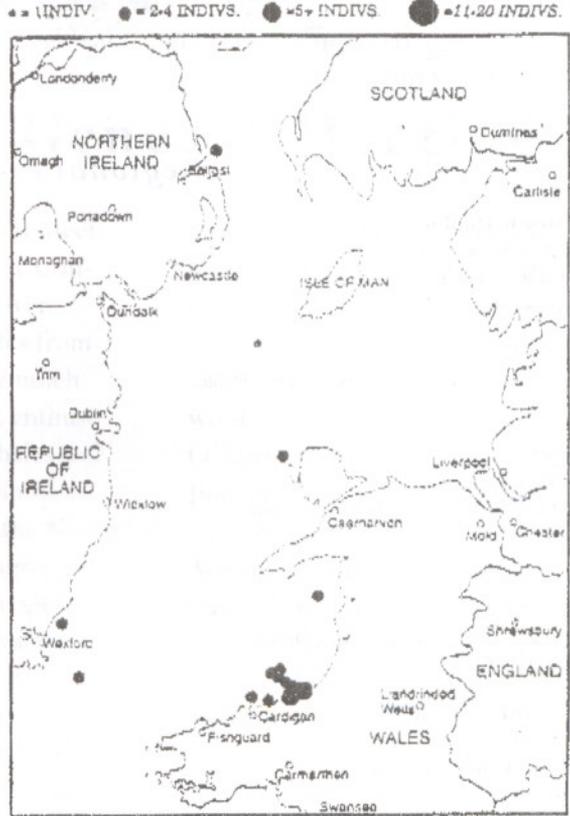
Next on the agenda was Carrigaholt's Castle Pier, where Sue Magee had invited us out on their dolphin watching trip. Just when you think things can't get much better, they do. My luck was holding out. The 15.30 trip into the Shannon Estuary proved to be one of the top five they have ever had, which isn't bad given that they've done over one thousand such trips since these Bottlenose dolphins first made the estuary their home. We located the dolphins quite early on, and once we found them they stayed with our boat, which interestingly had ten deaf children on board from Chernobyl. I've seen a lot of dolphins in the last year, but this encounter ranked among the best. They simply went ballistic, performing every trick in the book! There were demonstrations of speed swimming, somersaults, fluke slapping, breaching, and bow riding (imagine all this without any theme park tuition!) Clearly audible was the vocalising across the calm waters off Ballybunion beach. I've no idea what they were saying, nor would I ever want to. This was their party and we were merely uninvited yet tolerated guests. Food for thought is the possibility that these intelligent and sensitive animals felt some connection with these tragically handicapped children. I'd better stop before I start sounding too flaky, but there could be something to this.



**Fig 2 MAP OF DISTRIBUTION OF HARBOUR PORPOISE SIGHTINGS**



**Fig 3 MAP OF DISTRIBUTION OF BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN SIGHTINGS**



**Fig 4 MAP OF DISTRIBUTION OF COMMON DOLPHIN SIGHTINGS**

● = 2-10 INDIVS.    ● = 11-20 INDIVS.    ● = 21-50 INDIVS.  
● = 51-100 INDIVS.    ● = 101-200 INDIVS.



**Fig 5 MAP OF DISTRIBUTION OF MINKE WHALE SIGHTINGS**

• = 1 INDIV.    ● = 2-5 INDIVS.

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The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group is dedicated to the study and conservation of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) in Irish waters. It has established and co-ordinates a network of regional co-ordinators (see above) who will visit stranded animals and collect records of those sighted at sea. If you find a whale, dolphin or porpoise washed up, observe one at sea or from the shore, or are interested in learning more about the group, contact your regional co-ordinator or the national co-ordinators.

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