



## The IWDG – Where Do We Go from Here?

The 1997 Annual General Meeting of the group was held last November and attracted a disappointing attendance. A summary of the meeting is given elsewhere in this newsletter. During the short open forum at the end of the meeting, a number of interesting ideas were brought up for discussion and some of these are being taken further by the members present at the meeting. No doubt, we will hear more of them anon. However, one item which was raised requires a more general input from the members of the group and this is to decide on the short- to medium-term objectives of the group.

To explain, when the IWDG was founded, as well as having the general aims of the study and conservation of cetaceans, two specific objectives were identified and worked towards by the group. These were (1) to have Irish waters declared a cetacean sanctuary and (2) to have a marine biologist appointed to the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Both these objectives had a political/administrative dimension, which might have militated against them being brought to fruition, but thankfully it did not work out that way and both aims have now been achieved. The group, having achieved these objectives, must set itself new targets and the question is what should they be.

Perhaps the first thing to decide is what type of objective we should be considering and in that context the following guidelines might be useful:

- 1 Any objective would have to be clearly defined so that all members of the group would fully understand it and there would be no ambiguity about it.
- 2 Any objective would have to be achievable by the group. An over-ambitious objective would only be a waste of time and effort and be worse than no objective at all.
- 3 It should be local (i.e. relevant to cetaceans that use Irish waters).

So, where does that leave us? Well, one possible objective would be to have the waters around Northern Ireland declared a cetacean sanctuary, or to encourage the Irish government to sign the ASCOBANS agreement. The Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Seas (ASCOBANS) came into force on 29 March 1994 and encompasses the marine environment of the Baltic and North Seas. The agreement addresses issues of habitat conservation and management, surveys and research, use of incidental catches in fishing gear and strandings, legislation,

*Continued overleaf*

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

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information and education, and provides the framework on which an action plan for conservation and management can be developed. If Ireland signed the agreement, the area encompassed by the agreement could be extended to include all the waters around Ireland (the sanctuary, in effect). Alternatively, the group could decide to set out a 4–5 year plan about how cetaceans use of a particular stretch of coast and channel its resources in that direction. This could involve sea-based surveys, land-based watches and encouraging yacht people, divers, fishermen and others to look for and report any sightings of cetaceans.

These are just a few suggestions, but other members of the group must have more and better ideas and it would be nice to hear them. A small group like the IWDG, especially one with its members scattered all over the country, benefits greatly from being focused on one or two definite aims and it is better again if the members themselves decide on these aims rather than the committee imposing them from 'on high'. So, if you have any ideas or even the germ of an idea that you haven't necessarily fully thought through yet, please let us know and hopefully the group can shortly settle on its aims for the next few years.

Conal O'Flanagan and Emer Rogan

If anyone has an opinion or something of interest they would like to contribute to the IWDG newsletter, then please send it to Dr Emer Rogan at the Department of Zoology and Animal Ecology, University College, Cork. Phone 021 904197 or email [e.rogan@UCC.ie](mailto:e.rogan@UCC.ie)

Anyone interested in joining The European Cetacean Society (ECS) [see also p. 6] should also contact Emer Rogan.

Further details about the ECS can be obtained from the society web-site at:  
[HTTP://web.inter.NL.net/users/J.W.Broekema/ecs.htm](http://web.inter.nl.net/users/J.W.Broekema/ecs.htm)

## Whale Sanctuary Tee-Shirts

To commemorate the declaration of Irish waters as a whale and dolphin sanctuary, in 1991, a special whale sanctuary tee-shirt was designed. The original design of a whale and four dolphins happily swimming in a turquoise sea with text in English was printed on white. More recently, these tee-shirts have been re-printed with the text in Irish and printed on grey. Orders can be made, price £12.00 (including p&p) and all profits go to the IWDG. These are available from either Emer Rogan, Dept. of Zoology and Animal Ecology, University College, Cork, or Conal O'Flanagan, 41 Lorcan Grove, Santry, Dublin 9.



## IWDG Meeting Saturday 16 May 1998

### Venue: Carrigaholt Hall

The next meeting of the IWDG will be held in Carrigaholt Hall, on Saturday 16 May at 10.00 a.m. The main theme of the morning session will be whalewatching, and Holly Arnold from Scottish Natural Heritage will be one of the speakers. Holly has worked on Bottlenose dolphins in Cardigan Bay, Wales, and in the Moray Firth, Scot-

land, and has been responsible for drawing up codes of conduct for dolphin watching tour boats in the Moray Firth. The afternoon session will consist of IWDG business. For more information, contact Simon Ingram, Dept. of Zoology and Animal Ecology, University College, Cork.

## Stranding Study

A study is currently in progress at UCC examining the health status of cetaceans stranded along the Irish coast. This study has been financed by the National Heritage Council since August 1995 and is now helped through funding from the European Regional Development Fund (INTERREG II PROGRAMME Ireland/Wales), the Collaborative Celtic Marine Strandings project, which commenced in January 1997. The objective of this program is to monitor the health status of marine mammals on the east/south-east coast of Ireland, in order to establish the threats that these animals are facing and consequently develop a sound marine policy.

With the help of the stranding network, to a great part volunteers that are members of the IWDG, the carcasses are collected for post mortem examination. These animals are then photographed, measured and sexed. Teeth are extracted for age determination, parasites and food remains are collected and samples for contaminants and histology are taken. Carcass condition varies from fresh to extremely poor. Animals in very poor condition are identified, photographed and measured and occasionally skin or other samples may be taken.

The species examined range from Harbour porpoise, Common dolphin, Striped dolphin, Risso's dolphin, White-beaked dolphin, White-sided dolphin, Pilot whale to more exotic animals like Humpback whale, Sperm whale and True's beaked whale. Since January 1997, we have been funded to examine seals on the east and south-east coast of Ireland. Most of the ones examined to date are Grey seals.

In cetaceans, live stranding and pneumonia are very common causes of death. Another common cause of death is incidental capture in fishing nets. These animals are often thrown overboard and are then washed ashore in a bad storm. Other fatal conditions found include pleurisy, in conjunction with pneumonia, heart problems, septicemia, calving problems and colic. One animal's stomach was so full of plastic bags and other rubbish, that it was easy to determine why this animal had died. One Common dolphin is thought to have died having been struck by a boat's

propeller. Invagination of the cardiac section of the stomach, haemorrhagic infarction of the pyloric section of the stomach, edema in the lungs and severe bruising in the abdominal cavity were secondary lesions in a female Risso's dolphin that was unable to deliver a calf due to a uterine torsion and died of dystocia. The seals examined often died of a parasitic pneumonia. Some had lesions, that suggested they were beaten to death, one definitely was shot. And they are also sometimes incidentally caught in fishing gear.

Other lesions that are found, which do not cause the

animal's death but might contribute to weakening it, are nematodes in the lung, often together with pneumonia, stomach ulcers, adhesions in the abdominal cavity, anaemia, liver problems, kidney problems, mastitis, fractured jaw and problems of the pancreas. Common skin lesions range from viral infections to scars inflicted by other dolphins whether in play or in fights, which are generally known as tooth rakes. All major organs are examined thoroughly for parasites. Various nematodes and/or cestodes can be found in the lungs, heart, stomach, intestine, inner ear, kidney, muscle, skin/blubber and the abdominal cavity. Fluke can be found in the stomach, liver and pancreas.

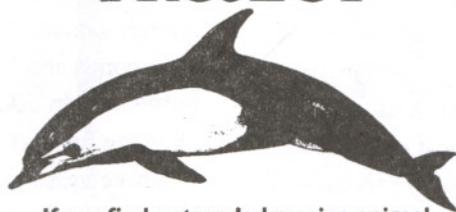
Samples for analysis of radionuclides, heavy metals and organochlorine contaminants are also taken.

The results from the present study provide information on the health status and biology of marine mammals in Irish waters. The more animals we examine, the more reliable our results become. Annual variations imply that long-term studies must be conducted in order to achieve results that can be used as a baseline. Thus the examination of stranded animals needs to be continued. Through continued monitoring, changes in mortality patterns can be detected, which helps to determine whether changes are due to human impact or natural pathogens and furthermore assists in the evaluation of threats for marine mammal along our shores.

If you come across a dead marine mammal, please contact us. We can be contacted at the Department of Zoology and Animal Ecology, UCC, at 021-904053 or 021-904179.

Irene Gassner MRCVS

### COLLABORATIVE CELTIC MARINE STRANDINGS PROJECT



If you find a stranded marine animal  
please contact

**LIVE STRANDING:**

WALES: RSPCA 0990 555999

IRELAND: University of Cork 021 904197 or 021 904053

**DEAD STRANDING:**

WALES: Marine Environmental Monitoring 01348 875000

IRELAND: University of Cork 021 904197 or 021 904053



Supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) under the leadership of the Irish Government. The 01238 612161

## Pingered Porpoises

Incidental catches in various forms of gillnet are now recognised as being one of the threats to cetacean populations world-wide. In recent years, the use of acoustic alarms or pingers, attached to fishing gear, has been investigated by a number of scientific institutions as a means of reducing cetacean bycatch levels. University College, Cork, have teamed up with the Sea Mammal Research Unit, St Andrews University, Scotland, the Irish South and West Fishermen's Organisation and the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations (UK) to evaluate the effectiveness of pingers in reducing the rate of Harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) bycatch in a Celtic Sea bottom-set gillnet fishery. The project is funded by the EU until November 1999. Recent studies in this gillnet fishery on the Celtic Shelf estimated an annual bycatch of over 2,000 porpoises, which represents 6.2% of the estimated local population. Such an annual rate of bycatch is thought to exceed the biological sustainable removal level by a factor of three.

The various methods aimed at reducing cetacean bycatch levels have included: 1) broadcasts of killer whale vocalisations; 2) placement of high-energy

sound sources on fishing gear to cause approaching marine mammals to experience discomfort; 3) alteration of the acoustic reflectivity of gear to make it more detectable by marine mammals (i.e. passive alarms); and 4) attachment of active acoustic alarms or pingers to gear so that marine mammals will be alerted to its presence. Research conducted in the USA, UK, Denmark and the Netherlands indicates that pingers can be very effective in reducing porpoise bycatch rates. A study in the Gulf of Maine demonstrated a 91% reduction in entanglement mortality of Harbour porpoises when active pingers were used.

The pingers to be tested during the current study were designed and assembled by the Underwater Acoustic Group at Loughborough University, UK. The alarms will randomly emit a range of high frequency signals (between 20 and 160kHz) every 5 to 30 seconds at a level of 145dB. At such levels, all porpoises within 300m of the pingers should be alerted, allowing for variations in oceanic background noise.

Three vessels from each of the Irish and English hake fishing fleets will participate in the study, which will look at the bycatch problem over a twelve-month period (May 1998–May 1999).

*Michael Mackey and Emer Rogan*

## Shannon Update

Regular readers of the newsletter will know that the IWDG, in partnership with University College Cork, is involved in an intensive study of the Bottlenose dolphins in the Shannon estuary. Simon Ingram is doing most of the fieldwork and Simon spoke about some of his findings at last year's AGM.

Other important sources of information are incidental records from interested people living and working near the estuary, and the most important of these are the records sent in by the operators of the Shannon ferry. The ferry crosses the estuary Killimer in Clare and Tarbert in Kerry every half an hour during daylight hours and provides an excellent platform from which to look out for dolphins. The ferry skippers have very generously and helpfully recorded all their sightings over the two years of the project and a brief look at these records shows a clear pattern of sightings. Firstly, dolphins have been seen almost

every month of the year, but they are seen most often in the late spring and summer months. Secondly, they can be seen at any state of the tide but there is a marked peak in sightings in the two to three hours before low tide. The tables illustrate this pattern. What this means to the ordinary individual who wants to see a few dolphins is that with a bit of planning, and reasonable luck, they can be seen without too much difficulty.

So, if you are in the area during the summer, check the tide times, hop (or drive) onto the ferry and keep your eyes open. If you time it right you would have to be very unlucky not to see something. Then, having whetted your appetite, why not head west (on the Clare side) towards Kilrush and Carrigaholt for a dolphin watching boat trip in the estuary – now that's a real treat.

*Conal O'Flanagan*

Table 1. Number of Sightings per Month

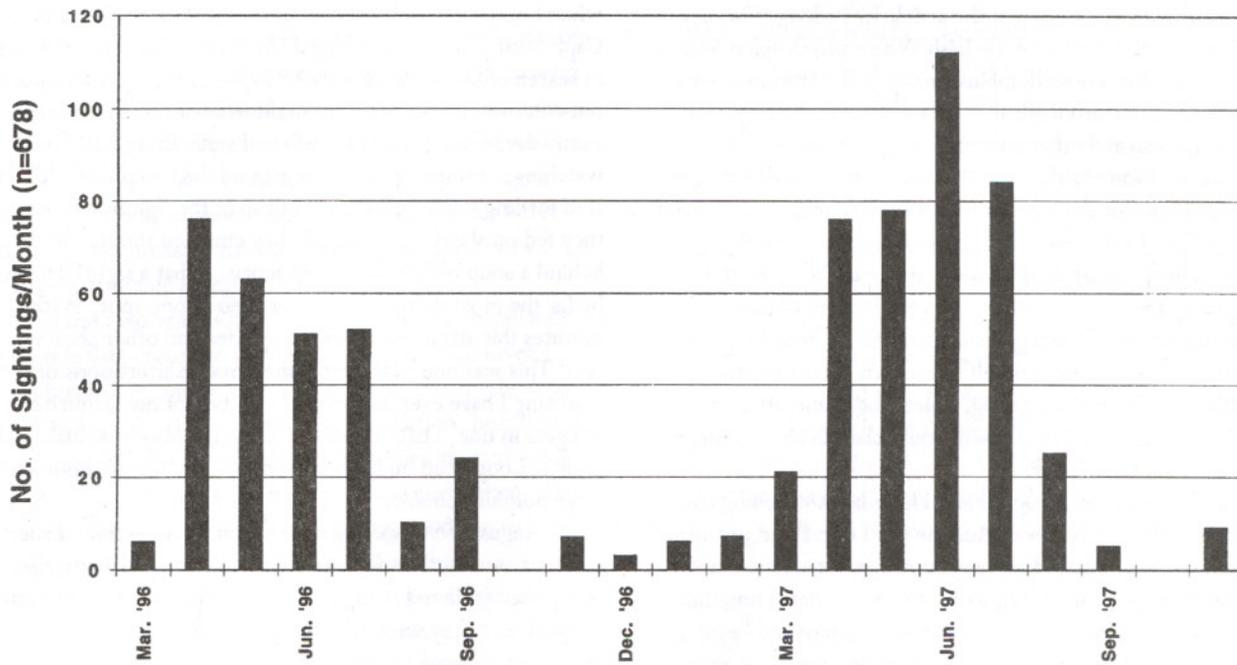
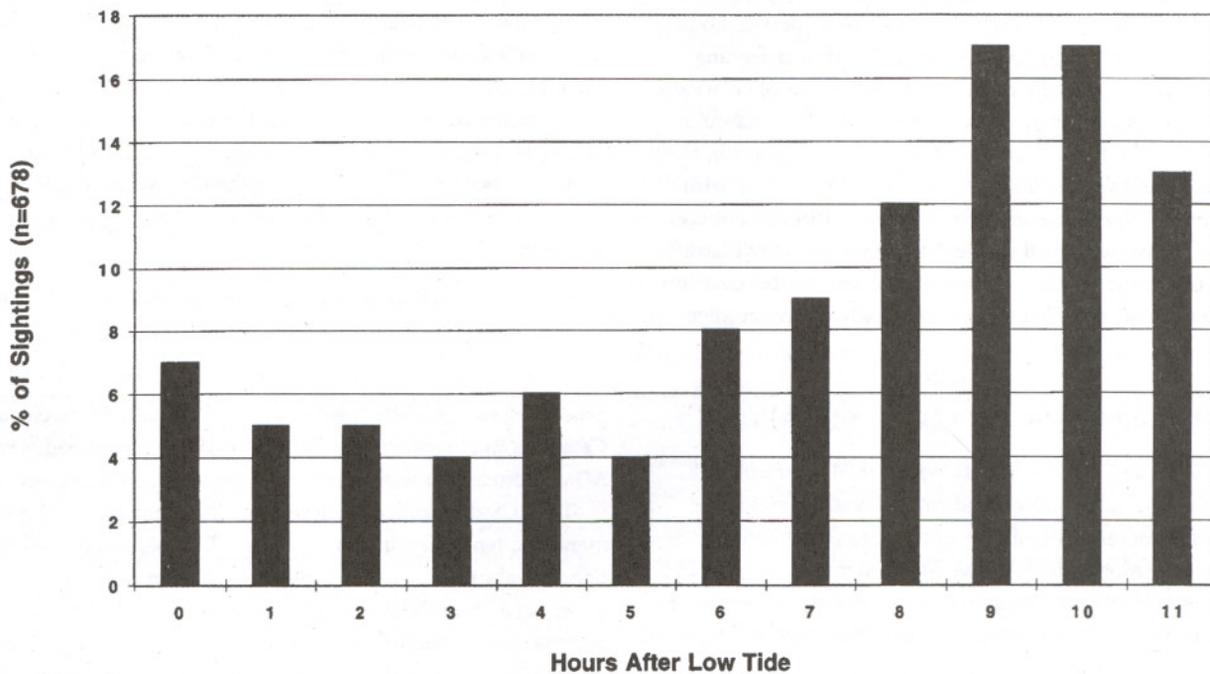


Table 2. Distribution of Sightings over the Tidal Cycle



## Cetacean and Seabird Watching Go Hand in Hand

I read with great interest the article by Padraig Whooley in the April '97 issue of the Irish Whale and Dolphin Watch, on the Bottlenose dolphins survey in the Shannon Estuary. Through my ornithological interests I have seen many whales, dolphins, fish and other maritime mammals all along this coastal location. As the official county recorder of bird sightings in Clare for the Irish Wildbird Conservancy and the compiler of the Loop Head Log, I process this data annually and have in my possession sightings of cetaceans between the mouth of the Shannon estuary and the Bridges of Ross. After finishing the article and glancing through the remainder of the newsletter, I promised myself to post any records to the IWDG, knowing that Padraig, Emer Rogan and others might appreciate this data, as I myself would cherish bird sightings from within the county.

My fellow ornithologists and I have been watching passage seabirds off the Bridges of Ross on the Loop Head peninsula since the mid 1980's. Each autumn large movements of seabirds migrate along the Irish west coast, departing their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere and heading to richer feeding waters in the south Atlantic for the winter months. Rafts of shearwaters, petrels, auks and other seabird species build up off Loop Head and pass the Bridges of Ross from late July to the end of October, feeding as they go on mackerel and other planktonic lifeforms. With the aid of high-powered telescopes, birders flock to the locality, installing themselves on the bridges of Ross for periods of up to 16 hours or more per day in the hope of seeing large movements of birds or rare south Atlantic and Mediterranean vagrants. Scanning the waves for small storm petrels no larger than a sparrow or gliding shearwaters in circular feeding groups, we occasionally come across dorsal fins of cetaceans. These sightings bring great excitement to a day's seavatch.

I personally love to see dolphins, porpoises, sunfish, basking sharks and whales on those rare occasions. I only wish that I had more experience in identifying these magnificent creatures as I have with bird species. Through the years I have witnessed some amazing sights of cetaceans on this coastline. Through these experiences one can nearly always predict

when and where dolphins and whales will appear. I think migrating birds and cetacean feeding go hand in hand. Where you find feeding cetaceans, you will find feeding seabirds and vice versa. This first came to my attention some years back when I observed such conditions on the Adriatic Sea and Cape Saint Vincent in Portugal. At Cape Saint Vincent I was in search of Cory's shearwaters, a species rare to these waters but commonly found on the Mediterranean. On a beautiful sunny day in late July, as I combined sunbathing with sea-watching, I noticed a school of around 200 dolphins in a frenzied feeding party below the clifftop at the lighthouse. As they fed on shoals of small fish they churned the sea, leaving behind a soup of fish scales and debris. What a sight! This was by far the most dolphins I've ever seen in one spot. Within minutes this attracted my target species and other shearwaters. This was one of the most memorable afternoons of sea-watching I have ever had, combining two of my favourite delights in one. I have observed such sightings in Kilbaha harbour at Loop head on numerous occasions, but without such large dolphin schools.

31 August 1996 was my most recent recollection of such an event. A mixed flock of kittiwakes, Manx and sooty shearwaters had gathered at the mouth of the Shannon, just south of Loop Head. They were in a typical circle-feeding raft and repeatedly returned to the same spot after every looped flight track. Through my telescope I observed what looked like movement just below the water surface. Within a matter of minutes I noticed what all the fuss was about. Two Minke whales were feeding the area and the birds had observed them from above, gathering to cash in on whatever scraps remained. I watched for about an hour as the gathering moved closer to the shore and views of the Minke whales became clearer as they gently broke the surface of the water while feeding. One whale looked much larger than the other so I took them to be a mother and calf team. This is typical of whale sightings at Loop Head.

My personal recommendations for anyone who is searching for large cetaceans would be to go to Loop Head from August through to October. This is the time when seabird migration is at its peak and the chances of locating cetaceans are high.

*John Murphy, 5 Ballycasey Grove, Shannon, Co. Clare.*

### The European Cetacean Society (ECS)

The European Cetacean Society was formed in January 1987 with the aims of promoting and co-ordinating the scientific study and conservation of cetaceans and to gather and disseminate information to members and the general public. The ECS is therefore a scientific organisation, but many members are just interested in whales and dolphins without being professional biologists.

The society meets once a year in a European country with invited international authorities, talks and posters. Conference

proceedings are published under the title European Research on Cetaceans and to date, eleven volumes have been published. The AGM is also held at this time.

The ECS also produces a newsletter three times a year for members, reporting current research in Europe, recent publications and abstracts, working group activities, conservation issues, legislation and regional agreements, local news and cetacean news from the world.

Membership is open to anyone with an interest in cetaceans and the society is financed through annual membership subscription. Full membership is 60DM and 35DM for students.

## Whale Watching Irish Style!

by Padraig Whooley

It's that time of the year again when another long winter gives way to spring, and I wonder what I might happen upon this summer when I go out in search of the whale (and dolphin). Since returning from my travels I've had to make do with our own 'local talent', this was not something I particularly relished, but my scepticism has been replaced by enthusiasm for the quantity and quality of sightings that occur along our coast.

In the last two years I have spent days on our headlands and islands that compare very well with the Vancouver's and Kaikoura's of this world. So for those of you who have had neither the opportunity nor the inclination, head to our hot spots and with a little luck and some practice, you may be pleasantly surprised with what passes your horizon. Of course like any form of wildlife watching you have to be in the right place at the right time. There have been occasions when I've felt sympathy for the photographer in the kit kat add, waiting to snap the elusive Giant Panda, only to blink and miss them as they figure skate across their enclosure !! Not that I'd ever recommend the zoo as a proper environment to view wild animals.

But an incident occurred last summer on Cape Clear that proves my point. I've never seen Risso's dolphins before and I was determined that this visit would bring this sorry situation to an end. I was diligent over and above the call of duty doing everything textbook style, even getting up with the birders at ungodly hours. Do you think I got to see my Risso's?, you must be kidding. The nearest I got was having rissoles for lunch in the harbour restaurant. Where as my friend David Wall, groggy after a night on the beer on Sherkin, unzips his tent to start a day of otter research only to find two of these dolphins practically staring at him a few yards off shore. Now where's the justice in this?

There are certain steps we can take however to improve our odds at having a successful sea watch. Among the most important are:

- Concentrate on the summer months – when waters are warmer and there are greater inshore movements of fish such as sand eels, herring, and mackerel, which are a major food source for cetaceans.
- Avoid inclement weather – anything over a sea state three will make seeing even larger whales quite tricky, not to mention the diminutive Harbour porpoise. High pressure zones bring calm waters which are perfect for spotting fins, but pretty useless if you're a birder, who craves inclement weather and high winds.
- Coincide your watch with feeding activity – unfortu-

nately for us cetaceans tend to be more active in early morning and late afternoon when they're feeding. Luckily for us this gives us the rest of the day to sleep off the effects of your 5.30 a.m. wake up call.

- Select your watch sight – elevated areas such as cliff tops, headlands or dunes will give you a greater field of vision, a bigger horizon, and a better perspective. They also tend to be more visually appealing and the scenery alone ought to make the watch worth while should the 'fins' stay away.
- Optical aids are crucial – even with 20/20 vision and a calm day a wee porpoise 200 yards off could be pushing the limits. So invest in a good pair of binoculars, but be warned that you get what you pay for. I'm not suggesting you run out and get a pair of Leica, Zeiss or Swarovskis for £600–£800, but beware of those nasty pairs in the £30–£50 bracket. We could all learn from birders, who employ the dual technique of scanning with the binoculars and focusing with a powerful spotting scope usually with about 20 times magnification and wide angle lens. With this combination of high optics and a clear head you should be well on your way to spotting the lice on a Whale's back from 1000 yards.
- Be comfortable – wear the right clothes, bring a friend (but not that good a friend!) and enjoy your watch, and if you see nothing, who'll know the difference if you take a few liberties with the truth in the pub afterwards.

Of course you can do all of the above and it will count for very little if you're in an area where there is very little cetacean activity. Having spent the last 30 years in Co. Wicklow and watching Bray Head and Greystones very regularly, I can say that this part of the Irish Sea suffers from 'cetacean anorexia'. The only species appearing with any regularity being the Harbour porpoise. In five years of watching I have never seen a dolphin and the last whale seen was on a float on our St. Patrick's day parade!! But we can't be dogmatic, as there have been incidental sightings of Bottlenose dolphins and the occasional Minke whale much further out.

All I can say to those of you living along the south, west and north coasts is that you are indeed fortunate. Along these coasts, sightings and strandings would indicate that these waters straddling the Continental Shelf are at least seasonally home to large congregations of coastal and pelagic dolphins and whales of both the toothed (Pilot, Killer, and Sperm) and Baleen (Minke, Fin, Sei) variety. Being a non-scientist I have to place more faith in my gut feelings than on hard evidence, but I can't help feel that land based whale watching could become significantly big-

ger than it is. From my own limited experiences I've drawn together a list of places that will rarely disappoint.

Of these Cape Clear is my favourite, so, yes I am biased, but it's rare that between leaving Baltimore and arriving in its harbour some 30 minutes later that you won't have seen at least several Harbour porpoise. Take a local charter boat out around the Fastnet and keep heading south till you see the gannets feeding, a good indicator of Dolphin activity, usually Commons. They will typically be in very large groups, upwards of several hundred. These Pelagic dolphins, although not as keen on human interactions as their Bottlenose cousins, will still bow ride and vocalise before getting bored and returning to the more mundane task of survival. From the cliffs at Blennaun you can frequently see Minke whale, Risso's, Commons, Porpoise and occasionally Pilot and Killer whales will swim close to shore. But keep an eye out as well for the massive Basking shark and the exotic Leatherback turtle.

The Old Head of Kinsale is another great spot and has the advantage of being more accessible than Cape Clear. Don't be put off by the guy who will charge you for the pleasure of walking out on its new golf course, as the £1.50 goes towards your public liability insurance!! This might be justified as on most Irish golf courses the traditional warning of a wayward shot is, 'four', but here it's more likely to be 'nein', as another German slices his ball into the Celtic Sea!! I watched this spot twice last summer and on both occasions I saw dolphins (species unknown) and porpoise. In late August I watched an amazing sunset whilst viewing both species in my binoculars simultaneously. Dr Peter Evans as a young lad saw his first whale, a Fin, off the Old Head. Mind you he didn't have to contend with stray golf balls.

On to the Blaskets; last summer was my first visit to this magical place, and despite the weather doing its level best to leave a negative impression, it still cast a spell on me. Lashed by rain, high winds and a mist that reduced visibility to zero for most of my stay, I had my work cut out for me. I was hopeful that while motoring out on David Westwell's mv *Pilot West* we might see something, alas no. But he later informed me that they were followed back to Dingle by a juvenile Bottlenose dolphin. For one brief moment of clarity when I had a half-hour window of visibility I saw a lone Bottlenose. There is also plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that Killer whales visit the beach area when the Grey seals are pupping in October. Now that would be a sight to behold, and much cheaper than flying to Patagonia.

I made it down to Carrigaholt in May for the "minimum population estimate" study, and again in August to show the resident Bottlenose dolphins off to friends who travelled from Wicklow. This is the "sure thing", if such a thing

exists when dolphin watching. You can imagine my embarrassment when they (the dolphins) failed to show. Needless to say I had a lot of explaining to do and a lot of drinks to buy in the "Long Dock". Our second day was much better, with fine conditions and a calm sea. As is often the case we located them near Ballybunion. All on board were delighted, myself included, as I was saved from buying the drink a second night on the trot. One thing that never ceases to amaze me about these animals is how huge the males are and how agile they can be if you locate them at the right time.

There is a huge gap in this piece. I've not mentioned the west or the north coasts. This is due to my not having had the time to visit these areas. There is no reason to believe that there is not at least as much activity in these waters. We have over fifty members between Galway, Sligo, Mayo, Donegal and Antrim, so don't tell me that nobody is seeing anything. Please put pen to paper and let us know what's going on in your area, so we can complete the jigsaw. Besides, the more others write, the less of my verbiage you will have to contend with.

## IWDG News

This summer I hope to join Simon Berrow's research project on John Petch's yacht. The plan is to survey Common dolphin populations between Clare and the Aran Islands, before heading out to the Continental shelf where we hope to encounter Baleen whales. I hope I still have my sea legs or else it's going to be a very long trip in conditions that will be far from luxurious. Incidentally, Simon is looking for volunteers for this project. The main proviso is that you have knowledge of cetaceans, with some exposure to life at sea. Simon needs a mixed crew, so this venture will be an equal opportunities employer. If you are interested please contact myself, as at time of writing Simon is still stuck on an ice flow somewhere in Antarctica.

I'll finish off with a note on the "Whale Stranding Exercise", which is being held in Dollymount Strand on Saturday 18 April, meeting at the Bull Island Interpretative Centre at 10.30 a.m. This major event is being hosted by the IWDG, in conjunction with the Irish Seal Sanctuary, British Divers and the Bull Island Centre. We would encourage all members to attend and feel it will be of particular importance that regional co-ordinators support this event. Many of you have requested such an exercise, and due mainly to the hard work of Paula McGrane we have it handed to us on a plate. The expert advice is being laid on by the British Divers Marine Life Rescue Group, and we will have our own technical people on the ground. The

cost for the day is £25. This is unavoidable, due to the logistics of bringing over both personnel and equipment and, hope, that it will not prove a problem. If it does, let me know. It is hoped that, with this initial course under our belts, we will run our own as the need arises.

Right now we need names, so if interested please contact me at the following: Pdraig Whooley, 77 Westland Square, Pearse St., Dublin 2; E-mail: padraig\_whooley@dell.com; Telephone: 01-6798351(home), 01-2044524(work).

## Come Sailing: Exploratory Whale Surveys off the West Coast

This summer we will be carrying out exploratory whale surveys off the west coast of Ireland. In collaboration with John Petch of Shearwater Cruises we will be conducting week long pelagic surveys from Kilrush Creek Marina in the Shannon estuary. The IWDG successfully carried out dolphin surveys in the Shannon estuary, which has led to the establishment of commercial dolphin watching in the estuary. With funding once again from Shannon Development this pioneering collaboration between science and industry is looking to expand offshore.

The western seaboard is recognised as an excellent place in Europe to see whales and dolphins but the habits, habitats and whereabouts of these often elusive animals is far from clear. Inshore waters are better surveyed and key areas have been identified through the IWDG and Seawatch sighting schemes but our knowledge of offshore waters is still very poor.

Large whales are thought to move along the edge of the continental shelf where upwellings increase marine productivity resulting in high densities of plankton – their main food. Increased productivity also increases densities of fish and large schools of dolphins have been reported near the shelf edge. Deeper waters are home to squid eating species such as Pilot whales and the largest of all toothed whales – the Sperm whale.

The objectives of the surveys during 1998 are:

- to carry out transects to and along the edge of the continental shelf in search of whales and dolphins,
- survey acoustically for whales and dolphins using underwater hydrophones,
- assess the feasibility of developing an offshore whale-watching industry.

We will be using the yacht *Seadrifter*, skippered by John Petch, to carry out these surveys. Operating from Kilrush

Creek Marina in County Clare we will transect across the continental shelf to the west of the Aran Islands, looking mainly for Common dolphins which are thought to calve in the area during the summer. On reaching the edge of the shelf we will follow the shelf contours looking for large whales and schools of dolphins.

As anybody who has been at sea off the west coast any activities are dictated by the weather. Even during the summer the prevailing winds can make the western seaboard a very hostile place and all transects will take into account

inclement weather and be modified accordingly. The addition of hydrophones for acoustic surveying will enable us to continue to work in sea-states unsuitable for visual surveys but within safe margins.

The coast of County Clare is relatively unprotected with only Killofinn on Inishmor offering a safe haven. At times all aboard "Seadrifter" will wish they were anywhere else but where they actually are, but such is the nature and challenge of this kind of work.

These surveys are being carried out through the IWDG. I am looking for volunteers to accompany us during

each exploratory trip. We are intending to carry out week long trips in June, July, August and hopefully September. *Seadrifter* accommodates 6-8 people and anybody who is interested in joining us should write to me outlining their experience and interests. Inevitably the west coast will turn some days into an ordeal and you should not think these are going to be an easy cruises. Once offshore it may be impossible to return to shore and storms may have to be ridden out at sea. Days will be long and responsibilities shared but it is a great opportunity to participate in a true exploratory exercise. Who knows what we might see and the experience will certainly be memorable.

If you are interested please write to Dr Simon Berrow, c/o British Antarctic Survey, High Cross, Madingley Road, Cambridge, CB3 0ET. Don't forget to include details of your experience and interests and which month you are available.



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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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Please send comments and contributions to:

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