

news

Killer whale thriller in Cork harbour

Jim Wilson

Killer whales (Orcas) are regularly observed in Irish waters, though are not usually seen close to shore and are rarely recorded in estuaries. Two of the most recent estuary sightings were a male in Lough Foyle in 1977 and a male and two females, briefly, in Cork harbour in 1974.

In the first week of June 2001, three Orcas were sighted off Roche's Point at the entrance to Cork harbour. Surprisingly, on Sunday June 10th, they entered the inner harbour in front of Cobh.

Unfortunately for the whales, it was a weekend, and within a short time all available craft were on the water trying to get a closer look. Over-excitement and ignorance led to the Orcas being chased around the harbour. Some thought they were going to beach and that every effort had to be made to guide them back out to sea. But these magnificent animals had no intention of leaving quickly. Despite the best efforts of boats and menacing jet-skis, the animals out-maneuvred the flotilla.

Over the next six weeks, tens of thousands came from all over Ireland and abroad to catch a glimpse of these spell-binding animals - the small pod comprised an adult female, adult male and what we believe was a teenage male. On June 12th, I counted fifty-eight craft chasing the Orcas off Cobh. As everyone wanted to get closer, the animals were frequently surrounded; nightfall held no guarantee of a reprieve. At one stage they were trapped in the deep-water berth at Ringaskiddy and the navy had to force boats to 'back off' to allow them get out.

That night, the harbour commissioners invoked a 500m-exclusion zone around the animals, under the 1996 Harbours Act. The efforts of the commissioners, navy and

Jim Wilson



Killer whales (Orcas), Cork harbour, 2001

Dúchas ensured that they were left pretty much alone for the rest of their stay.

The spectacle of the whale-chasing flotilla was witnessed by thousands who lined the shore at Cobh, and there was shame at the irresponsible behaviour of a few, including some who felt indignant at the authorities telling them what to do.

Midnight views

The three Orcas moved 2km upriver and, on June 15th, made a courtesy call to Cork city and swam past City Hall. It was a Friday night and hundreds of people pouring out of bars and nightclubs could not believe their eyes when they saw three killer whales in the River Lee, their fins silhouetted against the reflection of the street-lights. They remained in the city all day at Horgan's Quay, and thousands were treated to the amazing sight of three Orcas moving up and down the river like strange, oversized goldfish in a garden pond. This spectacle was at odds with the familiar TV images of Orcas catching seals on beaches in South America or cutting through still waters in British Columbia. That evening, they headed back down-river and eventually settled just east of Cobh.

I was privileged to see them each day of their stay bar two. I am still recovering from the dawn rise before work to watch and film them. I have been observing wildlife for over 20 years and was amazed how every time they surfaced felt like a first encounter. The only people as 'mad' as me were a handful of whale-watchers and kayakers who came from

as far afield as Donegal, Antrim, Dublin and Britain.

The Orcas were easy to follow with binoculars and the naked eye. They hunted together and were regularly seen rushing on the water's surface, presumably in pursuit of prey. Sometimes two would move slowly along a corridor of water, 200 to 500 metres apart, and eventually close in, with one adult circling slowly, pushing fish closer together. This would be followed by a short period of tail and pectoral slapping and thrashing on the surface.

They were regularly seen 'logging' on the surface in rest mode. They were also observed 'spy-hopping', rising vertically out of the water, exposing two-thirds of their body. They normally do this to see what is happening on nearby rocks or ice-floes.

I went on the water once, hoping they'd come close. We were drifting for about 30 minutes when the male approached. Emotions were a mixture of excitement and apprehension. It surfaced within two metres, the spray from his blowhole showering us like sea mist. It was an exhilarating experience I'll never forget. It seemed as though the fin, over 1.5 metres high, took forever to come out of the water and down again. I felt they had a definite interest in small craft as on a number of occasions I observed one deliberately change course and surface near boats.

The sad part of their visit was the female's death: she was found floating at the harbour mouth on the morning of July 7th and her body towed into Crosshaven.

• The Irish Whale & Dolphin Group (IWDG) is dedicated to the conservation and better understanding of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoise) in Irish waters through study, education and interpretation

• REGISTERED CHARITY No CHY11163

• WEBSITE <http://iwdg.ucc.ie>

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WORLD NEWS

Jim Wilson

● Cetacean news from the seven seas

True's beaked whale sighted in Europe

A True's beaked whale was recorded 30 miles north of Bilbao in the Bay of Biscay on July 9th - the first confirmed live sighting in European waters. The sighting was made during regular ferry surveys by ORCA and the Biscayan Dolphin Research Programme. Not only was the whale positively identified but observers managed to get excellent photographs of the whale breaching - the first photographs of this species in the field.

The IWDG carries out similar ferry surveys regularly, on board P&O ferries sailing across the Irish Sea. ■

It's a blast!

An injured humpback whale which beached in a river-mouth 500 miles east of Cape Town in South Africa was blown up to end its suffering. It was damaged internally, was overheating and its lungs had partially collapsed. It was decided that euthanasia was the only option and that triggering an explosion next to its head was the most humane way of killing it. ■

Australian whale carcasses protected

Authorities in South Australia are considering changing the law to protect people 'too stupid to protect themselves'. When a Southern right whale died off Cape Jervis, 60 miles south of Adelaide, about a dozen sharks began devouring the carcass. Sightseers clambered over the floating 45ft carcass to get a closer look. Local boat-owners started a lucrative trade ferrying people to view the circling sharks, and some people leaned overboard to stroke the feeding sharks! Currently, marine regulations in South Australia prevent people from coming within 10m of a live whale, and a similar exclusion zone may come into place for whale carcasses. (Source: *Irish Independent*, 25.07.'01). ■

Dolphin-friendly navy

The Royal Navy is to make its sub-mariner hunting frigates 'dolphin-friendly' by introducing a new sonar system that will not interfere with dolphin vocalisations. A contract worth £160 million seeks to develop a passive sonar system using lower frequencies than at present. Results are expected by 2004. (Source: *The Times*, 20.08.'01). ■

Dolphin bycatch in pair trawls

Dave Wall

Cetacean strandings around Cornwall have increased by 66%, according to a recent study by the UK fisheries ministry. It is thought the increase is largely due to bycatch in the sea bass fishery, which involves boats' pair-trawling.

Pair-trawls can be the size of a football field, and it is believed cetaceans only become aware of their entrapment when it is too late.

The report has significant implications for Irish cetaceans, as similarly large trawls are used in pelagic fisheries off the west coast, and pair-trawling has been promoted as a potential alternative to drift-netting for tuna off the south-west coast.

The tuna driftnet fishery was closed this year as a result of EU legislation imposed to prevent cetacean bycatch. How ironic, then, that one replacement for drift-netting may, at first sight, offer little benefit.

The International Whaling Commission has suggested that cetacean populations are unable to sustain an increase in mortality greater than 1% per annum. It seems likely that cetacean bycatch in paired trawls could exceed that level of mortality.

Bycatch is already a grave threat to harbour porpoise populations in the North Sea and Celtic Sea. The North Sea population is threatened with extinction in 30-40 years (according to WWF Germany), while the Celtic Sea population suffers a bycatch rate of around 6% per annum.

The bycatch rate for pelagic trawls in Irish waters is largely unknown. This is partly due to lack of bycatch data and in problems getting independent observers aboard factory trawlers working out of Irish ports. (An observer study of the Celtic Sea herring fishery in 1993/94 reported zero mortality of cetaceans and minimal bycatch of grey seals - Ed.)

The implications of this bycatch for pelagic dolphins in Irish waters may be very significant, especially as new research suggests that some pelagic dolphin populations off the west coast may be smaller than previously thought. ■

Send your letters, contributions or comments on the magazine to: The Editor, Irish Whale & Dolphin Group, Merchants Quay, Kilrush, Co Clare.



Minke whale off Cape Clear, Co Cork

Letter from the Secretary



Just a quick note to remind you that membership renewals will be posted out in January. I would ask you all to

please forward your renewals, with cheques if possible, as soon as you can. Please bear in mind that if you don't reply quickly we will waste our limited resources sending out reminders.

If there is any change in your contact details, be sure to let us know so we can update our membership database. If you have gone online in the past year but not forwarded your email address, please do so now, as email is the best way to keep in contact with you throughout the year.

Please note our new official address: 2 Langford Place, Langford Row, Cork. We also have a new dedicated IWDG phone line and answering service: (021) 431 5723. Please direct all IWDG queries to this number.

2001 was an exceptionally good year for the IWDG group, which is reflected in our membership growth. In the last issue I told you current membership was 300 and growing fast; well, that growth has now exceeded 400 and I think it entirely realistic to set a target of 500 members for the end of 2002.

Once again, we ask you to help us achieve our goals by passing our details, website address and publications on to any family, friends or colleagues you think may be interested in supporting the IWDG. If you feel you can help us in any practical or financial way, please contact us at the above address or telephone number.

Pádraig Whooley
IWDG Secretary

Common dolphin breaching off Little Skellig, Co Kerry



Des Lavelle

IRISH NEWS

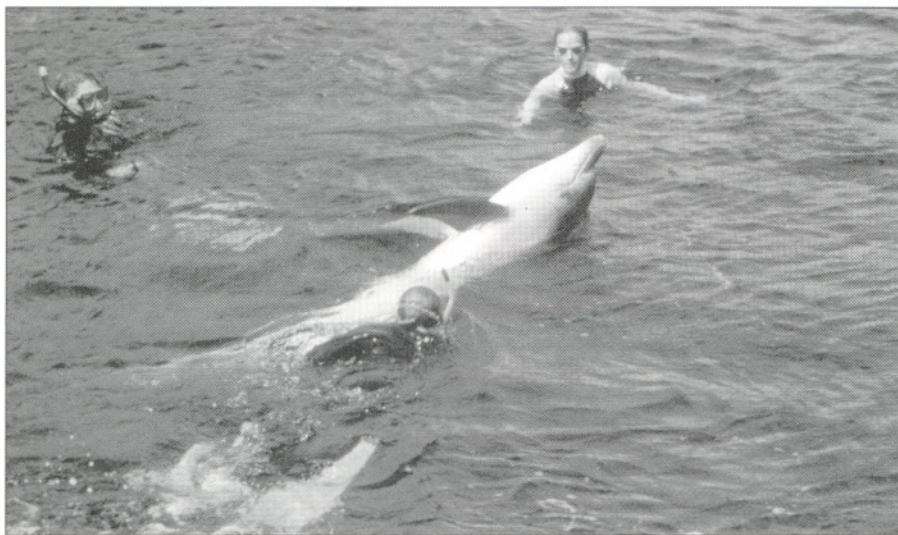
Padraig Whooley



Bottlenose dolphin breaching, Shannon estuary

The trials of Dusty: a friendly dolphin in north Clare

Simon Berrow



The Doolin/Fanore dolphin: she's a female bottlenose

Liam MacNamara

For as long as I can remember, I've had an interest in dolphins. Not whales, so much, as I thought the chances of seeing one were virtually nonexistent. Dolphins, however, are more inclined to come close to shore and could frequently be seen passing along the coast where I lived. Every time they did, my interest would be renewed.

I joined the IWDG Constant Watch Sighting Scheme in 1994 and it gave me the opportunity to develop my interest. Since then, I have spent many pleasurable hours watching these intriguing creatures. I still haven't been lucky enough to spot that elusive whale, but down the years there have been plenty of dolphin sightings. I have seen bottlenose, common dolphins and harbour porpoises frequently. As for whales, the only answer is to keep trying. After all, they're out there and not that far away - perhaps all I need is an upgrade of my binoculars (Liam saw his first whale in September off Loop Head - Ed).

Originally my watch-site was close to home (Derreen, near Fanore, Co Clare) but earlier this year I switched it a few miles up the road to Black Head. The main reason I moved my watch-site to Black Head was to avoid the madness that developed this summer close to Fanore. Earlier this year, reports appeared in newspapers of a friendly bottlenose dolphin, and the publicity prompted hundreds to descend on our little community to see and swim with it. Their numbers continued to increase, peaking on August bank holiday weekend.

She had been in the area since October, having moved from Doolin. For me, it was

like a dream come true - a wild, resident dolphin just a few hundred yards from home! I've spent many evenings admiring her and her antics, and often awoke to the sight of her frolicking about in her watery world... what a magical way to wake up!

Alas, the magic faded, replaced by madness and mayhem. This craze to be with a dolphin is not without its difficulties. Anywhere people gather in numbers there are bound to be problems, and the locals soon found out what it meant to have a friendly dolphin, especially landowners whose fields had to be crossed. Another problem was traffic congestion, with tailbacks developing frequently and cars being parked carelessly on both sides of the road, blocking entrances to private homes.

The area the dolphin frequents is not a known bathing area and, depending on the wind, the sea can become dangerous for swimmers, and the rocks are jagged and slippery. At a meeting in June hosted by the IWDG, the dangers of swimming was discussed and signs were erected, but they appear to have had little or no effect on numbers taking to the water. Luckily, the summer passed off without incident, though one man was plucked unconscious from the water after being bashed against rocks.

The dolphin seems oblivious to the mayhem. She was wonderful to watch can captivated all who saw or touched her. She seems to be enjoying the attention, but in my opinion such close contact with humans cannot be good. What effect will this have on her development? It is possible that with each new, human friend she makes, her chances of interacting with her own kind

again will get less and less.

As winter approaches and weather deteriorates, fewer swimmers are taking to the water and, as happened last year in Doolin, the dolphin is finding herself becoming more and more isolated. For an animal that was on the receiving end of such welcome attention and affection, being left alone must be difficult and isolating. Recently, I witnessed her virtually stranding herself in what I believe was a desperate attempt to find 'friends' who had deserted her. If that is the case, then I cannot help wondering if it could have been avoided, if we had thought of the effect our selfish desires to swim with a wild dolphin might have on the animal.

Nobody knows what the future holds for this wonderful creature; perhaps she will live out the winter here in Fanore and welcome back the hordes next summer. I think, for her own sake, that if she were to leave and rejoin her natural family, to meet up and make some real friends in the dolphin world, that would be for the best. That is all I wish for her, the very best. ■

Irishdolphins.com

A new website has been launched to cater for the growing interest in 'friendly' or interactive dolphins.

Its editor Graham Timmins says, "Media reports about sociable dolphins often tend to be shallow and sensational. Our idea is to provide accurate, in-depth and up-to-date information about any dolphins interacting with people in Irish waters. We cover aspects such as local conditions, the history of interactions and current patterns of behaviour."

Website designer Keith Buchanan makes it easy to navigate this extensive site, with dozens of photos of Irish dolphins, most never published before. Background articles of a more polemical nature discuss hot topics in this field, and people are invited to contribute their own stories of what they have observed when visiting friendly dolphins such as Fungie in Dingle and Dusty in Fanore. The site is intended to become a resource for responsible eco-tourism and for students - in the biological or social sciences.

• Check out the site at:
<http://www.irishdolphins.com>
Please send them your feedback! ■

WHALE DIARY

Colin Barnes



DIARY OF AN IRISH WHALEWATCHER ● By Pádraig Whooley

Fin whale off Galley Head, Co Cork

Irish whalewatching comes of age

2001 was the year Irish whale watching came of age. A national whale-watch day, several highly successful courses and a little bit of Lady Luck all combined to place Irish whalewatching centre-stage.

The south coast's winter inshore movement of common dolphins petered out by March and was followed by a predictable lull in activity, which lasted till early June. Yet again, harbour porpoises became quite elusive, presumably moving to offshore calving grounds. By June 4th they were back, as I watched groups of females with newborn calves feeding close to the Cork cliffs, mirroring to within days my first mother-and-calf encounters of the species the previous year.

At the opposite end of the biomass scale were the giants: having recorded fin whales off Kinsale and surrounding headlands

from June in 1999 and again in 2000, we were not to be content with distant encounters in 2001. There was a tentative plan to get close to the second-largest living animals on Earth - the fin whales obliged by turning up at their usual haunts two weeks' early.

The first encounter of the summer was mediated by the Irish Air Corps, with a magnificent series of aerial photos of two adult fin whales travelling with a calf in clear waters south of Kinsale on June 4th.

Harbour porpoises were not the only species moving inshore this weather, as the following day came the first report of the Cork harbour killer whales: Mick Mackey reported three adding an "interesting dimension" to a joint Irish and Swedish 'man overboard' naval exercise outside Cork harbour.

The killer whales caught the public's imagination in a huge way and the IWDG benefited in terms of

"Humpback whales made occasional appearances from August onwards, adding spice to the fin and sei whale encounters we have come to expect from June onwards"

profile and membership. But this came at a price, placing enormous demands on our time and resources as our focus shifted to the Orcas.

The 'feeding frenzy' in Cork harbour was matched by a frenzy of another type as commercial and vested interests sought their slice of the pie. Some locals wasted little time in profiteering and, as ever, the animal welfare's well-intentioned but ill-informed fringe got ready for a 'live stranding' gig of the year and another chance to play God. Unfortunately, they failed to read the part of the script that says healthy killer whales do not strand.

A highlight of the summer was a pelagic trip from Cape Clear on July 9th, which followed our first whale-watching weekend on July 7-8th (see page 6). While boarding the boat, RSPB's Anthony McGeehan whispered in my ear in a strong Ulster accent: 'Now remember, sonny, birds first!' Although delivered in jest, it served to remind me that whalewatchers are still very much the new kids on the block. An hour later an observant botanist yelled "whale!" All eyes focused on a distant group of large whales, blowing vigorously. Moments later, one started breaching clear out of the water. We drew nearer and our excitement grew as it showed its long white pectoral fins, identifying it as a humpback whale. Then the unimaginable happened: a smaller minke whale breached no less spectacularly - at least eight times - between us and the distant humpbacks.

Continued next page...

Humpback whale 'fluking' off Seven Head, Co Cork



Killer thriller in Cork harbour

Continued from page 1...

I witnessed the post-mortem, which was surreal given that I had seen her hunting off Cobh the previous evening. Measuring 7m, her teeth were worn flat and a few had large cavities. She died of blood poisoning and pneumonia - the result of an infected jaw caused by tooth decay. She was quite old, possibly 60-70 years (to be confirmed).

I will never forget filming a canoeist on an early-morning, flat-calm sea, hoping an Orca would surface. I waited and waited until the

male rose very slowly out of the water within a few metres of the canoe, its huge dorsal fin sparkling as it caught the sunlight, its immense bulk dwarfing the canoe, only to disappear again without as much as a splash.

I'd like to pay special tribute to Mick McCarthy, assistant harbour master, who worked tirelessly to ensure the whales' safety and that of those using the harbour. I would also like to thank the navy, Gardai, Dúchas and UCC for their efforts. Well

done to IWDG members, especially Pádraig Whooley, for keeping the media informed, and Peter Wilson and Conor Ryan who recorded 50 hours' observations and are writing a paper on the whales, the first detailed study of the behaviour of this species in Irish waters.

● IWDG welcomes further sightings of these or other Orcas. Who knows, they might be back next year! ■

With two whale species vying for attention, I suspect an albatross could have landed on the deck undetected. The temptation, seeing Anthony excitedly changing camera lenses, proved irresistible and I reminded him of his earlier 'birds first' mantra on the quay wall... The humpbacks brought the Cape weekend species' count to seven.

As in previous years, the rate of large baleen whale sightings off Kinsale built up through the summer, reaching a 100% encounter rate in October to December.

Humpbacks made occasional cameo appearances from August onwards, adding spice to the fin and sei whale encounters that we have now come to expect from June onwards. On occasion these species were observed in close association, foraging between the Old Head and Galley Head.

I would like to thank Tim Feen (Ardfield) and Colin Barnes (Castletownshend) for their numerous sightings, which helped us build a more complete picture of the cetacean fauna in this area. Colin's whale-watching trips enjoy an encounter rate second to none, - he can be contacted for bookings on 086-327 3226.

A quick glance reveals just how closely this year's cetacean sightings matched those of previous years, to the extent that we can now start differentiating between coincidence and seasonal occurrence. For instance, Dick Coombes' sighting of 16-20 fin whales off the Old Head on July 27th, 2001 bore a remarkable resemblance to my encounter of 15+ fin whales in the same area on June 25th, 2000. The fact that humpback whales have been observed three years' running, at the same time, in the same area, begs the question: are these the same whales? If they are, then how many similar events are occurring, unnoticed, around our coast? My guess is, quite a few.

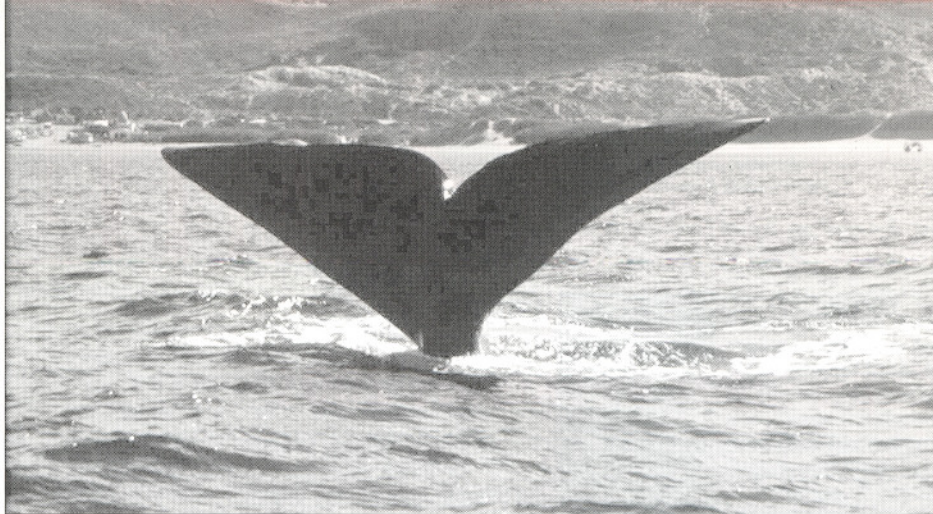
Don't delude yourselves that we are simply fortunate in Cork to have brilliant headlands from which we can see such 'splendiferous' fauna. The Cork sightings-rate merely reflects observer effort and, having removed much of the guesswork from this field skill, we are now reaping the benefits.

Rather than getting complacent, we must redouble our efforts. As ever, the message is, if you don't look, you won't see. So let's start talking to locals, listening to fishermen, networking with angling, diving and sailing clubs and meeting up with other members to start building up the real picture, accurately reflecting the true cetacean diversity around our coasts. ■

• If you have any queries on watching whales, etc, write to Pádraig Whooley, 2 Langford Row, Langford Place, Cork Tel: (021) 431 5723 Email: iwdg@eircom.net

IWDG Website:

Visit our website at: <http://iwdg.ucc.ie>



Southern right whale

Miguel Iniguez

Right whale of a time

Oscar Merne, *Dúchas The Heritage Service*

In the autumn of 1998 and 1999, I visited South Africa and, although we weren't particularly searching for whales and dolphins, we saw plenty.

In both years, we spent a couple of days at De Hoop Nature Reserve on the south coast, some 220km east of Cape Town. This is a wonderful area of limestone with c3,000 species of plants, a large lagoon or vlei full of waterfowl (c80 species), magnificent dunes and over 30km of wild, sandy beaches where the endangered Black Oystercatchers are the main bird species present.

The first time we visited this beach we noticed long, low, black structures just beyond the breakers and thought they were rocky reefs exposed at low tide. But very soon the 'reefs' raised enormous, square-ended pectoral fins and tail flukes and even surged completely out of the water and crashed back, causing massive displacement of white spray. What we were looking at was a group of 40- to 50-tonne adult Southern right whales and their half-grown calves. With binoculars and telescope we scanned a few kilometres up and down the beach and located at least thirty of these magnificent creatures playing in the warm, shallow waters of the Indian Ocean, in what was clearly a major nursery area. We spent hours watching them in fascination, occasionally switching to the Black Oystercatchers and the 'dassies', or rock hyraxes, hanging out on the rocks above the beach.

In 1999, we visited Hermanus, the world-famous whalewatching town on the south coast, where a town crier announces the presence of Southern right whales. At times, the huge beasts come right up to the cliffs and you can look down their blowholes from the cliff-top road and car parks at the edge of town. The whales are literally 10-20m from you, and you get a really good impression of just how massive they are. If the breeze is blowing towards you, you can even smell their bad breath! At Hermanus, it's possible to go out in whalewatching boats, but close approach (<300m) is

prohibited, so land-based views are often better.

On the Cape peninsula, we had more experiences of whales. From our room in a seafront hotel in the Seaport district of Capetown we saw a Southern right whale close to the promenade, with flocks of white-chinned petrels from Antarctica wheeling about closely and thousands of Cape cormorants flying past. On the way to the Cape of Good Hope another right whale was wallowing close to a reef where thousands of Cape fur seals were hauled out. A bit further on in False Bay we also watched a humpback whale slapping its enormous white flippers on the sea surface. Near Cape Point lighthouse, where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meet, we sipped tea on the restaurant balcony and watched an elegant Bryde's whale glide by. On another occasion we went on a boat from Hout Bay for a very close view of thousands of fur seals on a rocky islet, and we had a school of a dozen or so common dolphins riding the bow wave for part of the trip.

But our best experience of all was at a beach just north of Lambert's Bay (200km north of Cape Town) where we had close encounters with a school of Heaviside's dolphins. We were strolling along the beach when we noticed the dolphins coming in towards the shore. With binoculars, we were delighted to see they were the very small, oddly-shaped Heaviside's, which are something of an enigma. Their range is extremely limited, being confined, as far as is known, to the cold Benguela current off the west coast of South Africa, and little is known about their numbers, biology, etc. Anyway, the dolphins came closer and closer and then into the breakers, where they started surfing the waves towards the beach. Again and again they swam out and surfed in, obviously enjoying themselves immensely. I couldn't resist getting into the icy cold water (it was 28-32°C on the beach - what a contrast!) and wading out up to my chest. I was only 5m from the dolphins when they came to the end of their surfing run and turned back out to sea. What a wonderful experience! My wife, who doesn't like cold water, happily watched with her binoculars from terra firma. ■

SIGHTINGS

Pádraig Whooley



Whalewatching on Bullig Point, Cape Clear, in July

● Cetacean sightings and related news

Cape Clear weekends 2001

On 7-8 July we ran the first of our whale-watching weekends on Cape Clear Island in west Cork, and to call it a success would be a huge understatement - it produced an amazing seven species in just three days.

Between 4-5 minke whales were seen with ease on each whale-watch over the weekend, on occasion moving close to our cliff vantage point at Bullig. As the first watch drew to a close and retina fatigue gave way to hunger pangs, Simon Berrow yelled "killer whales!" Yeah, right, we thought, as a frantic search revealed nothing and our scepticism turned to derision. His reputation was salvaged when the familiar, scimitar-like dorsal fin of an adult male sliced through the calm waters beneath us. Some moments later a female joined the male and we lost sight of them as they rounded Blanan, heading west. A phone call to Jim Wilson confirmed these were not the Cork harbour killer whales, as he had been with them only 20 minutes earlier. Harbour porpoises brought our morning tally to three species.

Sunday produced minke whales 'on tap', while porpoises, although seen, were elusive, perhaps still spooked by the killer

whales' inshore foray the previous day. By day's end, common dolphins had brought the species' tally to four.

On Monday morning, about 50 common dolphins moved to within a stone's throw of the cliff. Some hours later, a Risso's dolphin swam into South Harbour and Steve Wing, the bird observatory warden, saw bottlenose dolphins from the island's tennis court! But the best was yet to come, as we were to find out on the evening pelagic trip when we were treated to a display by breaching humpback whales (see also page 4).

We held a second whalewatching weekend on 18-19 August. Alas, it was a bit of a wash-out, as driving rain and mist-shrouded cliffs drove us indoors for back-to-back slide presentations. For many with a ferry to catch their first watch on Sunday was all too brief. But it did produce harbour porpoises and common dolphins. There is more to Cape, however, than its wildlife, and those who stuck out the storm-front were rewarded with stunning vistas that ensured the weekend was still a memorable one. ■

WhaleWatch Ireland 2001

August 4th was National WhaleWatch Day. This major IWDG event attracted over 1,000 whalewatchers from throughout the four provinces to six headlands around our coast. Although the prevailing blustery conditions at several locations were far from ideal, it provided for many their first taste of Ireland's land-based whalewatching potential. Cetaceans were observed at five of the six sites and among the sightings were harbour porpoises, common dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, one unidentified whale and also a sunfish. Total number of animals observed was approximately 50.

Surprisingly, the best action was at Dublin's Howth Head and Ramore Head in Co Derry, where watchers enjoyed superb

views of harbour porpoises with calves.

The IWDG hopes to make this an annual event, and we invite people to contribute to this special day. Do contact us.

The IWDG would like to thank the following organisers for their efforts in the run-up to the event, their help on the day and for their post-event reports: Tony Murray (Mayo), Jim Allen (Derry), Nick Channon (Dublin), Jim Hurley (Wexford), Pádraig Whooley (Cork), Simon Berrow (Clare).

The IWDG would also like to thank Patagonia clothing and Fragrances of Ireland, makers of Inis perfume, for their sponsorship of the event. ■

Surveys by IWDG and P&O ferries

Dave Wall

The IWDG ferry surveys in collaboration with P&O ferries have been underway for four months. Already the trips have yielded 39 cetacean sightings. Most sightings were of harbour porpoise, but common dolphins and minke whales were sighted and there was a possible sighting of white-sided dolphins. The surveys continue, thanks to

the kind sponsorship of P&O Irish Sea ferries.

In November, we began surveying on the new P&O route to Mostyn in north Wales, and we'll soon commence surveys across the Celtic Sea from Rosslare to Cherbourg in France. For more information see <http://iwdg.ucc.ie/ferrysurvey.html> ■

Sightings review

The IWDG recently completed a major analysis of all cetacean sighting records submitted to the group since its inception. A total of 2,836 records involving 17 species were collected by the IWDG over the 10 years since 1991.

Harbour porpoise was the most frequently reported species, with 946 records (33.3%), followed by common dolphin (545 records, 19.2%), bottlenose dolphin (341 records, 12.2%) and minke whale (265 records, 9.3%).

Rare or unusual species included a sighting of false killer whales in Galway Bay in 1986 and two Ziphiid sightings (Cuvier's beaked whale and bottlenosed whale). Four mysticete species were reported, including 18 records of humpback whale. Records were received from all around the Irish coast and from all coastal counties except Leitrim.

Since 1991, a total of 619 Constant Effort Watches have been carried out from 36 sites in 10 counties. Most (36.5%) were carried out from Dreen in Co Clare, with 130 (21.0%) carried out from the Old Head of Kinsale, Co Cork, and 67 (10.8%) from Howth Head, Co Dublin.

The review, funded by the Heritage Council under its 2000 Wildlife Grant Scheme, will be available shortly and it is hoped that all records will be available on-line to members in the New Year. ■

Dublin porpoises

Dave Wall

IWDG members have been keeping watch over porpoises in Dublin Bay. Porpoises are regularly seen from Howth Head and Bray Head and have also been seen in Killiney Bay (porpoises are seen on one in five trips on the DART from Dublin to Bray) and from the east pier in Dún Laoghaire. Concurrent watches from Howth, Killiney and Bray have shown that porpoises are found at each location at the same time. Dublin Bay is a candidate SAC: the IWDG has proposed that it also be designated for harbour porpoise.

Dublin members may like to meet regularly to co-ordinate watches, etc. Contact Dave Wall 087-297 7931 ■

Strandings

NEWS ● Cetacean strandings around the Irish coast

For recent strandings see <http://iwdg.ucc.ie/strandrecords.htm>

Whale burnt - but why?

A fin whale was washed ashore at Fahey Bay, Clifden, Co Galway, in September. Galway Co Council decided to burn the whale following complaints about the smell. The whale was possibly 2-3 weeks' dead when stranded. Dúchas conservation ranger and local IWDG contact Ger O'Donnell measured the whale and took a tissue sample for UCC. Standing 8ft-high and almost 60ft-long, the whale attracted a constant stream of curious visitors, from children to the elderly: 1,500 are estimated to have seen it over two days.

Given the public interest, instead of causing public money to go up in smoke it is surprising that Galway Tourism, Dúchas or the National Museum did not recover the whale for display at a later date. It could have been towed to a nearby beach, buried and the 60ft skeleton recovered in a year or so and displayed in Conamara National Park or the

local Oceanworld to increase public awareness of Ireland's cetacean diversity.

Council workers will spend four days burning the whale with diesel and will then remove what's left at a cost of about £1,000. Perhaps in future local authorities and Dúchas might consider spending the taxpayer's money in ways which promote non-polluting disposal methods and create an educational asset for Ireland's marine heritage. ■

Whale good in Nigeria

"The meat is good" said JJ Ibrahim as he hacked a piece of fatty flesh from a blue whale washed up near Lagos, Nigeria's biggest city. As a gang of club-wielding youths forced workers from local office blocks to pay an 'admission fee' to look at the whale, throngs of people scavenged the remaining few bones. JJ suggested: "Most of it is gone, so you better buy fast". (Source: *Independent* 21.08.01) ■

Fin Whale washed up in Fahey Bay, near Clifden, Co Galway



A sailor's tale

John Petch

Tom O'Leary and I just completed a yacht delivery trip from the Mediterranean. We saw common dolphins nearly every day, but north of the Belengas Islands we came across a school of nearly all adult females with small calves. One was the smallest I had ever seen and must have been newly-born. At one stage, we had six adults bow-riding, and each had a calf alongside. It made me realise that the adult dolphin is quite big and that many we see are juveniles.

Leaving northern Spain, we sailed NW for a couple of days and at about 12°W we came upon a pod of fin whales. One was very large and blew right alongside with what I can only describe as an impressive roar. That day, we sailed north through three other pods of fin whales. Night was very dark and quite rough and the phosphorescence was absolutely amazing. We wondered if the organisms that caused it were the food of the fin whales and

if that was why the whales were all concentrated there - or was it just a coincidence?

We saw more common dolphins all the way to Ireland, and coming up to Old Head of Kinsale we were treated to a super display of dolphins in the phosphorescence. I was standing on the bow and saw a satiated gannet sitting on the water about thirty feet to starboard. Two dolphins left the bow and came up under the gannet, hoisting it into the air. It flapped across the water, too heavy to fly, and nearly got run down by our yacht.

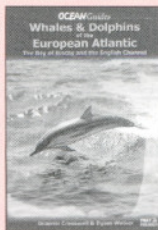
I can just imagine its comments: "Bloody dolphins, why can't they go and play with a beach ball instead of ramming me up the bum". The dolphins stayed with us to within a mile of the Old Head. No matter how many times I see it, I always get a thrill seeing dolphins at night, and for some of our crew, for whom it was the first time, it was a truly magical experience. ■

Book Reviews

Whales and Dolphins of the European Atlantic

Graeme Cresswell & Dylan Walker
OceanGuides

From WildGuides, 9 Birch Grove, West Hill, Ottery St Mary, Devon EX11 1XP, £8 Stg



New field identification booklet from ORCA, who carry out regular surveys from ferries crossing Bay of Biscay. Excellent production with clear descriptions, layout and photo-montages of each species in the field. A most useful field guide to help those whalewatchers trying to improve their identification skills. Highly recommended.

Whalewatching 2001

Erich Hoyt

From IFAW (www.ifaw.org), £10.00

Full report of the value of whalewatching worldwide, including Ireland. As 2002 is International Year of EcoTourism, maybe Ireland should look to ways of developing the potential for Irish whalewatching. Tourism has suffered enormously from crises during 2001 and Ireland must develop new, internationally attractive tourism products if it is to compete on the world market. What better way than whalewatching?

Creatures of the Deep

Erich Hoyt

From Firefly Books, £27.95

Another excellent book from this prolific writer. Fresh from an excellent book on ants, Hoyt invites us to explore the last unexplored frontier on Earth - the deep oceans. An excellent introduction to this poorly-known but rapidly-expanding field of study. Excellent pictures of weird-looking creatures and an interesting text which explores the development of deep-sea research as well as ecology and oceanography.

At a time when Ireland is exploring its offshore waters, paving the way for mineral and fisheries exploitation, it is important that we understand and appreciate the wonders of the deep.

Shannon Dolphins

Simon Berrow and Sarah Ferriss

From Shannon Dolphin and Wildlife Foundation, Merchants Quay, Kilrush, Co Clare, €4

32-page colour booklet for those interested in learning about the only known resident group of bottlenose dolphins in Ireland.



Face to Face with a Beached Whale Guidelines for the Welfare of Live-stranded Cetaceans

Available from IWDG Secretary for £4 incl P&P ■

Photo competition

Are they too hard? Nobody guessed the identity of Eddie Dunne's holiday snap in our last issue. Deep in Laos in South-East Asia, the Irrawaddy dolphin is frequently seen along the coast and in rivers and is actually a member of the family Delphinidae. ■

Sightings:

Details of any sightings should be sent to the IWDG Cetacean Sighting Scheme.

NETWORK

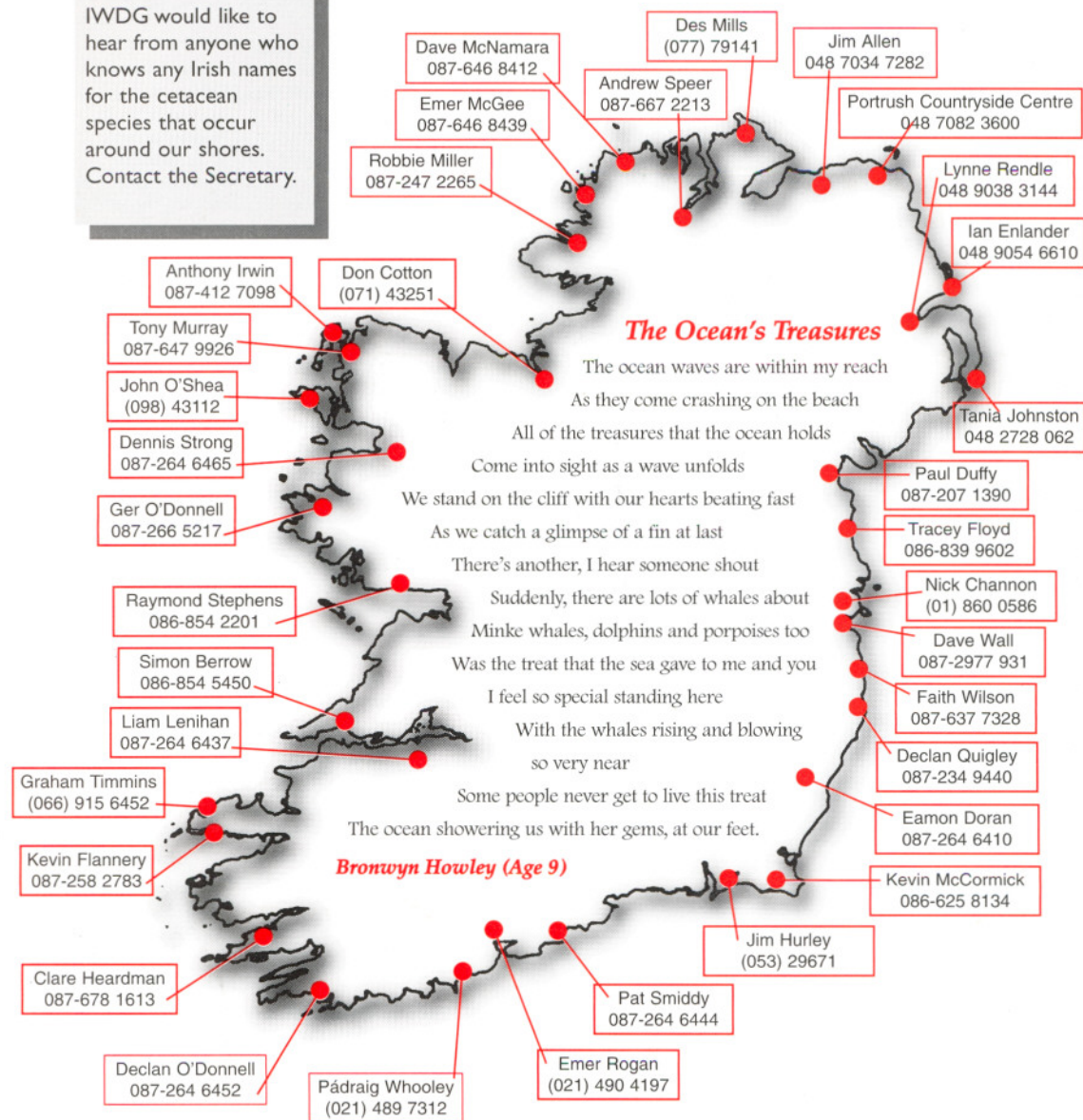


● IWDG contacts around the coast

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group has established a network of contacts who will visit stranded animals and collect records of those sighted at sea. If you find a whale, dolphin or porpoise washed up, or observe one at sea or from the shore, please tell your nearest contact person.

Irish names

IWDG would like to hear from anyone who knows any Irish names for the cetacean species that occur around our shores. Contact the Secretary.



Strandings

Dr Emer Rogan, Dept of Zoology, UCC
Tel: (021) 490 4197 or (021) 490 4053
Mobile 087-699 5314
Email: e.rogan@ucc.ie

Live strandings

Dúchas (01) 647 2404
IWDG 087-699 5314
086-854 5450
ISS (01) 835 4370

Sightings

Dr Simon Berrow, Merchants Quay, Kilrush, Co Clare
Tel: (065) 905 2326
Mobile: 086-854 5450
Email: SDWF@oceanfree.net

IWDG News

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Text & Editors

Simon Berrow & Pádraig Whooley
Design & page make-up
Cóilín MacLochláinn

IWDG address

Republic of Ireland:

Pádraig Whooley, IWDG Secretary, 2 Langford Place, Langford Row, Cork
Tel/Fax: (021) 431 5723
Email: iwdg@eircom.net

Northern Ireland:

Ian Enlander, Commonwealth House, 35 Castle St, Belfast BT1
Tel: 028 9054 6610
Email: ian.enlander@doeni.gov.uk

IWDG Committee

Chairperson:

Dr Simon Berrow
IWDG, Merchants Quay, Kilrush, Co Clare Tel: 086-854 5450

Secretary:

Pádraig Whooley
(as per official address above)
Tel/Fax: (021) 431 5723
Email: padwhorca@hotmail.com

Treasurer:

Phyllis Ryan, 49 Sackville Court Blessington Street, Dublin 7

Committee members:

Dave Wall, Dr Emer Rogan, Faith Wilson, Kevin McCormick, Tracey Floyd, Anthony Irwin, Ian Enlander

Website

<http://iwdg.ucc.ie>

Membership subs

Student/unemployed/OAP: €10
Waged: €20
Family: €30
Corporate: €125
Contact Secretary, IWDG

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