

Cuvier's Beaked Whale



[Photo: Colin D. MacLeod]

Classification

Class: *Mammalia*

Order: *Cetacea*

Suborder: *Odontoceti*

Family: *Ziphiidae*

Genus: *Ziphius*

Species: *cavirostris*

Common names: *Cuvier's Beaked Whale; Goose-beaked whale*

Irish Name: *Míol mór socach Cuvier*

Key Identification Features

Max body length: 23 ft

Average body length: 20 ft

Blow: *Slightly forward and to left, inconspicuous*

Head: *Gently sloping forehead*

Beak: *Indistinct (less distinct with age)*

Dorsal Fin: *Small, falcate*

Colouration: *White, beige to brown. Colour varies according to location, sex or age. Older animals almost white.*

Markings: *Upper side can be almost white in front of dorsal fin. Swirling patterns typical of many animals. White or cream on underside and sides.*

Field Identification

The dorsal fin is often the first feature seen at sea and is set far back on the body. The head is usually small and pale, visible only when sighted close up when the animal is surfacing from a deep dive or surfacing to breath before deep diving, when they may also steeply arch back and lift flukes. Colour variations are common, light brown to grey or white in older animals.

Species Similar in Appearance

The beaked whales are among the most difficult to tell apart, thus the cuvier's can easily be confused with almost any other beaked whale, and perhaps the bottlenose whale and minke whale.

Behaviour

Although rarely seen, these whales have been known to breach and occasionally approach boats.

Status and Distribution

Distribution is known mainly from strandings and a few sightings. Cuvier's beaked whale appears to be one of the most abundant and widespread of the beaked whales. It has a very broad range in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans, but is apparently absent from Polar waters. It is encountered around oceanic volcanic islands with some regularity.

Where and When Best Seen in Ireland

Although rarely seen alive, they are the most frequently recorded beaked whales in Ireland. Between 1901-1995, 21 individuals washed up along our coast, an average of just 1 every 4 years. In 1997, two were recorded. But in nine days in March 2000, three washed up dead on Irish beaches, two in Co. Clare and one in Co. Sligo. Then on May 1st 2000 a fourth washed up at Ballyferriter, Co. Kerry. The IWDG raised the possibilities of these unusual stranding events being linked to offshore seismic surveys along the west coast.

They may occur in numbers over the Atlantic continental shelf - most records Jan to March and June to September.

Food and Feeding

Cuvier's are a deep diving animal. It is thought they feed primarily on squid

Reproduction and Life Cycle

Too little is known about their life history to comment.

Social Structure

Although information is very scarce it is thought that Cuvier's beaked whales live in family groups of up to 25 individuals. A typical group size would be 5-7. Single animals are thought to be old males.

ID image

cuviers.jpg

