

# BOAT USER'S GUIDE TO Irish Whales & Dolphins

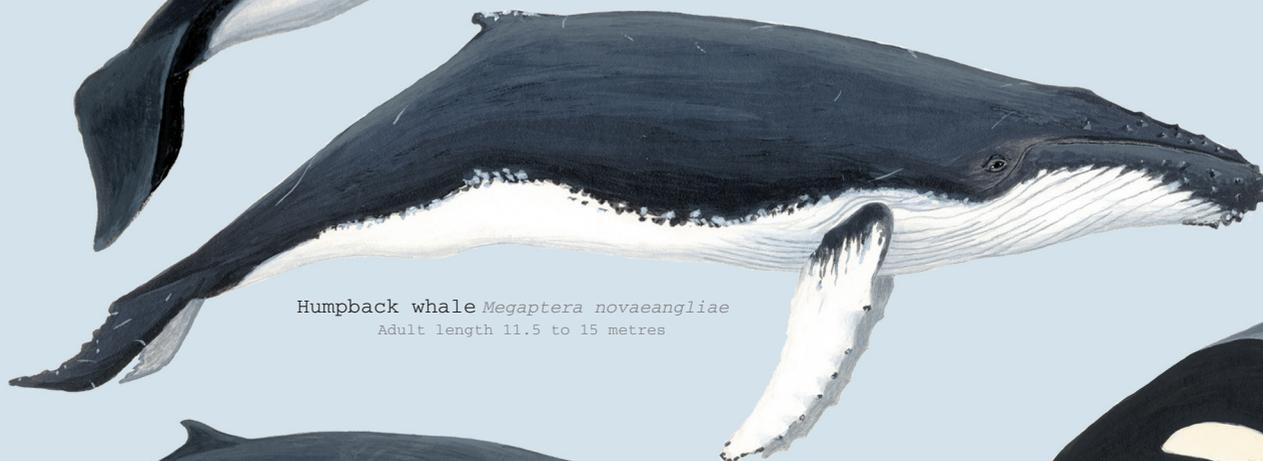
Illustrations by Jim Wilson



Human to same scale



Fin whale *Megaloptera physalus*  
Adult length 18 to 22 metres



Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*  
Adult length 11.5 to 15 metres



Minke whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*  
Adult length 7 to 10 metres



Harbour porpoise *Phocoena phocoena*  
Adult length 1.4 to 1.9 metres



Common dolphin *Delphinus delphis*  
Adult length 1.7 to 2.4 metres



Bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*  
Adult length 1.9 to 3.9 metres



Killer whale *Orcinus orca*  
Adult length 5.5 to 9.8 metres



Risso's dolphin *Grampus griseus*  
Adult length 2.6 to 3.8 metres

## How to identify the species you've encountered

You are unlikely to observe many of the 24 Irish cetacean (whales, dolphins and porpoises) species, as some are rare vagrants, or only occur seasonally in late autumn and winter, while others tend to occur in deeper waters off the shelf edge. This identification guide illustrates the eight species that make up the majority of all Irish cetacean sightings.

Profiles of all 24 species are available on the IWDG website [www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie). The best way to confirm your identification is to take a photograph or video, so if there is likely cetacean activity up ahead, get your camera ready, before things get too hectic.



Bord Iascaigh Mhara  
Irish Sea Fisheries Board



## Surfacing sequences and descriptions

### How to locate cetaceans

Whale-watching is best carried out during calmer periods of sea state <2 in good visibility. Binoculars may not be that useful on smaller boats, as they are difficult to hold steady and limit your field of view. Keep scanning along the horizon, focusing on areas with large concentrations of seabirds or diving gannets, which may reveal feeding dolphins or whales. Investigate any peculiar surface disturbances thoroughly.

Find out more at the IWDG website [www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie)

### How you can contribute to whale conservation?

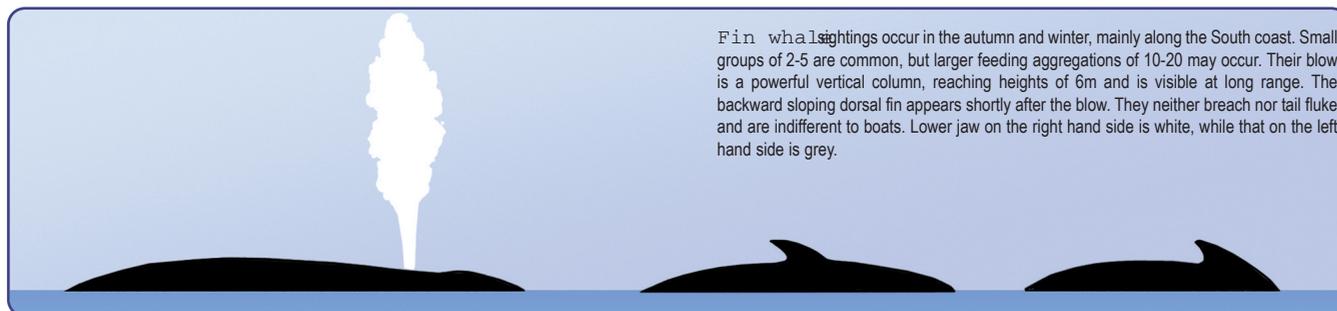
The IWDG co-ordinate an All-Ireland cetacean sighting scheme which collates, validates and stores all sightings on a central database. Your sighting will help improve our current understanding of these magnificent animals. Please report your sightings:

- On-line via the IWDG website [www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie) sighting section.
- By emailing full details: date, time, position (or nearest location), species (if known), group size, behaviour, with relevant field-notes, photographs or video footage to [sightings@iwdg.ie](mailto:sightings@iwdg.ie)
- Phone or text **086-8545450**
- Sightings forms are available from: IWDG, Merchant's Quay, Kilrush, Co. Clare.

### Recommended code of conduct

Boat-based whale-watching usually involves some level of disturbance to the cetaceans. You can help minimise disturbance by using the following guidelines:

- Reduce speed to less than 7 knots when a cetacean is seen.
- Keep a steady course, with a slow "no wake" speed.
- Do not cut across their path or criss-cross in front of them.
- Do not encircle, or corral animals between boats.
- Avoid spending more than 30 minutes with the same animal(s).
- If unsure of a whale's position, stop and put engine in neutral until it is re-sighted.
- Be particularly careful if adults with calves are present.
- Do not swim with cetaceans for your own safety and theirs.



**Fin whale** Sightings occur in the autumn and winter, mainly along the South coast. Small groups of 2-5 are common, but larger feeding aggregations of 10-20 may occur. Their blow is a powerful vertical column, reaching heights of 6m and is visible at long range. The backward sloping dorsal fin appears shortly after the blow. They neither breach nor tail fluke and are indifferent to boats. Lower jaw on the right hand side is white, while that on the left hand side is grey.



**Humpback whale** Sightings are increasing along the Irish south coast. Their large, bushy blow may be visible at long range. They are the only frequently seen whale that lifts its tail-fluke out of the water. They may be approachable, and at close quarters both the knob-like tubercles on their head and the pronounced hump forward of the dorsal fin can be seen. They may breach, and slap their pectoral fins on the surface.



**Killer whale (Orca)** Sightings of the largest member of the dolphin family occur sporadically off all coasts, usually in small groups of 2-5 individuals. The most distinctive feature is a tall, triangular, dorsal fin, reaching up to 2 m in adult males, which is visible at long distances. The distinctive white eye-patch and a pale saddle behind the dorsal fin combine to give them a striking appearance, which should cause little confusion.



**Minke whale** Smallest and most commonly observed baleen whale, appearing in all Irish waters, generally on their own. As with all whales their dorsal fin is located two-thirds along the back. Have distinctive white band around their "flippers" (pectoral fins). The blow is generally not visible, but may be audible if close. Unlike humpback whales, they do not raise their flukes out of the water, but may breach for sustained periods



**Risso's dolphin** Large and can appear along any coast, generally in groups of less than 10 individuals. May approach boats but generally will not bow-ride. Adults very pale, often white in colour, with extensive scarring all over their bodies. Tall dorsal fin, located mid-way along the back, and bulbous head with no distinct beak may result in some Risso's being mistaken for killer whales.



**Bottlenose dolphin** Large, of robust build, and will be familiar to many, as "Fungi" and "Flipper" are bottlenose dolphins. Will approach boats to bow-ride and are more frequently seen in smaller groups of 5-15 along the south and west coast. Unlike the common dolphin, has a shorter beak, and are plain grey with no obvious colour pattern.



**Common dolphin** The smallest and most frequently observed dolphin species. Readily approach boats to bow-ride. Can be observed in large groups with upwards of several hundred individuals, often in association with diving gannets. Slender in build, with long beak and an hourglass pattern on their sides, with a yellow/tan patch sweeping from the eye to the dorsal fin.



**Harbour porpoise** Our smallest cetacean. Shy, do not bow-ride and generally avoid boats. They have a gentle "rolling" motion, revealing a small, dark back and triangular dorsal fin located mid-way along the back. They generally create little surface disturbance and the head and tail are rarely visible.

**IWDG** [www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie)  
The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group