

FIRST CONFIRMED RECORD OF A NARWHAL (*Monodon monoceros*) IN IRELAND

Stephanie Levesque¹, Jim O'Donovan², Mags Daly¹, Loraine Fay³, Simon Berrow¹

stephanie.levesque@iwdg.ie

Irish Whale
and Dolphin
Group



www.iwdg.ie



¹ Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, ² Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine,
³ National Parks and Wildlife Service

An tSeirbhís Páirceanna Náisiúnta
agus Fiadhúla
National Parks and Wildlife Service

An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine

INTRODUCTION

On 14 November 2025, the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) received a report of a dead whale on Sweet Nellie's Beach in Greencastle Cove, Co. Donegal. It was initially reported as a pilot whale, though no images were sent.

A further report submitted the following day included a single photograph that did not show the head. It was clear, however, from the skin pigmentation and head shape that this was no pilot whale, but more unusual.

It was unclear if the dorsal fin was naturally absent, or if it had been cut/scavenged



First photograph received on 15 November, 2025. Photo by Niamh Galvin.

VOLUNTEER NETWORK

A request was subsequently made to the IWDG's Volunteer Stranding Network to collect detailed images of the animal, to which volunteers swiftly responded.

The resulting images confirmed the lack of both a dorsal fin and teeth, which allowed IWDG to identify the whale as a young, female narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*) – the first confirmed record of this species in Ireland, alive or dead.



Close-up image of the head, and image confirming lack of a dorsal fin. Photo by IWDG volunteer Alena Kunkel

SIGNIFICANCE

Narwhals occur in Arctic waters of the North Atlantic, typically north of 60°, and are rarely recorded outside of this range.

Historical records indicate that only nine previous strandings have been documented in western Europe since the late 19th century, three of which were females (Fraser 1974).

Prior to this event, the most recent stranding in western Europe was a juvenile male stranded in Belgium in 2016 (Haelters et al. 2018).

Records indicate that sightings are also rare in this region; one off Aberdeenshire and two off Orkney in 1882, and one in the Hebrides in 1976.

POST MORTEM RESULTS

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) secured the carcass for the IWDG, who delivered it to the Cork Regional Veterinary Lab where a post mortem examination was carried out, funded by NPWS.

Results revealed the animal was a young, 2.42 m female in poor nutritional condition. Pulmonary congestion, with histology revealed a mild verminous bronchitis and bronchiolitis. Sectioned nematode worm profiles were present within the lumen of a vascular sinus of the spleen, indicating parasitaemia at the time of death.

The contribution of the identified parasitism to the poor body condition of this animal is uncertain. The cause of death was attributed to starvation. The central nervous system was not examined.

Genetic analysis was carried out at University College Cork to confirm species identification.



Narwhal at the Cork Regional Veterinary Lab. Photo by Simon Berrow/IWDG.

CONCLUSION

This event highlights the importance of national stranding schemes in documenting rare and unusual strandings. It demonstrates the essential role of volunteer networks in confirming species identification and enabling rapid response, alongside the strength of collaboration among the public, government agencies, universities, and conservation organisations.

Together, these coordinated efforts support timely response and comprehensive scientific investigation, advancing our collective knowledge of elusive marine species.

Thank you to IWDG Volunteer Alena Kunkel for photographing the animal, Eileen Dillane at University College, Cork for carrying out the genetic analysis, and Emmett Johnston and Pauline Bryce of the NPWS Regional staff for recovering the animal.