

# Cetaceans on the South Wexford Coast

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A **Cetacean** (say: 'set-ay-shun') is a member of the group of mammals that comprises whales, dolphins and porpoises. Eighty-nine species of cetacean are known world-wide<sup>1</sup>; 26 of these have been recorded in Irish territorial waters, 16 of them on the South Wexford Coast<sup>2 and 3</sup> (see list overleaf).

## Some group characteristics of the 26 species of cetaceans found in Irish territorial waters

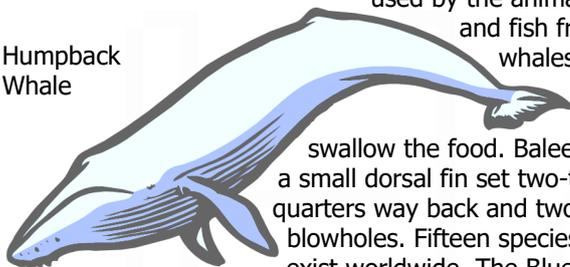
- ◆ They are very highly specialised.
- ◆ They are all marine.
- ◆ They surface to breathe air.
- ◆ Their nostrils form a blowhole.
- ◆ They store oxygen in muscles.
- ◆ They have large brains.
- ◆ They have streamlined bodies.
- ◆ They have very little body hair.
- ◆ Their fore limbs are flippers.
- ◆ Their hind limbs are vestigial.
- ◆ Their tails are horizontal.
- ◆ Their tails move up and down.
- ◆ They are all warm-blooded.
- ◆ They have thick blubber.
- ◆ Young are called calves.
- ◆ Mothers suckle their calves.

Cetaceans are divided into two distinct groups: baleen (say 'bay-lean') whales and toothed cetaceans. The main distinguishing features between members of the two groups are: (1) their method of feeding, (2) the position of their dorsal fins, and (3) the number of blowholes.

Baleen whales feed by gulping in mouthfuls of seawater. They then squeeze the water out through thin parallel

plates that hang like curtains from the outer margin of their upper jaws. These plates are made of a substance called baleen or whalebone. Bristles fringe the baleen plates and form a mesh that is used by the animal to sieve plankton and fish from the water. The

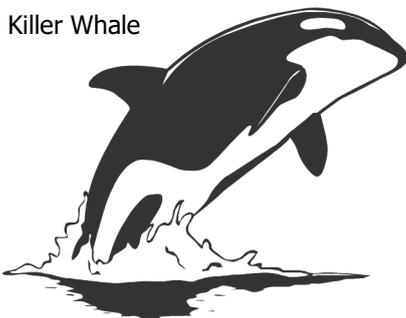
Humpback Whale



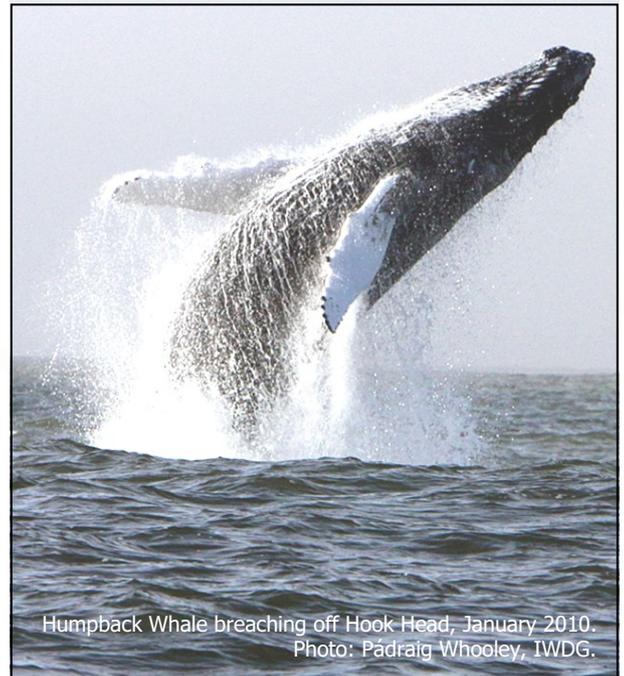
whales then lick the baleen with their tongues and swallow the food. Baleen whales also have a small dorsal fin set two-thirds to three-quarters way back and two nostrils or blowholes. Fifteen species<sup>1</sup> of baleen whales exist worldwide. The Blue Whale is a baleen whale and is the largest animal that even existed on planet Earth.

Other cetaceans have teeth and use them to catch prey such as squid and fish. They have relatively large dorsal fins set mid-way along the back and only one nostril or blowhole. They also have a well-developed melon. The melon is a nasal organ found in their 'foreheads'. It contains a waxy mass and is believed to play a role in echolocation by focusing the sound signals that they emit to locate and catch prey. Seventy-four species of toothed cetaceans are recognised worldwide<sup>1</sup>; these include the Sperm Whale (as in 'Moby Dick'), beaked whales, the Killer Whale (as in 'Free Willy') and all dolphins and porpoises.

Killer Whale



The Killer Whale, a toothed cetacean, is boldly patterned black and white. Also known by its Latin name 'orca' it lives in tightly-knit family groups called pods. Like wolves, pods hunt cooperatively preying on fish, seals, the calves of large whales and even adult baleen whales that they attempt to drown.



Humpback Whale breaching off Hook Head, January 2010. Photo: Pádraig Whooley, IWDG.

The Humpback Whale gets its name from the prominent hump on its back just in front of the dorsal fin. The hump becomes more pronounced as the whale arches its back before a dive.

## Did you know? Life evolved in the sea.

Over hundreds of millions of years marine creatures gradually colonised the land. Cetaceans evolved from the ancestors of hippo-like land animals that returned to the seas and oceans about 50 million years ago.

## References

1. <https://www.marinespecies.org/cetacea/aphia.php?p=browser>.
2. Wilson, J, and Berrow, S. 2006. *A Guide to the Identification of the Whales & Dolphins of Ireland*. Cork: The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group.
3. <https://iwddg.ie>; website of the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group.
4. Wall, D., Murray, C., O'Brien, J., Kavanagh, L., Wilson, C., Ryan, C., Glanville, B., Williams, D., Enlander, I., O'Connor, I., McGrath, D., Whooley, P. and Berrow, S. 2013. *Atlas of the Distribution and Relative Abundance of Marine Mammals in Irish Offshore Waters: 2005-2011*. Kilrush: The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group.
5. Reid, J. B., Evans, P. G. H. and Northridge, S. P. 2003. *Atlas of Cetacean distribution in north-west European waters*. Peterborough: Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

**Legal protection.** Under the *Wildlife Acts* 1976 and 2000, all cetacean species are protected in Irish waters. On 7 June 1991, waters within the Irish economic exclusive zone (the 320km limit) were declared Europe's first Whale and Dolphin Sanctuary.

**Further information.** The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) is the foremost organisation in Ireland concerned with the study and conservation of cetaceans. If you want to join the IWDG or want further information about any of the 26 species of cetacean recorded in Irish waters go to the group's website at <https://iwdg.ie/>.

**Please report your findings.** If you see a cetacean at sea, please report your finding to the IWDG while the animal is still in the area. If you find a stranded one on the beach please report it as soon as possible and as early in the day as possible to facilitate a site visit by an IWDG volunteer during daylight and before the next high tide. IWDG contacts for the South Wexford Coast include the following members.

Jim Hurley	086 163 7199
Tony Murray	087 647 9926
Deirdre Slevin	087 131 9001
Kevin McCormick	085 818 7946

These IWDG contact persons record and identify specimens and collect tissue samples for further study. Records may, of course, also be submitted online to <https://iwdg.ie/>.



**Above:** Curtain of baleen hanging from the upper jaw of a Minke Whale stranded at Ringbaun, Kilmore, on 3 May 2009 (IWDG Record ID #3318).

**Below:** Beak of a Common Dolphin stranded at Bastardstown, Kilmore, on 17 January 2011 showing its rows of sharp, conical teeth (IWDG Record ID #3565).

Photos: Jim Hurley



**Species List.** The following is a list of the 26 species of cetacean recorded in Irish territorial waters. The 16 species sighted and/or stranded, either dead or alive, on the South Wexford Coast are highlighted in **green**; other species are shown in **red**.



Details of recent sightings and strandings may be found on the website of the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group at <https://iwdg.ie/>.

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## Cetaceans (Order Cetacea): 2 Suborders

### ◆ Baleen Whales (Suborder Mysticeti): 2 families

- ☞ Right Whales (Family Balaenidae): 2 species
  - **North Atlantic Right Whale** *Eubalaena gracialis*
  - **Bowhead Whale** *Balaena mysticetus*
- ☞ Rorquals (Family Balaenopteridae): 5 species
  - **Humpback Whale** *Megaptera novaeangliae*
  - **Minke Whale** *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*
  - **Sei Whale** *Balaenoptera borealis*
  - **Fin Whale** *Balaenoptera physalus*
  - **Blue Whale** *Balaenoptera musculus*

### ◆ Toothed Whales (Suborder Odontoceti): 6 families

- ☞ Sperm Whale (Family Physeteridae): 1 species
  - **Sperm Whale** *Physeter macrocephalus*
- ☞ Pygmy Sperm Whales (Family Kogiidae): 1 species
  - **Pygmy Sperm Whale** *Kogia breviceps*
- ☞ Beaked Whales (Family Ziphiidae): 6 species
  - **Cuvier's Beaked Whale** *Ziphius cavirostris*
  - **Northern Bottlenose Whale** *Hyperoodon ampullatus*
  - **Sowerby's Beaked Whale** *Mesoplodon bidens*
  - **Blainville's Beaked Whale** *Mesoplodon densirostris*
  - **True's Beaked Whale** *Mesoplodon mirus*
  - **Gervais' Beaked Whale** *Mesoplodon europaeus*
- ☞ Monodonts (Family Monodontidae): 1 species
  - **Beluga Whale** *Delphinapterus leucas*
- ☞ Oceanic Dolphins (Family Delphinidae): 9 species
  - **Bottlenose Dolphin** *Tursiops truncatus*
  - **Striped Dolphin** *Stenella caeruleoalba*
  - **Common Dolphin** *Delphinus delphis*
  - **White-beaked Dolphin** *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*
  - **Atlantic White-sided Dolphin** *Lagenorhynchus acutus*
  - **Risso's Dolphin** *Grampus griseus*
  - **False Killer Whale** *Pseudorca crassidens*
  - **Killer Whale** *Orcinus orca*
  - **Long-finned Pilot Whale** *Globiocephala melas*
- ☞ Porpoises (Family Phocoenidae): 1 species
  - **Harbour Porpoise** *Phocoena phocoena*

See [www.southwexfordcoast.com](http://www.southwexfordcoast.com)