

Cetaceans on the South Wexford Coast

A cetacean (say: 'set-ay-shun') is a member of the group of mammals that comprises whales, dolphins and porpoises. About 90 species of cetacean are known world-wide; 26 of these have been recorded in Irish territorial waters, 15 of them on the South Wexford Coast (see list overleaf).

Cetaceans are divided into two distinct groups:

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 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.

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 whales then

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.

Blue Whale is a baleen whale and is the largest animal that ever 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

baleen (say: 'bay-lean') whales and toothed whales. 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.



Figure 1. Humpback Whale breaching off Hook Head, January 2010.

Photo: Pádraig Whooley, IWDG.

emit to locate and catch prey. Seventy-four species of toothed whales are recognised worldwide; these include the Sperm Whale (as in 'Moby Dick'), beaked whales, the Killer Whale (as in 'Free Willy') and all dolphins and porpoises.

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 hippopotamus-like land animals that returned to the seas and oceans about 50 million years ago.

References

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- 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*, all cetaceans 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. For further information about any of the 26 species of cetacean recorded in Irish waters go to the group's website at <https://iwdg.ie/>.



Figure 2. Curtain of baleen hanging from the upper jaw of a Minke Whale stranded at Ringbaun, Kilmore, on 3 May 2009.

Photo: Jim Hurley

If you see a cetacean at sea please report your finding to the IWDG while the animal is still in the area. Records should be submitted online to <https://iwdg.ie/>.

If you find a stranded cetacean 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/or before the next high tide. IWDG volunteers record and identify specimens and collect tissue samples for further study. Records should be submitted online to <https://iwdg.ie/>.



Figure 3. Beak of a Common Dolphin stranded at Bastardstown, Kilmore, on 17 January 2011 showing its rows of sharp, conical teeth.

Photo: Jim Hurley

Species List. The following is a list of the 26 species of cetacean recorded in Irish territorial waters. The 15 species sighted and/or stranded, either dead or alive, on the South Wexford Coast are highlighted bold in green.

Details of recent sightings and strandings may be found on the website of the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group at www.iwdg.ie.

Cetaceans (Order Cetacea): 2 Suborders

Baleen Whales (Suborder Mysticeti): 2 families

Right Whales (Family Balaenidae): 2 species

- Northern 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 or White 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***