

SEA MAMMALS

CETACEANS – WHALES AND DOLPHINS

Cetaceans are mammals that are supremely adapted to life in the sea. They spend their entire lives there, breed, give birth and suckle their young without ever needing to come ashore. In fact, because the ocean supports their body weight, they can grow to enormous sizes. The largest animal that has ever existed on earth is the blue whale. The largest ever recorded was a female from the Antarctic that measured 33.5 metres long and weighed between 190 and 200 tonnes.

There are two sorts of cetaceans, distinguished by how they feed. Baleen whales feed by filtering great mouthfuls of seawater through baleen plates in their mouths. There are eleven species of baleen

whale ranging from the largest – the Blue whale – right down to the smallest one – the Minke whale – which are often seen in Irish waters. There are sixty-eight species of toothed cetaceans including Sperm whales, Beaked whales, dolphins and porpoises. These use their teeth to catch individual items of prey.

Cetaceans communicate by sound. They use sonar to navigate and to detect prey. They can dive to considerable depths and remain submerged for a long time. But then they come to the surface, expel their breath through their blowhole – one or two depending on species – and take in a new breath before slipping beneath the waves again.

WHALES



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Minke whale

Unlikely as it may seem, whales have been recorded in the Irish Sea very close to the Dublin coastline. The species seen is the Minke. This is the smallest whale that comes into Irish waters and the only species that ventures up the Irish Sea from time to time, in summer and autumn. The Minke whale is a Baleen whale, which means that it has baleen plates for filtering food from water rather than having teeth. It feeds at the surface and dines upon small fish as well as the smaller plankton. Its dives can last for twenty minutes or so and then it surfaces and blows the air from its lungs through its two blow-

holes on the top of its head.

It is the whale's blow that attracts the watcher's attention – two spouts rising to about 2 metres – not particularly spectacular. When it dives it just submerges itself – there are no acrobatics with its tail raised in the air, as happens with other species of whale. But it is very much a whale – much bigger than any other sea mammal you are likely to see off the Dublin coast – it can be up to 10 metres in length, which is far bigger than the next biggest sea mammal recorded in the Irish Sea – the Bottle-nosed dolphin.

