

Book Review

A GUIDE TO THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE WHALES AND DOLPHIN OF IRELAND. Editors: Jim Wilson with Simon Berrow. Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Merchants Quay, Kilrush, County Clare, Ireland, 2006. ISBN 0-9540552-2-5, 118 pp.

The wonderful, wild, and ragged coastlines of the west of Ireland abut the deep open Atlantic seas where many of Europe's whales and dolphins can be found. In fact, the diversity (about one-third of all known species) and the abundance of cetaceans around the entire 5,000-plus-km Irish coastline are probably greater than anywhere else in Europe, except, perhaps, the facing coasts of Scotland. The cetacean enthusiasts of Ireland—and the many visitors that go there to enjoy its natural splendors—have long deserved their own cetacean identification (ID) guide, and now a very good one has been produced. This new guide is suitably pocket-sized (18x13.5 cm); colour-coded; and full of crisp, well-arranged, and carefully chosen images and other information that can be expected to substantially help cetacean enthusiasts to identify these species and thereby improve their knowledge. (It also has a pocket-money price tag that should help younger people become involved, too.)

At its core are 24 "species profiles," including a main image with key distinguishing features and sketches of surface behaviour. Profiles also include descriptions of the surfacing sequences of the species plus notes on behaviour, distribution in Irish waters, and global distribution. This information is displayed across two pages and, thanks to the ring-binding, can be easily viewed. Other similar species are also highlighted because, as experienced watchers of cetaceans (and birds) will appreciate, working out which of several similar species you are looking at is often the most frustrating and/or fascinating aspect of cetacean (or avian) field work. The guide also touches briefly on three further species recorded in UK waters, but not reported from Ireland, and provides a list of seven species known in European but not UK or Irish waters. Given the high mobility of these animals and the mounting evidence that distributions are changing as a result of climate change, providing a fuller description of these species might have been helpful.

There are a number of cetacean or marine mammal ID guides already available. The classic

being Mark Carwardine's (1995) comprehensive eyewitness handbook. This is very widely used (including often by me), but, as it covers all cetacean species, is perhaps slightly too big for the field-jacket pocket. The Wilson and Berrow guide compares well with Carwardine's over its more limited range and includes some novel features that will help in field identification, including overhead views of some bow-riding species and a series of photographs which show what these animals really look like at sea and, in some cases, when stranded.

The use of photographs reflects a sensible trend in cetacean ID books. Whereby drawings of the animals are used to show their key features, overall shape, and likely colouration and patterning, photographs reveal what you may be lucky enough to see in the field, which is typically not the whole live animal! Perception of colouration changes with light conditions (as well as varying between individuals and age groups). Thus, identification tends to rely on the shape of that fraction of the animal protruding briefly above the water surface and, in my experience, movement and other behaviour, too. Successfully and accurately identifying a cetacean in the field can be quite fraught. Indeed, I would recommend that any sighting record should be annotated with a comment on how accurate the recorder believes the species identification to be. One way to do this is to score how many of the key ID elements seen in the guide are recorded.

Wilson and Berrow provide a carefully devised key for stranded species, with a surprising 15 pages devoted to the identification of skulls. I say surprising because encountering skulls in the field (especially in a clean condition) is a rare thing, but when I do encounter such a skull, I shall certainly reach for this guide. Similarly, I anticipate that the short sections on dentition, baleen, and throat grooves may well prove useful at some point in the future.

A section providing distribution maps for 24 species, as the authors clearly state, only provides a general guide to where whales and dolphins have been seen in Irish waters, and the authors wisely note that distributions and abundance are only poorly known. Their guide should help to address this, but this will only be true if someone compiles the information gained. This brings me to the publisher—the Irish Whale and Dolphin

Group (IWDG)—and the last few pages of the book which describe “how to get involved.” This section points the reader to four data collecting schemes which the IWDG are running. At the front of the book, there is further practical information about cetacean watching, including notes on suitable clothing and accessories.

The short sections towards the front on history and law in an Irish context cannot do justice to such topics, but this would not be expected in such a deliberately thin tome. Ireland has had an important role in the spheres of whales and whaling up to, and including, the recent past. One element of this was the establishment of an Irish “sanctuary” in 1991. At the time, this seemed to be a response to the ongoing debate about commercial whaling, but a sanctuary has more potential than just addressing a problem that does not exist there anyway (i.e., whaling), and Ireland (and the UK) could do a great deal more to protect these animals. The IWDG, as it hopefully grows in strength and influence, will need to consider how its sightings, strandings, and other data will best be used to promote conservation. A scientific approach alone will not be enough!

Overall, the authors, publishers, and government sponsors of the book are to be congratulated on producing something which can be expected to have a really positive conservation impact. As an ID guide, it is exemplary. As a potential gift book focused on whales and dolphins, it also makes an attractive little package, and it is available from the IWDG via the group’s website: www.iwdg.ie.

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Literature Cited

Carwardine, M. (1995). *Whales, dolphins and porpoises: Eyewitness handbooks*. London, New York, and Stuttgart: Dorling Kindersley.