



## Irish Whale and Dolphin Group

### **2009 Large Whale Season Begins**

**By Pádraig Whooley**

The end of summer generally heralds the start of the large whale season and the arrival of fin and humpback whales along the Irish South coast. This year is no different, and in the past week the slow trickle of large whale sightings has become a steady stream. The distribution of validated sightings reported to the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) shows fin whales being reported from several inshore Cork locations and humpback whales have been confirmed further west off the Kerry coast. So yes, it's time to blow the dust of those binoculars and to reacquaint yourself with your local headland.

We need no reminder that 2009 was another awful summer, which likely kept a lid on sightings of large whales since June. For instance in July we only received one report of a fin whale along the South coast, and August was almost as bad with just four sightings. Three of these sightings were of fin whales between the Old Head of Kinsale and the Kinsale Gas Fields and were well offshore.

September arrived and there was still little sign of an inshore movement until mid-way through the month. Since then there have been almost daily sightings from known Cork hotspots such as Power Head (Nr. Roche's Pt.), Old Head of Kinsale and more recently from Galley Head. On 20<sup>th</sup> Sept Colin Barnes sighted two fin whales just outside Dirk Cove, nr. Galley Head during a whale watching trip, and can confirm that one of these was a well known fin whale #FWIRL2 named "Scar", whom IWDG have recorded on 24 occasions since 2005. Such re-sightings are not merely of academic interest, as they confirm that West Cork waters provide important feeding habitat for these giants which can spend five months or longer over the Autumn/winter period feeding on large shoals of sprats and spawning herring.

So the data suggests strongly that increased numbers of fin whales, are arriving inshore along the West Cork coast, and in the coming months these are likely to be viewable from watch sites along the coast. The great thing is that no matter where you live in West Cork you are never likely to be far from a vantage point which has the potential to offer some of the best land-based whale watching in the northern hemisphere. Our recommendation would be one of the following: the Lusitania memorial at the Old Head of Kinsale, Seven Heads, Galley Head (note you can no longer bring cars up to the lighthouse), Downeen Pt., (Rosscarbery), Toe Head, Baltimore Beacon, Mizen Head, Sheeps Head or the Beara Peninsula. But don't restrict your watches to these sites, as fin whales can potentially be seen anywhere along the Cork coast given suitable calm conditions and clear visibility.

The rule of thumb is that those very large whales with a large 6-9m vertical plume or “blow” which do not lift their tail-flukes are most likely to be fin whales; whereas the smaller, more robust whales with a more bushy blow, that lift their flukes are almost certainly humpback whales. The smaller and more frequently seen minke whale neither shows a visible blow and never tail-flukes. IWDG would love to hear of your sightings, be they land or boat based, and we’d ask you to report them on the sightings section of [www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie). On the home page, select the “sightings” option on top of page, then select the “Report Sightings on Line” option, and this will take you straight into the form. All you need do is complete as many of the fields as accurately as you can, based on what you actually saw (as against what you might have liked to have seen). Once reported, your sighting will be validated (checked for accuracy) and added to the Irish cetacean database with full acknowledgment.

IWDG hope to continue our Photo ID research in the coming season to build on the existing large whale catalogues which commenced in 2003. The Irish whale catalogues currently stand at 62 recognisable fin whales and 10 humpback whales, almost all of which have been recorded in West Cork’s productive waters. It will be interesting to see how these numbers increase in the coming months and how many re-sightings of returning whales we can document. These catalogues are available online on <http://www.iwdg.ie/iscope/sightings/photoID.asp?id=89>.

If in the coming months you are out on a whale watching trip and are fortunate enough to have an encounter with either fin or humpback whales, we’d love an opportunity to view any hi res copies of reasonable quality images for matching purposes, which can be emailed to [padraig.whooley@iwdg.ie](mailto:padraig.whooley@iwdg.ie). Fin whales should be photographed “side-on”, with a suite of images from the right side (if possible) from the head area down to and including the dorsal fin, which is located 2/3 along their massive backs. Humpback whales are best photographed from behind, which gives you the chance to capture the ventral (under) surface of their tail-flukes as they lift them before deep diving.

We had many enquires about our local Galley Head watch as part of All-Ireland Whale Watch day on Sun 23<sup>rd</sup> August. Unfortunately due to the torrential rain and high winds that persisted right up to the start of the event, we really had no option but to cancel this local watch, which was a first in seven years of running this outdoor event. So on behalf of all of us in IWDG we hope this didn’t upset your plans on the day and thanks for bearing with us. We hope that we’ll have more suitable weather in August 2010.

Finally, many of you will have noticed the marvelous life sized humpback whale “tail-fluke” sculpture at the Waterfront Plaza on the way into Clonakilty, across from Euro Spar. Full credit to Bobby Hilliard of Hillback Construction for having the vision to commission this installation, which is both sensitive to the site and relevant to the area. IWDG also congratulate sculpture Kevin Holland for his attention to detail, and for capturing the essence of a “fluking” humpback whale so nicely.... and without ever having seen one in the flesh! I think we’ll have to put that right when the humpbacks hopefully make an appearance later in the year.

But this installation is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is an acknowledgment of the growing recognition that these large whales are not only an important aspect of the natural history of the area, but that they have the potential to help create an exciting new brand identity, unique to West Cork. In time, this sculpture could act as a catalyst that will put the area firmly on a very short list of the world's top whale watching destinations. What seemed like a pipe dream not so long ago, is becoming a reality, as West Cork gains an international reputation as one of the best places in Europe and beyond to both observe and study whales and dolphins in the wild.

West Cork may never be able to compete with the likes of Hermanus in South Africa or Kaikoura in New Zealand. But we don't have to. These are the whale watching Mecca's of the southern hemisphere. Let's settle for West Cork being recognized internationally as having some of the best whale watching in the Northern hemisphere. Our location, stunning coastal scenery, reliable whale season and a strong local maritime tradition, make us the envy of many maritime nations. All that is missing is a little vision, and some joined up thinking. We live in hard, yet interesting times.

Pádraig Whooley  
IWDG Sightings Co-ordinator  
[www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie)

