

Fins can only get better for Ireland's burgeoning porpoise, dolphin and whale population thanks to the efforts of a conservation group which is marking its 25th anniversary, writes **Yvonne Gordon**

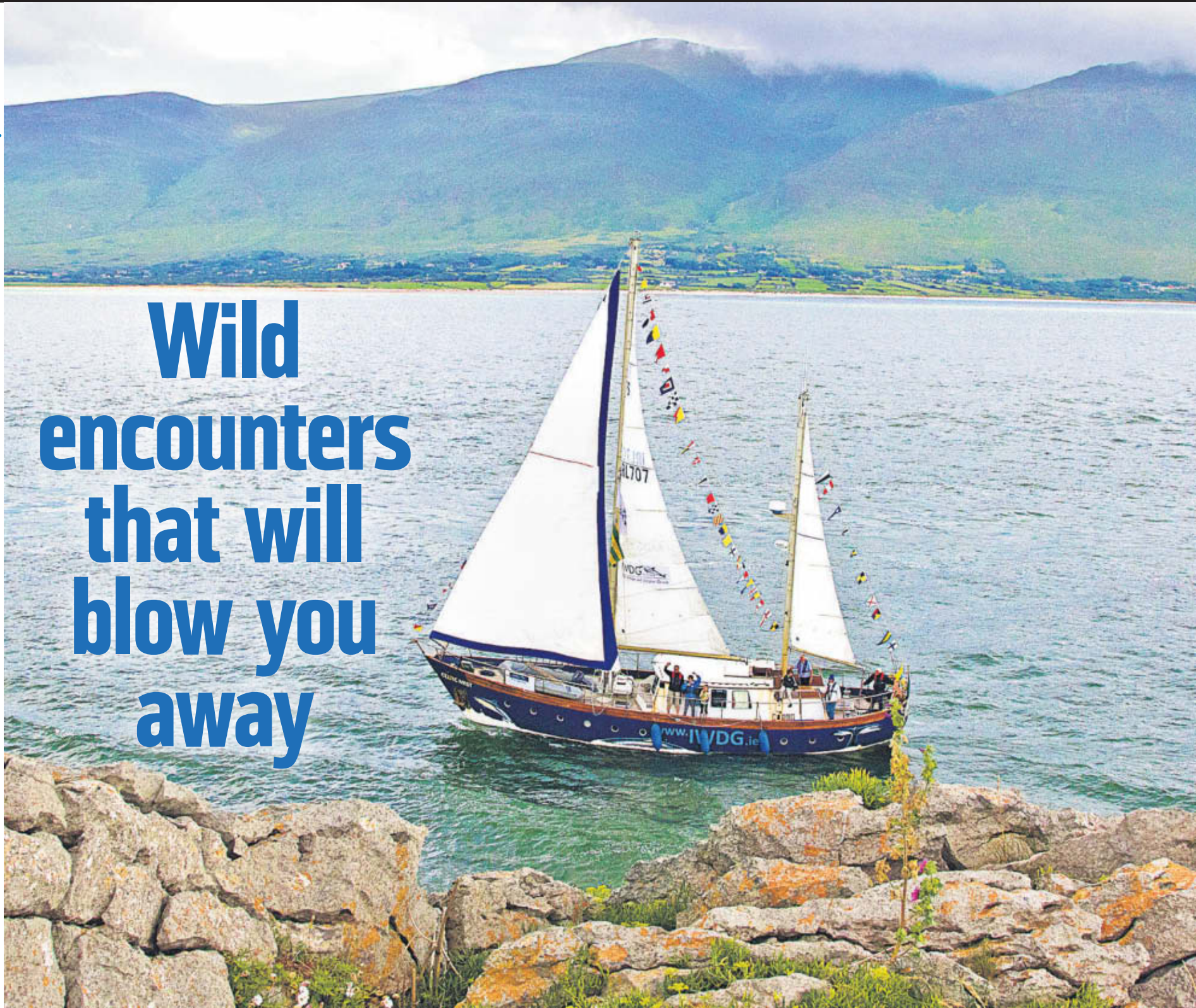
It's early afternoon on the River Liffey in Dublin and as we motor past the Poolbeg chimneys where the river opens into Dublin Bay, Dr Simon Berrow points out a colony of terns nesting on an abandoned mooring platform. We're just a couple of miles from O'Connell Bridge, yet as I watch the seabirds on the platforms and the black guillemots nesting in holes in the walls, I realise how little connection there is between people in the city and the wildlife of the bay. That's before we even start looking to see what's under the surface of the water, which is the day's mission. Dr Berrow is the chief science officer and acting chief executive of the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG), which has just celebrated its 25th anniversary. "We've carried out a lot of surveys in Dublin Bay over the past 10 years and it always amazes me the wealth of wildlife in the bay and the surrounding areas, from harbour porpoises to minke whales and grey seals," he says. "The seabirds are just astonishing; not just off Howth Head, Ireland's Eye and Lambay Island, but in the heart of the city we have terns nesting. Wildlife really is everywhere."

Ireland's waters were declared a whale and dolphin sanctuary in 1991 — the first of its kind in Europe — thanks to the efforts of the IWDG. Dr Berrow was one of the co-founders of the group, along with Johnny Woodlock, Don Conroy and Brendan Price, and John Bowler of Greenpeace, a supporter of the project.

We are all aboard Celtic Mist, the old yacht of former taoiseach Charles Haughey, who the IWDG lobbied to declare Irish waters a whale and dolphin sanctuary, and who granted the request in 1991. After Haughey's death in 2006, the yacht was donated to the IWDG by his family.

In 1991, few people even knew there were whales in our waters, and many still do not realise the amount of whales we have, including the minke, long-finned pilot, humpback, sperm whale, blue whale and even the killer whale.

Fungie, the Dingle harbour resident, may be our most famous dolphin but he's far from alone. In addition to the bottlenose dolphin we have six other species, including the Atlantic white-sided dolphin and Risso's dolphin. There



Wild encounters that will blow you away

are other permanent residents in the Shannon estuary, and smaller harbour porpoises are also plentiful.

As well as spotting species and logging their activity, the IWDG's remit is to identify possible threats and to take action. "We have to ensure the water is clean and provide safe interactions," says Price, in the yacht's saloon.

Another development in establishing the sanctuary is the growth in whale- and dolphin- watching. "Before the sanctuary the idea of going out with the hope of seeing a large whale was unheard of," says Woodlock.

The IWDG has a system for sightings, and all are validated and logged. Most of these are casual sightings reported by members of the public. About a quarter of sightings are from "effort watches" — when an observer goes to an area, either by boat or on land, to conduct a watch for a certain period of time with the hope of sighting a cetacean (whale, dolphin or porpoise). There are also regular monitoring programmes, including surveys on sea-ferry routes such as Rosslare to Pembroke and Dublin

Eyes on the prize Dr Simon Berrow's children, Muireann and Ronan, left, had a whale of a time on board the Celtic Mist; below, humpbacks have been spotted in our waters

to Holyhead. The IWDG runs workshops and courses on whale- watching and live strandings.

There have been some notable milestones over the years. In 1996, the IWDG collaborated with University College Cork to count the resident bottlenose dolphin population in the Shannon estuary for the first time.

In June 2001, three killer whales arrived in Cork harbour and stayed for the summer. In July 2007, the IWDG logged its 10,000th cetacean sighting (a harbour porpoise) and it has logged 26,500 sightings to date.

The group runs research programmes to identify what is in our waters and the animals' movements. One of the most vital tools is a hydrophone, an microphone designed to be used



underwater. On board the Celtic Mist, Dr Simon Berrow shows me how the device works, as he drops a line behind the yacht as we move along.

The hydrophone is towed underwater, and on board we can listen to vocalisations through headphones. The sounds are put through software with a "click" and "whistle" detector. We were hoping to hear porpoises but it was a quiet day.

I learn that the clicks of porpoises are at a much higher sound frequency than those of humpback whales or dolphin whistles. Those of baleen whales, including fin, blue and sei whales, are at very low frequencies.

Sometimes a hydrophone will be dropped to the sea bed and recovered after six months, with recordings logged, or a click detector will be attached to a mooring. Other research vessels will also tow hydrophones to pick up signals that indicate vocalising cetaceans in an area. They tow in specific patterns, such as zigzags, to increase the efficiency of the coverage.

Fungie, the Dingle harbour resident, may be Ireland's most famous dolphin but he is far from alone



By strange coincidence, the 25th whale and dolphin species was spotted in Irish waters in May, in the IWDG's 25th anniversary year. The 20ft juvenile Arctic bowhead whale was filmed at Carlingford harbour, Co Louth, and it provided a rare sighting of the species.

Despite the best efforts of groups such

as the IWDG, we still know little about the world's oceans. Twelve people have walked on the moon since 1969 and about 540 people have been in space, but only three have gone to the deepest part of the ocean (the Marianas Trench — 10,973ft down in the western Pacific). We have more detailed

maps of the surfaces of the moon, Mars and Venus than we have of the ocean floor. Some scientists regard the ocean as the final frontier with more mysteries, more strange life forms and more challenging environments than anything we might find in space.

Spending a few hours on a yacht in Irish

waters, I realise that it is thanks to people such as the founders of the IWDG that we know more about the animals that swim off our coast. Next time I venture out to sea, it will be nice to know who, and what, I'll be sharing the water with.

iwdg.ie

Once more unto the breach

The best time to see whales and dolphins in Ireland is between May and October, and for large whales between October and February on the south coast. Headlands are the best places to spot whales and dolphins as they jut out into the sea, closer to deep water. It is easier to spot cetaceans surfacing in calm seas, and cloudy days can be better than sunny ones as there is less glare. Here are the 25 species recorded in Irish waters so far:

- **Blue whale:** the largest mammal on Earth, it can measure up to 33 metres.
- **Fin whale:** it can reach speeds of up to 37km/h.
- **Humpback whale, pictured:** gets its name from the characteristic humped shape of its back when diving.
- **Sei whale:** was heavily exploited by the whaling industry and now listed as endangered.
- **Minke whale:** the smallest and most frequently recorded baleen whale in Irish waters.
- **Sperm whale:** deep-diving species, spending 80% of its life deep below the ocean surface.
- **North Atlantic right whale:** once considered the "right whale" to hunt.
- **Northern bottlenose whale:** named after its prominent beak and usually seen in small groups.
- **Cuvier's beaked whale:** usually observed singly or in small groups and does not approach boats.
- **Sowerby's beaked whale:** found only in the North Atlantic in deep waters beyond continental shelves.
- **True's beaked whale:** shy of shipping and boats. Photographed

Hole lot of fun A humpback whale calf, clockwise from far left, the Celtic Mist, Dr Simon Berrow demonstrates a hydrophone to Yvonne Gordon, who scans the water for signs of whales, and a bottlenose dolphin

- off the west coast of Ireland in 2013.
- **Gervais' beaked whale:** found only in the Atlantic. One stranding record in Ireland.
- **Long-finned pilot whale:** second-largest member of the dolphin family and highly social.
- **False killer whale:** its name refers to its resemblance to the killer whale.
- **Beluga:** Arctic species, rarely seen below 60°N.
- **Pygmy sperm whale:** deep- and long-diving, and after surfacing sinks inconspicuously without rolling and is seldom resighted. Known in Ireland from strandings.
- **Killer whale:** has been seen all around the Irish coast and been recorded entering harbours and estuaries.
- **Risso's dolphin:** has a distinctive pattern, with a grey body and white scratches which become more numerous with age.
- **Bottlenose dolphin:** three distinct populations are recognised in Irish waters — offshore, inshore and a resident population in the Shannon estuary.
- **Common dolphin:** rarely seen alone, occurring in schools from a few to more than 1,000. Frequently approaches boats to bow ride and often very vocal, with clicks and whistles.
- **Atlantic white-sided dolphin:** gregarious and acrobatic, tending to occur offshore.
- **White-beaked dolphin:** rarely seen alone, usually travelling in groups of up to 50, offshore.
- **Striped dolphin:** rarely seen in Irish waters, usually seen out to sea.
- **Harbour porpoise:** most widespread and abundant cetacean in Irish waters. At up to 1.8 metres in length, this species is small and shy of boats.
- **Bowhead whale:** an Arctic species, and the 25th species recorded in Irish waters.



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