

Harbour Porpoise

Scientific Name: *Phocoena phocoena*

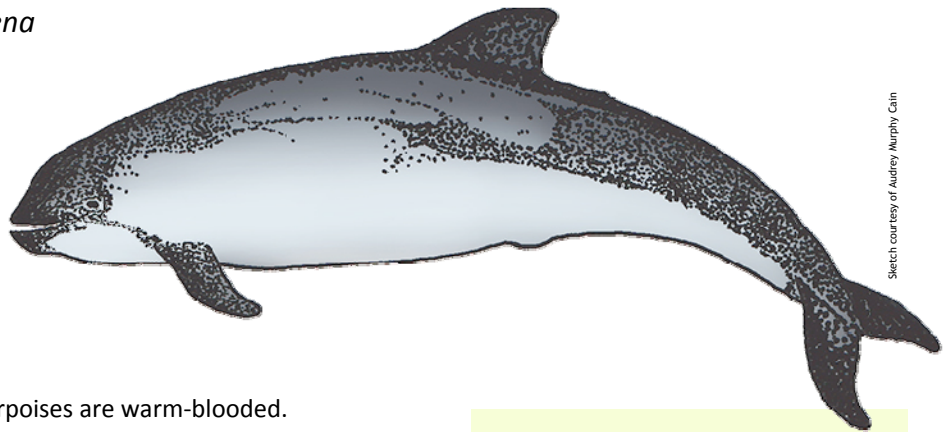
Irish Name: Muc mhara

The Harbour Porpoise is a marine mammal and, along with dolphins and whales, it belongs to a group of animals known as cetaceans. The porpoise is the smallest cetacean in Irish waters and the most common. It can be found in shallow waters around the coast, near harbours and sheltered coastal bays. Like nearly all mammals, porpoises are warm-blooded.

With its streamline body, the Harbour Porpoise looks very like a dolphin, but it has a blunt head and no beak. It has small oval flippers and a triangular-shaped dorsal fin. As it breathes air, it must regularly swim to the surface.

Just like dolphins, porpoises also use echolocation to navigate. They send out sounds that bounce off objects sending echoes back to let them know what is ahead. Echolocation also helps them find food. They feed on fish and shellfish on the bottom of the sea and grip their prey with spade-shaped teeth. Dolphins tend to have cone-shaped teeth.

Porpoises live in groups of about 3-15 and are playful animals. However, they are also shy creatures in Irish waters so, though they are more plentiful, they are seen less often. They don't come up to play like dolphins, nor do they bow ride boats like dolphins.



Sketch courtesy of Audrey Murphy Cain

Other Porpoises

The Harbour porpoise is the only porpoise in Irish water. There are six species of porpoise around the world. One of these, the Vaquita porpoise, is found only in the northern Gulf of California. Not only is it the smallest but is also the most endangered marine mammal. Its Spanish name translates into "Little cow".

Family

Harbour porpoises give birth to a single calf, every two years. They carry their young for 11 months and give birth in early summer. The calf will stay with the mother for about 12 months.

What's in a name?

Harbour Porpoises are sometimes known as "puffing pigs", due to the sound they make when they are breathing. Their Irish name "muc mhara" translates to "sea pig".

FACT FILE:

Length: 1.4–1.9 m

Weight: 55–65 kg

Colour: Usually has a dark brown or grey back, light grey to brown sides and a white speckled underside.

Dive Time: 2 to 6 minutes

Diet: Herring, Mackerel, Sardines, Pollack, Whiting

Distribution: Found mainly in coastal temperate and sub-arctic waters.

Predators & Dangers

The Harbour Porpoises face a number of predators and dangers, including killer whales, large sharks and humans. Humans are a threat because of fishing, which can cause porpoises to become caught in nets. Unable to get back to the surface to breathe, they suffocate. Porpoises are also affected by damage to their habitat, such as from pollution.

