

## Harbour porpoise

*Phocoena phocoena*



The harbour porpoise is one of six species of porpoise. It is one of the smallest marine mammals. As its name implies, it stays close to coastal areas or river estuaries, and as such, it is the most commonly observed species of cetacean in Irish waters.

The harbour porpoise is a little smaller than the other porpoises, weighing 6.4-10 kg. The females are heavier, with a maximum weight of around 76 kg compared with the males 61 kg. Their small size, blunt beaks and dark grey back/whiter underside distinguish them. They also usually have grey stripes running along the throat from the underside of the body.

Harbour porpoise sub-species are widespread in cooler coastal waters of the North Atlantic, North Pacific and the Black Sea. In the Atlantic, harbour porpoises may be present in a curved band of water running from the coast of West Africa to the coasts of Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Scandinavia, Iceland, Greenland, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and the eastern seaboard of the United States.

They prey on small schooling fish, and cephalopods. Harbour porpoises tend to be solitary foragers, but they do sometimes hunt in packs and herd fish together. Young porpoises need to consume about 7% to 8% of their body weight each day to survive, which is approximately 15 pounds or 7 kilograms of fish. Significant predators of harbour porpoises include white sharks and orcas. Researchers at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland have also discovered that the local bottlenose dolphins attack and kill harbour porpoises without eating them due to competition for a decreasing food supply.

The primary cause of decline of harbour porpoise populations is accidental mortality in fishing nets, such as gill and tangle nets. Bycatch in bottom-set gill nets is considered the main anthropogenic mortality factor for harbour porpoises worldwide. The harbour porpoises of the north-east Atlantic live in one of the most polluted and heavily fished marine environments in the world, and thus are at great risk from these activities.

A study in 2005 estimated that there were 10,000 harbour porpoises on the west and south coasts of Ireland. Harbour porpoises are listed on Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive they are also listed on Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS). This listing means that these populations have an unfavourable conservation status or would benefit significantly from international co-operation organised by tailored agreements. In Ireland we have three SACs designated for harbour porpoises: Roaring water bay and islands SACs, The Blasket Islands SAC and Rockabill to Dalkey Island SAC.