

Mark Carwardine's Guide to Whale Watching: Britain and Europe

By Mark Carwardine. 2016. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC., 31 Bedford Avenue, London, UK, WC1B 3AT. 272 pages, 16.99 GBP, Paper.

Earlier this year I joined the author, Mark Carwardine, on one of his well-organised whale watching trips. Three hundred sightings of seven species of whale, plus thousands of dolphins and seals later, we decided the trip was a great success. With much interest I picked up Carwardine's latest book, a guide to whale watching in an area from Greenland to Novaya Zemlya, and south to the northern coast of Africa.

One third of the book is devoted to the 29 species of whales found in this large area. There is a succinct section on the whale's biology. A text box provides the key characteristics used for identifying the mammal to species. A second box covers notable statistics, such as length. A strip called the "surface profile" shows the

typical appearance of the whale at the surface. Martin Camm's artwork depicts the classic side view of each species. As Carwardine is an ardent photographer (I vividly remember the "frrrrrrp" of the author's professional, high-speed camera at 10 frames/second in my ear as I clicked away one photo at a time) there are plenty of photos.

The bulk of the book is devoted to a detailed guide of what whales you can find along the coastline of the area covered. Altogether 24 countries and special places (Svalbard, the Faeroes) are covered. Each area has an introduction that includes the most common cetaceans and the best places to find them. Seasonality and likelihood are estimated so the reader can plan where and

when to go, or what to look for, at key points along the coast.

After the introduction the author discusses each country in the area covered. Because of their position in the open ocean, Madeira, the Canaries, the Azores, the Faeroes, Greenland and Svalbard are treated separately. Generally the best places are headlands that poke out into the sea or offshore islands. Carwardine also includes the ferries that cross the Bay of Biscay, but not the numerous other European ferries. Any location that has whale watching trips is identified, but there are no details (operator's names, costs, etc.) given. (This information can be found on the internet.)

I was a little taken aback by the frequency of the author's detailed coverage of Harbour Porpoise. That was until I remembered a trip a few years ago. I went out for a few hours from Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. We did not see any whales, but the other people on this trip were thrilled by the antics of the Harbour Porpoises (and Grey Seals). Even though I live in the middle of the world's second largest country, I have spent a cumulative five months or more at sea and much more time shore watching, so I have seen these species very often. I do remember my first sighting, as a small child, of the dark shapes of Harbour Porpoise mystically emerging from a cold, grey English Channel – my first cetacean. Harbour Porpoises are often peoples first (and only) encounter with these little “whales”.

So I read through the comprehensive accounts, taking special note of places I had been or hoped to go to. Each place has the most likely species to be encountered, with a sense of your chance of actually seeing them. Taking a place like Flamborough Head, UK, I see that it is good for Harbour Porpoises, but there are other species like Minke Whale and White-beaked Dolphins possible. If I had known this I would have lifted my eyes from the sea cliffs and their abundant birds to scan farther offshore.

The species accounts are really good. I particularly like the surface profiles as these silhouettes of backs, fins, spouts and heads are what you typically see first. Identifying whales is a process of adding all the clues together and the surface profile is the first step. Then you can use the identification box to refine your thoughts. Finally, there is a distribution map to show if you are in range. The artwork is very nice, although it is rare to

see so much detail. Occasionally, in clear water with the animal close, it will roll on its side and you can glimpse the artist's perspective. The photographs are remarkable. They are taken from the observer's viewpoint so they typically show the best view you can get at the surface – the Sperm Whale's wrinkly skin, the Fin Whale's white chin, Bryde's Whale's nose tracks and so on. I do wonder how many thousand shots of disturbed ocean he threw away to get these gems.

The “Where to Go” section is very detailed. Anyone visiting the European coast should be able to estimate their chances of seeing cetaceans and what species to look for. The accompanying maps are clear and highlight the marine as well as land features. You can also use this section in reverse. If you want to see a specific species – say Risso's Dolphin – the book leads you to the southern Adriatic. I tried to work out the best chance I had to see Narwhal and realised Savissivik, Greenland in summer was the place. I am not sure how I could access this remote village of 70 people, but August sees 3000 Narwhal enjoying the bay.

In the Introduction Carwardine discusses the current plight of whales. For a long time I have had mixed emotions over professionally-run zoos, aquaria and botanical gardens. In my youth it was the only way I could afford to see the wildlife I was reading about. I learned much and, even today, I still read of information obtained in zoos – typically “in captivity ... the longevity was ... , the gestation period was ...”, etc. For many years now I have spent more time and money seeing animals and plants in the wild. Yet, I can see how difficult it would be for a typical family to spend the thousands of dollars and time needed to visit whale hot-spots like Svalbard and Baja. So is seeing a captive animal a worthwhile experience? I do not know. Carwardine, however, is clearly against keeping cetaceans in captivity and says this is “ethically indefensible”. It was much easier for me to agree with his comments on whale hunting, by-catch, overfishing and pollution.

This is a great book for the avid whale watcher and naturalist. It will be a good reference for future trips, both in deciding where to go and when passing through an area, what to see. The photographs are a bonus too.

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