



Dead Bryde's whale in Omaha Bay.

Perhaps this attitude is similar to the 'scientific' killing of the last huia for museum collections. Hopefully, it won't have a similar end result.

The whaling station that operated at Whangaparapara on Great Barrier Island, until the late 1960s, caught several Bryde's whales but they were considered too slim to be economic.

In late October 2000, a dead Bryde's whale floated ashore near Leigh, and earlier that year three Bryde's whales, between seven and 15 metres long, washed up on Great Barrier Island. Another dead Bryde's whale floated into Omaha Bay in 1999 and another washed up on Pakiri Beach in 1997. Collisions with ships travelling through the Hauraki Gulf are thought to be responsible for at least some of these whale deaths.

Our first experience of Bryde's whales was while watching gannets dive into a huge fish school off Leigh some years ago. A dark, curved dorsal fin and back broke the surface in the middle of the melée. The whale spouted several times then dived again for five minutes without showing the spectacular raised tail of a humpback or sperm whale. Several more whales then appeared, in and around the feeding frenzy, which included common dolphins, petrels, shearwaters and gulls, as well as the gannets.

Since then, we have recorded dozens of whale sightings in the Hauraki Gulf between Leigh, Little Barrier and Coromandel. In October, 1999 we recorded 42 spouts over a five-minute period, from a pod of Bryde's whales a kilometre off Cape Rodney, near Leigh. Their most spectacular act is a half roll with a huge splash. Occasionally they 'spy-hop', lifting

their heads clear of the water.

Usually Bryde's are a shy animal and will move away from boats, dive for five minutes, and resurface several hundred metres away.

New Zealand's marine mammal regulations prohibit approaching closer than 50 metres to a whale. This is for the safety of both the whale and the boat. During exuberant whale mating overseas some scientists' boats have been rammed and damaged.

Other visitors to the Hauraki Gulf are pilot whales. These large black dolphins, with bulbous heads, grow to around five metres long. They are well known for their unfortunate habit of beaching themselves in large numbers, usually on gently-shelving sandy beaches. Several hundreds have died around the coast over the years, although more recently whale rescue groups have managed to save many stranded victims.

For most New Zealanders, whale or dolphin watching is a rare experience. A recent development has been the establishment of a dolphin and whale-watch venture operating in the Hauraki Gulf out of Auckland.

Dolphins are the most common marine mammal in the Gulf, usually seen as they join boats for a bow ride. This activity brings great enjoyment to all who see it — it also appears to bring enjoyment to the dolphins. The two most common species in the Gulf are the bottlenose and the common dolphins.

The grey, bottlenose dolphins are usually seen close to the coast and regularly visit harbours and estuaries to feed on school fish. We have been approached by bot-



Bottlenose dolphin.

tlennose dolphins when kayaking around the Leigh coast. They are delightful travelling companions and have developed a variation to the 'dolphin on the bow wave' trick. If we continue paddling they move alongside and under the bow of the kayaks. The bow moves upwards and the kayak speed doubles on the pressure wave created by the dolphins. A 3.5-metre bottlenose dolphin can create quite a wake.

The common dolphin is less than two metres in length with dark grey on the top of their bodies, and white and cream on their sides and underneath. They live further offshore, and form pods of up to several hundred animals. In late autumn and early summer these groups move through the Hauraki Gulf, feeding on fish schools of mackerel and kahawai. From September to November we often see pods of these dolphins two to three kilometres offshore between Leigh and Little Barrier Island. When the pod is on the move dozens of dolphins can be seen jumping simultaneously.

*To be in the water with bottlenose dolphin is an unforgettable experience*

