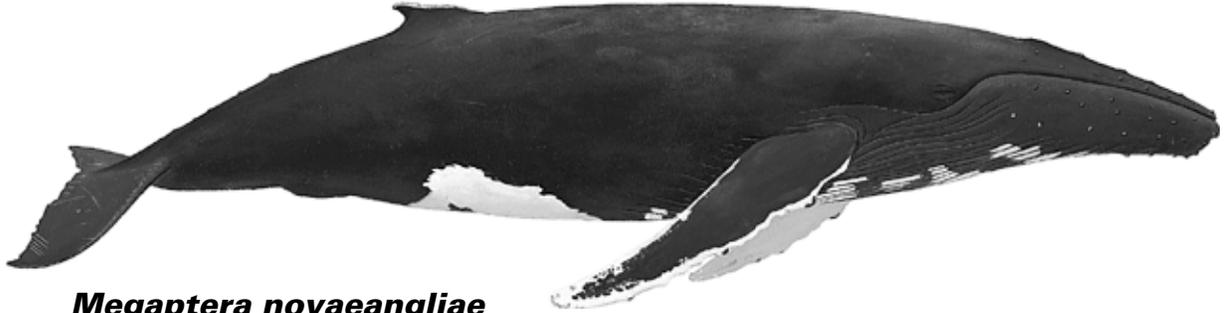


Humpback Whale



Megaptera novaeangliae

Meaning of scientific name: large-finned of New England

Description

The humpback whale was given its common name because of the shape of its dorsal (back) fin and the way it looks when the animal is diving. Its scientific name, *Megaptera*, means, “large-winged” and refers to its long, white, wing-like flippers that are often as long as one-third of the animal’s body length. Humpbacks are gray or black, except for the flippers, parts of the chest and belly, and sometimes the underside of the tail flukes. Each whale has its own unique pattern on the underside of its tail flukes, which can be used like “fingerprints” to identify individual whales. Unique to humpbacks are wartlike round protuberances (bumps or tubercles) that occur on the head forward of the blowhole and on the edges of the flippers. Humpbacks are baleen whales that have 14 to 35 long throat pleats that expand when the whale takes in water while feeding.

Northern Hemisphere humpbacks reach an average length of 49 to 52 feet (15-16 m), and southern humpbacks reach 60 feet (18 m). Females are generally larger than the males. The average weight for a mature adult is 35 to 50 tons.

Range/Habitat

Humpbacks are found in all oceans to the edges of polar ice, and follow definite migration paths from their summer feeding grounds to warmer waters in the winter. There seem to be three distinct populations of Humpbacks that do not interact with one another: one in the North Pacific, one in the North Atlantic, and another in the Southern Hemisphere (south of the equator). In the North Pacific, where their populations reach 15,000, humpbacks feed in the summer along the coast from California to Alaska. In the winter, they migrate to breeding grounds off of Hawaii, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Japan. The population in California migrates to Mexico and Costa Rica, whereas the Alaskan population migrates to Hawaii.

Behavior

Acrobatic humpbacks regularly breach (jump out of the water), stroke each other, and slap the water with their flippers and flukes. Scientists believe these activities are forms of communication because they create a great deal of noise, which can be heard at long distances under water. Humpbacks swim in groups or pods of up to a dozen at calving grounds, and in smaller groups of three to four during migration. Unlike other baleen whales, they can often be seen feeding cooperatively.

In feeding, they use baleen plates to strain other small fish such as krill or herring, and plankton out of the water. Their 270 to 400 baleen plates are dark and each is about two and a half feet long. Humpbacks use several different feeding methods. While “lunge feeding,” they plow through concentrated areas of food with their huge mouths open, swelling with large quantities of food and water. During “bubble net feeding,” which is unique to humpback whales, one or several whales blow a ring of bubbles from their blowholes that encircle a school of krill or fish. The whales then swim through the “net” with their mouths agape, taking in large amounts of food.

Humpbacks are best known for their haunting vocalizations or “singing.” They have a rich repertoire that covers many octaves and includes frequencies beyond the threshold of human hearing. These songs, apparently sung by males, last as long as 20 minutes, after which they are repeated, often with slight changes. Each year, the song undergoes changes from the year before, but all males sing the same song. When a whale is singing, it floats suspended in the water, head down and relatively motionless. Behavior such as dominance, aggression, and mate attraction may be related to singing.

Mating and Breeding

Females give birth every two or more years. Pregnancies last for 12 months. The calves nurse for eight to eleven months. When weaned, the calves are 24-27 feet (8-9 m) long.

Status

Humpbacks are among the most endangered whales and fewer than 10% of their original population remains. However, in recent years, humpbacks have been observed more and more frequently feeding along the California coast. Approximately 800 humpbacks feed along the California Coast in the Summer and Fall.

At The Marine Mammal Center

Probably the most famous humpback whale is “Humphrey,” who was rescued twice by The Marine Mammal Center and other concerned groups. The first rescue was in 1985, when he swam into San Francisco Bay and then up the Sacramento River. Five years later, Humphrey returned and became stuck on a mudflat in San Francisco Bay near 3 COM Park. He was pulled off the mudflat with a large cargo net and the help of a Coast Guard boat. Both times he was successfully guided back to the Pacific Ocean using a “sound net” in which people in a flotilla of boats made unpleasant noises behind the whale by banging on steel pipes, a Japanese fishing technique known as “oikami.” At the same time, the attractive sounds of humpback whales preparing to feed were broadcast from a boat headed towards the open ocean. Since leaving the San Francisco Bay in 1990 Humphrey has been seen only once, at the Farallon Islands in 1991.