

Blue Whale Fact Sheet

Blue Whale

Balaenoptera musculus



New York Status: **Endangered**

Federal Status: **Endangered**

Description

With lengths up to 100 feet (30 m) and weights up to 150 tons (136 metric tons), the blue whale is the largest animal that ever lived on this planet. An average individual is 70 feet (21 m) long and weighs 100 tons (90 metric tons). The female, which is larger than the male, gives birth to a calf that averages 25 feet in length and weighs about 2 tons. The calf drinks about 106 gallons of milk every day. An average adult has almost 2,500 gallons of blood and burns up to 3 million calories a day. Its heart weighs more than a ton and the tongue alone weighs about 2 tons! Linnaeus must have had his tongue in his cheek when he gave this species the Latin name "musculus," which means "little mouse."

As the common name indicates, the upperparts of the body are mottled blue-gray. The undersides are whitish or light yellow. This whale has a relatively small dorsal fin and black baleen plates. The straight, column-like water spout can reach 20 feet into the air. Speeds of up to 23 miles per hour (20 knots) have been recorded for the blue whale.

Life History

Blue whales migrate several thousand miles to wintering grounds and fast for the duration of their stay; the fat on their body is enough to see them through the whole winter. The mating season occurs for 5 months over the winter. A single calf is born after a gestation period of one year. It nurses for 7 months and will reach sexual maturity at 5-15 years of age. Females give birth every 2-3 years.

Distribution and Habitat

Blue whales are found in open oceans from the icy waters of the extreme Southern Hemisphere to the Aleutian Islands off Alaska at the northern boundary of the Pacific Ocean. Summers are spent in polar waters because food production is higher there. The diet consists exclusively of krill. In the winter, this species migrates to warmer tropic and subtropic areas to breed and calve.

Status

The blue whale is currently one of the world's most endangered whales. It was not hunted until somewhat modern techniques made them more easily attainable, but by the mid-1900's only about 1,000 were estimated to remain. Hunting ceased in 1967 and stocks in the Southern Hemisphere and North Pacific are currently recovering. The latest estimate revealed 15,000 blue whales remaining worldwide. Pre-whaling populations were estimated at perhaps 300,000 individuals.

Management and Research Needs

Today, threats to blue whales include destruction or modification of habitat. They are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. They are also fully protected by the International Whaling Commission. Efforts are being made to aid any whales which may become stranded offshore or washed up on beaches. A stranding network operated on Long Island by the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation under contract to DEC serves to alert marine biologists to the possible rescue of live animals and the identification and autopsy of carcasses. The hotline number for reporting strandings is (631) 369-9829.

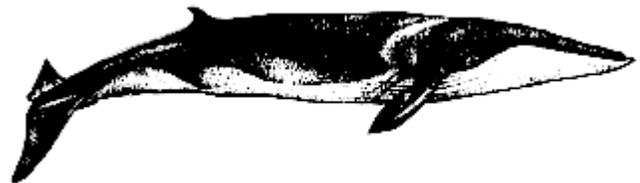
Finback Whale Fact Sheet

Finback Whale

Balaenoptera physalus

New York Status: **Endangered**

Federal Status: **Endangered**



Description

Second in size only to the blue whale, the finback reaches about 70 feet (21 m) in length and weighs up to 70 tons (64 metric tons). It shares with the blue whale the distinction of having the deepest voice on earth. The body is dark blue-gray above and whitish-yellow below, with a rather pointed head and a prominent back and dorsal fin which are easy to see. The asymmetrical coloration of the head is unique to the finback: on the left side the baleen (bony plates hanging from upper jaw - used to filter feed) and lips are dark, while on the right side the lower lip and the anterior third of the baleen are white or pale gray.

The finback often feeds by coursing through the water on its side, straining out krill and small fish through its baleen plates. Cruising at an average speed of 14 miles per hour (12

knots), the finback is one of the fastest of the large whales, capable of short bursts of speed up to 35 miles per hour. This species also makes some of the deepest dives of the baleen whales, and has remained submerged for as long as 50 minutes on a single breath. The "V" shaped spout can rise as high as 20 feet. Finbacks tend to be restless and easily spooked. They avoid noisy boats, but will swim up beside a stopped vessel.

Life History

In autumn, these whales migrate several thousand miles to equatorial waters. During winter, they fast almost completely, living off their fat reserves. Mating occurs throughout the winter and young are born a year later between December and April.

A calf, measuring 20 feet at birth, will nurse for about 7 months and reach sexual maturity at the age of 5-6 years. Reproductively active females bear only one calf every 2-3 years. The lifespan is unknown.

Distribution and Habitat

Finback whales live in all oceans of the world. They are found mostly offshore and tend to be very nomadic. High latitudes and cold currents are favorite areas because food availability there is high.

Status

As with the other species of whales, finback populations have suffered from decades of hunting. The pre-hunting population has been estimated at 30,000-50,000 in the North Atlantic Ocean. In earlier years, finbacks were not especially easy to harvest because of their speed and the fact that they sink when killed. However, modern techniques have made this whale more accessible and they became the target as blue whale populations decreased. In 1977, the International Whaling Commission's working group on North Atlantic whales estimated only about 7,200 finback whales in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

Management and Research Needs

A small aboriginal take of finbacks is allowed in eastern Greenland and the International Whaling Commission has also set quotas for western Greenland and the Spain-Portugal-British Isles areas. Problems facing finbacks today include over-utilization for commercial, recreational, scientific or educational needs. As with sea turtles, whales are often sighted in Long Island waters and occasionally become stranded or wash up dead on beaches, mainly

along the south shore. A stranding network operated on Long Island by the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation under contract to DEC serves to alert marine biologists to the possible rescue of live animals and the identification and autopsy of carcasses.

Humpback Whale Fact Sheet

Humpback Whale
Megaptera novaeangliae



New York Status: **Endangered**

Federal Status: **Endangered**

Description

The humpback is a chunky, heavy-bodied whale that weighs 30-40 tons (27-36 metric tons) and reaches about 30-60 feet (9-18 m) in length. It is dark gray to black above with white patterns underneath of various size. This species is distinguished from other large whales by a more robust body, fewer throat grooves, a dorsal fin that varies in size and shape, and very long white flippers (up to one-third the total body length). There are knob-like bumps on the head and snout, each holding one stiff hair. This whale is not actually humpbacked, but rather appears so when arching in preparation for a deep dive. Many people know humpbacks for their array of complex vocalizations or "songs" recorded during courtship. These songs can last from 3-40 minutes in duration. Another trademark of the humpback is its array of acrobatic antics including breaching, lobtailing, slapping the tail and waving the flippers in the air.

Life History

Both male and female humpbacks reach sexual maturity around the age of 9 years. On breeding grounds, males sing to attract females. Up to 6-8 males can fight for access to a single female via butting, jostling or lobtailing. Births take place between January and March after a gestation period of 11-12 months. The calf is about 15 feet long at birth and will nurse for about 1 year. It was previously believed that females give birth to one calf at intervals of about 2-3 years, but in Hawaii and the Atlantic Ocean females were recently found to calve every year.

Distribution and Habitat

Humpback whales occur in all oceans of the world, although they are uncommon in Arctic regions. During the summer months, humpbacks migrate to higher latitudes to feed. In the North Atlantic Ocean, there are separate feeding populations in the Gulf of Maine - Nova Scotia area, the Newfoundland - Labrador area and Greenland. In these areas, humpbacks inhabit waters over continental shelves and their ledges at latitudes of 40-75 degrees north.

The different Atlantic populations all migrate to and mix on the tropical breeding and calving grounds in the West Indies from January through March. After calving and/or breeding, humpbacks return to the northern feeding areas. Mothers return with calves, thereby imprinting the migration route on the offspring.

Status

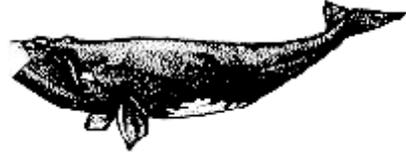
Humpback whales are among the most endangered of the large whales. Recent population estimates indicated about 2,000-4,000 individuals remaining in the western North Atlantic. There are better population estimates for this whale than for other species, because they can be seen easily from boats and airplanes and because they tend to gather at local breeding sites. Like other whales, this species has suffered greatly from exploitation by hunters. They gained protection in 1962 through the International Whaling Commission, and since then have shown some signs of recovery in the North Atlantic. This species is a "favorite" of whale-watching groups. The humpback is also the most common large whale recovered annually in New York's stranding program.

Management and Research Needs

Although hunting has been greatly reduced, many threats are still present. Among these are entrapment and entanglement in fishing gear, collision with ships, acoustic disturbance, commercial whale watching and research boats, and habitat degradation. A Stranding Network operated on Long Island by the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation under contract to DEC serves to alert marine biologists to the possible rescue of live animals and the identification and autopsy of carcasses.

Right Whale Fact Sheet

North Atlantic Right Whale *Eubalaena glacialis*



New York Status: **Endangered**

Federal Status: **Endangered**

Description

Slow swimming speed, a gentle nature, a body which is 40% blubber by weight (causing it to float when dead), and its propensity to stay mainly in shallow coastal waters were some of the reasons why 19th century whalers considered this the "right" whale to hunt, hence its name.

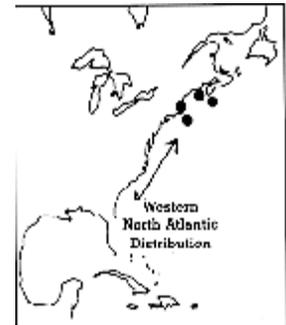
Right whales are quite rare to see and are physically very different from other species of whale. Characterized by the absence of a dorsal fin, a very large head, and a strongly arching mouth, this whale reaches about 50 feet (15 m) in length and weighs up to 70 tons (64 metric tons). Another characteristic trait is the light colored, wart-like growths on the head called "callosities." The number, distribution, and size of the callosities varies among individuals, and they are often used for identification. The body is dark to light gray, appearing mottled, with whitish underparts. Right whales strain plankton with baleen plates which may reach 7 feet in length. Because the two blowholes are widely separated, the spout is seen as two distinct sprays. A curious habit of this species is to "sail" by holding its flukes above the water and allowing the wind to push it along.

Life History

Right whales reach sexual maturity between 3-5 years of age. Courtship takes place in August and September. During the winter months, a small part of the population consisting of adult females and young calves migrates to a well-known calving ground in the shallow waters between Savannah, Georgia and Cape Canaveral, Florida. Calving peaks between December and March, after an unknown gestation period. Calves average 15 feet in length and will nurse for at least 9 months. Reproductively active females give birth to only one calf every 3-5 years. The life span and duration of reproductive activity for this species are unknown.

Distribution and Habitat

Right whales are found in the North Atlantic and North Pacific oceans. Five North Atlantic "high-use" areas have been identified: coastal Florida and Georgia; the Great South Channel east of Cape Cod, Massachusetts; Cape Cod Bay and Massachusetts Bay; the Bay of Fundy; and Browns and Baccaro Banks south of Nova Scotia. The majority of the population spends spring and summer off the coast of New England, and moves to waters off southern Canada for the latter part of summer and winter.



Other members of the population migrate to calving areas as explained above. The diet consists of copepods and krill which are obtained by feeding below the surface.

Status

The right whale is the world's most endangered large whale. Presently, the population is estimated to total no more than 600 individuals, 300-350 of which can be found in the North Atlantic Ocean. The population was originally decimated by hunting which began 800 years ago. By the 18th century, this was one of the Northeast's rarest animals. Protection since 1937 by the International Whaling Commission has not lead to any significant recovery. Major threats presently include collision with ships, entrapment or entanglement in fishing gear, habitat degradation (especially in feeding areas), and disturbance by vessels.

Management and Research Needs

A stranding network operated on Long Island by the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation under contract to DEC serves to alert marine biologists to the possible rescue of live animals and the identification and autopsy of carcasses. The hotline telephone number to report stranded animals is (631)369-9829. Future programs include education and enforcement to reduce the number of collisions with ships and entanglement in fishing nets, the designation of areas in U. S. waters as "critical habitat" needed for the survival of this species, and restriction of recreational whale watching activities. The population may be increasing, but this is difficult to determine since an increase in reported numbers may be the result of an increase in the number of whale-watchers and enhanced research efforts.

Sei Whale Fact Sheet

Sei Whale

Balaenoptera borealis



New York Status: **Endangered**

Federal Status: **Endangered**

Description

The sei whale (pronounced "say") measures 25-50 feet (8-15 m) in length and weighs 40 tons (36 metric tons), making it the third largest baleen whale, behind the blue and finback whales. It can be identified by its inverted "V" shaped water spout which reaches 6-8 feet into the air. The body is dark gray with variable white undersides, usually limited to the area of the throat grooves which do not reach as far as the navel. In Antarctic and Pacific populations, there are light-colored patches all over the upper body. However, Atlantic populations lack the patches and are more uniformly dark. The sei whale resembles a blue or finback whale, but has a smaller and more curved dorsal fin and is dark on the undersides of the flippers and tail flukes. This whale may be the fastest of the large whales, able to cruise at 16 mph (14 knots) with a maximum speed of 40 mph (35 knots) recorded. Sei whales usually travel alone or in small groups of five or less.

Life History

In autumn, these whales migrate several thousand miles to equatorial waters. The mating season occurs from December to April, during which time they eat very little or fast, living off their fat reserves. A single calf measuring 15 feet in length is born after a gestation period of 10-12 months. Calves are weaned on the summer grounds at the age of 6-9 months. Both sexes reach maturity at 5-15 years of age, and the female gives birth to one calf every 2-3 years. Members of this species may live for up to 70 years.

Distribution and Habitat

Sei whales are found in the North Atlantic Ocean ranging from Iceland south to the northeastern Venezuelan coast, and northwest to the Gulf of Mexico. There are also records from Cuba and the Virgin Islands. Sei whales are seen infrequently in U. S. waters. This whale breeds and feeds in open oceans, and is generally restricted to more temperate waters. Unlike most rorqual whales, the sei whale feeds mostly by filtering plankton while swimming (skim feeding), but is also known to gulp-feed krill, shrimp, and small fish.

Status

This species became important to the whaling industry as populations of blue and finback whales declined. Its earliest exploitation began in the 17th century, off northern Japan. Hunting began in the North Atlantic in the 1800's. In 1972, stocks in the North Pacific were estimated to be only 21% of original numbers. According to the Cetacean and Turtle Assessment Program (1982), there may be as few as 2,200-2,300 individuals in U. S. Atlantic waters currently. Although sei whales are relatively free of ectoparasites, many suffer from endoparasitic helminths (flatworms) which may cause kidney and liver problems.

Management and Research Needs

Hunting is no longer a problem for sei whales as a result of protection received through the International Whaling Commission and the Endangered Species Act. Iceland is still allowed an annual quota in the North Atlantic Ocean. A stranding network on Long Island operated by the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation under contract to DEC serves to alert marine biologists to the possible rescue of live animals and the identification and autopsy of carcasses.

Sperm Whale Fact Sheet

Sperm Whale

Physeter catodon



New York Status: **Endangered**

Federal Status: **Endangered**

Description

The sperm whale is the largest of the toothed whales. It is the best known member of the whale family, generally being represented in toys and drawings. Moby Dick was a sperm whale. The most distinctive feature is the large, blunt head. This immense head contains spermaceti, a substance once widely used for ointments and candles. In Greek, the name translates loosely to "spouter with teeth on the bottom." This is indeed a good description. The single blowhole, located near the front and to the left side of the head, is angled forward about 45 degrees; spouts reach 20 feet into the air. The lower jaw contains 18-25 teeth which assist in eating squid and other cephalopods. Another trait is the absence of a dorsal fin. Instead, a large hump is present and behind it a series of bumps along the ridge of the back that extends to the large, notched, triangular flukes or tail flippers.

A male can be up to 70 feet (21 m) in length and weigh 59 tons (54 metric tons), while females reach 38 feet and weigh up to 15 tons. Overall, the body is dark blue to slate gray on the upper parts, lighter colored underneath, and white around the mouth. The brain of the sperm whale is the largest of any animal, averaging 15+ pounds and reaching up to 20 pounds. Squid is the primary food of the sperm whale, and much of its biology and behavior can be attributed to the search for this food item.

Life History

Members of this species do not travel in mixed groups of several males and females like other whales. Instead, harems are formed, consisting of a bull leading a group of adult females and their young. Adult males without a harem travel in bachelor groups, obtaining a harem only by fighting and defeating a bull that leads one. Pregnant or nursing females, calves, and some juveniles swim in "mixed groups" or "nursery schools" made up of about 25 individuals. After weaning, the males form "juvenile schools" then "bachelor schools" when reaching puberty at about 9 years of age. Although males are reproductively mature at about 19 years of age, they are not "socially mature" and cannot mate until they have acquired a harem.

Males compete with one another in early spring and summer for control of a group of mature females. A successful male will mate with all the females in his harem. Gestation lasts for about 15 months and the calf, which is 12-16 feet when born, nurses for about two years. After weaning, the female may not become pregnant again for nine months. Females reproduce only once every four years.

Distribution and Habitat

Sperm whales are found in all of the world's oceans, except for the Arctic region. In U. S. waters, they may be found from California and Hawaii north to the Bering Sea, and from Maine to the Gulf of Mexico.

They tend to prefer deep waters and generally remain along the edge of continental shelves in water 3,000-6,000 feet deep or further out to sea. When in open waters, this whale may dive for periods of more than one hour at depths of up to 8,000 feet.

Status

Hunting was the primary cause of decline in this species. During the past two centuries, about one million sperm whales were killed. Current estimates reveal between 20,000-

100,000 sperm whales remaining. Hunting is no longer a threat to this species and there are apparently no other threats currently existing.

Management and Research Needs

As with sea turtles, whales are often sighted in Long Island waters and occasionally become stranded or wash up dead on beaches, mainly along the south shore. A stranding network operated by the Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation under contract to DEC alerts marine biologists to the possible rescue of stranded animals and the identification and autopsy of carcasses.

Harbor Seal

Did You Know?

Harbor seal Phoca vitulina (Photo: US Fish and Wildlife Service)



- Harbor seals are the most abundant seals found in New York State.
- Their average dive time is three minutes, although they can stay under water for up to 30 minutes!
- Harbor seals have a thick, insulating layer of blubber. They can slow blood flow to their skin to keep from losing heat to the cold water or air.
- Their large eyes, acute hearing, and sensitive whiskers help them hunt for prey.
- They have no tears, but mucus continuously washes over their eyes to protect them from saltwater. When on land, this mucus gives them a teary-eyed appearance.

What to watch for:

Size:

Male harbor seals average 5-5 ½ feet in length and weigh 200-250 pounds. Females are typically smaller, about 4 ½ to 5 feet in length and weigh 150-200 pounds.

Appearance:

A rounded body with a spotted coat ranging from silver-gray to



black or dark brown. They lack external ear flaps and have fan-shaped flippers.

Where to watch:

They spend their time in coastal oceanic waters and can be found basking on sand bars, rocks, or remote beaches during low tide within estuaries, bays, and rivers. When resting in water, their heads bob at the surface resembling a floating bottle and thus is termed "bottling."

When to watch:

The best times to watch harbor seals in New York are during the day from early winter (November) and into spring (May).

When watching seals, stay back about 150 feet in order to prevent unnecessary stress and abandonment of their basking sites. Approaching seals can cause them to feel threatened and they may bite. If a seal appears injured and in need of help, keep your distance and report to the NYS Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding Program at 631-369-9829.