



MAMMALS

BLUE WHALE

ABOUT

The Blue Whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) is the earth's largest animal. It eats 4 to 8 tons (3.6 to 7.3 metric tons) of krill (shrimp-like creatures) per day. In the wild, the average lifespan is 80 to 90 years. This magnificent marine mammal reaches up to 100ft (30 m) in length and weighs around 200 tons (181 metric tons). Their tongues can weigh as much as an elephant, and their hearts are as heavy as cars. Blue Whales are baleen whales, meaning that instead of teeth, they have fringed plates that act as a sieve when feeding, expelling the vast quantities of water taken in while trapping krill. Underwater, the Blue Whale appears to be truly that color; on the surface it seems to be more of a mottled blue-gray. It has a broad, flat head and a long, tapered body that ends with wide triangular tail lobes (flukes). The Blue Whale cruises the ocean at more than 5 mph (8 km), and can accelerate up to 30 mph when alarmed. They are among the loudest animals on earth, emitting a series of pulses, groans and moans to navigate and to communicate. It is thought that in ideal conditions they can hear up to 1,000 miles (1,600 km) away. This species sexually matures between 6 and 10 years of age. Calves are born weighing 3 tons (2,722 kg) and are 23 to 27 feet (7-8.2 m) long. The calf will nurse for 7-8 months and, during the nursing period, consume 100 gallons (379 liters) of their mother's fat-rich milk every day. When they reach 52 feet (16 m) in length they are weaned. It is most common to see Blue Whales traveling in pairs, although they may also be observed in groups.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Blue Whale is endangered and only 10,000 to 25,000 are thought to remain in the world's oceans. In the 1900s they were aggressively hunted for whale oil, which nearly drove them to extinction. One 90-foot Blue Whale could yield up to 120 barrels of oil. Almost too late, in 1966, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) placed them under worldwide protection. The World Conservation Union has also listed them on the Red List. Unfortunately, population recovery has been extremely slow. Only in the last few years have there been signs of the numbers increasing. Pre-whaling estimates numbered the Blue Whale population at 350,000, but up to 99% of the species were killed during the whaling era. They have few predators, but have been known to fall victim to shark attacks and killer whales. Many of them are also injured or killed each year by impacts with large ships.

For more detailed information visit: www.acsonline.org or <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com>.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Which organization first placed the Blue Whale under protection?

- a) The United Nations
- b) The World Wildlife Fund
- c) The Oceanic Society
- d) The International Whaling Commission

Answer is D.

