

MAMMALS

HUMPBACK WHALE

ABOUT

The Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) is probably the best known of the 20 whale species that can be found in US waters. Humpbacks are baleen whales, which means that instead of teeth they have rows of comb-like plates to help filter their food from the water. Baleen (the “comb” material) is made of the same protein as human fingernails or hair. Humpbacks are one of the easiest whales to identify. Their flippers are very long with scalloped edges in the front, and the fin on their backs (dorsal) is small and placed on a small hump two-thirds of the body length away from the whale’s head. Adults range in length from 39 to 52 ft (12 to 16 meters) and weigh about 79,000 lbs (36,000 kilograms). They are mostly black, often with a white belly and white markings underneath flippers and tail (flukes) that are unique to each whale. Humpbacks have fleshy knobs (tubercles) on their heads and lower jaws and sport paired blowholes on top of their heads. Females usually breed every two or three years starting at the age of five. The gestation period (pregnancy) is 11½ months. Calves nurse from their mothers, drinking 40 to 60 gallons of very rich fatty milk a day for about 10 months, after which they feed themselves. Male Humpbacks sing the longest and most complex songs in the animal kingdom which is thought to have a role in the mating ritual.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Humpback Whale is endangered in its range along the US coastline. There are approximately 80,000 Humpbacks worldwide, representing about 8% of estimated historic populations. Humpbacks feed in polar waters in the summer and migrate to tropical or sub-tropical waters to breed and give birth in the winter. It is thought that around 7,000 of these whales travel in US waters at some point each year. Humpbacks typically migrate over 15,500 miles (25,000 km) annually. Like other large whales, this species was and still is a target for the whaling industry. Because of over-hunting the population fell by about 90% prior to the emergency suspension of whaling in 1966. There has been a partial recovery due to protection laws, but they are still threatened by entanglement in fishing nets, collisions with ships, and noise pollution.

For more detailed information visit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humpback_Whale or www.earthtrust.org.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

How many miles does a Humpback Whale migrate every year?

- a) Approximately 80,000 miles
- b) Over 15,500 miles
- c) 1,966 miles
- d) It doesn’t migrate

Answer is B.

