



---

## SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET

---

### SEI WHALE IN UK WATERS

**DESCRIPTION** The sei whale, *Balaenoptera borealis*, grows to between 12-17.5m in males and 12.7-21m in females. The head and body is a dark steely grey which continues on to the back, flanks and rear part of the belly. The head is V-shaped and centrally ridged. The dorsal fin is 25-60cm high and almost erect, strongly sickle-shaped, and situated nearly two-thirds of the way along the back.

At sea it is seen to have a vertical bushy blow up to 3m high, simultaneous with fin, before a shallow roll.

**DISTRIBUTION** Sei whales, though rare and often sporadically and unpredictably distributed, have a worldwide distribution, reported from most oceans and seas with an apparent preference for temperate and oceanic waters. They are deep water animals, rarely found in marginal sea areas, they generally don't venture as far poleward as fin whales but may show a great tendency to enter tropical waters. One problem with mapping their distribution is distinguishing them, at sea and in whaling records (which provide a lot of the information on their distribution) from Bryde's whale. The winter months Sei whales spend in temperate waters around southern California and the Revillagedo Islands of Mexico, the summer on high latitude feeding grounds of Japan and Korea and northwards and from Canada to the Gulf of Alaska. In the East Atlantic Sei whales are thought to winter off Spain, Portugal and north-west Africa.

No current estimates exist for the North Atlantic population, but recent sightings surveys indicate a population numbering a few thousand individuals, with evidence of noticeable depletion of stocks from some of the former whaling grounds.

**SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR** Sei whales usually travel alone or in groups of two to five individuals, although large groups of up to thirty can be seen at good feeding grounds. During its shorter dives the Sei whale rarely descends to more than a few meters so its progress can be followed by 'fluke prints'. Sei whales rarely breach, but the dorsal fin and back may be left visible for longer periods of time than with other large whales. As with some other baleen whales there may be some segregation in the population during migration. Pregnant females are among the first sei whales in the migration to and from the Antarctic, and in the Antarctic and North Pacific, the older and bigger sei whales tend to be found in the highest latitudes.

**REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY** Northern hemisphere males reach sexual maturity between 12.7 and 12.9m, females between 13.1 and 13.7m. Despite problems of estimating the age of sei whales, females are thought to ovulate for the first time between five and six years. The species probably breeds in warm temperate and subtropical waters during winter months, and then migrates northwards to summer in cold temperate and polar seas. The conception of their calves takes place in late autumn to early winter after a

gestation period of between 10.5-12.5 months and lactation then lasts for 5-9 months. The maximum the life span of a sei whale is thought to be around 65 years.

**DIET** Sei whales feed on plankton, taken by swallowing or skimming behaviour. In the southern hemisphere krill is the major food although unlike the blue, fin, humpback and minke whales, *copepods* and *amphipods* are also taken. In the north pacific *copepods* form are the major food, with krill only forming about 10% of the diet.

**THREATS** When the blue whale went into decline in the middle 1950s the whalers moved to smaller species, first fin whales, then sei whales and lastly minke. IWC progressively shut down whaling operations in north pacific and southern hemisphere in the 1970s, although sei whales have been hunted until recently in the Denmark Strait.

#### FURTHER READING

Evans, P.G.H. 1987. *The Natural History of Whales and Dolphins*. Christopher Helm, London. 360pp.

Evans, P.G.H. 1992. *Status Review of cetaceans in British and Irish waters*. Sea Watch Foundation, Oxford.

Evans, P.G.H. 1995. *Guide to the identification of whales, dolphins and porpoises in European seas*. Sea Watch Foundation, Oxford.

Evans, P.G.H., Anderwald, P., and Baines, M.E. 2003. *UK Cetacean Status Review*. Report to English Nature & Countryside Council for Wales. 160pp.

Gambell, R. 1985. Sei whale *Balenoptera borealis*. In: S.H. Ridgway and R.J. Harrison (Eds), *Handbook of Marine Mammals* Vol. 3. The Sirenians and Baleen Whales. Academic Press, London. 362pp. pp.155-170.

Horwood, J.W. 1987. *The sei whale: Population Biology, Ecology and Management*. Croom Helm, London. 375pp.

Mead, J.G. 1977. Records of sei and Bryde's whales from the atlantic coast of the United States, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. *Rep. Int. Whal. Commn* (Special Issue 1): 113-116.

Reid, J., Evans, P.G.H. and Northridge, S.P. 2003. *Cetacean Distribution Atlas*. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough. 68pp.