

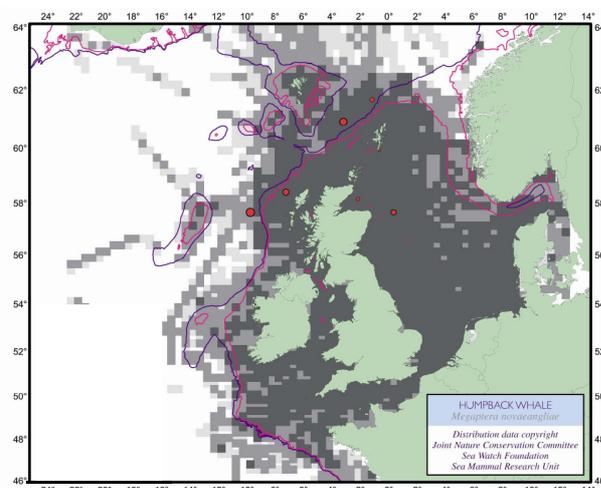


THE HUMPBACK WHALE IN UK WATERS



DESCRIPTION The humpback whale is one of the easiest whales to identify, thanks to its distinctive tail flukes, knobby head and long flippers, as well as its habit of raising its flukes high into the air when making a deep dive. The shape of the tail flukes, as well as their markings, are unique to each whale, and so can be used for recognition of individuals. Humpbacks are known as ‘baleen whales’, a name which refers to the hundreds of comb-like plates which hang down from their upper jaws. These plates have stiff hairs that filter food out of the vast amounts of water taken into the mouth during feeding, acting as a kind of sieve. One of the most energetic of the large whales, its spectacular breaching and flipper slapping is familiar to all. The body is large and stocky, an adult measuring up to 15 metres in length, and weighing up to 35 tonnes. The ‘blow’ of a humpback rises to 2.5 - 3 metres in height, and is distinctively ‘bushy’ in shape.

DISTRIBUTION A wide-ranging species with distinct seasonal changes in distribution, the humpback whale migrates thousands of kilometres to breed and feed. It spends much of the year close to the shore or to islands, but will migrate across the open sea. The species is rarely seen in British waters, but is occasionally encountered off the west coast of Ireland and northern Scotland in summer, on its way from wintering and breeding grounds off the coasts of Africa to feeding grounds mainly around Iceland. For half a century, the species was extremely rare in British waters after a long history of over-exploitation. However, since the 1980’s, the species has been recorded regularly from Shetland, the northern Irish Sea (from north-west England to south-west Scotland), and in the western approaches to the Channel.



SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR Humpbacks are usually seen singly or in social groups of up to seven whales, but larger concentrations can develop in feeding and breeding areas. ‘Escort’ whales, often male, accompany cow-calf pairs, and become aggressive to other humpbacks approaching the group, particularly rival males. They have also been known to exhibit threat displays towards boats, but this rarely results in contact with the boat. Humpback whales are famous for their hauntingly beautiful ‘songs’ - lone males at breeding grounds sing long, complex, songs which are different in different oceans, with changes occurring during the season. It is not clear exactly why males sing but it is believed to be to advertise their location to females, or to dominate rival males, or for both reasons.



REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY Female humpbacks occasionally give birth every year, but usually reproduce every 2 or 3 years, with a pregnancy of about 11 months followed by 10 to 11 months nursing of the calf. Newborns measure between 4 and 5 metres. Calves often remain with the mother after weaning, even if a new calf is born.

DIET AND FEEDING The humpback whale consumes krill (shrimp-like creatures), as well as fish (such as herring and cod in British waters). Huge quantities of food and water are taken in through the mouth, which is then closed to allow water to be pressed through the baleen. The sieved food is then swallowed. Humpbacks use a variety of elaborate feeding techniques, such as using 'nets' of bubbles to trap prey, disabling fish using their flippers, and lunging.



THREATS Because of their tendency to come close to shore and to congregate in large numbers, humpbacks were particularly vulnerable to hunting - from an original world population of around 125,000, the current size of the humpback population, although difficult to estimate, appears to be between 12,000 and 15,000 worldwide. They are still hunted in certain areas, despite being protected by international legislation due to their rarity. As well as hunting, they are also vulnerable to pollution, industrial activities, boat traffic, and entanglement in fishing gear.

FURTHER READING

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