



MINKE WHALE IN UK WATERS



DESCRIPTION The minke whale, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* is the smallest and most abundant of the baleen whales (a separate species *B. bonaerensis* is now recognised in the Antarctic, and other geographical populations may represent separate subspecies or species). Males are from 7-9.8 metres and females 7.5-11 metres in length, both slightly larger in southern hemisphere populations. They have a slender, pointed triangular head with a single central

ridge. The dorsal fin is relatively tall, sickle-shaped, and situated nearly two-thirds of the way along the back. The head and body are dark grey to black but with grey areas or chevrons on the flanks, and a distinctive diagonal white band on the flippers. At sea, they have an inconspicuous (often unseen) vertical blow 2-3 metres high which is seen almost simultaneously with the fin, before the animal goes into a relatively arched roll.

DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS The minke whale has a worldwide distribution in tropical, temperate and polar seas of both hemispheres. The species seasonally migrates from polar feeding grounds to warm temperate to tropical breeding grounds although animals in temperate regions may remain there throughout the year. Minke whales are widely distributed in relatively small numbers along the Atlantic seaboard of Europe, mainly from Norway south to France, and in the northern North Sea.

In the UK and Ireland, the species is widely distributed along the Atlantic seaboard, also occurring regularly in the northern and central North Sea as far south as the Yorkshire coast. It is seen in small numbers in the Irish Sea particularly in the deeper central region. It is rare in the southernmost North Sea and Channel, as well as south of here in the Bay of Biscay, although it has been recorded increasingly frequently in these areas in recent years.



■ Regular, common or fairly common
■ Occasional
■ Casual or absent



The world population is estimated at somewhere between 500,000 - 1 million animals. The only population estimate for minke whales in UK waters is from the North Sea (and Channel) where a line-transect survey in July 1994 estimated 8,445 individuals (95% confidence limits 5,000-13,000). The latest population estimate for the North-east Atlantic stock seasonally inhabiting the North, Norwegian and Barents Seas was 112,000 (with 95% confidence limits of 91,000-137,000) in 1995.

SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR Minke whales are frequently found as solitary animals or in groups of two or three, although they may congregate in areas of food concentration in cold temperate and polar seas during summer, and up to fifteen animals have been recorded in feeding aggregations in northern Britain. Although minke whales can be difficult to approach, some individuals are inquisitive and may investigate boats. They sometimes spy-hop and breach. Minkes appear to be segregated by age/sex classes more than any other baleen whale, which makes it hard to measure abundance from catch information.

REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY Female minke whales are sexually mature from the age of 6-8 years, and males at 5-8 years. Adults are thought to live to between 40 and 50 years. In the northern hemisphere, mating is from October to March (in the southern hemisphere, mating occurs from June through to December, peaking in August and September). Gestation is about ten months, with calving occurring primarily between December and January (between May and June in the southern hemisphere). Lactation lasts from 4-6 months. Generally, females give birth to a single calf, but a study of over 10,000 pregnant females found that 60 (0.6%) carried twins, and three carried triplets.



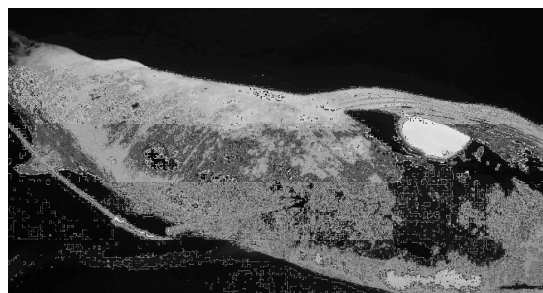
DIET Fish, such as herring, cod, capelin, sand eel, haddock, whiting, and saithe are all reported as forming a large part of the minke whale diet. Plankton makes up a higher portion of the diet in polar regions, where fish are less important. Off west Greenland, krill (and sand eel) are mainly taken, and in the Okhotsk Sea, pelagic crustaceans are eaten. The southern hemisphere stocks feed predominantly upon krill.

THREATS The minke whale has been taken by whalers from the earliest of times, but it was following the marked depletion of the larger species (due to whaling) during the 1930s in the northern hemisphere, and in the 1970s in the Antarctic, that minke whales became a major target for modern whalers. There has been much debate as to whether the Northeastern Atlantic

stock has been depleted from the initial size at the start of exploitation, and the matter remains to be resolved with different workers reaching entirely different conclusions. Whaling by the Norwegians resumed in 1998, and around 300 are taken annually.

Because of its relatively small size, the minke whale was not a target of the Scottish and Irish whale fisheries in the early years of the 20th century, but since the late 1920s, whaling for this species was carried out along the Norwegian coast, expanding just before the Second World War to Svalbard, and Shetland - Faroe Islands, and later moving to the Barents Sea and Iceland, Jan Mayen, West Greenland and Labrador. Since 1986, the species has been given total protection from commercial whaling although Iceland had a limited minke whale fishery until 1993, and Norway has gradually increased its catch limit year by year, taken under objection to the IWC's commercial whaling moratorium. In 1999, Norway assigned itself a catch of 753 whales, though it actually took 589 whales because of lack of demand in Norway for the products.

Incidental capture of minke whales in fishing nets and traps is also a cause for concern. Since the 1970s, there has been a specific problem of entrapment of minke whales along with other whales, in traps, weirs and nets of New England and eastern Newfoundland. At least ten minke whales died as a result of this between 1969 and 1978. Minkes have also entered salmon cages, and been entangled in gill nets, and creel lines around the British Isles.



FURTHER READING

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