



Humpback Whale

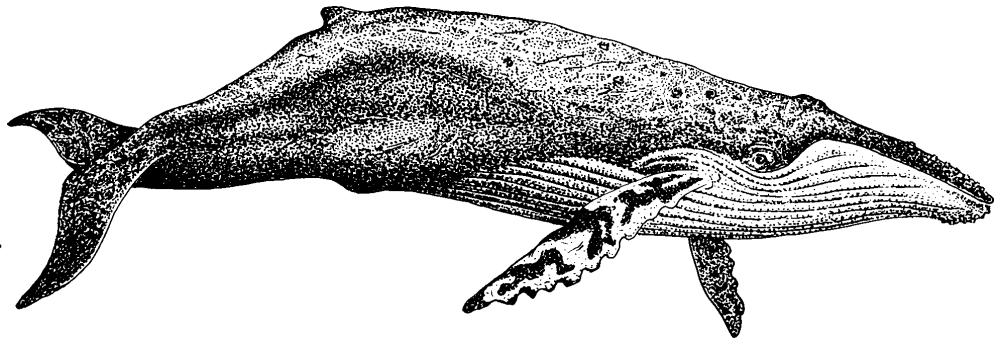
Megaptera novaeangliae

The humpback whale derives its genus name—*Megaptera*—from the Greek words *mega* for “large,” and *pteron* for “wing” or “fin.” Their enormous size and that of all whales have been a source of wonder and fear for mankind and the basis of many myths and legends, many of them inaccurate. During medieval times, for example, the Scandinavians described “bad” whales: “They all have in common that they are full of greed and fierceness. They are never satisfied in their killing as they ply the oceans looking for ships. They leap into the air so that they can move easily, sink the ships and totally destroy them.” Icelandic sailors were forbidden to mention the whale at sea. Instead, the fishermen called it a fish because mention of its true name would cause the “evil” whales to attack the ship.

Today, legend has given way to knowledge about these airbreathing mammals. The humpback is the only species in its genus. Like other members of the mysticeti or baleen whales, it lacks teeth and filters food through horny plates or baleen that grow down from the sides of its upper jaw.

History and Status

The humpback once roamed freely throughout all the oceans. Its natural predators, other whales and sharks, did not cause a decline in the population. The humpback’s tendency to feed and mate near coastal waters and its inability to swim fast, however, made it easy prey for commercial harvest. Whales produce large quantities



of oil and meat and have long been prized by humans. At the turn of the century, an estimated 100,000 humpbacks inhabited the southern oceans. The North Atlantic population has declined to a low of 1,000 individuals.

Because of its global migration, humpbacks must be protected on an international level. The International Whaling Commission seeks to regulate commercial whaling in different countries. Controversies exist today and several countries have chosen to ignore regulations on harvesting humpback whales.

Description

Humpbacks eat schooling fish such as herring and codfish and will consume up to 1.5 tons per day of oceanic plankton called krill. They have developed a unique method of capturing prey called “bubble netting.” Humpbacks dive below and circle a school of fish or krill, emitting a series of bubbles as they ascend to the surface. Once the prey are corralled into this bubble net, the humpback charges through with its mouth open, engulfing the prey.

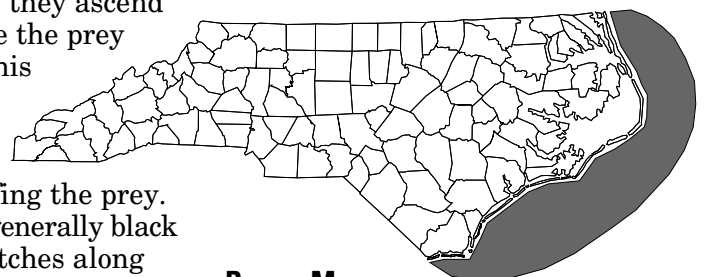
Humpbacks are generally black except for white patches along the throat, breast and undersides of the fluke and flippers. Long,

narrow flippers extend nearly one-third the length of the body and are irregularly scalloped on the posterior margin. Humpbacks are slow swimmers (4 to 7 mph); however, they occasionally gather enough speed to leap clear of the water in a dramatic, acrobatic move.

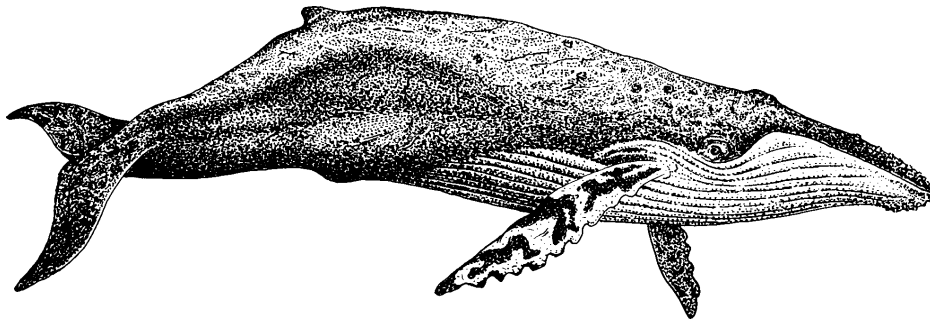
The humpback is the most demonstrative of all species of whales. A flipper is often raised and slapped against the water, or the tail is raised high into the air and brought crashing back to the water in a loud report. Since water is an efficient conductor of sound, humpbacks rely on their sense of hearing. They sing and actually compose songs that change over the years and are unique to each breeding population. Generally only males sing in the breeding grounds and the singing ceases once a mate is found.

Habitat and Habits

Humpbacks prefer protected



Range Map:
Occupied range ■



waters over shallow banks and shelf waters for breeding and feeding. In the western North Atlantic, they begin their winter migration in August, moving south from Iceland, Greenland, and New England along the continental shelf to Bermuda, and south to Venezuela. During migrations, humpbacks rarely feed and are often found alone or in groups of two to three. Once they reach their summer and winter grounds, they congregate in groups of up to 12 and 15 and begin feeding to restore body fat.

Range and Distribution

The humpback is widely distributed in all oceans. It migrates toward the poles in summer and toward the tropics in winter and visits the North Carolina coast during seasonal migrations. Its distribution in general is over shallow banks and in shelf waters along continental coasts and oceanic islands.

People Interactions

Humpbacks have been known to approach ships to feed on the discards from a hauled net, but generally they avoid human contact. In recent years, humpbacks have stranded on North Carolina beaches in increasing numbers and the cause is unknown. North Carolinians often report sightings of humpbacks around fishing piers.

References

- Leatherwood, Stephen. *The Sierra Club Handbook of Whales and Dolphins* (Sierra Club Books, 1983).
Ellis, Richard. *The Book of Whales* (Alfred Knopf, 1980).

Credits

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HUMPBACK WHALE

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Cetacea

Average Size

Length: females can be 51 feet; males, 48 feet
Weight: females, 32 tons; males, 29 tons

Food

Krill and schooling fish (capelin, herring, codfish).

Breeding

Females reach sexual maturity at a size class of 37 to 40 feet; males at 35 to 38 feet. Mate in winter. Normally reproduce at intervals of two or more years.

Young

Called a calf. Gestation is 12 months with a birth of a single calf, which the female nurses for 10 to 11 months. Calf is 16 feet long at birth and 26 to 29 feet when weaning is complete. Newborn calves are awkward at birth and must practice diving, breath holding, breaching and many other maneuvers necessary for survival.

Life Expectancy

Whales have been estimated to live 47 years, but aging techniques are not highly accurate.