

Humpback Whales: Acrobats of the Ocean

Humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) are easily identified because of their distinctive appearance and acrobatic behaviors. As the name implies, they have a hump in their back that sticks out when they dive. They are also well known for their “singing” and lively behavior.



photo: T. Conlin

Physical Description

Skin: Humpbacks can be a range of colors from white to gray to black, and sometimes their skin is a spotty mix of these colors.

Size: Humpbacks can grow to 11-16 meters (35-60 feet) in length and 30-50 tons in weight. Females are usually slightly larger than males.

Head: The humpback’s head and jaws are quite large and are dotted with golf-ball sized bumps called tubercules.

Fins: Humpbacks have the largest flippers of any whale species. These flippers take up one-third of the whales’ body length and are usually white in color. Humpbacks also have a small fin on their backs.

Tail: The tail, or fluke, of a humpback is triangular and has deep ridges. Each humpback has a unique black and white pattern, like a human fingerprint, located on the underside of its fluke.



Tubercles



Pectoral Flipper



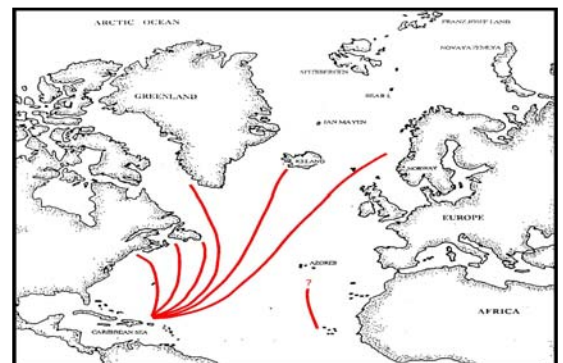
Dorsal Fin



Fluke Print (photo: CCC)

Distribution

Humpback whales live in all oceans of the world. During the winter mating season, they make their homes in the waters of the Caribbean, usually among the islands and reefs of the West Indies. Most whales live along the banks of the Dominican Republic, and some live in the Mona Passage near



Migration (COA)

Puerto Rico. Smaller numbers of whales have also been seen throughout the Lesser Antilles, including waters around Barbados, Dominica, St. Vincent, Grenada, Guadeloupe, St. Barts, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela, the Colombian Caribbean and the Gulf of Paria.

In the spring and summer, humpback whales migrate to the colder waters of their northern feeding grounds. They travel to areas as far away as the Gulf of Maine, Greenland, Iceland and Norway. Humpbacks typically migrate to the same feeding grounds every year.

Social Interaction

Humpback whales have very loose-knit social bonds. While mothers and calves may stay together for up to a year, most humpbacks stay together for only a few hours to hunt and feed.

Feeding and Behavior

Humpback whales are a species of “baleen whale”, whales that do not have teeth, but instead eat by filtering prey through baleen, a substance resembling thick, coarse hair. Like all baleen whales, humpbacks only eat for part of the year and spend the rest of the year living off their blubber. Humpbacks hunt in packs and typically encircle large numbers of small fish and other organisms, which they then gulp and filter through their baleen.



Mother and calf (T. Conlin)

Interesting Facts

The songs of humpback whales are very complex and captivating. Humpbacks will sing the same song for hours and even days, but will make slight changes so that their song is never exactly the same.

Humpbacks also perform an action called “breaching” in which they jump high out of the water, twist around, and slap the water as they come back down. They also poke their heads and tails straight out of the water and slap the water with their tails (“lobtailing”).



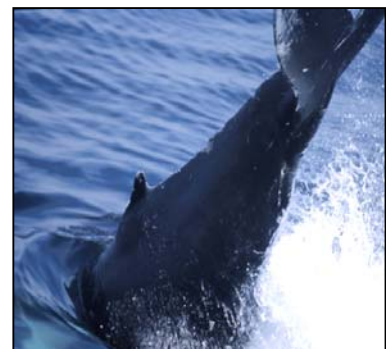
Humpback whales are well known for their playful and noisy behaviors. Although humpbacks are active all year, they are especially lively during mating season, when male humpbacks put on elaborate shows to attract females. They often “sing” complex, beautiful songs that can be heard for miles. They also make other sounds including squeaks, grunts and groans.

Threats

Humpback whales were targeted by early whalers because they are slow swimmers and their calving grounds are located close to shore. They’ve been protected under the International Whaling Commission (IWC) since 1966, but illegal kills have occurred and Japan has expanded its controversial scientific whaling program to include this species.



Spinning Head Breach (photo: CCC)



Tail breach

For more information, contact your local animal welfare organization or marine life protection and preservation society.