

## Minke Whales: Solitary Swimmers

The minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), also known as the Little Piked Whale, is the smallest of the rorqual family of whales. (Rorqual whales are identifiable by a dorsal fin, throat grooves and no teeth.) The minke is a fast swimmer and can be hard to spot at sea due to its small size and because it spends relatively little time at the surface and its blow is rarely visible.



*Photo courtesy of Whale Center of New England*

### Physical Description

**Color:** Minke whales are black to dark gray on top and white below. Areas of lighter gray are present on each side, one behind the flippers and one below and forward of the dorsal fin.

**Size:** Adult minkes measure 9 to 10 meters (29-33 ft) in length and weigh about 10 tons. Southern hemisphere minke whales are slightly larger than those found in the northern hemisphere.

**Head:** These whales have a narrow, pointed snout that often breaks the surface at an angle during surfacing. A single ridge runs from the tip of the upper jaw to the blowhole.

**Fins:** The minke's dorsal fin is tall and curved.

**Tail:** Tail flukes are broad and pointed at the tips with a notch in the center. Minke flukes are rarely shown when diving.



*Photo courtesy of Whale Center of New England*

*Minke whale jaw*

### Distribution

Little is known about the distribution of minke whales in the Caribbean, although sightings are occasionally made. While strandings of mostly immature minkes have been recorded in the Gulf of Mexico, no live whales have been observed, with the exception of a minke calf. Because strandings in the Gulf occur during winter and spring months, it is thought that these animals may be taking part in a northward migration from the Caribbean Sea or the open ocean, or they may represent strays from breeding grounds elsewhere in the western Atlantic.

Minke whales, including a mother and calf, have been observed on Anguilla Bank. A mother-calf pair also was observed in the Anegada Passage. Additional sightings have been made near Grand Turk and Caicos Islands, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and the coast of Dominica. It is possible there is a distribution of minke whales during the winter months in the North Atlantic and south and east of Bermuda. In addition, acoustical data suggests that these random sightings belie a larger presence of minkes in the region that have yet to be observed or studied.

### **Social Structure**

The minke tends to be a solitary animal, although in feeding grounds they may be seen in pairs, feeding on small prey beneath flocks of seabirds. In the North Atlantic, groupings of over 400 individuals may form on occasion.

### **Feeding and Behavior**

In the North Atlantic, minke whales feed on small schooling fish such as sand lance, mackerel and herring as well as krill. Instead of teeth, the upper jaws of minke whales have plates of baleen, a sieve-like device made of keratin that filters their prey. Minkes are known for their curiosity about ships, often approaching and crossing the bow or traveling alongside moving vessels.



*Minke whale surfacing*

*Photo courtesy of Whale Center of New England*

### **Interesting Facts**

*The minke life span is thought to be about 50 years.*

*Minke whales are sometimes preyed upon by killer whales, especially in parts of the southern hemisphere.*

*Some minke whales migrate long distances, while others may travel just within a limited area.*

### **Threats**

At present, more minke whales are hunted than any other whale species. Minkes are currently being hunted in the Antarctic by Japan, in the North Atlantic by Norway, and in Icelandic waters by the country of Iceland.

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