

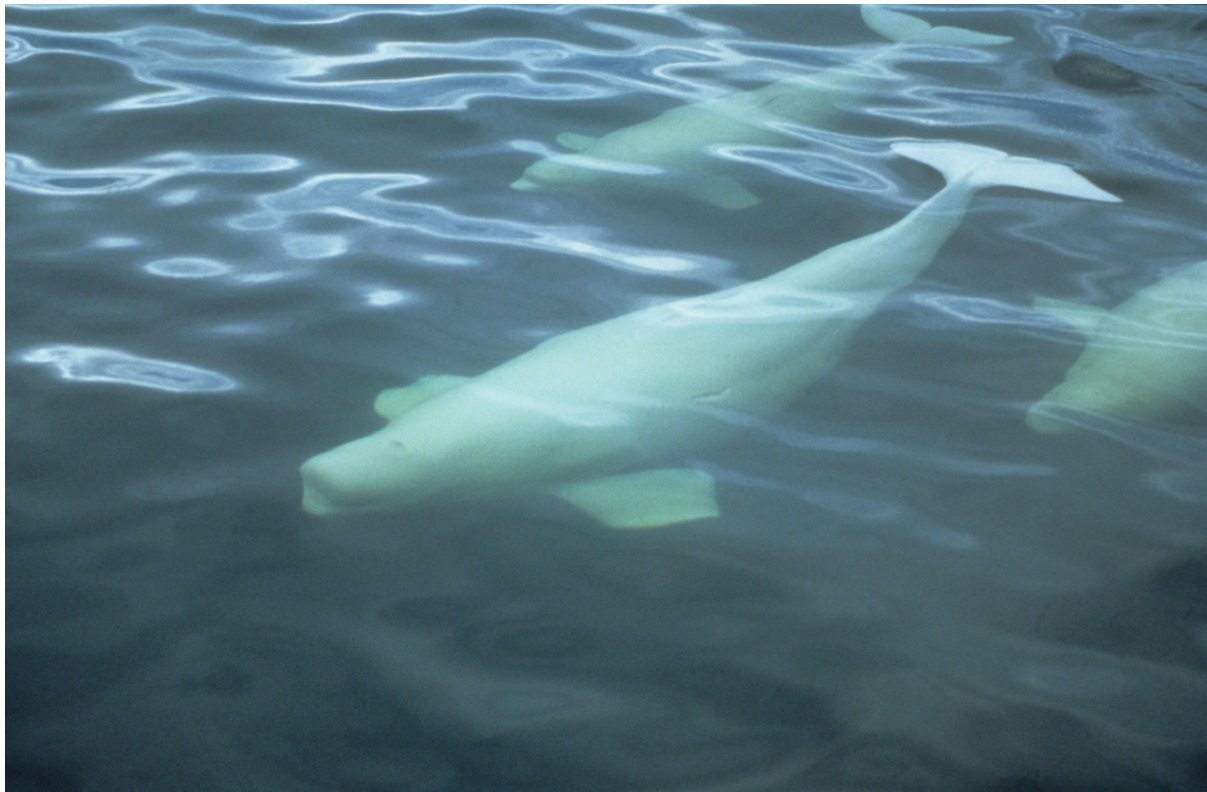


*SPECIES FACT SHEET –*

# **Beluga Whale**

## ***(Delphinapterus leucas)***

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*Photo © Thomas Henningsen*

## Measurements

### Length

Newborn: c. 1.6 m

Full grown: 3 – 5 m (male 25% larger than female)

### Weight

Newborn: 79 kg

Full grown: 400 – 1,000 kg (female),  
1,000 – 1,700 kg (male)

## Identification

### *At Sea*

Uniform white body, lacking dorsal fin. Young individuals varying shade of grey. Stout body with small head and pronounced melon with very short beak.

### *On Land*

Upper profile of the beluga skull is broad and flat with erupted teeth in both upper and lower jaw: total count 16-22/16-18 (upper/lower jaw). Teeth in lower jaw of mature animals may be very worn.

## Description

### *Head*

The head is small, bulbous, with short beak and a cleft upper lip. It looks unusually small compared to the rest of the body. The neck is highly flexible and visually distinct. There are 8-11 pairs of peg-like teeth in upper jaw, and 8-9 pairs in the lower jaw, often curved and worn. It has 40 teeth in total which, in older individuals, may be worn to gum line. It has a bulbous melon with a visible neck which is malleable (due to unfused neck vertebrae) as is the face and lips.

### *Body, Fin & Markings*

The body is stout, often with folds of fat along belly and sides. It is a distinctive pure white colour (summer) or yellowish. Calves are dark grey or grey-brown, often covered in blotches, becoming lighter with age. They can be confused with un-tusked narwhals. Flippers are short, rounded and progressively turned up at the tips in adults. The tail fluke is deeply notched, changing shape with age and developing a lobe on each side of the trailing edge. It lacks a dorsal fin but it does have a ridge in its place.

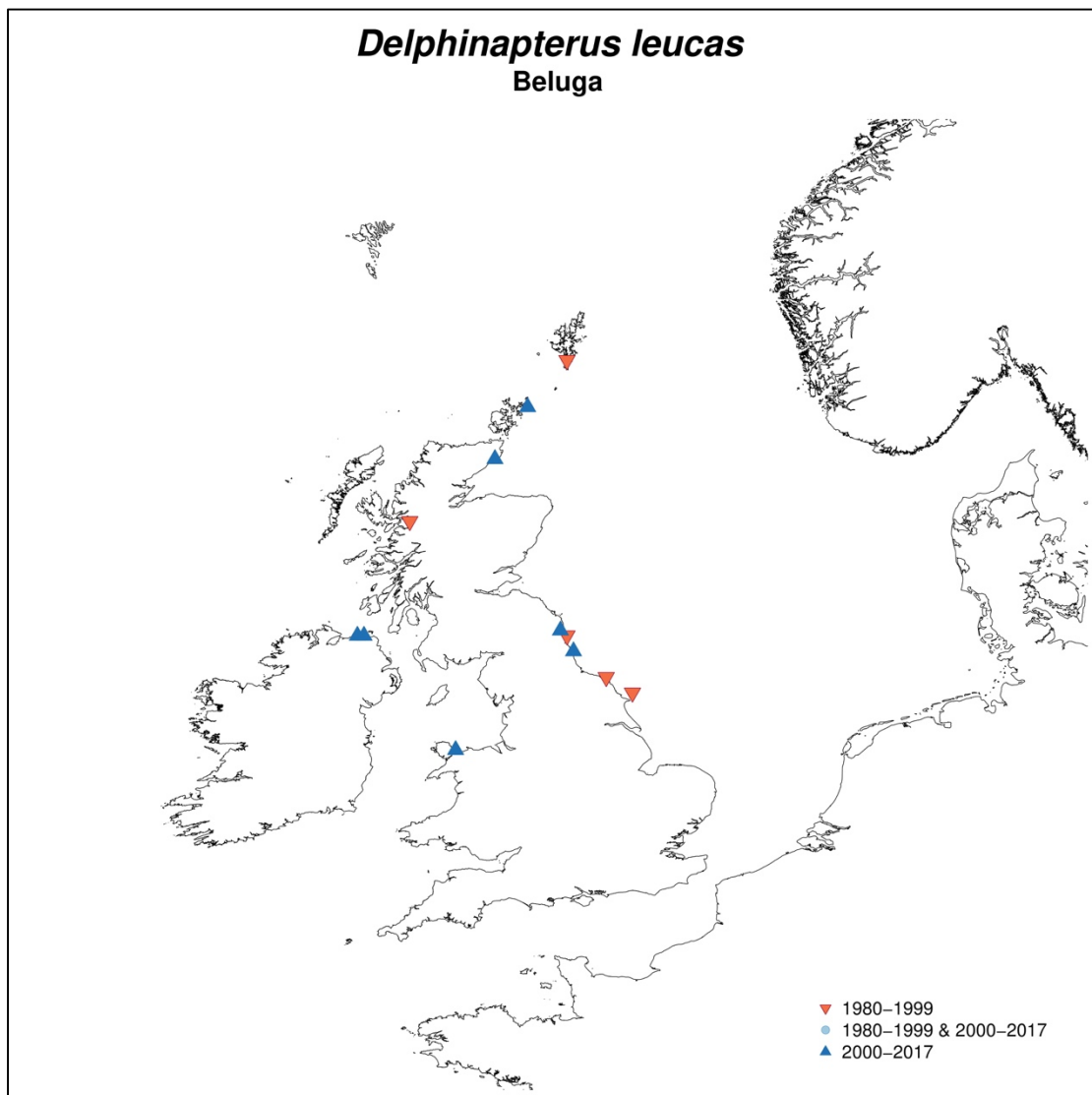
## Distribution

### *Global Distribution*

Belugas inhabit arctic and circumpolar waters, occurring at or near the ice-edge, between 50-80° N. The most southerly resident population is in the Gulf of Lawrence, Canada.

### *European Waters*

In Europe, belugas breed in the Barents Sea from which they may wander southwards west of Norway, resulting in occasional sightings in the British Isles.



*Beluga whale sightings around British Isles (Source: Evans & Waggitt, 2020)*

### *UK & Ireland*

The only stranding on the British coast occurred in October 1932 near Stirling. Sightings have been reported from the Northern Isles, the west coast of Scotland and the northern North Sea south to the Yorkshire coast. They have been reported in Ireland off Clare Island, County Mayo and in Cork harbour.

## Abundance

The total population estimate is c. 150,000 with 30 possible stocks around the Arctic.

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## Habitat

Belugas prefer cold marine waters near or within sea ice. They have been recorded entering estuaries and river mouths for short periods in summer. In spring, when sea ice recedes, belugas move to summering grounds, often forming dense concentrations in discrete coastal locations in waters that may be as shallow as 1-3 m.

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## Diet

Belugas feed primarily on fish, both neritic and pelagic (including arctic cod, polar cod, salmon, herring, capelin, smelt and saffron cod), depending on seasonal habitat. They are also known to feed on squid and octopus, and benthic crustaceans (shrimps and crabs).

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## Behaviour

Belugas are gregarious and rarely seen alone. The basic social unit is mother-calf pair but older calves may also be present. They are often found in groups of 2-20 of a similar age/reproductive status, with larger aggregations of hundreds to thousands. They are presumed to be promiscuous since there is no clear indication of a male-female bond and appear to only mix during breeding seasons. Belugas have an annual moult, entering sheltered shallow coastal and estuarine waters, where they may actively rub their skin on gravel substrates. They are not observed to breach but in large groups they may often spyhop, tail wave or flipper slap. Important forms of communications within herds include facial expressions and physical contact such as biting. They are slow swimming but a capable divers (up to c. 25 mins) with a maximum recorded depth of >1,100 m. Belugas are often referred to as the 'sea canary' due to their very vocal nature; during socialisation they make a variety of whistles, chirps and grunts that can be heard both above and below water. Fifty calls are recognised.

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## Life History

A single calf is born in late spring - early summer. The gestation period assumed to be c. 13 (12-15) months with lactation period of c. 2 years. The Calving interval is approximately 3 years, and mating is believed to occur in late winter- early spring. Both sexes reach sexual maturity at 5- 8 years. Life span thought to be at least 40 years.

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## Conservation Threats

Most populations have been hunted, in some areas unsustainably. They are kept in many captive facilities and trained for military purposes by US and Soviet navies. Other human impacts include habitat destruction and disturbance from vessel traffic as well as incidental

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capture in fishing gear and pollution. They are legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

**IUCN status:** Near Threatened.

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