



**SPECIES FACT SHEET –**

# **Fin Whale**

## ***(Balaenoptera physalus)***

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*Photo © Peter GH Evans*

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## Measurements

### Length

Newborn: c. 5.5-6.5 m  
Full grown: 18.5-24 m  
(females slightly larger than males)

### Weight

Newborn: 1,800-2,800 kg  
Full grown: Up to 80,000 kg

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## Identification

### *At Sea*

Very large whale (second largest in the world). On surfacing, the blow resembles an elongated inverted cone, rising to a height of 4-6 m, followed by a long shallow roll. The dorsal fin is variable in shape. Though small, it is taller than the blue whale's fin, much more obvious and backward-pointing, and placed two-thirds along the back.

### *On Land*

General form slender; 56-100 long throat grooves; 260-480 relatively short baleen plates (up to 72 cm long, 30 cm wide) on each side of upper jaw, striped alternately with bands of yellowish-white & bluish grey but entirely white or yellowish-white on front third of right side, and brownish-grey to greyish-white fringes.

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## Description

### *Head*

Like all rorquals, it has a slender streamlined body. The head resembles that of the blue whale, but is narrower and more V-shaped. Like the blue whale, there is a single prominent ridge along the middle of the top of the head, but it is not quite so flat. There is a characteristic extension of white, which is sometimes yellowish-tinged on the right side of the jaw to include the front baleen plates, mouth cavity, and lower lip on that side.

### *Body, Fin & Markings*

The head, back and flanks are uniformly dark grey or brown shading to white below. Sometimes one or more light-grey streaks or chevrons extending from head onto the top of the neck and upper back. The dorsal fin is prominent (>60 cm high) and backward pointing, slightly recurved at tip, and situated about 70% along the back. The flippers are long (up to 10% of body length) and tapered. There is a prominent ridge along the tail stock between the dorsal fin and flukes. The undersides of the tail flukes are white, but with a grey border.

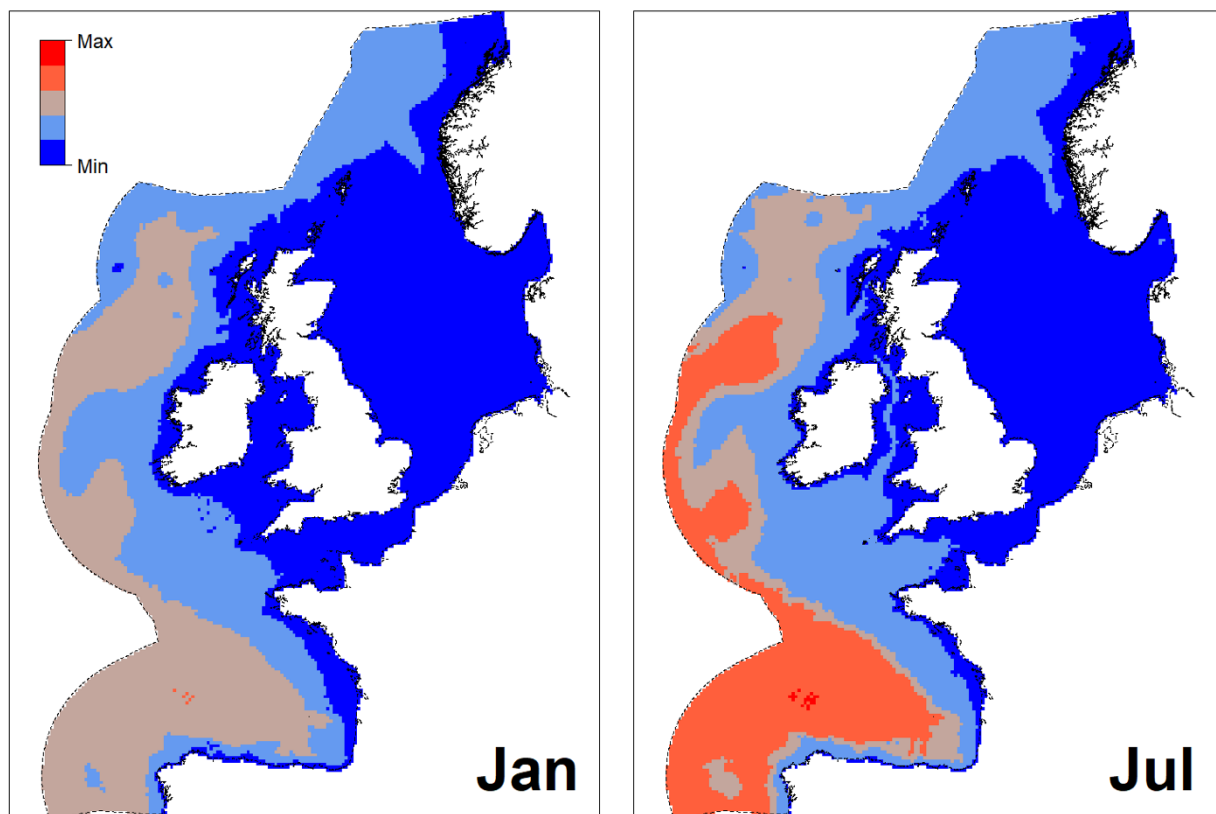
## Distribution

### *Global Distribution*

They have a worldwide distribution, mainly in temperate and polar seas of both hemispheres. They can be found in the North Atlantic, from Baffin Bay, Irminger Sea and Barents Sea south to Gulf of Mexico and Greater Antilles in the west, the Azores, and the Iberian Peninsula in the east.

### *European Waters*

They are uncommon but widely distributed in the deep waters of the central and eastern North Atlantic from Iceland, Svalbard, Jan Mayen, and NW Norway south to the Azores, Iberian Peninsula, and Mediterranean Sea, where a separate resident population exists.



*Overall Distribution of Fin Whale around British Isles (Source: Waggitt et al., 2020)*

### *UK & Ireland*

Although fin whales show seasonal migrations, spending the summer in polar regions and then moving south to winter in lower latitudes, a portion of the population (particularly males) remains through the winter even in cold temperate regions such as Iceland, Ireland, and the British Isles. In these waters, the species occurs mainly along the edge of the continental shelf. Areas of local importance include the Faroe-Shetland Channel, Rockall Trough, Porcupine Bank and the south coast of Ireland east into the St George's Channel. A few fin whales enter the North Sea and can be seen as far south as the Yorkshire coast.

## Abundance

The fin whale is the commonest large whale in the eastern North Atlantic, Bay of Biscay and Mediterranean. Combining surveys encompassing shelf waters of northern Norway to those of southern Portugal yielded an overall estimate of around 18,000 fin whales in 2016, with the largest numbers in the Bay of Biscay. Across the North Atlantic as a whole, there are probably in the region of 80,000-100,000 individuals.

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## Habitat

The species is most commonly recorded in deep waters (400-2,000 m depth) off the edge of the continental shelf. However, in some localities such as off southern Ireland and in the Celtic Deep within the St George's Channel, it occurs in waters of less than 200 m depth. It appears to favour areas with high topographic relief - underwater sills or ledges, upwellings and frontal zones between mixed and stratified waters with high zooplankton concentrations.

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## Diet

The fin whale is a pelagic feeder. Its diet consists mainly of planktonic crustaceans (particularly euphausiids) but it will also take small schooling fish including herring, capelin, sandeel, blue whiting, mackerel, and squid.

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## Behaviour

Fin whales tend to be more social than other whales, sometimes gathering in groups of 2-7 individuals, or more, although the typical group size is just 1-2 individuals. They can sometimes be seen in the North Atlantic in feeding aggregations numbering in the low tens, and associated with other species of cetacean, where prey is abundant. Individuals may change association with one another over short time periods, suggesting fluid relationships at least on the feeding grounds.

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## Life History

Sexual maturity is reached in fin whales around 6-10 years for females and 8-12 years for males, with a gestation period of 11-12 months. The breeding season is mainly November-February. Lactation is 5-7 months, with calves weaned around the end of their first migration to the high latitude feeding grounds in late spring/early summer. The calving interval is typically two years but may vary with food availability. Fin whales can live up to 90-100 years.

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## Conservation Threats

North Atlantic fin whales were hunted extensively during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to marked declines in the population. In the last half century or more, however, there is indication that the species is recovering, with the annual increase in the northern North Atlantic estimated in recent years to be around 4%. Besides direct takes in Icelandic waters, the main threats currently facing fin whales appear to be ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear, although disturbance from underwater noise may also impact individuals. The species is legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

**IUCN status:** Endangered.

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