



SPECIES FACT SHEET –

Humpback Whale

(Megaptera novaeangliae)



Photo © Peter GH Evans

Measurements

Length

Newborn: 4-4.6 m

Full grown: 16-17 m

(females c. 1-1.5 m longer than males)

Weight

Newborn: c.680 kg

Full grown: Up to 40,000 kg

Identification

At Sea

The humpback whale is one of the most distinctive of all rorquals. It has a much more robust body than other rorquals. Flippers are the longest of any cetacean. Its knobs (tubercles) on the head are also diagnostic. Habit of raising tail before a deep dive separates it from all rorquals except blue whale. Trailing edge of tail prominently serrated, frequently has much white on underside. Blow is typically low (up to 3 m high) and bushy, although sometimes can appear tall and more columnar; sometimes V-shaped.

On Land

The humpback whale has 270-400 baleen plates per side (up to 70 cm long × 30 cm wide), generally black with black or olive-black bristles. From 14 to 35 ventral grooves, up to 38 cm wide, extending almost from tip of lower jaw to umbilicus. The skull is easily distinguished from other rorquals by the relative narrowness of the snout (rostrum) compared to the cheek bone (zygomatic arch).

Description

Head

The head is relatively short, with a flattened top, covered by a number of fleshy knobs or tubercles. These extend over the lower jaw, which also has a rounded protuberance near the tip. The ridge along the midline of the top of the head is indistinct unlike in other rorquals.

Body, Fin & Markings

The body is very robust, black or dark grey in colouration with white undersides of variable extent. The dorsal fin is very variable both in size and shape, ranging from a small triangular knob to a larger distinctly recurved fin, placed nearly two-thirds along the back. The flippers are very long, nearly one-third the total body length. They are scalloped with bumps along the leading edge, and are largely white. The tail flukes are very broad and distinctly notched, but are commonly scalloped with knobs along the trailing edge giving an irregular appearance. The pigmentation of the underside of tail is variable, from all white to all black; these markings are unique to each individual. Females possess a grapefruit-sized lobe at the rear end of the genital slit; this is absent in males.

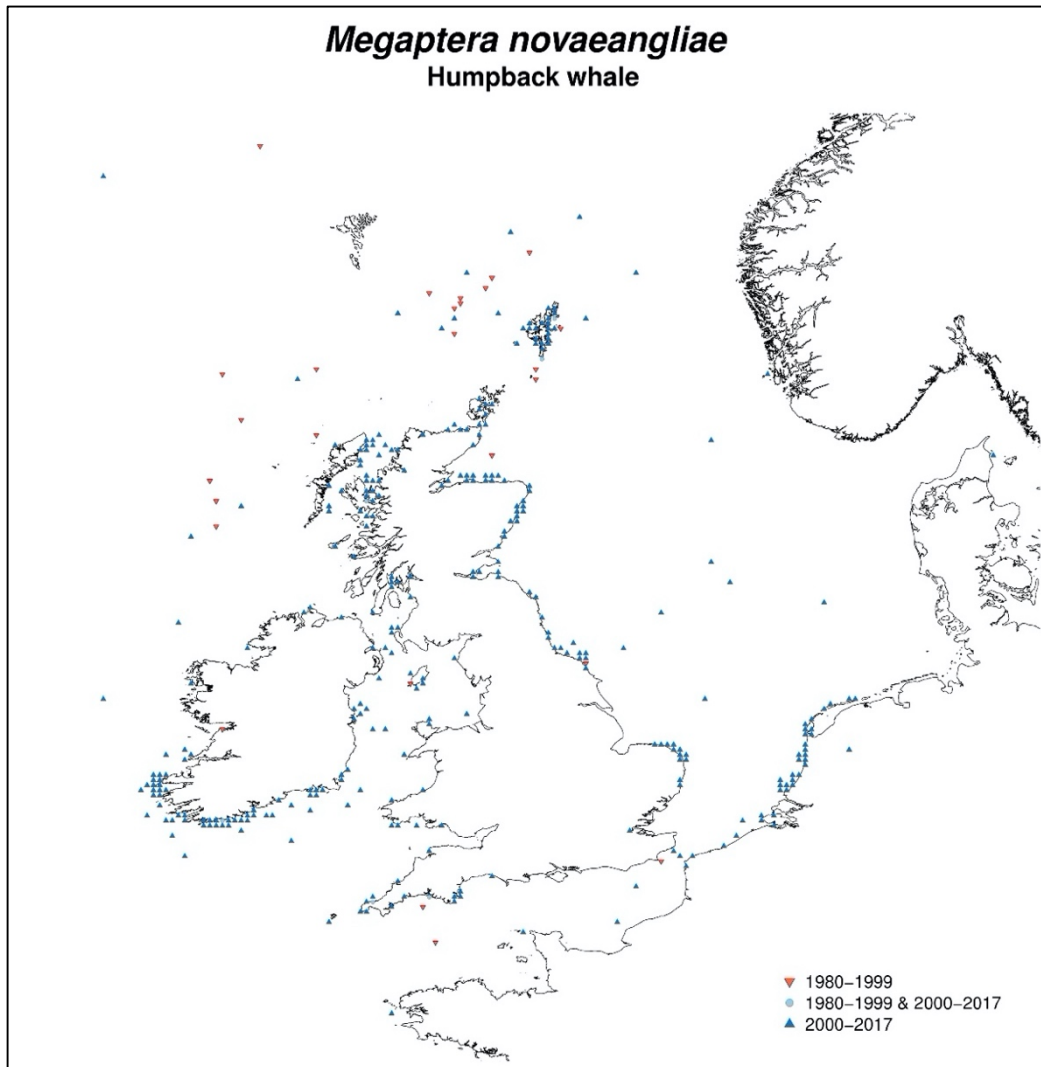
Distribution

Global Distribution

The humpback whale has a worldwide distribution in all seas, occurring even occasionally to the ice edge. The main feeding areas in the North Atlantic include the Gulf of Maine, Gulf of St Lawrence, Newfoundland/Labrador, Greenland, Iceland and Norway. The species is more common on the west side of the North Atlantic, spending the summer in Baffin Bay and along the New England coast. The eastern North Atlantic population migrates primarily to the West Indies, although some animals winter in the Cape Verde Islands. Despite fidelity to specific feeding grounds, however, whales from all North Atlantic areas appear to mix spatially and genetically in the West Indies in winter.

European Waters

In the eastern North Atlantic it occurs around Iceland, Norway, the British Isles and Ireland. In shelf waters of northern Europe, humpbacks occur mainly between May and September.



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

UK & Ireland

Sightings from around the British Isles and Ireland have increased markedly since the early 1980s, occurring in three main areas – The Northern Isles south to eastern England; the northern Irish Sea north to West Scotland; and the Celtic Sea between southern Ireland, SW Wales and SW England, with a few but increasing number of sightings and strandings also in the southern North Sea. From the British Isles and Ireland south to the Iberian Peninsula, sightings may occur at any time of year, including November to March. Sightings in Ireland, occurring mainly along the south coast, increase through the summer to peak in September to December, rapidly declining between January and May.

Abundance

Overall, the North Atlantic population has recovered well from exploitation, estimated at somewhere between 9,400 and 16,400 in 1992, with the great majority occurring in the west central part. In 2007, around 10,000 were estimated in the region of Iceland and the Faroes. Surveys in Norwegian waters between 2002 and 2015, yielded a total estimate of around 7,350 animals, mainly around Bear Island and in the northern Barents Sea. There are no abundance estimates in the North Sea or Atlantic waters west of Ireland and the British Isles.

Range & Habitat

The humpback whale is strongly migratory (with journeys of almost 5,000 miles each way), feeding in summer in high latitudes, and mating and calving in winter in tropical waters, although a few overwinter on the feeding grounds. It frequently may be found in coastal waters.

Diet

The species has a generalist diet, feeding on euphausiids (krill) and various species of small schooling fish including herring, sprat, capelin, sand-eel, and mackerel.

Behaviour

There is no strongly organised social structure. They are typically found in small unstable groups or alone, although large feeding aggregations of 20 or more can occur in summer and large competitive groups of males can form around females in breeding areas. Humpbacks appear to be unique among large whales in their use of bubbles to corral or trap schooling fish. They blow nets, clouds, or curtains of bubbles around or below schools of fish, then lunge with mouths open into the centre of the bubble structure. Humpbacks are known for their frequent high energy aerial displays, which include breaching (particularly in their tropical breeding grounds), lobtailing and flipping; these behaviours occur at all times of year and in widely different contexts, and are likely to perform a variety of social or other functions.

Life History

Strongly seasonal, with most births in low latitudes in winter, and gestation between 11-11.5 months. The calving interval is typically 2–3 years, with occasional annual calving. The age at sexual maturity varies by population, from 4 to >10 years for both sexes. Longevity is not well known; it is at least 48 years, and possibly up to 80 years. The annual population growth rate is 3.1–6.5% in western North Atlantic, and annual adult mortality is 4-5%.

Conservation Threats

The conservation status of humpback whale is now rated Least Concern (IUCN). Once heavily exploited by whaling, their population reduced by >90%. They have been protected in the North Atlantic since 1955, and worldwide from 1966. Current threats to humpbacks include entanglement in fishing gear, ship strikes, and disturbance from underwater noise. The species is legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

IUCN status: Least Concern.

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