



SPECIES FACT SHEET –

Common Minke Whale
(Balaenoptera acutorostrata)



Photo © Peter GH Evans

Measurements

Length

Newborn: c. 2.8 m

Full grown: Up to 8.8 m

(females c. 0.7 m longer than
males)

Weight

Newborn: c. 450 kg

Full grown: c. 9,200 kg

Identification

At Sea

Inconspicuous (often unseen) vertical blow 2-3 m high almost simultaneous with fin, before relatively arched roll. Erect recurved dorsal fin nearly two-thirds along back. White band across flippers. May confuse with immature sei whale or northern bottlenose whale unless head shape or flippers seen.

On Land

General form slender; 50-70 moderately short throat grooves, often extending just past the flippers; 231-285 short (up to 20 cm long, 12 cm wide) yellowish white (black or streaked towards back) baleen plates with fine, white fringes.

Description

Head

The head is more pointed and triangular than other rorquals. There is a single prominent ridge along the middle of the top of the head forward of the blowhole. Occasionally there is a light chevron on the back behind the head, as in the fin whale. The mouthline curls down towards the gape below the eye.

Body, Fin & Markings

The body is slimmer than other rorquals such as fin and sei whales, with a relatively tall, recurved dorsal fin, nearly two-thirds along the back. Only under particular atmospheric conditions is the blow seen clearly, occurring almost simultaneously with the appearance of the fin. Otherwise the head, back and upper flanks are dark-grey to black, but with areas of light-grey often on the flanks, one just above and behind the flippers and the other in front of and below the dorsal fin. The slim, pointed flippers each have a distinctive transverse white band, which sometimes extends over almost the entire upper surface. A lack of white markings on the pectoral fin distinguishes the Antarctic species from the common species.

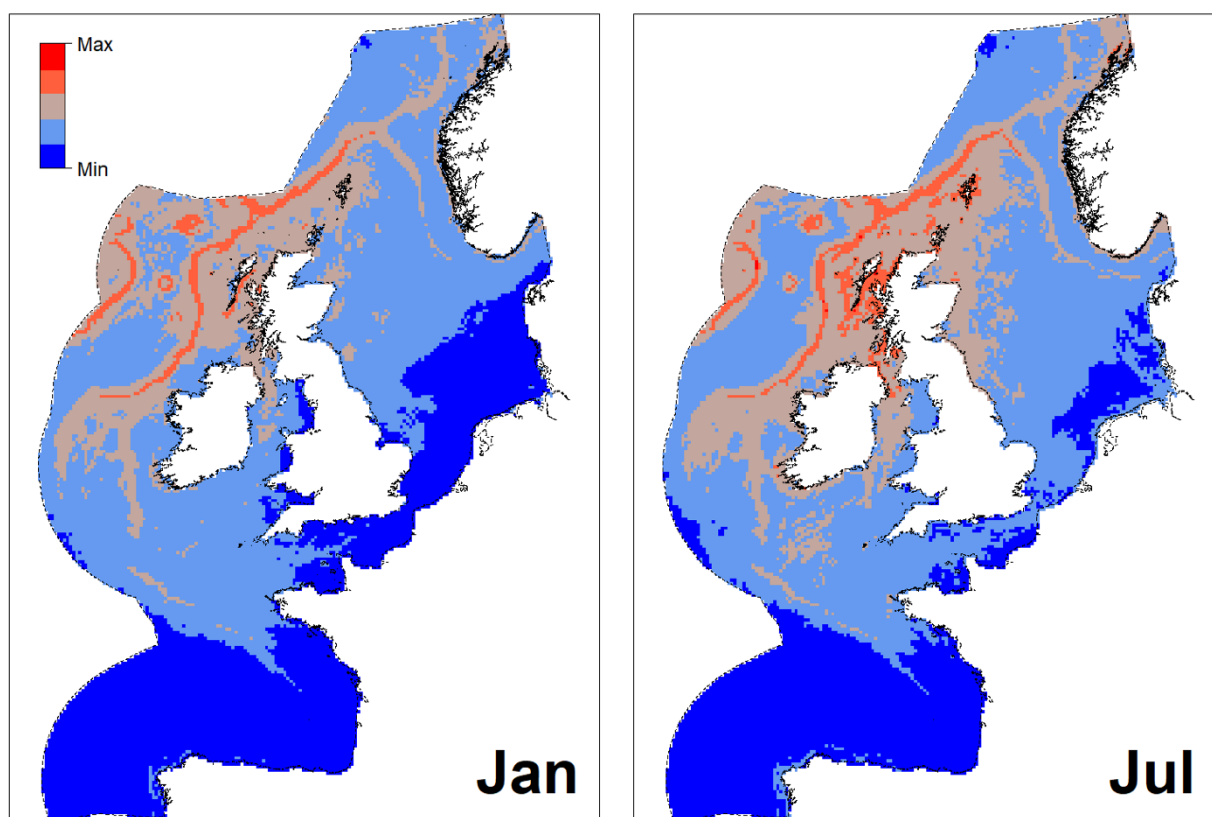
Distribution

Global Distribution

The species has a cosmopolitan distribution from the tropics to the ice edge in both hemispheres, though more uncommon in equatorial waters.

European Waters

Widespread in the central and eastern North Atlantic from Iceland, Norway and the Barents Sea south to SW Portugal, mainly out to the edge of the continental shelf. Present also in the central and northern North Sea, but largely absent from the deep areas of the Bay of Biscay, and only casual visitors to Inner Danish waters, the Baltic, and the western Mediterranean.



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

UK & Ireland

Around the British Isles and Ireland, the highest numbers occur off the north and west coasts of Scotland and in the Hebrides, off the west and south coasts of Ireland, in the central part of the Irish Sea including the Celtic Deep, and in the northern and central North Sea including around the Dogger Bank; it is rare in the southernmost North Sea and eastern half of the English Channel.

Abundance

Surveys between 2008 and 2013 for the central and north-east areas of the northern North Atlantic indicated a combined population of c. 140,000 animals. Further south, a large-scale survey conducted in 2016, encompassing the North-west European continental shelf including the North Sea, English Channel, and Celtic Sea, estimated a population of just over 14,000 animals, numbers greatest in shelf waters of the central and northern North Sea, and west of Britain. Surveys in the North Sea suggest no significant change in numbers between 1994, 2005 and 2016. Recent surveys in 2015 around Iceland and the Faroe Islands indicated a population of around 42,000 animals, three times larger than the estimated population around the British Isles.

Habitat

It occurs mainly over the continental shelf of temperate and subarctic regions, including bays, fjords and other inlets. It will often feed around banks and in areas of upwelling or strong currents around headlands or small islands, primarily during summer.

Diet

It is the most catholic feeder of the rorquals, a meso- and benthopelagic feeder. In the northern hemisphere, it takes mainly fish (sandeel, herring, mackerel, sprat, capelin, cod, whiting, haddock); however, it also takes euphausiids and copepods, especially at higher latitudes.

Behaviour

Usually seen singly or in pairs, it will sometimes aggregate into groups of 10-20 individuals when feeding. Evidence from recognisable individuals indicates seasonal site fidelity over a small geographic range. It will frequently approach vessels, and bow and stern riding is not unusual. Breaching is also not uncommon. It may release bubbles under the surface, possibly to aid prey capture. It frequently feeds in association with other cetacean species, e.g. harbour porpoise, white-beaked and Atlantic white-sided dolphin, and humpback whales.

Life History

This species reaches sexual maturity around 6 years in females and 7 years in males. The gestation period is c. 10-11 months. Lactation lasts for 5-6 months, and the calving interval is 1-2 years. The life span is 40-50 years, but possibly longer. Mating and calving are thought to be mainly in winter months between October and March. Individuals summering at higher latitudes appear to migrate southwards to breed, although some (e.g. around British Isles and Ireland) remain year-round, possibly with some movement offshore.

Conservation Threats

In recent years, between 600 and 800 minke whales on average have been killed annually in Norwegian waters. Threats to the species besides hunting include entanglement in fishing gear (particularly creel lines), prey depletion, ship strikes, and underwater noise disturbance. The species is legally protected in British and Irish waters.

IUCN status: Least Concern.

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