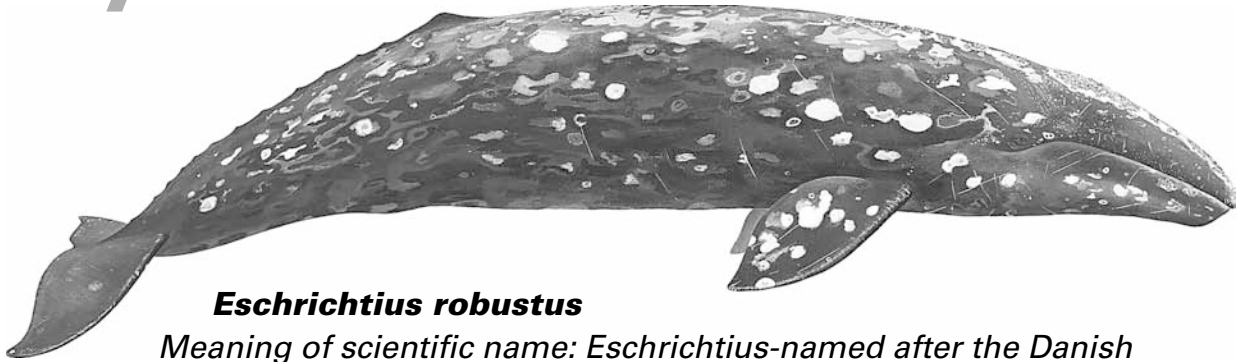


Gray Whale



Eschrichtius robustus

Meaning of scientific name: Eschrichtius-named after the Danish professor who worked with these animals; robustus-strong

Description

Gray whales are medium sized whales, reaching up to 45 feet (14 m) in length, with the females usually being larger than the males. They are gray with white patches, which mostly consist of areas where barnacles and lice have attached themselves to the whales. In fact, they carry over 400 pounds of barnacles and whale lice. Gray whales have no dorsal (back) fins. Instead, they have a low hump and a series of six to twelve knuckles or bumps. Gray whales are baleen whales, and each has approximately 300 plates of cream-colored baleen hanging from its upper jaw. Two to five throat creases allow their throats to expand during feeding. Sparse hairs are found on the snout, especially in young whales. Their blows are usually low and puffy or heart-shaped.

Range/Habitat

Gray whales are found only in the Pacific Ocean, with a population of approximately 26,000. The largest group of gray whales summers north of Alaska in the Bering and Chukchi Seas and winters in the waters of Baja California, Mexico. Another group in the Pacific, found in the waters of Korea and Japan, is close to extinction with only 100-250 individuals. Another group of gray whales once lived in the North Atlantic Ocean and became extinct in the 17th century, due to hunting. Gray whales generally stay around the continental shelf and are truly a coastal species.

Behavior

Gray whales have one of the longest migrations of any mammal. During summer, they live in the Arctic in areas rich in their food, bottom-dwelling organisms. As fall approaches, there is less sunlight, less food, and the water turns cold. This is when the whales travel to Baja California, where they enter lagoons to give birth and mate. Gray whales can be seen passing by California in December and January during their southern migration, and again in March and April on their northern journey.

Since gray whales migrate relatively close to shore, whalewatching has become very popular. Many opportunities are available for viewing gray whales from coastal cliffs and headlands or from whalewatching boats. In the seventies, "friendly whales" were first encountered in San Ignacio Lagoon in Baja California, Mexico. Here, gray whales will sometimes swim near small boats and allow themselves to be touched. Concern has grown about the impact of boat traffic around whales, and the number of boats allowed in all of the breeding lagoons is restricted. Along the migration route, boats' proximity to whales is also limited.

Gray whales feed by sucking in bottom-dwelling animals, mostly amphipods (which are related to shrimp). Muddy patches of water are often seen in places where gray whales are feeding. They feed primarily in the Arctic, although some have been observed feeding during the migration.

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Mating and Breeding

Female gray whales usually give birth every two to three years, and their pregnancies last twelve months. Newborn calves average 16 feet (4.9 m) in length and weigh about 1,500 pounds (680 kg). Calves are weaned at about eight months, after they have journeyed with their mothers back to the northern feeding grounds.

Status

Gray whales have returned from the brink of extinction. In the late 1800s, the gray whale breeding grounds were discovered, and whalers killed a large percentage of the population. The drop in population made it no longer profitable to hunt gray whales; they were left alone and their numbers recovered. However, the early 1900s brought the invention of factory ships, which processed whales aboard the vessels. This new technology allowed intensive hunting on the grays once again, and their population again dangerously dropped to probably fewer than 2,000 individuals. Protection finally came in 1946 through an international agreement to stop hunting them. Since that time, the population has grown to approximately 26,000, similar to what it was before modern-day whaling. As a result of this population recovery, gray whales were removed from the endangered species list in 1994.

In 1998 the International Whaling Commission reinstated a treaty made between the U.S. Government and the Makah Indians in 1855, giving the Native American group the permission to hunt gray whales. Under the new agreement, the Makah are able to take 20 whales through the year 2004. After a 70-year ban on gray whale hunting, the Makah took their first whale in May of 1999. The revival of the treaty is very controversial. Since the Makah have been allowed to continue gray whale hunting for its importance to their native culture, the environmentalists are calling for no exceptions to the hunting ban. This is because of the fear that the treaty revival will start a trend toward hunting other marine mammals.

At The Marine Mammal Center

In May of 1994 a gray whale named "Petaluma Pete" was observed in five different locations (Petaluma, Larkspur, Alameda, Redwood City and Santa Clara) in the San Francisco Bay. Three weeks after the first sighting the whale was found stuck in the mud of a slough two miles from the Bay. After three days of slow progress toward Bay waters the whale died of complications due to exhaustion, starvation and congestive pneumonia. Petaluma Pete's skeleton was preserved and has been used to educate thousands about gray whales.

Each year during gray whales' migration, a few whales enter the bay. Most return to the ocean and their migration, but some die and wash up on shore. When this happens, scientists from The Marine Mammal Center and other organizations perform a necropsy (autopsy) to determine the cause of death. Since 1997 the number of dead gray whales washing ashore along the North Pacific coast has gradually increased, with 269 reported along North America and Mexico in 1999. In 2000, more dead gray whales washed ashore near the San Francisco Bay than had in previous years. Necropsies were performed on those that were accessible and in good enough condition, but no one factor was linked to the cause of these deaths. In 2001, only 13 gray whale deaths were reported. However, scientists from The Marine Mammal Center and other concerned organizations are continuing to investigate the deaths of the previous two years.