



Whales of Spitsbergen

These mysterious and often-elusive ocean giants rarely reveal much of their hidden lives but are an incredible and fascinating group. Whilst some live for centuries, others represent the largest living things seen on the face of the Earth. Whether singing haunting melodies which travel for thousands of miles or swimming faster than most boats can move, the whales are full of surprises and are a wondrous part of any visit the frozen North.

Blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*)

Measurements: length 25 – 33.5 m
weight up to 190 tonnes



Well known for being the largest animals to have ever existed, the facts on blue whales are astounding; with a tongue the size of an elephant and a heart the size of a car, these magnificent whales feed exclusively on krill and are able to consume over 4 tonnes of this small, shrimp-like crustacean in a day. With an average lifespan of 80 – 90 years, blue whales also produce the lowest sounds of any whale, vocalizing as low as 14 Hz at volumes up to 200 decibels. Sounds at this frequency and intensity can travel for thousands of miles in the deep ocean. These sounds may be used to communicate with other whales and their low frequency pulses may be used to navigate by creating a sonic image of distant oceanic features.

Fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*)

Measurements: length 16 – 20 m
weight 4 – 10 tonnes



Fin whales are both a pelagic and nearshore species, sometimes frequenting waters as shallow as 30 m. Although generally brownish grey above and white below, fin whales have an unusual asymmetrical colouration; with the lower jaw white on the right side and dark on the left. Fin whales are second only to blue whales in length but appear thinner and more 'slight'. These sociable whales are typically seen in pods of 5 - 7 individuals but groups as large as 300 have been observed migrating together. The fin whale is one of the fastest of the cetaceans and reach speeds of 37 km/hr. They are also known to breach (leap) completely out of the water.

Minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)



Measurements: length 6.9 – 7.4 m
weight 4 – 10 tonnes

Whereas minke whales in the southern hemisphere appear to feed solely on krill, those in the northern hemisphere are known to take cod, herring and sardines in addition to krill. Although not considered strictly 'coastal', minke whales are rarely seen more than 150 km from shore and are commonly seen within bays, fjords and lochs and travel further into Arctic ice fields than any other baleen whale. With a dark upper body and a white underside, a broad white 'edge' runs along the dorsal side of the flippers. The head is pointed and narrow and the dorsal fin is characteristically high and curved. Although minke whales have a worldwide distribution, they prefer cooler regions to tropical areas.

Sei whale (*Balaenoptera borealis*)



Measurements: length 16 – 20 m
weight 4 – 10 tonnes

The sei whale is a medium-sized species, with dark steely-grey body with irregular white markings along its ventral (under) side. Within their northern range, sei whales mate between November and February, giving birth after an 11 - 12 month gestation period to a single calf. However, research has shown that whereas females tended to give birth every other year, the reproductive rate in sei whales is steadily increasing – which may be due to the pressure caused by human hunting; changing rates in reproduction. These whales have been estimated to live to an age 70 years and are known for their incredible speed (up to 50 km/hr) and their shallow diving.

Humpback whale (*Balaenoptera novaeangliae*)



Measurements: length 12 – 16 m
weight 30 – 50 tonnes

Humpback whales are one of the most enigmatic (and acrobatic) of the cetaceans; often 'tail-lobbing', 'flipper-slapping' and performing full breaches out of the water. Famed for their haunting underwater song, humpback whale song is a fascinating example of culture within the animal kingdom: within any given population of humpback whales, all males sing the same song. Songs between populations however vary enormously and each population's song changes gradually over a period of several years. Each song lasts typically between 15 - 20 minutes and is then repeated for several hours. Singing is thought to be a part of the species' breeding behaviour or a form of territorial behaviour.