

Hélis : A Wayward St. Lawrence Beluga... in the Delaware River, Near Philadelphia!

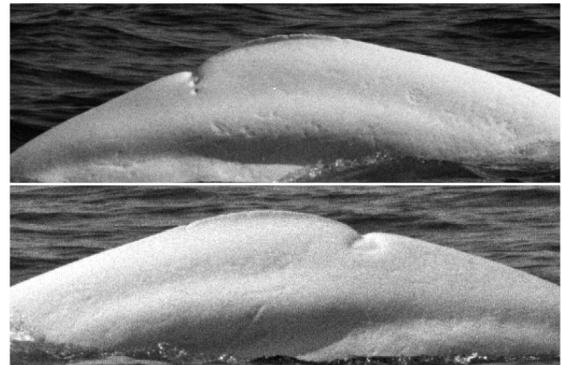
Last Tuesday, April 12, a beluga was sighted in the Delaware River, right in the middle of the city of Trenton, New Jersey, nearly 200 kilometres from the Atlantic coast! Hundreds of curious onlookers gathered along the riverbanks and aboard recreational boats to catch a glimpse of the whale. Photos from a variety of sources enabled GREMM researchers to identify the exceptional visitor as DI 018, or Hélis, a St. Lawrence beluga.

Hélis was one of the first St. Lawrence belugas to have been photo-identified by GREMM researchers as part of a scientific program for the long-term monitoring of the St. Lawrence beluga population, which was launched in 1985. At the time of first meeting, DI 018 (DI for the initials of the beluga's Latin name, *Delphinapterus leucas*) was already white in colour and therefore an adult; young belugas are greyish brown. DI 018 is thus nearly 30 years old.

In 1989, as part of the Adopt a Beluga program launched by the St. Lawrence National Institute of Ecotoxicology (SLINE), DI 018 was adopted by the students and staff of the biology module at Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, who gave him the name of Hélis. His name was inspired by the large scar on his back in the shape of a pale helix. This scar was probably caused by a propeller when he was quite young. The wound had already fully healed by 1986!

Hélis is not the first beluga to be spotted on the eastern coast of the U.S. Belugas have been observed as far as Long Island in the state of New York. However, Hélis' presence in the Delaware River constitutes the southernmost observation of the species. The beluga is an Arctic species; beluga populations are found from Greenland to Alaska, in Québec's Far North and in the Canadian Arctic. The St. Lawrence population is located at the southernmost limit of this species' normal range. The origin of these wanderers cannot always be confirmed, but such observations make it possible to better understand the movements of this Arctic species. In summer 2002, another beluga was photographed in Massachusetts Bay, near Cape Cod, and was eventually identified as an adult female from the St. Lawrence (DI 481).

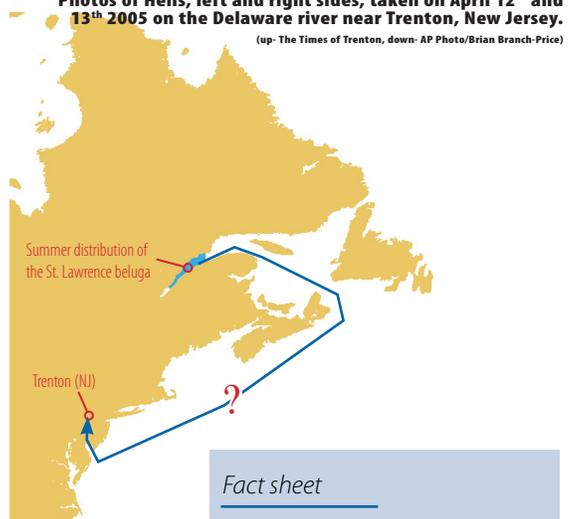
Although the presence of wild animals well outside their normal range is a natural phenomenon and not inherently worrisome, these wanderers can sometimes find themselves in unfortunate situations. This is the case for Hélis. Hélis' chances of returning to the sea and rejoining his pod are intimately connected to the attention he will receive, or rather not receive. As much as possible, Hélis should be left alone and not approached.



Photos of Hélis, left and right sides, taken on August 4th 1990 near the mouth of the Saguenay river, St. Lawrence estuary. (GREMM)



Photos of Hélis, left and right sides, taken on April 12th and 13th 2005 on the Delaware river near Trenton, New Jersey. (up- The Times of Trenton, down- AP Photo/Brian Branch-Price)



Fact sheet

Name : Hélis
Number : DL018
Sex : Male
Estimated age : 27 year +
Population : St. Lawrence
First sighting : Juin 1986
Last sighting : August 2003

The St. Lawrence beluga

The St. Lawrence beluga inhabits a heavily industrialized area: the waters that provide access to the heart of North America. Decimated in the past by commercial whaling, the beluga is now threatened by the spin-offs of industrialization. The St. Lawrence population is made up of a mere 1000 animals and is showing no signs of increasing. The examination of beluga carcasses recovered from the shores of the St. Lawrence—a programme initiated in 1982—has revealed disturbing concentrations of toxic chemicals in this population. Contamination has been determined to be a potentially limiting factor for its recovery. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) listed the St. Lawrence beluga as an “endangered” population in 1983. In 2004, this status has changed for “threatened” because of new quantitative classification criteria. This designation confers a high level of protection.



Beluga world distribution

To learn more

About the beluga : <http://www.whales-online.net/eng/FSC.html?sct=1&pag=1-3-2-3.html>

Science and conservation : <http://www.whales-online.net/eng/FSC.html?sct=2&pag=2>

Photo-identification program of the St. Lawrence beluga

Over 300 beluga whales have been photo-identified since 1985. Individual files based on these observations provide ways to study the belugas' habits, reproductive success, and social organization. The genetic analysis of biopsies of known belugas offers information on their gender and family structures.

In short

There is segregation within the beluga whale population. Females and young generally use the upstream portion of the summer range. They form three communities, each occupying its own territory. Associations between females of the same community are variable. As for the adult males, they frequent the central and downstream portions of their summer distribution area. There are two networks of males subdivided into clans. These clans are small groups of males that develop stable associations.

To learn more

Research projects : <http://www.whales-online.net/eng/FSC.html?sct=2&pag=2-1.html>

Research techniques : <http://www.whales-online.net/eng/FSC.html?sct=2&pag=2-2.html>



GREMM

Le Groupe de Recherche et d'Éducation sur les Mammifères Marins

108, de la cale sèche
Tadoussac (Québec) G0T 2A0
CANADA
info@gremm.org
<http://www.gremm.org>

GREMM is a non-profit organization. Founded in 1985, it is dedicated to scientific research on the marine mammals of the St. Lawrence and education for the conservation of the marine environment.



INSTITUT NATIONAL
D'ÉCOTOXICOLOGIE
DU SAINT-LAURENT
ST. LAWRENCE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE
OF ECOTOXICOLOGY

3974, Saint-Hubert
Montréal (Québec) H2L 4A5
CANADA
pbeland@inesl.org
<http://www.inesl.org>

St. Lawrence National Institute of Ecotoxicology

The SLINE is a registered charity involved in education, conservation and research on aquatic and marine ecosystems, and is primarily concerned with marine mammals.



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