



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

Description

Humpbacks are the most familiar large whales – they are well studied, frequently photographed, and a main attraction of whale watching boats. Humpbacks can be easily identified by their long flippers which can be up to one-third the length of the body, and inspired their scientific name which means “big winged New Englander”. Humpbacks have a dorsal fin and a noticeable hump on their back as they arch to dive. They can be individually recognized by the pigmentation pattern on the underside of their flukes (tails) which they frequently raise when diving.

Habitat and Distribution

Humpback whales are distributed worldwide, primarily along the coast and continental shelf. They migrate from summer feeding grounds in mid to high latitudes to winter mating and calving grounds in tropical and subtropical waters.

Sounds

The most remarkable sound produced by humpback whales is the song made by males on the mating grounds to attract females and possibly to establish dominance among other males. This song is specific to the population and changes over time. Humpbacks also make a variety of other social sounds including upsweeps, grunts, moans, squeaks, wops, and grumbles.

Feeding

Humpback whales feed alone or cooperatively on krill and small schooling fish such as herring, capelin, and sand lance.

Threats

Current threats include entanglement in fishing gear, ship strikes, whale watch harassment and loss of habitat.

Fun Fact

Humpbacks sometimes “bubble feed” blowing a ring of bubbles underwater to corral fish, and then dive through the middle to scoop them up!



Family: Balaenopteridae
Population: < 50,000
Status: Least Concern
Length: 52 – 56 feet
Weight: Up to 45 tons