

Fin Whale

Fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*) are found in polar, temperate, and subtropical waters worldwide. Within the U.S. waters in the Pacific, they are found seasonally off the coast of North America and Hawaii and in the Bering Sea during the summer. The population structure is not well understood for Fin whales in the North Pacific, but for management purposes they have been divided into three stocks: Alaska (North Pacific), California/Oregon/Washington and Hawaii.

In Alaska, fin whales are found as far north as the western Chukchi Sea, the Bering Sea, and throughout the Gulf of Alaska. They are rare offshore in southeastern Alaska and have not returned to protected inshore areas of southeastern Alaska, where they were common prior to commercial whaling.

General description: The large sleek body of the Fin Whale is dark grey with a light underside and a light grey on the dorsal neck surface. Unlike other whales, the Fin Whale has unique asymmetrical jaw coloration with a white lower right jaw and dark grey lower left jaw. The rostrum is V-shaped and flat with up to 475 two foot (0.6 m) long grey or white baleen plates per side of mouth. There are approximately 55-100 ventral throat grooves, which allow the mouth and throat to expand during feeding. On the back of the Fin Whale, there is a distinct ridge that extends from the dorsal fin to broad triangular tail flukes. The dorsal fin can be up to 2 ft tall (0.6 m) located two-thirds distance between the head and tail. This blunt tipped fin is falcate (hook) in shape and has a steep backward angle; it breaks the water surface shortly after a blow. Fin whales are second in size only to the Blue Whale. The average adult male Fin Whale is 70 ft (21 m) long and weighs 45 tons. Adult females average 73 ft (22 m) and 45 tons. At birth, Fin whales can weigh up to 3600 lbs (1600 kg) and has a length of 21 ft (6.5 m).

Food habits: Fin whales prey upon a variety of small schooling fish and invertebrates by gulping large swarms while swimming on their sides. Feeding primarily occurs during the summer in cold polar areas.

Life history: Fin whales are sexually mature at 6-12 years of age. Breeding occurs in the winter where a single calf is born every 2+ years after a gestation period of 11-12 months. Lactation usually lasts 6 months. Although not definitive, these whales may live to be 100 years old.

Seasonal movements: Fin whales are migratory. In general, the spring and early summer are spent in cold, high latitude feeding waters. In the fall populations tend to return to low latitudes for the winter breeding season, though may remain in residence in their high latitude ranges if food resources remain plentiful. In the eastern Pacific, Fin whales typically spend the winter off the central California coast and into the Gulf of Alaska. In summer, they migrate as far north as the Chukchi Sea to their summer feeding grounds in the Gulf of Alaska, Prince William Sound along the Aleutian Islands, and west of Kodiak Island.

Behavior: Fin whales are typically seen in groups of 6-10 animals, although they can also be found in pairs or even alone, and feeding aggregations as large as 100 have been seen in the Bering Sea when prey were plentiful. They are among the fastest of the great whales, with swimming speeds up to 23 miles per hour (37 km/h). Unlike some other whales, fin whales rarely show their flukes prior to a dive. These cetaceans produce 4-5 blows at 10-20 second intervals, then dive for 5-15 min with a maximum depth of 1000 ft (300 m).

Population size: The worldwide population estimate of fin whales is approximately 75,000 with about 16,000 in the eastern North Pacific. Recent, survey-based estimates found at least 5700 west of Kodiak Island including the central and eastern Aleutian Islands and the Bering Sea. They were particularly abundant near the Semidi Islands and were nearly five times more common in the central-eastern Bering Sea compared with the southeastern Bering Sea. Most sightings in the central-eastern Bering Sea occurred in a zone of particularly high productivity along the continental shelf break.

Predators, hunting, and other mortality: Between 1925 and 1975, almost 48,000 fin whales were reportedly killed by commercial whalers in the North Pacific, including Alaskan waters; commercial hunting has been banned since. Subsistence hunters in Alaska and Russia do not harvest Fin whales, but they are taken for subsistence off Greenland in the North Atlantic. Over the last decade, there has only been one fin whale reported killed by humans. In 1999 a fin whale was accidentally, fatally entangled in a fishing trawl. Although a few strandings have been reported in recent years, none have shown evidence of fisheries interactions.

The fin whale is listed as "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and therefore, listed as "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972.

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