

BOWHEAD WHALE (BALAENA MYSTICETUS) FEEDING NEAR POINT BARROW,
ALASKA, DURING THE 1985 AND 1986 SPRING MIGRATIONS

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Researchers have thought that bowhead whales seldom, if ever, feed during the spring and that, unless their path is blocked by ice, they seldom deviate from active migration. However, during the spring of 1985 we saw bowhead whales interrupt their migration and feed intensively in an area southwest of Point Barrow. All three bowheads harvested near the village of Barrow had over 5 liters of pelagic zooplankton (calanoid copepods and euphausiids) in their stomachs. Over 60 whales were observed during the period 26 May through 6 June in a previously unreported behavior of diving repeatedly under the landfast ice and feeding in an area 11.2 km southwest of Point Barrow. Observers recorded times for dive, surfacing, and respiration intervals for these whales. The recorded times were significantly different from those of bowhead whales migrating past Point Barrow in the spring and from bowheads, whose major activity was feeding, recorded in the Canadian Beaufort Sea during the summer and fall. Feeding occurred in an area at least 20 kilometers long and over a time period of at least three weeks. We again observed bowhead whales from aerial surveys during June of 1986 repeatedly diving under landfast ice and feeding.

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