



WHALE OF A TALE

Regulations prohibit approaching whales too closely, but some cetaceans, especially humpbacks, will swim over to check out whale-watchers up close. Feeding grounds off the Kennebunks, Monhegan, and Bar Harbor let visitors meet whales without having to undertake a long ocean voyage.

Thar She Blows!

A day trip into the Gulf of Maine offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to witness the ocean giants who summer just off our coastline. Here's a whale primer of sorts to help you bone up on your baleen before you set out on the high seas.

EDITED BY JOSHUA F. MOORE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRET GILLIAM

Talk about hidden in plain sight. Whales are some of the largest creatures on Earth, and yet most people go their entire lives without ever seeing one up close. They don't know what they're missing. The Gulf of Maine happens to be home to a unique ecosystem that serves as one of the most abundant food sources for a whole variety of whale species, from the lumbering, corpulent North Atlantic right whale to the shy minke whale. Between May and November these ocean giants can be found gorging themselves on a series of undersea shoals and ridges just a few dozen miles off the Maine coast between Kittery and Eastport, providing a sea-level display like no other. Those people who own a yacht are sometimes lucky enough to float upon a pod or two on their own (though all mariners must observe federal guidelines to keep from affecting the whales' behavior).

Don't fret if you can't captain your own ship: the Maine coast is sprinkled with whale-watching boats that will let you spend a few hours with these impressive creatures from the deep, and we've included a list of where to find the boats. It's an experience you won't soon forget.

What to Look For

Individual humpback whales are identified by unique markings on the underside of their tail flukes, while finback whales are recognized by chevron markings behind their eyes, and North



Atlantic right whales have distinct callosities, or bulbous growths, on their snouts. The science of using such identifying marks was invented in the late 1970s by Scott Kraus, an undergraduate student at the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, and has been used to track whale migrations from Maine to the Caribbean and the Carolina coast of the United States. Today Allied Whale, a research program within the College of the Atlantic, maintains a photographic catalog of all whales in the Gulf of Maine, using images taken by many of the whale-watching boats that depart from places like Bar Harbor, Eastport, and Kennebunk. This record, a cetacean family album of sorts, allows researchers, whale-watching guides, and regular visitors to Maine to actually recognize individual whales year after year, even noticing changes as younger whales mature.

For Their Safety

Though the North Atlantic right whale is one of the largest creatures on the planet (the blue whale takes that top prize, and the finback comes in second), it is also one of the most vulnerable. There are just four hundred left in the world, with entanglements in fishing gear and ship strikes being the two most common human-caused mortality sources for whales, according to Dr. Sean Todd, director of Allied Whale in Bar Harbor. The federal government has instituted a variety of regulations to



protect them. Ships can approach no closer than five hundred yards to a North Atlantic right whale and must stay at least a hundred yards from humpbacks and finback whales. New requirements that lobstermen use sinking lines, instead of the more common floating type, for their traps are also designed to protect whales that might otherwise become entangled in them.

Where to Find Them

If the Caribbean is the whales' bedroom, Maine is their kitchen. Warmer southern waters are conducive to birthing and mating, but the frigid, nutrient-rich currents that wash into the Gulf of Maine and the region's tremendous tides create the ideal feeding ground for whales. "If you are a large, fat, blubbery forty-foot-long animal, when you open your mouth it had better be worth it," declares Dr. Sean Todd of Allied Whale. "So whales tend to eat in areas of densely aggregate prey, and there are not many places like that — but the Gulf of Maine is one of them." Shoals such as Jeffrey's Ledge, off Kittery, and the inner Schoodic Ridges, off Mount Desert Island, create a natural upwelling that sends schools of herring into the bubble nets (literally a cage of air that

humpbacks create to trap fish, allowing the whales to then rise open-mouthed and swallow the cage whole) of humpbacks, krill into the lunging maws of finbacks, and copepods toward the North Atlantic right whales. Some locations even offer the chance to see whales from dry land; Zack Klyver, who grew up in Eastport before heading to Bar Harbor to lead whale-watching trips, recalls observing feeding finbacks push schools of herring into Passamaquoddy Bay, turning the water black with the densely packed fish. Whales have been found in locations throughout Maine, though finbacks seem to favor the areas around Mount Desert Rock and humpbacks are more numerous around Jeffrey's Ledge. In recent years fishermen and the occasional whale-watching boat have even reported spotting orca whales (commonly known as "killer whales" due to their hunting prowess, including feeding on other whales), a species more commonly associated with the Pacific Northwest.

Brains and Blubber

More than a few sightseers have been alarmed at how interested some whales, especially humpbacks, can be by the

presence of whale-watching boats. Though captains are restricted in their ability to approach whales, often humpbacks will swim within a few yards of the ships and playfully slap their pectoral fins on the surface of the water, use their tails to create a surprising saltwater shower for onlookers, or exhale loudly (and malodorously) just upwind. Staring into the grapefruit-sized eye of a humpback, many people believe they're making a mental connection with the gentle giant, but Allied Whale's Sean Todd cautions against making such inter-species leaps. "It's tempting to anthropomorphize, and I've certainly had experiences where it seems the whales are interested in us," Todd says. "But there is a tendency to overestimate intelligence when it comes to animals." Todd says one noteworthy aspect of whales' intellect, in addition to the high-pitched songs they emit as a breeding mechanism, is their ability to pass a system of rules — defined as "culture" in scientific terms — from one generation to the next. This is manifested in the whales' predictable annual migration patterns, as scientists and whale-watching boats have grown accustomed to seeing the same whales and their offspring returning to the same spots in the Gulf of Maine year after year.

The Gift of Whales

While whale-watching trips have been departing from Maine shores for decades, the industry has taken off in popularity in recent years. Smaller, fishing-type excursion boats have evolved into more stable, faster, double-hulled catamarans in locations like Bar Harbor, where the Bar Harbor Whale Watch Company now takes up to sixty thousand passengers a year out to see the whales. Since whales are wild, unpredictable



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS
Sometimes landlubbers get to witness whales in action, such as the finback, at middle left, shown lunge-feeding just off Monhegan. Those with their own yachts sometimes stumble upon a pod, but whale-watching companies know where to find the ocean creatures.

creatures, most companies offer vouchers for a free trip in the unlikely event that the whales fail to show themselves. For an increasing number of visitors, a trip on a whale watch has become a key part of their summer vacation. "Every day that I go out, we have people from all over the world who have never seen a whale, and many who have never even been on the ocean," remarks Zack Klyver, head naturalist for the Bar Harbor Whale Watch Company. "This is something they have come here primarily for; this was a major factor in their decision-making process, and we feel excited to help their dreams

WHALES IN THE GULF OF MAINE



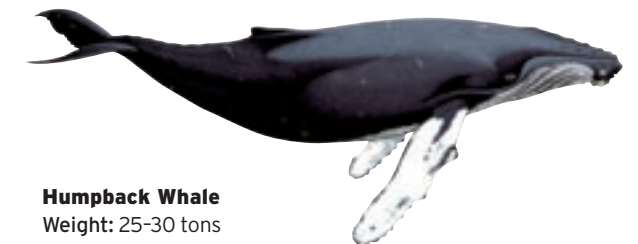
Finback Whale
Weight: 50-80 tons
Length: 60-80 ft.
Speed: 10-25 mph
Characteristics: Graceful, rarely reveals tail flukes.



Minke Whale
Weight: 4-5 tons
Length: 25 ft.
Speed: 5-15 mph
Characteristics: Shy, no visible spout.



North Atlantic Right Whale
Weight: 70 tons
Length: 45-55 ft.
Speed: 3-7 mph
Characteristics: Oblivious to boats and fishing gear in immediate surroundings. Twin blowholes produce double spout.



Humpback Whale
Weight: 25-30 tons
Length: 45-50 ft.
Speed: 4-6 mph
Characteristics: Inquisitive, acrobatic. Shows tail flukes upon diving.



Humpback breaching

Meeting Maine's Cetacean Visitors

A career beneath the water has helped one Maine resident build a relationship with the annual migration of humpbacks, finbacks, and other whales.

BY BRET GILLIAM

It's funny how things work out. Diving has become my professional career, along with being a shipmaster all over the world. On that long and circuitous voyage, I have had the chance to observe whales in every ocean and to swim with them in the wild before the plethora of rules and regulations were developed to control human interaction with cetaceans. When I was a kid, my family frequently visited Maine, and I honed my seafaring skills in the summer aboard lobsterboats and other commercial vessels that worked the coast. I shared the water with the humpback, minke, right, finback, and sperm whales that abounded back in the early 1960s. Occasionally, a colossal blue whale would pass by us when we worked way offshore, and the image of a mammal nearly a hundred feet-long that could tip the scales at over two hundred tons remains etched in my memory.

Because of reading *Moby Dick*, I was initially fascinated with sperm whales, but I quickly learned to appreciate the gregarious nature and fun-loving personality of the humpbacks, who seemed to actually seek out contact with my species. My early encounters were limited to topside glimpses, but even during these encounters the whales breached, tail-lobbed, and spy-hopped to get our attention. It seemed, at times, that they would like to have gotten into the boat with us.

But whales remained mysterious creatures and, in those days, we dared not slip into the water to join them in their realm. Perhaps our reticence was prompted by unfounded horror stories from sensationalist reports that we'd be rammed, slapped around, or swallowed whole like Jonah in the Old Testament. More likely our firm commitment to staying on the boats was reinforced by the profusion of sharks we saw. It wasn't until my practical diving



Humpback seen underwater

come true." The attraction is equally strong in other sections of the coast. Karen Duddy, the director of the Kennebunk & Kennebunkport Chamber of Commerce, says a whale-watching trip is at the top of virtually every traveler's "To Do" list, especially for families. "It's so popular that I just keep the brochure for the whale-watching boat right here at my desk so I can give people their number, rather than having to go get it from the front office," Duddy says.

Mysteries of the Deep

As much as researchers have learned about whales over the years, thanks largely to partnerships with whale-watching boats, the undersea giants still hold many mysteries. Where minke and finback whales spend the winter, for example, is unknown, a surprisingly basic fact if scientists are to sufficiently study these migratory creatures. The inability of the North Atlantic right whale stock to rebound, despite the strict protections put in place, also perplexes scientists. Even the humpbacks' reason for breaching, where they launch themselves headlong out of the water (offering an acrobatic display for whale-watching customers), has never been determined conclusively, with researchers suggesting it may be a courting ritual, a feeding mechanism, or simply a way of having fun. 🐋

MAINE WHALE WATCHES

You don't need to be a skipper to enjoy Maine's whales. Here are a handful of tour operators, arranged alphabetically by town, who can get you close (but not *too* close) to the cetaceans.

Bar Harbor Bar Harbor Whale Watch Co., 207-288-2386, www.barharborwhales.com

Boothbay Harbor Cap'n Fish's Whale Watch Cruises, 207-633-3244, www.mainewhales.com

Boothbay Whale Watch, 207-633-3500, www.whaleme.com

Eastport Eastport Windjammers, 207-853-2500, www.eastportwindjammers.com

Kennebunk First Chance Whale Watch, 207-967-5507, www.firstchancewhalewatch.com

Kittery Seafari Charters, 207-439-5068, www.seafaricharters.com

Ogunquit Deborah Ann, 207-361-9501

Portland Odyssey Whale Watch, 207-775-0727, www.odysseywhalewatch.com

experience challenged the theory that all sharks were instant killers that I deemed to give snorkeling with humpbacks a chance.

Of course, the lobstermen and other fishermen shared the certainty that I was completely insane but tolerated my efforts to actually see a whale underwater with one part grudging appreciation for my courage, and at least two parts sympathy for whatever mental deficiency I suffered. Nonetheless, my repeated efforts yielded no success, mostly due to bad visibility and a significant lack of understanding of the whales' behavior.



Bret Gilliam spent thirty-five years as a professional diver and filmmaker, earning the scuba depth record for a dive to 452 feet. When he is not exploring the Maine coast on his motor yacht, he divides his time between homes on Arrowsic Island, Moosehead Lake, and Northport.

Over the years, though, it's been a rare privilege for me to have had the opportunity to work up close and personal with humpback whales in various locations for more than forty years. I remember seeing pods at close range during the sixties in the Gulf of Maine. During these summer feeding migrations, we were able to approach individual whales in kayaks and later snorkel with them, where they treated us with benign indifference while they chomped down on hundreds of pounds of sand eels and krill.

Although humpback whales choose the summer months to gorge on the food they find in the Gulf of Maine (they spend the winter on the Silver Bank, off the north coast of the Dominican Republic), the water visibility is generally poor due to the summer plankton blooms and only rarely have conditions been good for underwater filming.

Also, it's cold. Not cool, not chilly, not brisk. Damn cold. After spending nearly twenty-five years living all over the

Caribbean, it's tough for me to come to grips with anything less than about eighty degrees water temperature. Back when I was younger, I free dived with the whales in the Gulf of Maine in a two-millimeter wet suit that gave me maximum flexibility and allowed me to be quicker in the water. If I kept active, I could last about half an hour before I needed to be extracted and re-warmed like a reptile on a rock.

But the water was cold and visibility rarely more than thirty feet or so, limiting our observation of these magnificent beasts to seeing only about half the animals at any given time. I longed for the chance to get some in-water time with the humpbacks with better filming conditions.

Later as my filming and shipping career expanded around my professional diving, I followed the whales that summered in Maine to the Silver Bank and to points farther south in the Caribbean. These areas were the places where they gave birth in the protected lee of massive barrier reefs and, finally, the chance was afforded to observe them in clear water. My work included a series of published images and accompanying articles as well

WHALES VS. BUREAUCRATS

A dose of field experience can go a long way toward setting realistic, practical regulations.

When commercial operators discovered that whales were good business, a whole new whale-watching industry was created in New England. Of course, this also led to the development of a whole new set of rules to control interaction with whales and a need for a new bureaucracy to police everyone. Don't get me wrong: I think regulations to protect whales are good. It's just that some of the people that ended up making the rules seemed to have a profound lack of practical field experience when it came to whale behavior and habits.

Here's a recent example of bureaucratic absurdity: A few years back, a Maine whale-watching excursion boat spotted a whale exhausted and entangled in a fish net barely able to keep itself on the surface and in imminent peril of drowning. The captain had his crew cut away the net. The freed whale swam away to spout another day. Initially, federal officials considered citing the captain for violating the Endangered Species Act by interfering with the whale, but eventually they conceded that he had

acted in good faith. Maybe he should have just let his passengers watch it struggle and die – at least that's what any objective observer could deduce from our government's initial response to his well-coordinated and timely rescue.

Consider the humpback. There are all sorts of rules about not approaching the whales too closely. And that's great in theory. The reality is that many humpbacks are curious and seem to welcome interaction with humans. I've been offshore in the Gulf of Maine when whales surface next to yachts, ships, lobsterboats, and excursion vessels, and do everything but climb aboard and make a sandwich. These loquacious mammals will entice the unwary observers by waving a pectoral fin and then dousing the surprised onlookers. Retreating to a safer distance only prompts the whales to approach and spy-hop to ogle the humans from up close. One thing is certain; no human will ever be able to approach a humpback in the water unless the whale agrees. We're just too slow and can't hold our breath long enough. —Bret Gilliam

as television documentaries for clients like *National Geographic Explorer*.

The thrill for me has only intensified over the years as the whales have increased in numbers off Maine, and I continue to renew acquaintances with individual animals that I recall meeting as babies nearly four decades ago in the warm clear waters to the south.

So take your whale encounters any way you can, whether aboard a whale-watching excursion boat, a snorkeling expedition where it's legally permitted, or simply the brief glimpse as they pass by while you're out for a routine day on the water. It's all good. 🐋