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Belugas roam ice-bound Arctic Ocean with ease

STUDY: Biologists surprised at whales' ability to navigate pack ice on long journeys north.

By Doug O'Harra
Anchorage Daily News

(Published: January 12, 2003)

Satellite-tracked beluga whales from Point Lay roamed deep into the Arctic Ocean last summer, and two young whales swam hundreds of miles into almost solid pack ice.

A female beluga traveled almost 700 miles northwest to a position north of Wrangel Island before returning to waters near Point Barrow. A male cruised 500 miles northeast.

While this summer's whales didn't go as far north as some big male belugas tracked in previous years, the two gray-toned adolescents still traced remarkable journeys as they navigated vast reaches of frozen sea, said biologist Robert Suydam, a wildlife manager and researcher with the North Slope Borough.

"My guess with all these guys is they're just looking for good things to eat," Suydam said Friday. "Maybe they're out there chasing big schools of Arctic cod. But we don't know."

Numbering at least 65,000 in four stocks, Alaska's Arctic belugas have long congregated in estuaries and along the ice edge in summer from Bristol Bay to the Beaufort Sea. Hunters from more than 40 Alaska villages harvest the whales in subsistence hunts co-managed for a decade by the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

To discover their migratory secrets, a team of scientists and Alaska Native hunters have been capturing belugas most years since 1997 in Kasegaluk Lagoon near Point Lay and equipping them with \$4,500 half-watt satellite tracking tags.

What they've discovered suggests that Alaska's common white whale travels farther through ice-covered ocean with far more ease than anyone thought possible. For instance, big males migrated in 1998 and 1999 to the same area of deep sea about halfway to the North Pole. The findings stunned whale biologists at the time.

"It's the distance, it's the ice, and it's always the depth of the water," Suydam said. "What the heck are they doing out in water that's 12,000 feet deep? Those things are amazing to me."

This year, the team wanted to capture females and younger whales to see whether they had different habits or stayed closer to shore. Over two days in early July,

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scientists and hunters from the beluga committee caught and released two female and three male whales in the lagoon, on Alaska's northwest coast. Only one female was a white adult. The rest were gray-toned youngsters.

The adult female's tag stopped transmitting within five days. Two males stuck relatively close to Alaska, traveling only a few hundred miles. The other two whales -- a 10-foot, 6-inch female and a 9-foot male -- took the season's epic trips.

No other female whale had ever been tracked as far, Suydam said. "That one whale went farther west than we've ever had a whale go before, and that surprised us all."

The tags stopped transmitting as summer ended, and the last tag signed off on Sept. 30.

Suydam, one of the principal investigators, is now at work on a scientific paper about the project. Next season, the team hopes to track five belugas in Norton Sound. Future research will focus on where the belugas spend winter.

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For the most recent wanderings of Point Lay belugas:

www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/whales/beluga/ptlay.htm

For more beluga information:

www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/whales/beluga.htm

www.state.ak.us/local/akpages/FISH.GAME/notebook/marine/beluga.htm



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