



National Marine Fisheries Service
Alaska Region

NEWS RELEASE

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NOAA SCIENTISTS SIGHT BLUE WHALES IN ALASKA *Critically Endangered Blue Whales Rarely Seen in Alaska Waters*

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service announced today, that NOAA scientists made a rare sighting this month in Alaskan waters. From the deck of the NOAA research vessel *McArthur II*, they spotted and positively identified rare and endangered blue whales, *Balaenoptera musculus*, the largest animals known to live on Earth. NOAA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

"For whale researchers, this is huge," said Dr. Jay Barlow, NOAA's chief scientist on the research cruise. "There have been many marine mammal surveys in Alaska by ship and aircraft, and countless years of small boat research on humpback whales in Alaska, and yet, these are the first fully documented sightings of blue whales here in the past three decades."

Scientists saw the first blue whale about 100 nautical miles southeast of Prince William Sound where the ocean is approximately two miles deep. The next day, two more blue whales were sighted a little further offshore, about 150 nautical miles southeast of Prince William Sound. The recent sightings were in an area where blue whales were commonly harpooned in the days of pelagic whaling.

The confirmed presence of blue whales in the Gulf of Alaska did not surprise NOAA Alaska Fisheries Science Center whale researcher Kate Stafford.

"We've been hearing eastern and western north Pacific whales on deep water recordings in the Gulf of Alaska. We knew they must be there, but because our instruments are so far apart, we can't pinpoint the location of calling whales," she said.

Researchers were able to get close enough to the giant whales to get biopsies—tiny pieces of the skin and blubber, which will be used for genetic testing and pollutant studies. They also took video and numerous pictures to document the sighting.

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“The genetic samples, pollutant signatures, and high-resolution photographs may provide clues to help us figure out where these whales are coming from,” said Barlow.

Digital images were transmitted to blue whale researcher John Calambokidis of Cascadia Research. Calambokidis is checking the image against others in his database to see if photos of the sighted whales match other photos taken in other places.

“Identifying these whales as sighted both in the Gulf of Alaska and in another area would help us to document how and when these huge whales move through the Pacific,” said Barlow. “Sighting blue whales was a side benefit of this SPLASH research cruise, which is dedicated to studying humpback whales.”

NOAA’s “Structure of Populations, Level of Abundance and Status of Humpbacks” (SPLASH) program project involves NOAA scientists and hundreds of other researchers from the United States, Japan, Russia, Mexico, Canada, the Philippines, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala. The SPLASH program is dedicated to assessing humpback whale populations throughout the North Pacific Ocean.

This summer’s research cruise of the *McArthur II* is a part of the three-year SPLASH effort. So far, the *McArthur II* has traveled along the coast of Washington and British Columbia and through the Gulf of Alaska. After a brief port call in Kodiak, the ship will continue its whale research along the Aleutian Island chain to the edge of Russian waters.

Blue whales are believed to migrate in the North Pacific in summer to northern feeding grounds, where they eat about four tons of krill (tiny shrimp-like plankton) per day, putting on fat for the winter. For winter, they migrate south to wintering and calving grounds in the tropics. Blue whales travel far and they can travel fast--up to 20 knots in a burst of speed.

Blue whales have been protected since 1965. They were hunted commercially between 1860s and the 1960s, with a broadly estimated 350,000 killed during that century. Most recent population estimates show about 12,000 blue whales remaining worldwide, with approximately 2,000 of these feeding in U.S. waters off California in summer and fall.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to providing and preserving the nation’s living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management, and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

On the Web:

NOAA’s Fisheries: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>