



Minke Whale

Minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) are the smallest of the mysticete (baleen) whales and can be found world-wide. They belong to a subgroup of baleen whales called rorquals. Rorquals have throat grooves that expand during feeding while other baleen whales do not. In spring and summer in Alaska minke whales are common in the Bering Sea, Gulf of Alaska, and in the waters of Southeast Alaska.

General description: At birth a minke whale is approximately 10 ft (3m) long and weighs 1,000 lbs. Adult females measure about 28 ft (8 m) and weigh approximately 8 tons. Adult males are slightly smaller, measuring 26 ft (8 m) and weighing approximately 6 tons.

The minke whale is short and sleek with a pointed head. The flippers are short and pointed. The dorsal fin is prominent and falcate (hooked) and located about two thirds down the body from the head. There are 50–70 throat pleats that end just behind the flippers and identify minke's as rorquals.

The color of the minke whale is black or dark grey above and white below, with a white chevron band behind the head. The flippers have white patches.

Food habits: Minke whales are filter feeders. When they find prey in high density, they open their lower jaw to an angle almost 90 degrees perpendicular to their body and use the water pressure to force prey into the pleats of the throat grooves. The lower jaw is then closed, and the tongue is used to force the water out through the baleen, thus filtering the prey from the water. They feed primarily on euphuasiids, copepods, sand-lance, and larger schooling fishes such as herring, pollock, and salmon.

Life history: Minke whales breed December–March but in some regions may breed year-round. Age at sexual maturity is about 6 years for females and 7 years for males. The gestation period is approximately 10 months and lactation lasts 4–5 months.

Seasonal movements: Minke whales migrate north in the spring and summer through coastal waters. During their southern migration in the autumn and winter they are found farther offshore.

Behavior: Minke whales are curious and often approach ships but they do not bow-ride like Pacific white-sided dolphins or Dall's porpoises. They may be seen in groups of 2–3 but may congregate into larger groups at higher latitudes.

Minke whales are the fastest swimmers among the baleen whales and they use their speed as a defense strategy to avoid predation by killer whales. Although killer whales are faster in the initial sprint, minke whales can outdistance killer whales due to their endurance capabilities.

Population size: There are no estimates of abundance for the Alaska stock of minke whales, but they are not currently listed as 'threatened' or 'endangered' under the Endangered Species Act, nor are they listed as 'depleted' under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Predators, hunting, and other mortality: Killer whales are the only natural predators of minke whales. Subsistence harvest of minke whales is rare in Alaska, but has been known to occur at Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island. Currently, Japan harvests up to 100 minke whales annually from the North Pacific stock under a research permit.

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