

September 2010: Meditations on Whales

As a teenager I was obsessed with dolphins and whales, although at that time the only ones I had seen were in tanks at Sea World. When people inevitably asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I loved being able to offer up a profession that no one had heard of. "I want to be a cetologist," I'd say. "Studying cetaceans. You know, whales?"

Enamored with the bottlenose dolphin, I imagined myself in warm, tropical blue waters swimming alongside a pod of these beautiful creatures, learning how to speak their language of clicks and whistles. While I had seen harbor porpoises in Penobscot Bay, they didn't seem much more exciting than seals. I don't think it ever occurred to me that with minimal effort I could see dolphins, even big whales, right here in Maine.

Now that my passion is birds, I try to get in one or two pelagic bird outings each summer, during which I enjoy the added bonus of seeing whales. Actually, one of the best ways to get out into the Gulf of Maine for deep-sea birding is to go on a whale watch. As a birder, I'm usually one of the few people on the boat who isn't disappointed if we don't see a whale. On a recent whale watch out of Portland, we saw four minke whales, the most common Maine whale. Most people on the four-hour voyage were disappointed that we didn't see more, but for me and the two other birders on the boat, the trip was a success: we also saw three species of shearwaters.

But I'm never blasé about seeing whales, even minke whales. In fact, the real highlight of that whale watch was when a minke whale rolled past very near the boat, giving everyone a close up view of its 30-foot body, as well as its complete mastery of the ocean. When I'm on Monhegan Island in late September I sometimes spend several hours at a time hanging out on the cliffs watching for minke whales feeding offshore. They often come quite close to the island. There's something amazing about seeing such a big creature rise to the surface and then, just as quickly and silently, disappear again beneath the waves.

On longer pelagic bird outings, such as Maine Audubon's annual fall trip out of Bar Harbor, I've enjoyed some truly thrilling whale encounters. On one trip the boat was surrounded by a school of strikingly patterned Atlantic white-sided dolphins, including a few calves. They rode the bow waves and kept pace alongside the boat for what could only have been the sheer joy of it. On another trip we saw several humpback whales. These huge whales, which grow up to fifty feet long and can weigh as much as 40 tons, offer more dramatic action for the human observer. They often breach above the water's surface, lob their tails, and slap the water with their flukes, sometimes very near the boat.

On a late summer whale watch out of Kennebunkport a few years ago, my husband and I were excited to see several fin whales. Next to the blue whale, the fin is the largest mammal on earth—bigger, in fact, than any of the dinosaurs ever were, according to the on-board naturalist. Males can be up to 78 feet in length (and females even larger), and a baby fin already weighs two tons at birth.

I like imagining these giant, intelligent mammals moving through the murky depths of our oceans, true leviathans in their underwater realm. The fin's sheer length makes it easy to distinguish from other whales. When it breaks the surface, that dark upper body goes on and on. Fins are also fast in the water for something so large, able to swim in bursts of more than 20 miles per hour. The naturalist referred to them as "greyhounds of the sea," and in the old days of whaling, this speed kept them alive, unlike the slower, now near-extinct right whale. (Alas, that speed hasn't helped them much in the modern whaling era, with its high-powered boats.)

Whale species have distinctive-looking "blows" or spouts when they exhale. The fin's blow is a columnar plume visible several miles away. The humpback's is lower and rounder in comparison. Because they're ocean dwellers, it's easy to forget that whales have lungs and need to surface to breathe every now and then, albeit through a hole in the top of their head. It's also a bit strange to realize that they nurse young cradled by the sea. Because it breathes through a blowhole rather than its mouth, there's no problem with a baby whale accidentally inhaling water into its lungs while nursing in the briny deep. But I can't help but wonder if whale's milk tastes salty.

All the whales I've seen off Maine have been baleen whales—specifically, rorquals, a type of whale that features chin grooves and dorsal fins. Despite their size, these whales eat really tiny food, including krill, and small crustaceans and fish. Fringed plates of baleen hang down where upper teeth would be. The chin grooves expand the whale's mouth, enabling it to take in a large volume of water; when that water is expelled, anything edible is trapped behind the baleen. The world's largest animals are thus living on some of the smallest. When you think about the incredible amount of krill that must be needed to sustain a single whale—up to two tons a day for a fin whale—it's easy to see how essential the health of our oceans is at every level of life.

Toothed whales, which actively hunt larger prey, include the sperm whale of "Moby Dick" fame, which is not normally seen near Maine, and the killer whale. Although one or two killer whales are spotted each year in the Gulf of Maine, they're an unusual sighting. Brian Benedict, Deputy Manager of the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge, encountered one this summer just off Owls Head as he was boating back to Rockland from a visit to a refuge island. He said he'd never seen one in the wild before, but he had no doubt what it was when he saw that tall, black dorsal fin and white head markings. The whale was probably about the size of his boat.

The killer whale got its name for the ferocity with which it attacks its prey, which can be almost anything else in the water. It's been observed killing great white sharks, and several members of a pod will gang up to kill much larger whales. Attacks on humans are very rare in the wild, although in captivity there have been a few dozen attacks on humans, including a well-publicized, fatal attack on a trainer at Sea World this past February. Not to sound all "Free Willy"-esque, but perhaps this should tell us something about keeping captive such an intelligent predator that is so perfectly adapted to life on the open sea. I do

realize that's ironic coming from someone who was at one time inspired to be a cetologist after watching Shamu at Sea World. But I would prefer that the next cetacean I see be a free range whale living the good life on the bounty of the Gulf of Maine.