



Discover the Gray Whale

Eastern Pacific gray whales are beautiful and distinctive medium-sized baleen whales, averaging 45 feet in length and weighing approximately 33 tons (66,000 pounds). They lack a dorsal fin, having instead 6-12 dorsal knuckles along their backs. The whales are medium gray with white patches and a mottled appearance.



A Whale of a Journey

The gray whale makes one of the longest and most impressive annual migrations of any mammal. Each year, about 20,000 individuals journey more than 10,000 miles from their summer feeding grounds in the Arctic to the warm, tranquil breeding lagoons of Baja California, and back again.

The migration begins in early October from the Chukchi and Bering Seas. Pregnant females leave first, followed by males, young adults, and juveniles. Gray whales travel alone or in small groups, covering 85–100 miles a day. By mid-January, most of the whales reach the lagoons.

Before the end of February, pregnant females bear their calves and males continue to seek out available females for mating. Most calves are born in one of the whales' three preferred lagoons: Scammon's, San Ignacio, and Magdalena Bay.

Gray whales head northward in two stages. The first stage, beginning in February, includes newly impregnated females, adult males, and juveniles. The second stage, beginning in March, includes new mothers and their calves. When they return to the Arctic, gray whales feed constantly on bottom-dwelling amphipods (small shrimp-like organisms) in order to put on the 6–12 inches of blubber needed to sustain them for the next migration.



FUN FACTS

- A baby gray whale weighs 2,000 pounds at birth
 - A mother's milk contains 50% milk fat
- A female will give birth every other year to every three years
 - A gray whale can eat up to 2,400 pounds of food a day
 - Gray whales are estimated to live up to 70 years
- Gray whales communicate with a series of clicks and grunts
 - A gray whale's flukes can measure 10–12 feet across



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Arctic Chukchi Sea

Summer Feeding

RUSSIA

Ocean

Grounds

Bering Sea

Beaufort Sea

Alaska

Unimak Pass

Anchorage

Gulf of Alaska

CANADA

Vancouver

Seattle

Portland

Boise

Pacific

U.S.A. Ocean

Salt Lake City

San Francisco

Las Vegas

Los Angeles

San Diego

Phoenix

Winter Birthing&Mating Grounds

Scammon's Lagoon

San Ignacio Lagoon Magdalena Bay Lagoon

La Paz

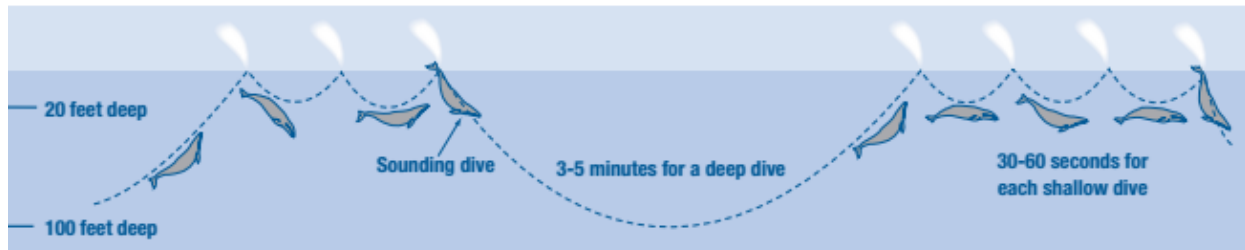
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Discover the Gray Whale

Watching Whales

Along the migration route, gray whales display characteristic diving behavior. They stay near the surface for a series of short, shallow dives to build oxygen reserves, then dive deep into a "sounding" dive. At the start of this dive, whales roll their backs above the water, revealing their dorsal knuckles, and lift their flukes (tail) into the air. This dive lasts 3–5 minutes. As they surface, look for the distinctive heart-shaped blow that can reach up to 12 feet high.



If you are lucky, you may catch a gray whale breaching or spyhopping.



During a breach, a whale launches up to three-quarters of its body out of the water and crashes back down on its side or back. A whale may do this for communication, courtship, to remove parasites, or just for fun!



A spyhop occurs when a gray whale raises its head out of the water to expose its eyes, possibly to take a look around.

A Story of Success

Hunted to near extinction twice in the last 150 years, the rebound of the Eastern Pacific population of gray whales is remarkable. Pressures from commercial whaling pushed numbers so low in the late 1800s and early 1900s that only a few hundred individuals remained. Gray whales made a dramatic recovery, thanks to a number of laws and actions: an international hunting ban of gray whales in 1946; the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973; and various Mexican laws protecting two key nursery areas. Today, gray whales number around 20,000, and they were the first marine mammal species to be removed from the list of Endangered and Threatened Species in 1994.

However, gray whales still face a number of threats including entanglement in drift nets, collisions with ships, habitat destruction, noise pollution, and changes in climatic conditions.



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20 feet deep

100 feet deep

Sounding dive

30-60 seconds for each shallow dive

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3-5 minutes for a deep dive

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