



Physical Description:

Minke whales are the second smallest baleen whale in the world, reaching a maximum length of 30 feet and weighing up to 10 tons. They belong to a subgroup of baleen whales that are streamlined in shape, called Rorquals, meaning 'red-throated' or 'pleated.' They possess 50-70 ventral throat grooves, or ventral pleats, which expand like an accordion when feeding, exposing the pink or red skin underneath. The coloration consists of dark gray on the back and white on the ventral surface, with swathes of white sometimes on the dark back. Most Minkes possess a distinct white band in the middle of their small pectoral fin which is highly variable by individual, and subspecies. The dorsal fin is prominent and located on the rear third of the body, but is only a few feet tall so it is sometimes overlooked amidst the waves. The blow is small, quick, and bushy, reaching a maximum height of about 9 feet and usually goes unnoticed. It is common to hear the blow rather than to see it. Overall, the Minke Whale is long and streamlined with a sharp face which has a lateral ridge leading from the tip of the rostrum to the blowholes.

Photo Identification Methods:

Minke whales can be individually identified by unique features such as notches in the dorsal fin, scars on the body, fin shape, and lateral body pigmentation. It is not possible to tell male from female except in the rare case of a mother calf pair. To date, a total of 30 individual Minke Whales have been catalogued over 11 years of study around the San Juan Islands. In some cases, pigmentation on the pectoral fins can also assist in identifying individuals though it is very rare to see the pectoral fins.

Natural History:

Species Subtypes:

There are two separate species of Minke Whales; the Southern Minke Whale or Antarctic Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera bonaerensis*) which is found exclusively in the Southern Hemisphere and lacks the characteristic white patch on the pectoral fin, and the Common Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*). The Common Minke Whale is further divided between Minke Whales found in the Northern Hemisphere, and the smaller Dwarf Minke Whale found in the Southern Hemisphere. Though the Dwarf Minke Whale is not listed separately by taxonomic status, it is widely accepted to be a Southern Hemisphere subspecies of the Minke Whale and is considerably distinctive in appearance and behavior. From there, the Common Minke Whale can be divided further still into three separate stocks in the Northern Hemisphere; in the Western North Pacific there are the Sea of Japan/East China Sea Stock and the West Pacific/Sea of Okhotsk Stock. The third stock is called the Remainder Stock and includes all Minke Whales East of 180 degree W longitude.

Reproduction:

Very little is known about the reproductive cycle of the Minke Whale. Calving grounds remain a mystery, but are believed to be in tropical waters based on acoustic detection and a few mother and calf sightings in the Caribbean and off Brazil.

Life Cycle:

At birth, the Minke Whale is 8-9 feet long and weighs in at about 700 lbs. After nursing for only 6 months, the calf is independent. Like other baleen whales, Minkes are generally solitary. Sexual maturity is reached when the whale is about 23 feet in length (around 6-8 years old). Gestation is 10 months and females usually give birth every two to three years though they may reproduce annually. Lifespan is thought to be 50 years but is uncertain.

Range:

The Minke Whale is found in every ocean of the world. Summers are spent in cold water feeding grounds and in winter, Minkes are thought to migrate to more temperate waters for breeding and to give birth, except possibly, for Minke Whales off the west coast of North America which are observed in low numbers year round in predictable areas. These Minkes are considered to be part of a “resident” stock and demonstrate site fidelity returning to the same location year after year.

Diet:

Locally, Minke Whales feed on small schooling fish such as herring, capelin, and sandlance along with a variety of zooplankton. Minke Whales are opportunistic feeders, and will feed on whatever is locally abundant at the time. Minke Whales specialize in one of two feeding techniques; lunge feeding or bird associated feeding. In the San Jan Islands, some individuals search for, chase, and trap their own prey (lunge feeding) while other individuals prey upon fish schools trapped and congregated at the surface by diving birds (bird-associated feeding).

In bird-associated feeding, a Minke Whale surfaces where diving birds and predatory fish are feeding. As the birds concentrate the smaller fish into what is called a “bait ball” the Minke Whale will scoop up the fish out from under the birds. Bird-associated feeding is best suited for brief, but concentrated food resources.

Lunge feeding on the other hand, makes better use of patchy prey resources that can be found relatively predictably (such as at a fish spawning site). The Minke Whale will lunge out of the water or near the waters’ surface at high speeds enclosing vast quantities of water and prey in its mouth, filter out the extra water through the baleen, and engulf the remaining prey. Different feeding strategies vary by location and by individual.

Status:

Population estimates of the Minke Whale remain unclear. The only reliable population estimate is specifically of the “remainder stock” of Common Minke Whales found along the western coast of North America; there are thought to be between 200 and 600 individuals. Minke Whales are currently not listed as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act or considered to be “depleted” under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Threats:

Historical:

Over the course of the last century, commercial whaling is responsible for a loss of more than 100,000 Minkes in the Southern Hemisphere alone (most of these probably Antarctic Minkes). When the population of the larger rorqual whales had been so depleted by commercial whaling, the industry was forced to exploit the smaller, but more abundant, Minke Whale and by the 1980s the Minke Whale was the most heavily hunted baleen whale in the world.

Current:

The Minke is still more heavily hunted than almost any other whale. According to the Northern Oceanic and Atmospheric Science Administration (NOAA) entanglement and ship strikes could be reducing the already small 'remainder stock' population.

Fun Facts:

- Siamese twins have been recorded in Minke Whales! There have also been cases of Siamese twins in humpback whales and sei whales though none of the offspring have survived (Ivashin and Zinchenko 1982).
- The Minke Whale reportedly was named after a novice Norwegian whaler named Meincke. There are three versions of the story: one states that Meincke mistook a minke whale for a blue whale, which the whalers were targeting, so they jokingly named the small whale after him. Another states that Meincke called out a sighting of the small baleen whale at a time when they were considered to be too small to hunt. A final story states that Meincke was notorious for taking small whales so they named all small whales "Meincke's Whales" and eventually narrowed it down to just one species. A few decades later when all of the great whales stocks were depleted, whalers changed their minds and decided that maybe the little whale wasn't too little after all.
- Minke Whales have earned several nicknames including 'slinky Minke' for their sometimes unpredictable surfacing patterns, 'dinky Minke' for their relatively small size, and 'stinky Minke' from their "bad breath" when they blow.
- Other names for the Minke Whale include piked whale, little finner, lesser finback whale, lesser rorqual, and sharp-headed finner.
- The Minke Whale has 230-360 baleen plates on either side of the upper jaw to strain out small prey. These baleen plates are continuously growing and made of keratin, the same mineral which makes up hair, fingernails, hooves, and antlers.
- Some Minke Whales who have been photo identified around the San Juan Islands have earned names such as Pancho Villa, Trotsky, Chrissy Hynde (Bank) and Johnny Walker which was changed to Joan when they found the whale to be a female. For a complete ID guide of minke whales in the San Juans, or to contribute your own identification photo, please visit <http://www.northeastpacificminke.org/>

Sources:

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Thank you to Uko Gorter for use of minke whale graphic



Created by Brittany Bowles
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