

They're back!

Today, about 30,000 humpback whales roam our oceans. That's 30 times more than in 1965.



The Comeback

COVER PHOTO: FLIP NICKLIN

Humpback whales are great acrobats. Using their powerful black-and-white speckled tails, they leap out of the water and flop on their backs. This is called **breaching**. Sometimes they even do somersaults. Spotting one of these giant gymnasts was harder 30 years ago. Humans had been hunting them for hundreds of years, and they were becoming **extinct**. Now, thanks to recent laws that protect humpbacks from hunters, these whales are making a long awaited comeback. That means that scientists are getting a better chance to study the humpback's amazing feats.

And amazing they are. A humpback's tail has to be very strong to launch it out of the water because a humpback weighs about 40 tons. That's the same weight as about eight male African elephants. When a humpback breaches, it flings out its front **flippers** almost as if it were going to fly. Its flippers measure up to 17 feet, which is as long as a canoe.

Humpbacks aren't the largest of all whales, but they are really big. From head to tail, they measure more than 40 feet. Humpbacks got their name from a hump that appears on a back **fin**. They also flex their backs up in a hump before they dive.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC FOR KIDS

Water Wings.

When a humpback breaches, it flings out its front flippers as if it were going to fly.



PHOTO: FRANÇOIS GOHER / PHOTO RESEARCHERS

Humpbacks

Flying Leaps

Why do humpbacks breach? No one is quite sure. Some scientists say humpbacks breach because it helps them get rid of whale lice and **barnacles**. Barnacles are tiny shellfish that bore headfirst into their skin. When humpbacks slap their big bodies down on the water after breaching—whack—goodbye, pests! (They hope.)

Some scientists think humpbacks breach to threaten smaller whales with their big size. Still other scientists believe they do it to communicate with each other. Maybe there isn't just one answer.

Deep-Sea Singing

Humpbacks seem to communicate in another way—by “singing.” Other types of whales also sing. The blue whale, which is the world's largest type of whale, has the loudest song. It belts out a tune that is thousands of times louder than a jumbo jet taking off.

But a loud song isn't everything. Scientists think the humpbacks sing very complex songs. The songs can go on for 30 minutes or so and sound to us like moans, groans, roars, squeaks, chirps, yups, and oohs. Just as people from various areas speak with distinct accents, humpbacks from different places have their

SEPTEMBER 2000

own special accents.

Only male humpbacks sing, and we're not sure why. The songs may have something to do with courting females because when a male attracts a female, he pipes down.

Coming Up for Air

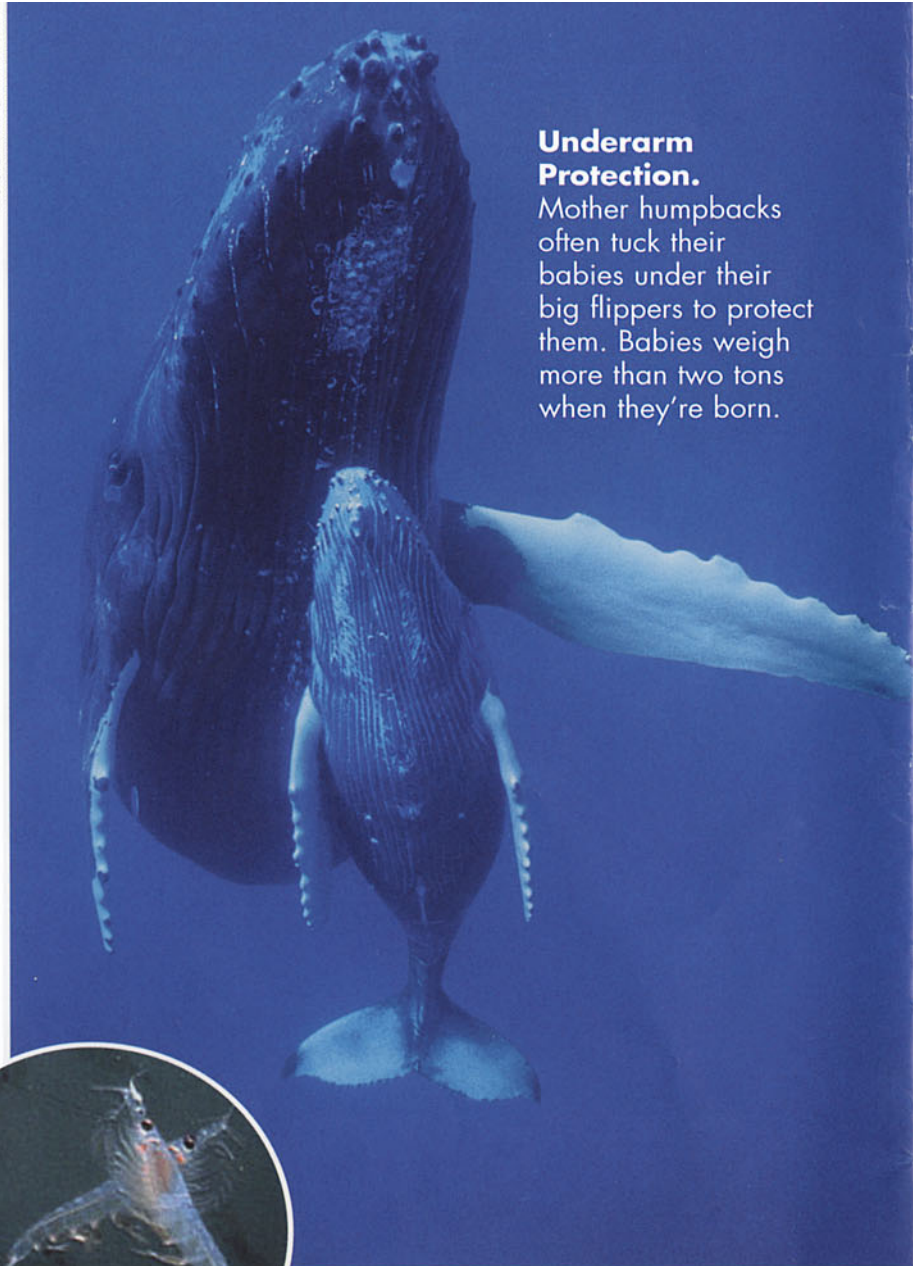
You may be surprised to learn that whales are not fish. They are mammals. Instead of breathing through gills, they breathe through lungs like other mammals. A humpback can stay underwater for hours. Eventually it comes to the surface where it blows old air out of two **blowholes** on top of its head. It breathes in fresh air and dives back under.

Going the Distance

Humpbacks are great travelers. Every year they swim between their summer grounds where they feed and their winter grounds where they breed and raise their young. (See map on page 8.) Some travel as far as 5,000 miles one way. This movement is called **migration**.

Humpbacks live in both hemispheres of the world. In the Southern Hemisphere, they feed in waters around Antarctica. There the whales stock up on small fish and their great favorite—**krill**. Krill are shrimplike creatures that aren't much bigger than pieces of popcorn. How does an animal as huge as a whale live on something so small? The answer is it eats a LOT of krill—maybe up to 4,400 pounds

PHOTO: FLIP NICKLIN, MINDEN PICTURES



Underarm Protection.

Mother humpbacks often tuck their babies under their big flippers to protect them. Babies weigh more than two tons when they're born.



◁ Munch a Bunch of Krill.

Popcorn-size krill are favorite whale food. Humpbacks can eat up to 4,400 pounds of them per meal.

during one meal. To reproduce, Southern Hemisphere humpbacks migrate north toward the Equator.

In the Northern Hemisphere, there are several groups of humpbacks. One favorite feeding ground is Glacier Bay near the Arctic Ocean. A group of humpbacks migrates from there to the warm Pacific waters of Hawaii. Many others feed in the North Atlantic Ocean and swim to the West Indies to mate and give birth.

Hunting for Humpbacks

Humpbacks are very curious. They often swim up to boats to check things out. This makes them easy to hunt. Fishermen began hunting humpbacks in Japan in the early 1600s and in eastern North America in the 1700s. They hunted them for their **blubber**, a thick layer of fat under their skin. Fishermen could eat the blubber as well as turn it into oil.

Fishermen also wanted the humpbacks' **baleen**. These are stiff strips that hang like a big comb in its jaws and take the place of teeth. When a humpback takes a big gulp of ocean, the baleen strains out the water and traps masses of krill and little fish. Businesses wanted baleen to make ladies' corsets. In the 1800s and 1900s, fishermen built big whaling stations on islands in Antarctica. Soon the numbers of humpbacks in the Southern Hemisphere began to decline, too.

To the Rescue

Scientists think that before whaling became popular, there were about 100,000 humpbacks in the world. By 1965 only 1,000 humpback whales remained. In 1966, humans realized that humpbacks and other whales were going to become extinct unless they did something. By the 1970s, humpbacks were put on the endangered species list as well as on other lists that protected them from hunters. Now scientists estimate that 30,000 humpbacks roam the seas. That is not close to what their worldwide population once was, but it is much larger than in 1965. It is probably enough to call the humpback "The Comeback Kid."

WebLink



Hear for Yourself!

Listen to a humpback sing at <http://metalab.unc.edu/pub/multi-media/sun%2Dsounds/whales>.

SEPTEMBER 2000

Unsolved MYSTERIES



- 1 Why do you think whales breach?
- 2 Why do you think they sing in different accents?
- 3 Do you think whales and birds sing for the same reasons?



Swim Up to the Mike.

This humpback sings a moanful song into a recorder called a hydrophone. The white bumps on its flipper are barnacles.

PHOTO: FLIP NICKLIN

Whale Words



baleen: Stiff strips that hang like a big comb in the jaws of some whales. These strips take the place of teeth.

barnacle: A tiny hard-shelled animal that attaches itself to whales, rocks, and other sea surfaces.

blowhole: A nostril at the top of a whale's head. Humpbacks have two. Some whales have only one.

blubber: A thick layer of fat under a whale's skin.

breaching: Leaping out of the water.

extinct: No longer alive on Earth.

fin: A fan-shaped body part used to steer in water.

flipper: A broad, flat limb used for swimming.

krill: Small shrimplike creatures that whales eat.

migration: When animals move to a different area to avoid cold weather, find food, or find a safe place to breed and raise their young.

7