

Blue Monarchs of the Pacific Coastline

By Reese Halter

The West is home to many migratory animals, the most remarkable of which is the majestic blue whale, the largest animal ever to have lived on earth. It graces British Columbia's coastline during its summer migration to the most productive ecosystem on our planet - the polar seas.

People have much in common with whales: we both like to eat, mate, touch, talk, sing, sleep, travel and listen.

Prior to commercial whaling, the number of blue whales was estimated at 200,000. Today only about 10,000 of these awesome creatures remain.

The enormity of a blue whale is breathtaking. They are about five times larger than the largest dinosaur. The only other organism comparable in size are the few remaining champion trees. About 6 1/2 blue whales would fit - end to end - inside the largest known tree in British Columbia, the Cheetwhat Lake western redcedar.

Blue whales are 98 feet (30 meters) long with a mass of about 146 tons (131.5 tonnes). Their hearts weigh 992 pounds (450 kg.) (the size of a Volkswagen Beetle) and pump 14,109 pounds (6,400 kg.) of blood! Their horizontal tail has the power of a 500 horsepower outboard motor. They can travel at 31 miles per hour (50 km./hr.) for two hours at a time and 43 miles per hour (70 km./hr.) for 10 minute intervals.

When a blue whale takes a breath it is equivalent of eight for a human. As they surface, they fill 80 to 90 per cent of their lungs with air. Humans fill only about 20 per cent. At rest, their heart rate is nine beats per minute. They can remain submerged for up to two hours and dive to depths greater than 379 feet (115.5 meters) (equal to the tallest tree on Earth - a coastal redwood).

Although single-celled algae stick to the whale's under-belly making them appear yellow to silver, their real skin color is dark. That's because their bodies use oxygen very efficiently due to special muscular protein (myoglobin), which also prevent them from getting nitrogen in their blood preventing an affliction known to divers as the bends.

There are two distinctly different populations of blue whales: one in the northern and one in the southern hemispheres. They do not intermingle. They both spend the summers feasting in the polar seas where long days promote growth of billions of tonnes of plankton (minute plants and animals). They spend their winters mating and calving in warm equatorial waters.

Blue whales don't have teeth. Instead they have an exquisite filtration system called a baleen. Three hundred and sixty plates hang from the upper

jaw. One gulp contains about 5.5 tons (5 tonnes) of water. As the mouth closes, water is expelled through the baleen plates and filled with plankton, crustaceans and small fish. On average a blue whale will eat between 1,984 and 9,039 pounds (900 and 4,100 kilograms) of plankton for about 120 consecutive days.

Whales use sonar for radar and as a communication system. They are the loudest animal on earth at 188 decibels (louder than a 747 jet engine). We have yet, and may never come to, understand their complex language.

Blue whales are the monarch of the seas; invincible yet gentle. To be in the wild and in the presence of a whale is the most humbling of experiences. They teach us a message; a message of respect for one another; and a respect for all Nature.

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