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Blue whales rule the coast

Editor:

As February comes to a close, so too does another extraordinary migratory season of the largest animal ever to have lived on Earth – the majestic blue whale. It graces California, as close as half a mile from the mainland coast, during its spring 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 17 blue whales would fit, end to end, inside the largest known tree in the world, a giant California mountain sequoia, General Sherman.

Blue whales are 98 feet long with a mass of about 146 tons. Their hearts weigh 992 pounds (the size of a Volkswagen Beetle) and pump 14,109 pounds of blood. Their horizontal tail has the power of a 500 horsepower outboard motor. They can travel at 31 miles per hour for two hours at a time and 43 miles per hour for 10-minute intervals.

When a blue whale takes a breath it is equivalent to 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 (equivalent to the tallest tree on Earth – a California coastal redwood, Hyperion).

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 tons 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 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 of plankton for about 120 consecutive days.

Whales use sonar for radar and as a communication system. They are the loudest

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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.

Dr. Reese Halter
Founder of Global Forest Science
February 24, 2009

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