

# ASK the AQUARIUM

**Q. Do whales migrate along our coastline, and if so, when are good months to be watching for them?**

**A.** They sure do, and of the ten “great” whales—animals that reach lengths of 30 feet or more in the order Cetacea—eight have been reported in the coastal waters of North Carolina.

Seven of these giant creatures are baleen whales, the largest animals that have ever lived. Baleen whales are members of the suborder Mysticeti or “mustached whales,” so called because of the bristle-like strands of baleen instead of teeth attached to their upper jaws. Baleen is used during feeding to strain krill or other types of plankton from seawater.

Minke, sei, Bryde’s, fin, blue, humpback and northern right whales have all been sighted in North Carolina waters. The minke is the smallest of the baleen whales, attaining a maximum length of 33 feet. The blue whale is the largest of all animals, reaching a maximum length of 98 feet and weight of 100 tons.

Most baleen whales are great travelers, making seasonal migrations from feeding grounds near the poles to tropical breeding areas. It is during these migratory treks that whale watchers are most likely to see one of these giants of the sea.

One of the most predictable migrators of the great whales is the humpback. December and January are prime months to spot these huge creatures as they travel southward through North Carolina coastal waters to the warmer waters of the Caribbean where they breed or give birth. In spring, humpbacks return north to the cool polar waters for a summer of feeding. They consume more than 1.5 tons of food a day! During their northward migration, humpbacks pass through the waters of North Carolina in March and April.

Humpbacks tend to swim near shore during migration, increasing the likelihood of a sighting. They are the most animated and acrobatic of the great whales. Humpbacks can lift their 40-ton bodies almost completely out of the water in a dramatic behavior called breaching. These graceful giants are also the most vocal of the baleen whales, producing an elaborate melody of moans, yelps and chirps that make up the most complex song in the animal kingdom.

Photo Courtesy of Wayne Justice



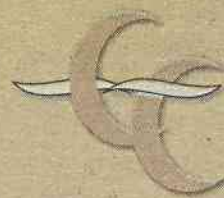
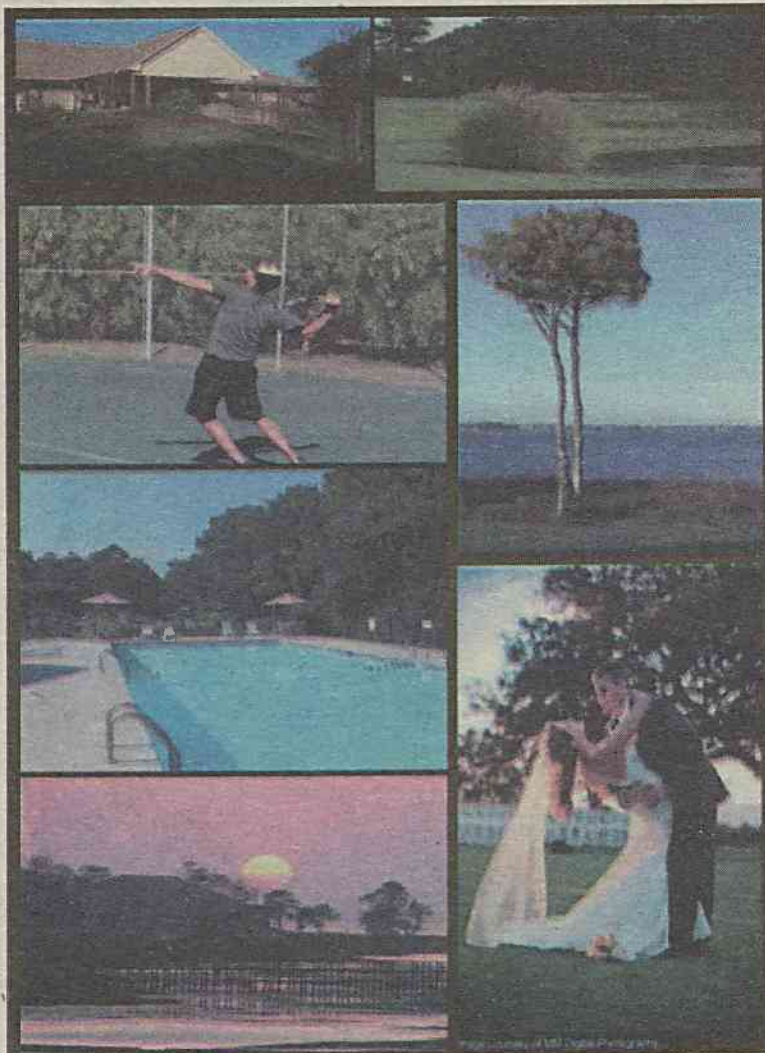
A right whale and calf pass just offshore near Beaufort.

The sperm whale, the largest member of the suborder Odontoceti or “toothed” whales, is also a visitor to North Carolina waters. Sperm whales, which reach a length of 50 feet and weigh about 40 tons, remain widespread in the coastal waters of the Atlantic despite a huge drop in their numbers from whaling activity earlier this century. Their smaller cousins, the pygmy sperm whale and the dwarf sperm whale, are rarely spotted in Carolina waters, but this may be due to their preference for deeper waters.

More than 20 other Cetaceans, which also include dolphins and porpoises, have been recorded in the coastal waters of the Carolinas. The most abundant Cetacean along the Atlantic Coast is the bottle-nosed dolphin; other visitors include the harbor porpoise and four species of beaked whales.

Spotting a great whale in North Carolina waters is a rare and special experience. Their numbers are few because of excessive whaling; many have been hunted to near extinction. All of the great whales are considered endangered species and are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the International Whaling Commission.

Discover more fascinating facts about North Carolina’s aquatic animals and environments by visiting the aquariums at Pine Knoll Shores, Fort Fisher, on Roanoke Island, Jennette’s Pier in Nags Head or by visiting our website at [ncaquariums.com](http://ncaquariums.com).



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