

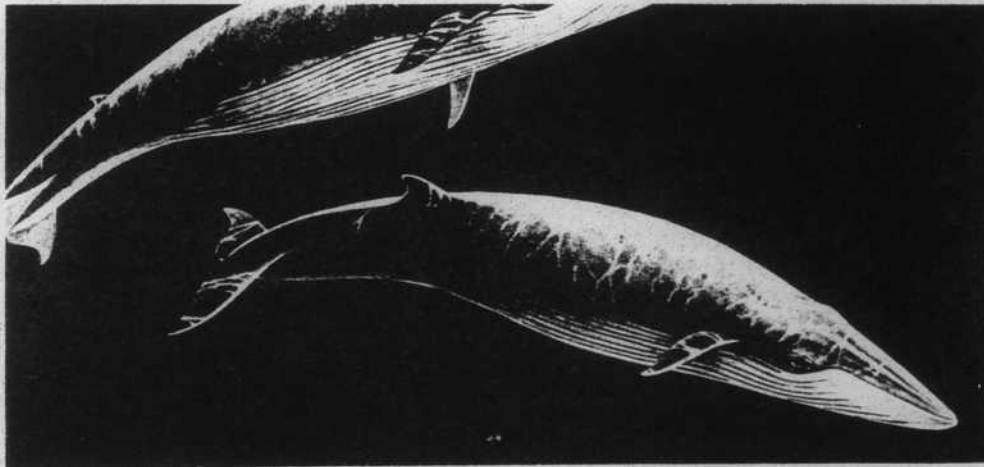
Whale of a time at the coast

Of the ten "great" whales, animals in the order Cetacea reaching lengths of 30 feet or more, eight have been reported in the coastal waters of North Carolina. Seven of these giant creatures are baleen whales, the biggest 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 attached to their upper jaws instead of teeth. The baleen is used during feeding to strain krill or other plankton. The minke whale, sei whale, Bryde's whale, fin whale, blue whale, humpback whale, and the northern right whale have all been sighted in North Carolina waters. The minke whale is the smallest of the baleens, attaining a maximum length of 33 feet. The blue whale is the largest of all animals, reaching a maximum length of 98 feet and an adult body 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. The winter months of December and January are prime times



to spot these huge creatures as they travel southward through our coastal waters to the warmer waters of the Caribbean where they will breed or give birth. In the spring, humpbacks return north to the cool polar waters for a summer of feeding, where they will consume over 1.5 tons of food a day. During this northward migration, humpbacks pass through the waters of North Carolina during 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 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.

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 North Carolina waters but this may be due to their preference for deeper waters.

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

Spotting a great whale off the Brunswick County coast is a rare and special opportunity. 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.

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