

Gray Whales in the Salish Sea

Diving Deeper

Gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) were once common throughout the Northern Hemisphere, but the Atlantic populations were hunted to extinction by the middle of the 18th century. Today, two Pacific populations of gray whales are recognized: the western North Pacific stock (found along the coast of Asia) and the eastern North Pacific stock (found along the coast of North America). The whales most familiar to us are part of the eastern stock, which was taken off the US Endangered Species Act in 1994 and is today considered a healthy population with over 25,000 individuals. The same cannot be said for the western stock, which is estimated to contain fewer than 200 individuals.

Gray whales are baleen whales (suborder Mysticeti), but are unusual members of the group. Unlike all other baleen whales, grays are bottom-feeders, seeking out shallow, muddy areas of the coastline where they can strain out benthic crustaceans, mollusks, and sometimes even eelgrass and algae! The feeding pits made by foraging gray whales as they suck up mouthfuls of sediment are large enough to be seen in satellite images!

Gray whales undergo one of the longest migrations of any mammal. In the eastern Pacific stock, they move up the West Coast to the Bering Sea each spring, spending their summers feeding on the abundant food resources of the Arctic waters and Alaskan coastline. In the fall, the whales travel back south along the coast, giving birth to their calves in protected lagoons along Baja California during the winter. These lagoons provide the calves refuge, but the southern waters do not support an abundance of food for the adult whales. During the winter, adult grays must survive exclusively on the blubber layer they developed during the previous summer. All in all, gray whales live 3-5 months of the year with no significant food resources!

In the early 1990s, scientists noted a small group of gray whales that had begun breaking off from the spring migration route to spend 2-3 months (usually March through May) in the Salish Sea. These individuals - returning year after year - feed extensively on ghost shrimp in the shallow intertidal areas of north Puget Sound before continuing north to the main summer feeding grounds. Today, there are about a dozen individuals in this group of whales (known as the "Sounders").

General Biology

[Gray whale migration map](#): *A picture's worth a thousand words. Check out just how far gray whales must travel each year!*

[Gray Whale Feeding Pits \(Satellite Image\)](#): *This image was taken off of Whidbey Island in May of 2018. The speckled areas in the intertidal mudflat are actually pits dug by gray whales as they forage!*

1999 PTMSC Gray Whale/Spirit's Story

[Spirit the Gray Whale](#): *Learn the story behind the juvenile gray whale in the PTMSC museum.*

Current Threats

[Current \(2019\) Gray Whale Unusual Mortality Event](#): *Read the Seattle Time's account of the (probably ongoing) gray whale UME, and dig deeper into why scientists think so many grays stranded last year.*

[“Sounders” and their role in understanding the UME](#): *A little bit of local pride! Learn how the Salish Sea’s own group of oddball whales are helping researchers learn more about the health of the eastern Pacific stock.*

Other useful sources

[North Puget Sound Gray Whales \(“Sounders”\)](#): *Look here for Cascadia Research Collective’s portal on the Sounders: who they are, what we know about them, and what we are still trying to learn.*

NOT Docent related, but DANG that’s an interesting article:

[Grays might be trickling back into the Atlantic basin](#)