AMERICAN CETACEAN SOCIETY FACT SHEET

P.O. Box 1391 - San Pedro, CA 90733-1391 - (310) 548-6279

MINKE WHALE

Balaenoptera acutorostrata

CLASS:	Mammalia
ORDER:	Cetacea
SUBORDER:	Mysticeti
FAMILY:	Balaenopteridae
GENUS:	*Balaenoptera*
SPECIES:	***acutorostrata*** (may soon be split into acutorostrata and bonarensis (Antarctic)

The minke *(pronounced mink-ey)* whale is also known as the Little Piked Whale. Like all the rorquals, the minke is a fast swimmer, capable of reaching speeds of 18-24 knots (16-21 mph). The minke can be curious, and has been known to approach ships, even at times keeping up with moving vessels. Often, however, minkes spend relatively little time at the surface. It may be hard to see a minke at sea because its blow is rarely visible and it tends to disappear quickly after exhaling. Since it is relatively small, it may be hidden in a choppy sea. Minke distribution is widespread, ranging from sub-tropical to polar waters. In their feeding grounds in the Antarctic, minkes will actually inhabit the pack ice!

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

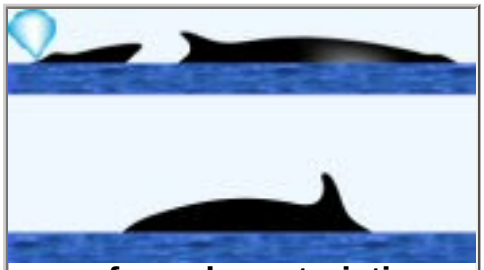
The minke whales is the smallest member of the rorqual family of whales (those whales with baleen, a dorsal fin, and throat pleats). One of its most distinctive features is the narrow, triangular rostrum (upper jaw), which is proportionally shorter than in other rorquals. A single ridge extends from the tip of the rostrum to the blowhole. The minke is a baleen whale, having 280 to 300 yellowish-white baleen plates, usually no more than 11 inches in length, on each side of its upper jaw. Its body is slender and streamlined. Like all rorquals, the minke has a series of 50 to 70 ventral grooves, or pleats, that expand during feeding.

COLOR

The minke is counter-shaded-black to dark gray on top, white below. Some minkes have a light-colored chevron on the back behind the head. Two areas of lighter gray appear on each side: one behind the flippers and another below and forward of the dorsal fin. Distinctive to minke whales outside of the Antarctic is a white band on each flipper. The band is usually absent in Antarctic minkes, although some show an irregular banding pattern

FINS AND FLUKES

The dorsal fin of the minke is tall and falcate (curved), and is located two-thirds of the way back on the body. Its flippers are slender and pointed at the tips. Flukes are broad, up to one-fourth of the body length, pointed at the tips, and notched in the center.



surface characteristics

LENGTH AND WEIGHT

Adult males average about 8 m (26 feet) with a maximum length of 9.4 m (31 feet), while adult females average 8.2 m (27 feet) with a maximum length of 10.2 m (33 feet). Both males and females weigh about 10 tons. Both sexes are slightly larger in the southern hemisphere.

FEEDING

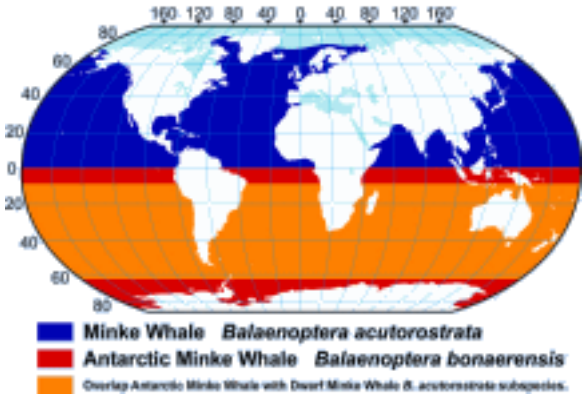
Minke whales feed primarily on krill in the southern hemisphere and on small schooling fish (capelin, cod, herring, pollock) or krill in the northern hemisphere. They will also eat copepods in certain areas.

MATING AND BREEDING

Sexual maturity is reached at 7 or 8 years in the northern hemisphere. Breeding peaks in summer months. The gestation period is 10 to 11 months, and calving is thought to occur once every two years on average. Calves are 3 m (10 feet) at birth and weigh 450 kg (1000pounds). Minke calves nurse for approximately 6 months.

DISTRIBUTION AND MIGRATION

Minkes are found in all oceans, though they are rarely observed in the tropics. They seem to prefer icy waters, and are found right up to the edge of the icepack in polar regions, and have actually become entrapped in the ice fields on occasion.



range map

NATURAL HISTORY

Minkes tend to be solitary animals, though sometimes they are seen traveling in pairs or in small groups of 4 to 6. In the polar regions, where food is concentrated, it is common to find larger aggregations of feeding animals in an area. They appear to segregate by age and sex more than do the other baleen whales. Females remain close to shore, while males are farther out to sea. Some minkes migrate long distances, but others may move only within a restricted area. In some regions, minkes may be found year-round. Their life span is believed to be about 50 years. Killer whales are known to prey on minkes, especially in parts of the southern hemisphere. The taxonomy of minke whales is currently in question, and soon there may be three species of minke whales: the Antarctic minke whale (relatively large and lacking a flipper stripe), the dwarf minke (smaller than Antarctic, has a flipper stripe, lives in tropical southern hemisphere waters), and the true minke whale (flipper stripe present, lives in the northern hemisphere).

STATUS

Only in recent decades have minke whales been taken by whalers to any extent; they were thought to be too small to be a worthwhile catch. But as the larger whale species became depleted, the whalers began to hunt the minke as a replacement. Since the late 1960s and 1970s, Japan, Russia (which has now ceased whaling), and (to some extent) Norway have focused their whaling efforts on minke whales. Scientists are still examining the populations of minke whales in areas where they are harvested, and have discovered that the largest numbers of minkes are found in the southern hemisphere. It is thought that minke populations have increased as they started to eat the food that was previously eaten by the now-depleted large whale species. The present population worldwide is believed to be over a millions animals.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We greatly appreciate the knowledge and assistance of Mason Weinrich of the Whale Center of New England, who contributed to the revision of this fact sheet.

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