

Gray Whales: Giants of the Sea

Gray whales are huge. Adults grow up to fifty feet long. That’s the length of a Greyhound bus! They can weigh twenty to forty tons. The females are larger and heavier than males. It takes a whale a long time to grow up, too. A female can first have a baby when she is eight years old. But, she may still have a long life ahead of her. These whales can reach the age of sixty.

Gray whales eat small clams, worms, and amphipods (like tiny shrimp) from the sea floor. They dive to the bottom and pick up a mouthful of mud. Then, they surface and force the mud through 140–180 filtering plates. These plates, called baleen, are made of the same material as our toenails. The baleen hang from each side of the upper jaw and trap the tiny animals. The whale licks them off with its tongue. Whales must do this again and again because they eat 7 percent of their body weight each day. If they don’t, they will not stay healthy.

The gray whales spend their summer in waters off Alaska. They spend the winter near Baja, California. That’s where the females give birth and raise their babies. A female has a baby every other year. She carries the calf for thirteen months. When she gives birth to the calf, it is fifteen feet long and weighs 2,000 pounds!

At birth, the gray whale calf has smooth, gray skin. By the time it is a year old, its skin is covered in barnacles and looks blotchy. The barnacles attach to the whale’s body. It’s the only place they can live. The barnacles eat tiny food in the water.

The whale babies nurse for seven months. They drink two gallons of milk each time. Whale milk is 52 percent fat. Cow milk is just 4 percent fat. Whale milk is so fatty because the calf must grow a layer of blubber. It needs warmth for the annual migration. Each year, these whales migrate about 12,000 miles up and down the cold waters of the Pacific coast. They swim 6,000 miles each way. They have the second-longest migration of any animal. In forty years of migrating, a gray whale swims the distance to the moon and back!

Sometimes a gray whale makes a huge leap from the water. It exposes most of its body length. But, no one knows the reason for **breeching**. Some scientists think that they are “talking” to other whales. Others say it is like our scratching. The whales are trying to remove itchy parasites from their skin. Maybe they are just having fun and enjoying being whales!



Photo by Dr. Steven Swartz, courtesy of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/Department of Commerce



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Gray whales are huge. Adults grow up to fifty feet long, which is about the length of a Greyhound bus. The adults can weigh twenty to forty tons, with the females being larger and heavier than males. It takes a whale a long time to mature, and a female can have her first baby only when she reaches eight years old. However, at eight, she is still quite young since these whales can live for sixty years.

Gray whales are large, but their food is not. They eat small clams, worms, and amphipods (such as tiny shrimp) from the sea floor. They dive to the bottom, pick up a mouthful of mud, go up to the surface, and force the mud through 140–180 filtering plates. These plates are called baleen. They hang from each side of the upper jaw and are made of the same material as our toenails. The baleen plates trap the tiny animals. The whale licks them off with its tongue and swallows them whole. Whales repeat this process over and over. They are eating machines. They must eat 7 percent of their body weight daily in order to stay healthy.

In summer, the gray whales live in waters off Alaska. Then, they travel down the shore of North America to spend the winter near Baja California, Mexico. In this warmer water, the females give birth and raise their babies. A female has a baby every other year. She carries the calf for thirteen months. When she gives birth to the calf, it is fifteen feet long and weighs 2,000 pounds!

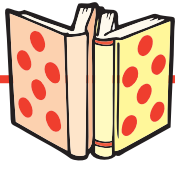
At birth, the gray whale calf has smooth, gray skin, but by the time it is one year old, barnacles have covered the skin, so it looks blotchy. The barnacles attach to the whale's body. They eat microscopic food in the water.

The whale calves nurse for seven months, drinking two gallons of milk each time. Cow milk is just 4 percent fat, while whale milk is 52 percent fat. Whale milk is so rich because the calf must grow a layer of blubber. It needs this warmth for the annual migration. Each year, these whales migrate about 12,000 miles up and down the cold waters of the Pacific coast. They swim 6,000 miles each way. This gives them the second-longest migration of any animal. In forty years of migrating, a gray whale swims the distance to the moon and back!

Sometimes people see a gray whale make a huge leap from the water that exposes most of its body length, but no one knows the reason for **breeching**. Some scientists think that this is a way of “talking” to other whales. Other scientists say the behavior is similar to our scratching. The whales want to get itchy parasites off of their skin. Maybe they are just having fun and enjoying being whales!



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Gray whales are huge. Adults grow up to fifty feet long, or about the length of a Greyhound bus. The adults can weigh twenty to forty tons, and the females are larger and heavier than males. It takes a whale a long time to mature; a female cannot have a baby until she is at least eight years old. At eight, she is still quite young considering that these whales can live for sixty years.

Gray whales eat small clams, worms, and amphipods (like tiny shrimp) from the sea floor. They dive to the bottom, pick up a mouthful of mud, return to the surface, and force the mud through 140–180 filtering plates. These plates, called baleen, hang from each side of the upper jaw and are made of the same material as our toenails. The baleen plates trap the tiny animals, which the whale licks off with its tongue. Whales repeat this process constantly because they must consume 7 percent of their body weight daily in order to stay healthy.

During summer, the gray whales live in waters off Alaska. Then, they travel along the shore of the North American continent to spend their winter near Baja, California. In this warmer water, the females give birth and raise their babies. A female has a baby every other year. She carries the calf for thirteen months. When she gives birth to the calf, it is fifteen feet long and weighs one ton!

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Sometimes people observe a gray whale making a huge leap from the water that exposes most of its body length. Yet nobody knows the reason for **breeching**. Some scientists think that this is a method of “talking” to other whales. Others say the behavior is similar to our scratching, and the whales are attempting to remove itchy parasites from their skin. Perhaps they are just having fun and enjoying being whales!



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