

## Whales of Texas

By Celeste Silling

Did you know that 27 species of whales have been seen in Texas waters? Whales are aquatic mammals characterized by their fish-like shape, hairless body, and blowhole. Because whales are mammals, not fish, they can't breathe underwater. They must emerge every once in a while, to breath air above water. When they dive back down, they close their blowhole so that water can't enter their lungs.

The blue whale is the largest of all known mammals (including the extinct ones), reaching up to 87 feet long and 330,000 lbs. The blue whale and several other species like the humpback and North Atlantic right whales migrate through our area every year.

These species are usually passing through on their way between a breeding zone and a feeding zone. In the winter time, the migratory whales generally inhabit warmer waters where they mate and have their calves. Then, in the summer, they'll swim to colder waters find food. Other whales are resident, and live here all year long.

We can sight and monitor whales in the water, but they also have the concerning habit of stranding themselves on the beach, which does make them easier to spot. Scientists have been studying the phenomena of whale strandings for a while now. There seem to be a variety of causes and we still don't fully understand it. Possible causes include parasites, illness, starvation, bad weather, and many other factors. Texas (particularly Galveston) has hundreds of whale strandings per year.

On the bright side, strandings do give us the opportunity to study these animals and their populations. We've gained a lot of information about what resides in our waters from these beached whales, and for some folks, it's a great chance to see one of these awesome animals up close.

The most common whale species near our shores is the bottlenose dolphin (yes, dolphins are species of whales!) They can be seen in bays, ship channels, and estuaries. A bit farther out, on the continental shelf, you can find more Atlantic spotted dolphins. Even farther into deeper waters, 19 whale species are regularly found, including the sperm whale, killer whale, and Risso's dolphin.

Some of our Texas whales, including the sei whale, blue whale and fin whale, have been placed on the endangered species list. A lot of the damage to whale populations was done by whalers, who hunted them for their meat and oil. Whales were so sought after that many were hunted to the brink of extinction. Now that whaling is extinct in most countries, whales are making a comeback. But due to slow reproductive rates, it might be a long time before the populations are back to normal.

Today, whales face a variety of other threats including climate change, habitat degradation, contamination, ship strikes, and entanglement. Entanglement occurs when the whale gets caught (most often in fishing nets) and can't escape. If the whale is too entangled, it can't hunt or go up to the surface to breath.

It's amazing that we have so many of these awesome animals in our waters! I personally didn't know that there were 27 whale species on the planet, much less in our backyard. As always, because Texas is home to so many amazing species, it's important that we be good stewards and take care of our habitat! If you see a stranded whale or dolphin, call the Texas Marine Mammal Stranding Network at 1-800-962-

6625 to contribute to research and hopefully save the animal. And if you're boating or fishing, be careful of your nets, lines, and boats!

Photo by NOAA. Caption: Sperm whales are one of the many whales found in Texas waters.