

Maui-Have a Whale of a Good Time

Maui, Hawaii; just thinking about the place conjures up a pleasant mental image of sunny days, swaying palm trees, and warm Pacific sea water. But humans are not the only mammals who like to come here and frolic in the 75 degree Fahrenheit water during the winter; as many as 10,000 humpback whales (or about half the population) migrate to the Maui Basin each November to give birth, nurse their young or to conceive in these warm waters. The other half of the North Pacific humpback population winters off of the coast of Baja, California or around the Southern Islands of Japan.



Humpback whales are attracted to this area because of the 300-foot shallowness of the Basin formed by the relative closeness of the islands of Maui, Lanai, Molikai and Kahoolawe to each other. On either side of the Basin, it drops down to 10,000 feet. Then in mid-April, they will again make their 4 to 6 week trip of 3,500-miles back to the rich and fertile waters off the coast of Alaska.

Whaling of Yesterday

But these huge cetaceans did not always have it this good. At one time, Maui was the whaling capital of the world. Starting in 1819 in Hawaii, the humpback whale was first hunted here for its whalebone called keratin and blubber oil. The oil was used to lubricate machinery, make candles and to light lamps. Whale bone was used in the making of corsets, fishing rods and umbrellas.

By 1846, 736 known whaling ships roamed the waters of Hawaii. Lahaina, Maui became a “gold rush” town in that whaling ships needed to be repaired, refitted and resupplied with fresh water, fresh fruit and vegetables, salted meat, tools, liquor and other commodities. But with the discovery of oil in Titusville, PA in 1859, the demand for whale oil began to decrease. By 1871, commercial whaling in the Hawaiian Islands had all but ended.

While the humpback whale population was down to about 300 at its lowest point, due to the conservation efforts of many organizations, including the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, their numbers have now rebounded to an estimated 20,000.

Whaling of Today



Today, these agile behemoths are only "hunted" by camera-wielding tourists while out on sanctioned whale-watching expeditions that leave right from dock at Lahaina in Maui. To find whales, expedition operators look for the "blow"

of a whale - the mist-like cloud of condensation that hangs in the air and can be seen for miles. The blow consists of two to three cups of seawater mixed with some mucous that is expelled from the lungs at over 200 mph through the two blowholes on top of a whale's head.

While by law a boat cannot approach closer than 100 yards to a whale, due to their curious nature many times a whale will approach close to the boat. On our expedition we could not engage the engines to move for about 30 minutes as we had a mother and calf comfortable with hanging out right in front of our boat. The mother would periodically help her calf rest by supporting it from underneath with her nose; once rested it would obediently follow alongside her.



Whale Acrobatics

Watching a 45-ton, 45-foot whale propel itself completely out of the water, called breaching, is something not soon forgotten. The muscle in a whale's tail is the most powerful muscle of any animal. With just two flips back and forth, it can shoot all 45-tons of itself completely out of the water like a missile coming up from a submarine.

But whales also have many other acrobatic routines including:

- lob-tailing,
- spy-hopping and
- fluke-up dives.

Lob-tailing, also called tail-slapping, is where a whale will forcefully slap its tail on the surface of the water. Scientists think it may be a form of communication with other whales, or a way to clean barnacles and other growths off of its tail, or just plain fun to do. Not only does this move make a large splash, it sounds similar to a shotgun blast going off each time they do it.

Spy-hopping is where a whale will lift its head out of the water vertically and look around. They can see equally as well above the surface of the water as they can below.

Fluke-up dives are where the whale's tail comes completely out of the water and it usually indicates the whale is going on a deep dive. It is easy to anticipate a fluke-up by the extreme arching of the back before the tail comes up. On shallower dives, the arching will not be as extreme and the tail stays in the water. Whichever acrobatic move you are privileged to see, all are awe-inspiring to even the most traveled and discriminating watcher.



Speaking of flukes, the marking on the underside of a whale's tail are as unique as fingerprints are to us - each one is different. These unique identifiers are used by researchers in their efforts to track movement and habits of whales.

Humpback Whale Calving

About 800 calves of the *Megaptera novaeangliae* are born here annually. Only about 50% of them will survive to adulthood. And while they don't have any natural predators down in Maui, orca whale pods kill many calves each year while they are in Alaska.

When born, a 10 to 15-foot calf will weigh around 1,500 pounds at birth. It will gain about 5 pounds per *hour - yes per hour* - on as much as 100 gallons of its mother's rich yogurt-like milk per day. One reason it is thought to be like yogurt is if the calf misses some milk, it stays together in a clump and the calf can then snatch it from the sea.

The calf will stay with its mother until they come back down here next winter. Then it will go off on its own. The mother will again try to conceive. If successful, once her body senses she is pregnant, she will immediately leave for Alaska. If not, she will migrate back with the rest of them in the spring.



The waters here are devoid of nutrients, so the mother fasts the whole winter she is here. Her first opportunity to feed again will be off the coast of California. She will carry this calf for about eleven months and will give birth to it once she is back in the Basin the following winter.

With whale-watching trips offered up to four times per day by several different companies, it is a big tourist business in Maui when the whales are "in". While you can watch whales from shore, it is much more enjoyable to watch them from a boat. Be sure to go on a whale-watching expedition while in Maui. It will be one shore excursion you will not forget!

Photographs:

All photos by Ron Kness.

Contributor's Bio:

Ron Kness is a travel writer/photographer with articles and photos published in various house publications, in-flight magazines and other media sources both online and in print. Ron is intensely interested in Hawaii and the surrounding Pacific region, and plans to return.