



# update



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Top photo: © Fred Wasti; Above: © WDCS; Balloons: Dona Tracey

Wildlife enthusiast, Dona Tracey, has been helping WDCS carry out humpback research this year. Here, she recounts a typical day at sea and highlights how, even far from sea, we can impact the animals' lives.

The best part of watching whales in their natural environment is that up close and personal encounter that no captive situation can provide. No bells, no whistles, no hoops and no fish rewards. The whales are simply doing what they do without any direction from us, like Perseid and her calf, the stars of yesterday's 'matinee' where I had the privilege of whale watching with two scientists, Sue and Regina, from WDCS.

We started our journey in Plymouth, Massachusetts, heading out past the Mayflower II, Plymouth Rock, the Monument to the Forefathers and Plymouth Light. As we sailed past history the now illegal, whaling industry came to mind. And it is gratifying to know that whale watching and not killing has replaced that part of the economy of Plymouth (and other whaling communities) dating back to 1830's when whale hunting, processing and manufacturing was common practice.

Our destination? Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, summer home to the great whales. On this day, we met up with fin whales, minke whales and of course humpback whales, all individually identifiable to the researchers.

Humpback whales can be identified by the markings on the undersides of their tails called flukes. These markings are as unique to humpback whales as our finger prints are to us. A catalog of over 2,000 humpback whale tails identifies each one with a picture, name and history. Scientists like Regina and Sue identify and track these whales and others through a database using, photos, time stamps, GPS, behaviour and field notes among other detailed information that contributes to our knowledge of whales; who they are, their migration paths, how they interact, hazards they face etc. so we might better protect them. Some of the whales can also be identified by their dorsal fins like that of Cygnus, a whale whose dorsal fin was probably injured in rowdy group behaviour with other male whales on their breeding ground.

Although the hunting of these humpbacks has long since been banned, the whales here still face many continuing hazards such as collisions with ships and entanglement in fishing gear. Even things we don't think about can have a deadly affect on them and in fact, on this trip, we came across and removed balloons from three different locations. Balloons pose an extreme hazard to marine mammals; they can mistake them for food, like jellyfish, and ingest them but they can't digest them. So, next time you're thinking of letting go of a helium balloon, think about where it might end up.



# adopt a whale

newsletter

February 2008

Photos - Above: © Duncan Murrell; Below: © WDCS/Regina Asmutis-Silvia

## Protecting our ocean treasures

by Regina Asmutis-Silvia, Senior Biologist

I heard "A Pirate Looks at 40" yesterday and thought the lyrics are more poignant than, perhaps, Jimmy Buffet intended. I've read that the ocean contains 362 trillion gallons of water, which is why "her belly" can hold huge treasures - whales. And considering the world's human population is more than 6 billion, it's likely that few people have seen whales.

And, yes, the ocean has seen it all. It's amazing when you think that, due to the recycling of water, the ocean water Cat's Paw filters through her baleen during each meal is potentially the same water that Cleopatra sailed on in the Nile. But what I find poignant in the lyrics is the "switch from sails to steam" and the "treasures unseen".

Each year, vessels seem to get larger and faster and the unfortunate result, for whales, is more and more collisions with these vessels, often fatal. Some due to the fact that whales are not easy to see. This may sound strange but an animal like SOD spends less than 20% of her time at the surface. As mammals, whales

*"Mother, mother ocean, I have heard you call  
Wanted to sail upon your waters since I was  
three feet tall  
You've seen it all, you've seen it all"*



*"Watched the men who rode you  
switch from sails to steam  
And in your belly you hold the  
treasures few have ever seen"  
Jim Buffet*

must surface to breathe, but most of their time is spent below the surface, but not always far enough below to be out of harm's way.

Some of the larger ships have drafts (the amount of ship below the surface) of more than 50 ft. So, if Reflection is feeding around relatively shallow areas, such as the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, where the water depth averages about 100 ft, she can be in the danger zone and little chance of being seen. And while size matters, speed matters more. Even a very small boat, going fast enough, can kill a whale. Slowing down not only reduces the potential injury, but also increases the chances of the whale

moving out of harms way.

The support you provide through the WDCS Adopt a Whale Programme does many things – it gets us on the water to provide you with information on your whale, it provides us the opportunity to get information about the issues whales face, and most importantly, it provides us the opportunity to fight for important regulations.

Jimmy Buffet is right, the biological treasures beneath the ocean are countless and we likely have many yet to discover. But in the meantime, we need to ensure we protect the treasures we know about. Thank you for making that happen.





Photos: WDCS/Regina Asmutis-Silvia, Fred Wasti, WDCS/Alex Hill, WDCS/Sue Rocca, WDCS/Kiel Rowley

# updates



The whale season in the Gulf of Maine “officially” begins each year when we first see SALT and in 2007 this was on April 22nd. SALT has such a big family now it’s almost a guarantee to see some of her calves and this year CRYSTAL, BRINE and MOSTAZA all made appearances.

We waited a long time for IVORY to show up this season and when she did, she had a new calf with her!

We’re also happy to report that REFLECTION, RUNE and FILAMENT were spotted with new calves as were SCRATCH and SICKLE who returned with her 11th calf!

PEPPER is also a Mom this year! She and her calf have been quite social, hanging out with other mother-calf pairs. Pepper has been teaching her calf all the tricks in the book too, including breaching, flipper

slapping and lob-tailing.

CAT’S PAW seems to favor a feeding area east of Cape Cod called the Great South Channel, so we did not expect her to show up in Canadian waters! Most humpbacks seem to be either northern or southern Gulf of Maine whales and stay somewhat loyal to their preferred feeding areas.

ORION was sighted in the waters off of Nova Scotia, as per usual and HALFMOON was seen again this year, also preferring more northern feeding areas. HAZE is a northern girl all the way and stays in the North of the Gulf of Maine when she eats.

QUIXOTE, another northern female, was spotted in the Bay of Fundy, off the coast of Nova Scotia. CLOUD was also seen in the Bay of Fundy,



## Whale Adoption website

You can keep up to date with all the latest news and sightings from the Gulf of Maine plus find out more about the fascinating lives of humpback whales by visiting our website at <http://www.whales.org>





living up to his namesake when researchers found him among the very low cloud cover - thick fog! CLOUD's sister SCYLLA also made an appearance and both of his brothers, LITTLESPOT and TIGRIS were seen this season.

While all three used to hang out in northern waters, CLOUD and LITTLESPOT made surprise appearances further south in the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary.

ISTAR their mother was also back this year and whenever she was sighted, she was almost always alone! The same went for MIDNIGHT who was also seen alone this season, probably as she didn't have a calf this year.

Our Alaskan researcher Jan Straley saw just one of our west

coast whales in 2007. This was another loner DOMINO who rarely associates with other whales.

Although we didn't see MARS this year, PUTTER her son was spotted hanging out with ONYX. SEAL, another of MARS' sons was also seen hanging out with an adult male named AGASSIZ. Both SEAL and AGASSIZ were synchronized flipper slapping!

MARS' daughter, NILE, returned with a calf this year making MARS a grandmother again! ORBIT is also a grandmother as her 1986 calf, ISTHMUS, returned with a new calf.

NILE's new calf is quite active and curious and in June this baby was seen tail breaching, flipper slapping and approaching whale

watch boats to get a closer look.

COLT was up to his old tricks in June when he gave the Dolphin Fleet Whale Watch boats one of his infamous close approaches! LINER and BUCKSHOT were also seen in June bubble-netting for fish together.

CORAL was first sighted this season in May and his brother PENINSULA was also spotted with SIRIUS in June.

SPOON was also seen this spring and her son, REGULUS, was back to his old tricks flipper-slapping in June. Instead of hitting the water however - he was hitting himself!

For a full list of contributors and whale sightings, please visit [www.whales.org](http://www.whales.org)

