

Publication:

Marine Mammal Milestones
By DARLING CETACEANS, Vol 2 Issue 2
April, 2005

Beautiful Belugas

They have nicknames like “canaries of the sea,” and “white whale” for obvious reasons that make them easy to identify as adults. It may be these characteristics that make the beluga whale one of the best known whale species, though its range is limited.

When born, beluga calves are grey in color and can be mistaken for narwhals. As they reach sexual maturity around age 5, they become pure white. While they still maintain the same size and shape as a narwhal, as adults they are harder to distinguish from floating ice, than from their relatives.

The ability to move the over-sized melon and protruding “lips” allows belugas to create a range of sounds. Listeners may think they hear birds whistling or chirping, doors creaking, or wood peckers when these creatures communicate.

The melon does not have the same feel as a dolphin or other cetaceans. It can be described as a wet and peeled hard boiled egg. However, it has more give, like pressing a plastic bag full of pudding.

Belugas are not endangered as a whole, but certain populations do face major threats. The estimated 500 that live in the St. Lawrence are treated as toxic waste upon death, due to large amounts of chemicals that have entered their bodies.

Belugas are still hunted by a select few, including the Inuit of North America. Naturally, their main predator is the polar bear. Bears will wait for belugas to surface to breath or become entrapped in the ice, so they may attack. Scars from these attacks are frequent in some beluga pods.

Belugas are social animals, traveling in families of about five, but joining others to create massive pods of hundreds to thousands. This made them easy targets for hunters, who would kill 800 in a single hunt in the 1890's.

Their social behavior is also evident in the way they become curious when new belugas or objects are introduced to their environment. Their ability to turn their heads allows them to check things out in a way other cetaceans can not.

They are not an acrobatic whale. Swimming slowly, they spend nearly all the time near the waters surface. Spyhopping and lobtailing are common, but breaching is rare.

Unlike most other cetaceans, belugas do not have a dorsal fin. Instead, they have a small ridge in the middle of the back that extends for approximately 20 inches.

Because of the extreme climates in which they live, the beluga has only recently been studied in the wild by people other than the hunters which depend upon them. Most knowledge about belugas comes from studies on captive animals, which are plentiful.