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Melon Headed Whales

The Melon-headed whale (*Peponocephala electra*) can be found in the tropical and subtropical offshore waters around the world. The scientific name is derived from the Greek word pepono meaning melon, cephalo meaning head and electra is a Greek mythology woman. There have been relatively common sightings of them in the Philippines and along the east coast of Australia, and year round observations have been made in Hawaii.

This whale is also grouped in a common subspecies nicknamed the Blackfish. Other whales in this group include the Killer whale, Pilot whale, and Pygmy Killer whale. They achieved this grouping because of their coloration. These animals are mainly a single color from mouth to tail. The Melon-headed whale has a marking on its lips that make it a bit easier to identify; it looks like it is wearing whitish lipstick. They have a slim head tapering to a point, single blowhole, long pointed flippers, a gray to off-white patch on the underside (not visible at sea), and a slender tail stock.

A newborn Melon-head whale calf is approximately 3 feet 3 inches when born. The birth weight is currently unknown. Calving season is believed to be in the late spring to early fall based on sightings when a calf is seen with an adult female. Adults range in size from 7 feet to 9 feet in length and weigh approximately 335 pounds.

Their diet consist of squid, octopus, shrimp, and small fish. They are believed to be evening and night hunters.

These animals live in relatively large family groups. It is common to see them in groups of 100 to 500. They are likely to be seen tightly packed and making frequent course changes. Melon-headed whales are known to stay in these groupings for their entire lives.

When traveling at a fast speed in the water they make low, shallow leaps out of the water often creating a lot of spray at the surface making identification difficult. When traveling at a slower speed they may actually lift their entire head out the water. They have been known to bow ride for short periods of time. When making a dive they can be seen strongly arching their tail stock. Currently, there is believed to be no migratory pattern for the Melon-headed whale. They are usually wary of boats but some of the observations are made in areas where tuna boats regularly follow dolphins to lead them to a food source, so behavior might differ depending on location.

A Melon-headed whale is one of the whales that researchers are now just taking a more intent interest in. Research is being conducted in the Philippines where there have been mass stranding of these whales. Better and more complete information about habitat, eating, migration, and gestation will evolve as the animal is further studied.