

Gray Whales **The Monumental Migration**



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by Jane Duden

Hello, Baby Whale!

This baby gray whale is just three weeks old. His mother swam nonstop for 55 days to give birth in the best whale nursery she knows, a sheltered lagoon in Mexico. Her long journey south started over 5,000 miles away, in icy waters off Alaska and Siberia. In her 45 years, she has traveled the distance to the moon and back — and she's not done yet!



Photo © Orca Network

Holy Cow, What a Calf!

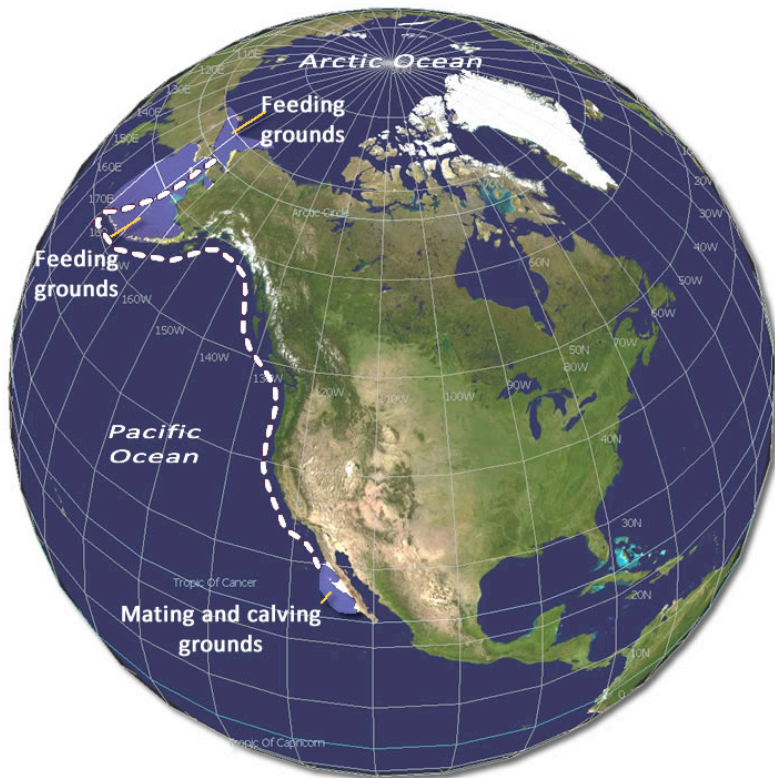
The baby gray whale weighs one ton and is fifteen feet long at birth. As a marine mammal, the calf starts life on a diet of milk. Each day he drinks enough to gain over 60 pounds! The baby gray must get ready to migrate more than 5,000 miles when only two or three months old.



Photo © Keith Jones

Moving With the Seasons

As spring approaches, the days grow longer. Hungry whales know it's time to leave the warm waters of Mexico. They will swim nonstop northward until they reach the food-filled, icy waters of the Arctic.



Blubber for Energy

Adult whales eat little or nothing during winter in the nursery lagoons. They don't find much food while migrating either. A whale's blubber provides the energy the whale needs when food is scarce. A 30-ton whale may burn up to eight tons of blubber during the winter months and two migration journeys!



Photo © Keith Jones

Blubber for Warmth

The thick layer of blubber under the gray whale's skin also works like a blanket. Blubber keeps warm-blooded whales from losing body heat as they migrate through cold water. Blubber insulates them in the icy northern waters of their feeding grounds too.



Photo © Keith Jones

Hunger Drives Spring Migration

In the spring, urgent hunger drives gray whales northward. They leave the warm winter breeding grounds to migrate back to cold summer feeding grounds. Longer days of sunlight bring the food chain to life. The warmth melts the ice, so the whales can swim freely to the far north. Soon it will be daylight 24 hours a day!



Photo © Keith Jones

The Eating Season

It's chow time at last! The huge whales feast all summer long. Tiny, shrimp-like krill are a big part of their menu. An average krill is 0.4 to 0.8 inches (1 to 2 cm) long. It takes a LOT of krill to fill up a gray whale!



Time to Go Again

After a few short months in the Arctic, the seasons are changing again. Northern days grow shorter. Water temperatures drop. Ice starts to form. The food supply dwindles in fewer hours of sunlight. Gray whales know what to do. They head for Mexico's warm waters, thousands of miles to the south. Our baby whale will make his first journey south, independent of his mom.



Always on the Move

A gray whale's life is always in motion. Changing seasons and the need to feed and breed keep whales moving. It's an endless journey, but each year's story is new. You can join the adventure. Follow the monumental migration live each spring with Journey North!



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