



Photo by Krauss Otterman

Juneau, a Humpback Whale’s Summer Vacation Destination

About 100 humpback whales frequent Juneau’s fjords and channels

By Aleta Walther © 2014
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Whether cruising the inside passage, kayaking across Auke Bay or relaxing atop a bluff overlooking Favorite Channel, you’re likely to see humpback whales lollygagging or logging, lobtailing or flipper slapping, or lunging or plunging in search of scrumptious krill and schools of fish.

Thanks to the humpback whale’s endangered specie status, current protection by [the International Whaling Commission](#), and abundant fish, more and more humpback whales are making Juneau their summer vacation destination. Humpback whales are the most commonly sighted baleen whales in Juneau waters. In fact, [Gastineau Guiding](#) is so confident our tour guests will see a humpback whale, we offer a whale-sighting guarantee.

So how are Juneau area humpbacks doing? So well that Alaska’s Department of Fish and Game recently [filed a petition](#) with the [National Marine Fisheries Service](#) seeking to remove the humpback from the endangered species list, stating that the humpback whale population has rebounded from dangerously low levels just a few decades ago.

“The subpopulation of humpback whales that migrates seasonally between Alaska and Hawaii has recovered, is no longer threatened with extinction...,” stated the [petition](#) submitted last February. A decision on the petition is pending.

Found in all of the world’s oceans, humpback whales generally spend their summers in temperate or polar waters, including the fjords, passages and channels of Southeast Alaska. In fall, most migrate south to warmer tropical waters for breeding and birthing.

“Although it is possible to see whales in Juneau waters any month of the year, whales are most frequently sighted from May through November,” says Suzie Teerlink, a Ph.D. student with the [School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences, University of Alaska, Fairbanks](#).

Ms. Teerlink and fellow researchers at the [Alaska Fisheries Science Center’s Auke Bay Laboratories](#) have developed a website tool for tracking Juneau-sighted humpbacks’ migration routes worldwide.

Just as humans have unique fingerprints, each humpback has unique identifying coloring and scars on the underside of its fluke (tail). Humpback whale researchers around the globe share their catalogs to compare fluke photographs and determine, or confirm, whale sightings.



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Before web-based cataloging, researchers shared film photos to determine humpback migration routes. It is through cataloging flukes that researchers have determined that many of Juneau’s summer-resident humpbacks migrate to Hawaii in the fall and back to Juneau in early spring, an arduous 6,000-mile, round trip trek. One of the longest migrations among mammals.

We use the Juneau [Humpback Whale Catalog](#) to help guests identify humpbacks seen on whale-watching excursions. It’s fun to see if our favorite whales return year after year. Check it out. Maybe you will recognize Smudge, Sasha, Dutchy, Captain Leif, Viking or Rubber Lips on your Juneau whale watching adventure. ☺

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Quick Facts

Adult Humpback Whale

- Up to 50 feet (15.25m) long
- Weigh up to 70,000 lbs. or 35 tons (31,751 kg)
- Color: black on upper side, molted white and gray on the underside
- Most distinguishing feature: large knobby flippers, 1/3 of body length
- Most distinguishing behavior: leaping out of the water, also known as breaching
- Feeding strategy: filter feeder
- Carnivore: Eats up to 1,000 pounds (453 kg) a day of krill (shrimp-like crustaceans) and small schooling fish.

[Click here to learn even more about humpback whales.](#)