

## Fin whale

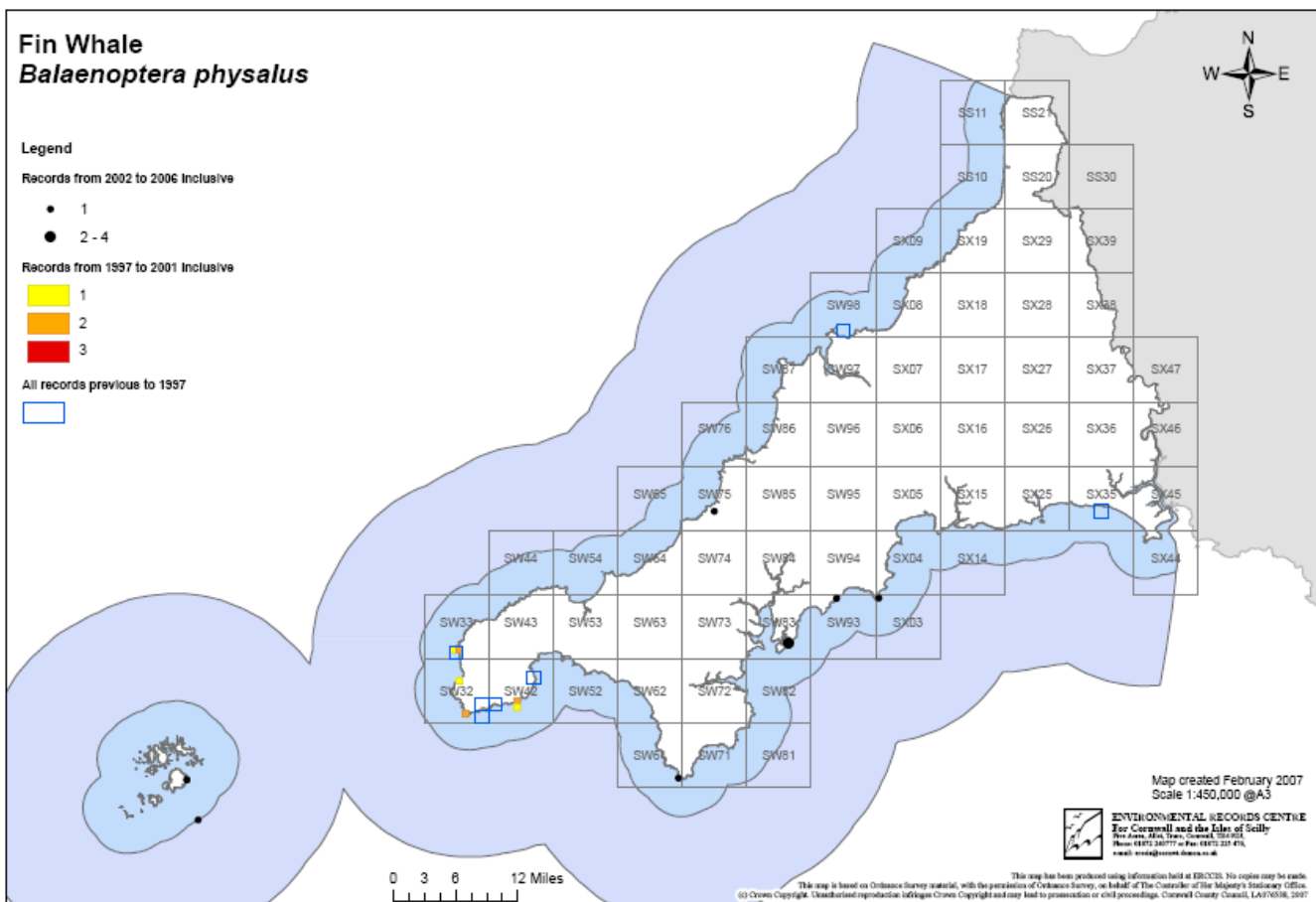
*Balaenoptera physalus* (Linnaeus, 1758) Order: Cetacea

The fin whale is the second largest animal on Earth after the blue whale. It can reach lengths of over 26m (85ft) when fully grown, but is just 6m (20ft) at birth. Females are generally larger than males. Like many whales, it is grey on top and white underneath and has a streamlined body with a pointed head, so is easily confused with similar species such as blue, sei and Bryde's whales. There is a small, arching, dorsal fin about two-thirds of the way along the back, while the pectoral fins on its sides are relatively small and pointed. The blowhole on the top of its head is divided into two, and a ridge runs from here down the head to the tip of the upper jaw. Instead of teeth it has rows of fine hairs that hang down from the upper jaw, called baleen, which filter out the prey in the water that passes through them, while the lower jaw is pleated and can expand hugely when it takes a mouthful of food-filled water. The easiest way to positively identify a fin whale is from the unique colour pattern on either side of the jaw, as the left side of mouth and baleen plates are grey, while the right side is white. This is thought to have developed from it swimming while feeding mainly with its left grey side facing upward and the right white side facing downward, helping to camouflage it from threats above and below. Fin whales can be spotted, even at great distances, when they exhale giving off a tall, narrow spray of moisture. In diving, the back of the animal will roll across the surface of the sea until the dorsal fin appears, upon which the whole animal will sink down, rarely showing the tail above the water. They make very loud, low frequency vocalisations that can be heard hundreds of miles away underwater, and may be used to communicate.

Fin whales have been recorded around the world in all oceans and in the eastern Mediterranean, although they are apparently rare in polar waters and uncommon in the tropics. They migrate long distances from warmer breeding grounds to colder feeding grounds every year. Females are pregnant for about a year, giving birth to a single calf that takes approximately 6 months to wean ready for the migration. A calf will mature and become sexually active after 6 to 12 years (when they have grown to around 20m in length) and the females can mate every second or third winter. Fin whales can live for up to 90 years. Large whales like the fin whale usually travel alone except when a mother is with her calf. However, small groups of 3 – 7 have been observed on many occasions and as many as 100 individuals can gather in rich feeding grounds.

This species lives mainly in the deep water of the open ocean, and is rarely seen close inshore unless there is deep water nearby. Around Cornwall the area they have been most frequently observed is between Cape Cornwall to Fal Bay. As filter feeders, they take huge mouthfuls of water to collect plankton, krill, squid and small fish in their baleen plates. They do this by either swimming along slowly at the surface with the mouth open, or by lunging partially out of the water on their front or right side.

Adult fin whales have no natural predators, although pods of killer whales may attempt to separate a young calf from the mother and drown it. Whaling is currently their biggest threat and the population globally has fallen dramatically over the centuries because of this. Fin whales were the most hunted of all whale species in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and 725,000 were killed in the southern hemisphere alone. Entanglement in fishing nets and ship strikes have also been reported. Sonar may also be a threat to them, as the loud noises produced by these devices can cause deafness if they are close to the sources, and can mask their vocalisations, making it difficult for them to keep in touch over long distances.



Fin whales prefer deeper offshore waters, and are normally found off the north and west of Scotland, western Ireland and southwest England. They are frequently recorded around British Isles between July and December. Elsewhere, three distinct populations are thought to exist: North Atlantic, North Pacific and southern hemisphere. The eastern Mediterranean population is possibly a subpopulation of the North Atlantic.

Recent conservation improvements have resulted in a gradual recovery, following the loss of perhaps 80% of the population to whaling, and now stands at about 119,000 individuals worldwide. Fin whales are still hunted by Japan despite the International Whaling Commission moratorium banning commercial whaling. Instead, Japan claims an exception from the moratorium to conduct scientific research. In the UK they are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Fin whales are a Biodiversity Action Plan species.

### Survey Methods

Boat based surveys from ships that cross areas of open ocean (e.g ferries) through programmes such as Organisation Cetacea (ORCA) and Marinelife.

### Key references

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- Walker, D & Wilson, A. (2007) Whales and Dolphins of Great Britain. Cetacea Publishing.
- Reeves, R., Stewart, B., Clapham, P. & Powell, J. (2002) Sea Mammals of the World. A&C Black Publishers Ltd.
- Shirihai, H. & Jarrett, B. (2006) Whales, Dolphins and Seals. A&C Black Publishers Ltd.

**Number of records per date class**  
 2002 to 2006 inclusive 9  
 1997 to 2001 inclusive 16  
 All records previous to 1997 12  
**Total 37**

### Did you know?

Fin whales are also known as finbacks, finners, common rorquals, razorbacks and herring whales. Common rorqual and finback are both old English terms and were used in Cornwall.

A 15m fin whale washed up dead near Sennen in October 2004 and samples were taken for analysis by volunteers from the Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network. In February 2008 a dead fin whale calf recorded by the CWTMSN at 6m washed up dead at Porthallow.