

# The Kids' Times:

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# Sei Whale



NMFS File Photo

Sei whales have tall, curved dorsal fins.

## How did the Sei whale get its name?

The sei whale (pronounced "sigh whale") is named after the Norwegian word for a fish called pollock: *seje*. Sei whales received their name because they sometimes gather off the coast of Norway at the same time as the pollock that come to feed on the abundant **plankton** each year. The scientific name, *Balaenoptera borealis*, is Greek for "winged whale" and "northern," respectively.

## What do they look like?

Sei whales are **rorquals**. The rorquals are a set of whales that are all in the family *Balaenopteridae*. They all have longitudinal grooves, or ventral pleats, on the throat and a small, pointed dorsal fin. The grooves allow the throat to expand so they can take in a large volume of water when they filter feed. The sei whale has 40-65 throat grooves.

Sei whales are also **baleen** whales. Baleen are long, flat plates, made of fingernail-like material called keratin, that hang from a

baleen whale's mouth in place of teeth. Sei whales have about 350 baleen plates on each side of the mouth.

Sei whales are slim whales, with dark gray on the back and are often white or cream-colored on the underside. Oval scars are often found on the body, supposedly made by the bites of cookie cutter sharks. Sei whales have small, pointed **pectoral fins**, with a tall, curved **dorsal fin**. Their **fluke** is relatively small in relation to their body. An adult male is, at maximum, 64 feet (19.4 m) long and weighs approximately 40,000 pounds (about 20 tons). Female sei whales are slightly larger. A newborn sei whale calf is approximately 15 feet (4.5 m) long at birth and weighs about one ton.

The sei whale is very similar to the Bryde's whale in physical appearance. They are often mistaken for each other in the wild. The main visible difference is that Bryde's whales have three ridges on the top of the head, while sei whales have only one ridge that runs all the way from the tip of the snout to the blowholes.



The Sei whale has a long, slender body.

Elane Eckert, NYSDEC

**Where do they live?**

Sei whales make almost all of the world's oceans their home, living in both shelf and oceanic waters. They live as far south as the Antarctic and as far north as Iceland in the North Atlantic Ocean. Sei whales have an unpredictable **distribution**. Many whales may be found in one area for awhile and then not return for years or decades. This behavior is unusual for rorquals, who generally have a predictable distribution. No one knows where sei whales breed.



Female Sei whales can be slightly longer than males.

NMFS File Photo

**How long do they live?**

The life span of a sei whale is probably more than 50 years.

**What do they eat?**

Sei whales have a diverse diet; the most diverse of any baleen whale. They eat small fish, **krill**, and **copepods**.

**How do they behave?**

Baleen whales, like the sei, feed differently than toothed whales (odontocetes). The throat grooves of the sei expand when they feed to allow the whale to take in large amounts of water. The water is then pushed back out, through the baleen plates. The prey is filtered out by the plates and then eaten by the whale.

Sei whales usually live and travel by themselves or in small groups of only 2-3 whales. If there is abundant food in a particular area, larger groups of whales will come together to feed. Up to 100 sei whales have been seen together, but that is uncommon.

Sei whales are among the fastest of the baleen whales. They can travel up to 34.5 miles per hour (55.5 km/hr). Sei whales dive differently than most whales. They do not arch their backs or show their flukes before diving; they simply sink below the surface. They often leave "fluke prints," smooth circles on the surface created by the movement of the fluke underwater.

Female sei whales can give birth to young when they are 10 years old. After that age, they give birth to a calf every 2-3 years. Most calves born in the winter. A sei calf will nurse on its mother's milk for 6-9 months after it is born.

**What sound do blue whales make and why?**

Very little is known about the sounds produced by sei whales or about the roles of acoustic communication in their social systems. In fact, most of the information about sound production in these sleek, fast-swimming baleen whales comes from a few recordings off the coast of Canada. From what is known about sound production in other whales, it is likely males produce much of the sound. The few recorded sei whale sounds are fairly similar to those of other whales, having phrases of fairly short (0.5 to 0.8 seconds long) and evenly spaced **pulses**. What is interesting, however, is that these recordings were at much higher frequency ranges (pitch) than most other large whale recordings. Sei whale calls appear to cover the 1.5 to 3.5 kHz range (1500 to 3500 Hz, similar to the frequencies of your own voice) compared to the ~ 15 to 30 Hz calls of blue

and fin whales, which are at a much lower pitch (like a tuba). Scientists do not know whether all sei whales make these fairly high frequency calls, but if they do, it will be an interesting discovery. Sei whales live throughout the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, but there is very little information on the sounds these animals make.

*(Contributed by Dr. Brandon Southall and Logan Southall)*

### **How many sei whales are there in the ocean?**

Today, there are around 8,600 sei whales in the North Pacific. This is only little more than 20% of the original population estimate of 42,000 for this area. Total population estimates for sei whales in all U.S. waters is unknown.

### **Who are their predators?**

Killer whales and humans are the known predators of sei whales. There have also been reports of sei whales hurt or killed by swordfish.

### **Why are they in trouble?**

The number of sei whales has been greatly decreased by commercial whaling. Sei whales were not hunted until the late 1950s because they are slim and have little blubber. However, whalers had to target sei whales when the supply of fin and blue whales decreased significantly because of over-hunting. Whalers targeted whales, including the sei, for their oil and baleen.

### **What is being done to help them?**

Sei whales are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act and are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. These laws protect sei whales from harm and harassment in U. S. waters. The International Whaling Commission, a group composed of countries from all over the world, also made commercial whaling of sei whales illegal in all the world's oceans except for the North Atlantic Ocean in 1980. It is against the law to harass or kill a sei whale.



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The tapered head of the Sei whale enables it to swim quickly through the water.

**Glossary:**

**Baleen:** Fingernail-like material, made of keratin, that hangs from the upper jaw of a whale's mouth; acts as a sieve to strain prey out of the ocean water

**Copepod:** Small crustacean

**Crustacean:** Marine animal with a segmented body, a shell, and jointed legs

**Distribution:** Area where an animal can be found

**Dorsal fin:** Fin on the top of certain whales, dolphins, porpoises, or fishes

**Fluke:** End of a whale's tail

**Krill:** Tiny, shrimp-like creatures

**Pectoral fin:** Fin on each side of a whale, dolphin, porpoise, or fish

**Plankton:** Floating, microscopic plants and animals that live in the ocean

**Polar:** Located near the North or South Pole

**Pulse:** A single beat

**Rorquals:** Whales with throat grooves



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Molly Harrison, 2005