

More Near-Shore Whale Sightings This Summer

Tuesday, 16 July 2013

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/130716.lots_of_humpbacks.mp3{/audio}

Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

A high number of humpback whales have been spending their days close to town this summer. This is good news for those who like to watch them, but local Marine Mammal Specialist Kate Wynne wants to remind folks to do so in a safe manner.

"There are a lot of moms with calves out there. So you'll see pairs, they're not all moms and calves, but usually pairs of animals spread out. And they're from the channel out to buoy three, over to long island and spruce island, Chiniak, and the issue is that they're very unpredictable in their behavior, especially the calves that are just learning to breach. And so you don't want to get too close to them. And we actually had one encounter with an anchored boat that a whale came up under, there's no way to avoid that, but just know that, that could happen with these unpredictable animals."

Wynne said the whales have also been sleeping close to town, which means boaters need to be even more aware of their surroundings while navigating.

"And they're sleeping close to the channel, coming into town. They look kind of like logs. They don't wake up very easily and people could accidentally run into them. What we've heard of are people that actually think they're either dead, and have, you know, motored over to see what's wrong with them and then had them take a breath. Or else people going over to try and get as close as they can to the animals while they're asleep. Which people should, they should know there's a 100 yard minimum distance requirement on these whales. So you don't disturb them. The point is if they're sleeping, you leave them asleep."

In general, Wynne said humpback whales are doing rather well, and the population is increasing about 5 percent each year. She said the near shore waters are critical habitat for moms with calves, which would explain the large number of sightings and frequent activity.

"So what you'll see are not the huge feeding groups that you see sometimes offshore, or up by the Shumagins, Barren Islands, but these just pairs of moms and calves and they cruise along the shore and they're probably eating sand lance,

needlefish, people call them. And so they just may not have been here in other years. It just might be really good habitat and prey source this year. It's not that those whales have never been there."

Recently the humpback whales' endangered species listing came under review to see if they should be down-listed. Wynne said they should definitely still be protected, but doesn't think they are in danger of becoming extinct.

"They wouldn't be taken off the list entirely they would probably be down listed to threatened. Right now they're listed as endangered. So they would still be on the ESA list, but they would be down graded, if you will. That review is ongoing. But because the population is increasing at 5 percent a year, there's probably reason to sit back and look at the status and see if they deserve the endangered status verse threatened."

Overall, Wynne asks that boaters keep an eye out for whale activity and slow down if they see whales in the area.