

Sunday, 10 January 2010

Whales: All You Ever Needed to Know



Well, almost. I decided to go for a talk about whales at the local Mackerricher State Park today. The talk, done by park ranger Fred (who was very enthusiastic and engaging), and assisted by the very knowledgeable Stan, was an excellent little learning session. I've always been fascinated by the big beasts of the Earth - such as Elephants and Whales - and I felt like I was back at school on a field trip today.

We started at the visitor centre and looked at the skeleton of a washed-up gray whale. Ranger Fred described the similarities between humans and whales. For instance, did you know that the cartilage-like, stringy filtering material that gray and humpback whales have in their mouth - called baleen - that catches shrimp and crustaceans for food is made of the same protein as human nails: keratin (Ranger Fred is holding a section of baleen from a whale's mouth in the picture).

After the talk, we went out to Laguna Point which is a rocky headland with great views of the ocean. There were some fat seals nearby, but we had come to look for gray and humpback whales that were migrating south away from chilly Siberia down to a much warmer Baha, California. A kind of whale holiday where they can go to eat, get pregnant and chill out. I hear they do good cocktails down in Baha too, maybe that's the real reason they go?

The whales pass quite close to the shore because of the nearby food they can eat as they swim: food to go, as they say over here. With the help of binoculars, I spotted two lots of blowhole sprays. And, with my new whale expertise, I deduced they were humpback whales. That's right, I could tell that just by their air-spray. *But how, Anthony?* I hear you ask (*my God, you know sooo much about whales*, I hear some of you add in dumbstruck awe).

Well, let me tell you. A humpback's blowhole makes a jet-spray that only shoots up straight, whereas a gray whale's blowhole makes a lovely heart-shaped spray when they come up to breathe. That's nice, eh? A heart. So, if you're ever tempted to call your lover a beached whale because they've been sat on the sofa all weekend, then you can always clarify and rescue your soon-to-be-punched big mouth by adding you meant it romantically; that they're just like a gray whale.

One other thing I didn't know about gray whales (and I know you didn't either) is that they used to be a land mammal. They still have an unevolved thigh bone in their tails left over from when they changed from being land creatures to become, er, *whales* about 12 million years ago.

That's all for today's lesson, thanks for listening. Your homework: draw a big blue whale on the nearest child's face.