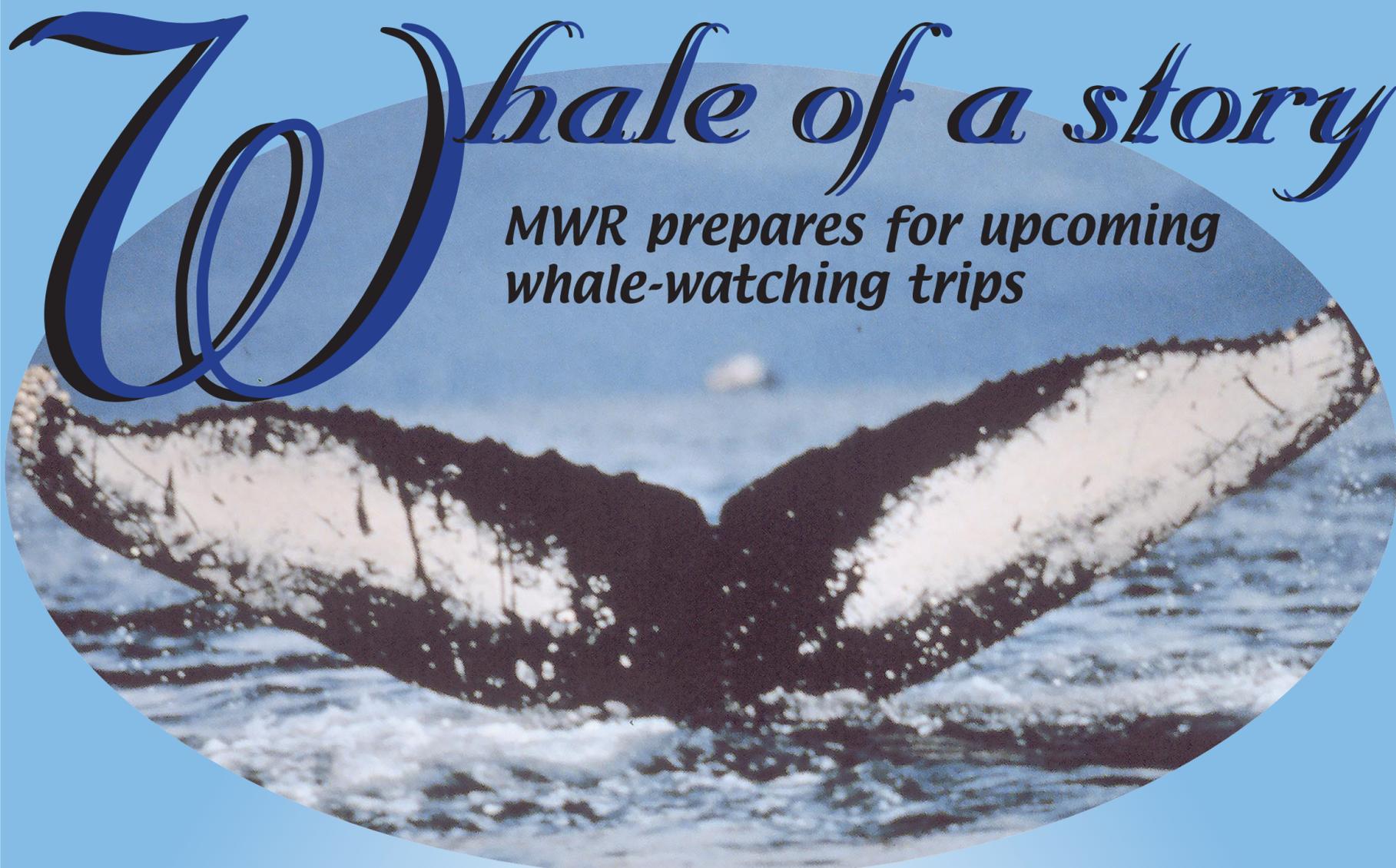


Liberty Call



Whale of a story

MWR prepares for upcoming whale-watching trips

photo courtesy of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration



Ken Cornia photo



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Above: A humpback whale's tail with distinctive markings which allows identification of individual animals is one of the many sites that can be seen while whale-watching.

Far Left: A group of whale enthusiasts enjoy a day of whale watching aboard a Dream Cruise boat. The Liberty in Paradise outdoor recreation program at Pearl Harbor has whale watching trips scheduled in February and March.

Left: A group gathers at Makapu'u Lookout which provides a front row seat for whale watching. The hike to Makapu'u is one mile each way. Ka'ena Point is another prime location for spotting the humpback whale and the hike of two miles (each way) is well worth the walk. When whale watching from shore, binoculars are recommended.

By Ken Cornia
MORALE, WELFARE AND RECREATION

THOUGH whales resemble fish in many ways, they are in fact extremely large mammals that share the waters of the world with many other inhabitants. Whales are warm-blooded, maintain a constant body temperature of about 99 degrees Fahrenheit and swim by moving their tails up and down.

Whales are very intelligent, having highly developed brains and like other mammals, they nurse their young with milk. Of all aquatic mammals, whales are the most completely adapted to life in the water. Similar to the many land dwelling mammals like humans, whales have hair on their bodies and breathe air with their lungs. Whales do not breathe through their mouths, but rather through a nostril or blowhole, located on top of the head. This need to come to the surface to breathe has made whale watching around the world a popular activity for the human mammal.

Whales can range in size from seven to 100 feet in length, and of the approximately 76 known whale species, each has its own unique characteristics. Most whales reside in salt water, with a few species that prefer fresh water. They can be found as far north as the Arctic circle and as far south as Antarctica.

Whales are commonly classified according to their feeding patterns, as one group of whales has teeth, while the other does not. Toothed whales like the killer whale have jaws lined with pointed teeth and feed on fish, squid and other prey. The sperm whale "Moby Dick" was perhaps the best known of all the toothed whales. Baleen or toothless whales have mouths lined with giant flexible combs of a material called baleen, or whalebone, which grows from the whale's upper jaw. Baleen are fringed plates that are used to filter small fish or crustaceans from the water like a gigantic strainer.

The baleen blue whale or "big blue" is probably the largest animal that has ever lived, including all known dinosaurs. This enormous mammal has been measured up to 100 feet in length, while weighing in at a whopping 180 metric tons. The Tin Man in the "Wizard of Oz" might think twice about his search for a heart if he were to be awarded one from a blue whale, as its heart is as big as a Volkswagen Beetle. The blue whale also makes the loudest sound (over 150 decibels) of any animal and can be heard over thousands of kilometers across entire oceans.

The baleen gray whale occurs in the north Pacific Ocean and is another favorite among whale watchers. Gray whales can be observed migrating between their winter calving lagoons off the west coast of northern Mexico and their summer feeding areas in the northern Bering Sea. This is one of the longest migrations of any mammal.

The Hawaiian Islands are blessed with one of the baleen's best, as the winter months offer prime-time viewing of the humpback whale. The humpback

whale can be found in all of the world's oceans, but due to the limited number of these whales, it is still considered an endangered species. It is perhaps the best known of the baleen whales.

Humpback whales migrate to the icy waters of the north to feed in the summer and to shallow tropical breeding areas like Hawaii in the winter. Mating results in a single calf born 11 to 12 months later and is nursed for less than one year. The humpback whale is characterized by a high humping or arching of the back when diving. They usually throw their tails above the water just before a deep dive.

Researchers have used the distinctive tail coloration and the shape of the trailing edge of the tail to identify several thousand individuals. This is the most common way in which most individual whales among a species are identified. Humpback whales can be seen just off shore of the Hawaiian Islands during the winter months and are the focus of the very popular outdoor recreation whale watching programs at Pearl Harbor.

The best viewing for humpback whales in Hawaii is by boat and there a number of reputable cruise lines throughout the islands. A recent MWR whale watching excursion by boat was with "Dream Cruises", located at the Kewalo Basin on the waterfront in downtown Honolulu. These eco-adventures are well worth the money, with humpback whales, pilot whales, Hawaiian spinner dolphins and the green sea turtle all on the visual agenda.

If you prefer to keep your feet on the ground, there are also some trails on the island of Oahu such as the Makapu'u Lookout that will provide you with a front row seat for whale watching. The hike is just one mile (each way) and includes a short trail to a lighthouse that offers a picturesque background for photos. Ka'ena Point is another prime location for spotting the humpback whale and the hike of two miles (each way) is well worth the walk. The whale's water spout is usually the best indicator of its presence.

Occasionally you may see a tail in the air as the whale begins to dive, or if you're really lucky, you may witness the holy grail of whale watching, a breaching whale. Humpback whales are highly acrobatic, so be prepared for some "G" rated or "great big" entertainment for the entire family. When whale watching from shore, binoculars are recommended.

The Liberty in Paradise outdoor recreation program at Pearl Harbor has whale watching trips scheduled in February and March and we would love for you to join us. To witness the whales from the water, we have a whale watching excursion by boat scheduled with Dream Cruises on Feb. 24. If you're a land lover at heart, then our whale watching hike to Ka'ena Point on March 10 or our whale watching hike to Makapu'u Point on March 25 are excellent opportunities to observe the humpback whales from shore.

If you would like to sign up for any of these trips, call Ken Cornia with the Pearl Harbor outdoor recreation program at 473-0899 or 473-5443.



Ken Cornia photo

A man enjoys the view off the coast of Oahu on his return from a whale watching excursion. The best viewing for humpback whales in Hawaii is by boat.