

BOWHEAD WHALES IN THE BEAUFORT SEA

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During aerial surveys for sea ducks in May and June of 1972 and 1973, our flights followed the major ice leads in the southern part of Beaufort Sea. This provided an opportunity to observe the large mammals occurring along the leads. We saw Polar Bear (*Thalarcticos maritimus*), Ringed Seal (*Phoca hispida*), Beluga (*Delphinapterus leucas*) and Bowhead Whale (*Balaena mysticetus*). Two or three bowheads were seen on June 8, 1972, in deep water between Baillie Island and Banks Island (approx. 71°N., 27°W.). Between three and five bowheads together were sighted on September 13, 1973, in ice-free waters about 50 meters deep (hydrographic charts, Canadian Hydrographic Service, Ottawa) halfway between Herschel Island and Roland Bay (approx. 69°30'N., 139°W.).

Inhabitants of Herschel Island told me earlier on September 13 that several bowheads had been in the area, one of which had torn up a seal net in Pauline Cove (69°35'N., 139°W.). These large-mesh nets had yielded considerable numbers of Ringed Seal, several Beluga, one or two Harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*) and a young bull Valrus (*Obobenus rosmarus*). The Herschel Island hunters indicated they intended to hunt bowhead and for that purpose some Beluga hunting equipment had been modified.

During an aerial waterfowl survey in August 27, 1973, I spotted a stranded Bowhead Whale about 22 miles



Close-up of baleen, Bowhead Whale. Aug. 27/73.

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northeast of Tuktoyaktuk. Upon closer examination, we found the 54-foot long whale to be resting on its right side. The animal was blackish brown except for a yellow-gray area near the tip of the mandible and near the tail, including the ventral surface of the flukes. I estimated about 200 plates of baleen on each side of the narrow upper jaw, with about one-third of the baleen plates partly hidden by the mandible. The most anterior plates were only a few inches long with a gradual increase in length of the baleen to 7 feet at about two-thirds of the way toward the angle of the jaw. W. Gillies Ross, examining log book records of whaling voyages, reported mature whales yielding baleen of over 10 feet, whereas a "small" whale taken had 5-foot long baleen.²

The dead whale had several small wounds: the largest one, about 4 inches across, was located 2 feet anterior to the genital opening, and three smaller wounds were observed in the axillary

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Rear view of Bowhead Whale. Aug. 27/73.

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region of the left flipper. The origin of the wounds could not be ascertained but birds had been feeding at these sites. About 100 Glaucous Gulls were concentrated at the bowhead's carcass but no mammal tracks were observed, indicative perhaps of a recent stranding of the whale.

E. D. Mitchell gives details on the observation and status of whales but it appears that little is known about the numerical status of the bowhead in the Canadian Arctic.¹

Other than the above-mentioned whale hunting at Herschel Island, I

know of no other bowhead hunting taking place in the Canadian West Arctic. Alaskan Eskimos, using shoulder-guns and other weapons, still hunt the bowhead (J. Bockstoece, personal comm.) but the effect on whale stocks of the hunting, including the high number of losses due to wounding is not known.¹

¹MITCHELL, E. D. 1973. *The status of the whales, 1973*. Nature Canada 2(4):9-25.

²ROSS, W. G. 1974. *Distribution, migration and depletion of bowhead whales in Hudson Bay, 1860 to 1915*. Arctic and Alpine Research 6(1):85-98.