



Song of the Humpback

- 1 Herman Melville, the writer of the famous whale story *Moby Dick*, wrote that humpback whales were “the most lighthearted¹ of all the whales.” A favorite of whale watchers everywhere, they swim in ocean areas close to land and are active at the surface, often jumping out of the water and coming down with a great splash. They are intelligent animals and can be seen working together as they hunt schools of small fish. And, if you listen closely, you might even hear one singing.

▲ Jason Sturgis of Whale Trust, a Maui-based research group, photographs a female humpback swimming with her child.

Recording Gentle Giants

- 10 Marine biologist² Jim Darling has studied the songs of humpback whales for 25 years. While recording whale songs on a boat near Hawaii, he invited author Douglas Chadwick to experience diving with a humpback. In the water, the way Chadwick heard the whale’s songs changed completely. “Suddenly, I no longer heard the whale’s voice in my ears. I felt it inside my head and bones.” He clearly sensed the whale’s silent awareness of him. The 13-meter-long giant looked him over³ curiously, but never harmed him.

- The whale then swam under the boat. It pointed its head down to the ocean floor and, with flippers extended out to its sides, began to sing.
- 20 Up in the boat, Darling recorded the whale’s song. Such songs may be long and complex, lasting for 30 minutes or more; they are perhaps the longest songs sung by any animal.

¹ Someone who is **lighthearted** is cheerful and happy.

² A **marine biologist** is a scientist who studies ocean life.

³ If you **look** something **over**, you examine it for a short period of time.



▲ A humpback's song is recorded by an underwater microphone.

Why Do They Sing?

Darling says that only male humpbacks sing, but for **unknown** reasons. It was previously thought that they sang to attract females, but scientists showed this was incorrect when they played recordings of whale songs in the ocean and no females came around. Another idea is that male humpbacks compete with each other using songs, just as other male animals do using antlers, or tusks.⁴

In addition to their long and mysterious songs, humpbacks make a **variety** of other sounds as they **interact** each day. When **alarmed** by **enemies** such as killer whales, or when the feeding is especially good, the sounds they produce can be louder than an airplane engine.

A Brighter Future

During the days of heavy whale hunting, the world humpback population was reduced from an estimated 125,000 to around 6,000 animals. Thanks to laws against hunting, humpbacks now number perhaps 30,000 animals, although the **constantly** moving humpbacks are very difficult to count. However, it now seems that this mysterious singer will continue to sing for years to come.

⁴ **Antlers** are long, branched horns that grow on the heads of some animals, like deer or moose.; **tusks** are the long, pointed teeth of some animals, like walruses.

Long-distance travelers ►

In summer months North Pacific humpbacks feed in the cold waters of Russia, Alaska, and Canada. In winter three groups travel south to Central America, Hawaii, and the western Pacific. A single journey may take them more than 2,500 miles—the longest migration of any mammal.

