

Voyagers of the Sea

by Heather Villa

Humpback whales, voyagers of the sea, live in oceans around the world. In the summertime, the icy Antarctic Ocean is the home for some of Earth's humpback whales. There, these enormous ocean mammals find lots to eat. They feast on small fish, miniature life forms such as krill (a type of shrimp), and plankton (tiny drifting creatures). Adult humpback whales are as large as a school bus. They weigh as much as seven or eight elephants! So they eat as much as two tons of food in one day. (Imagine how much food that is. The weight of two tons is about the same as 18,000 pieces of cheese pizza.)

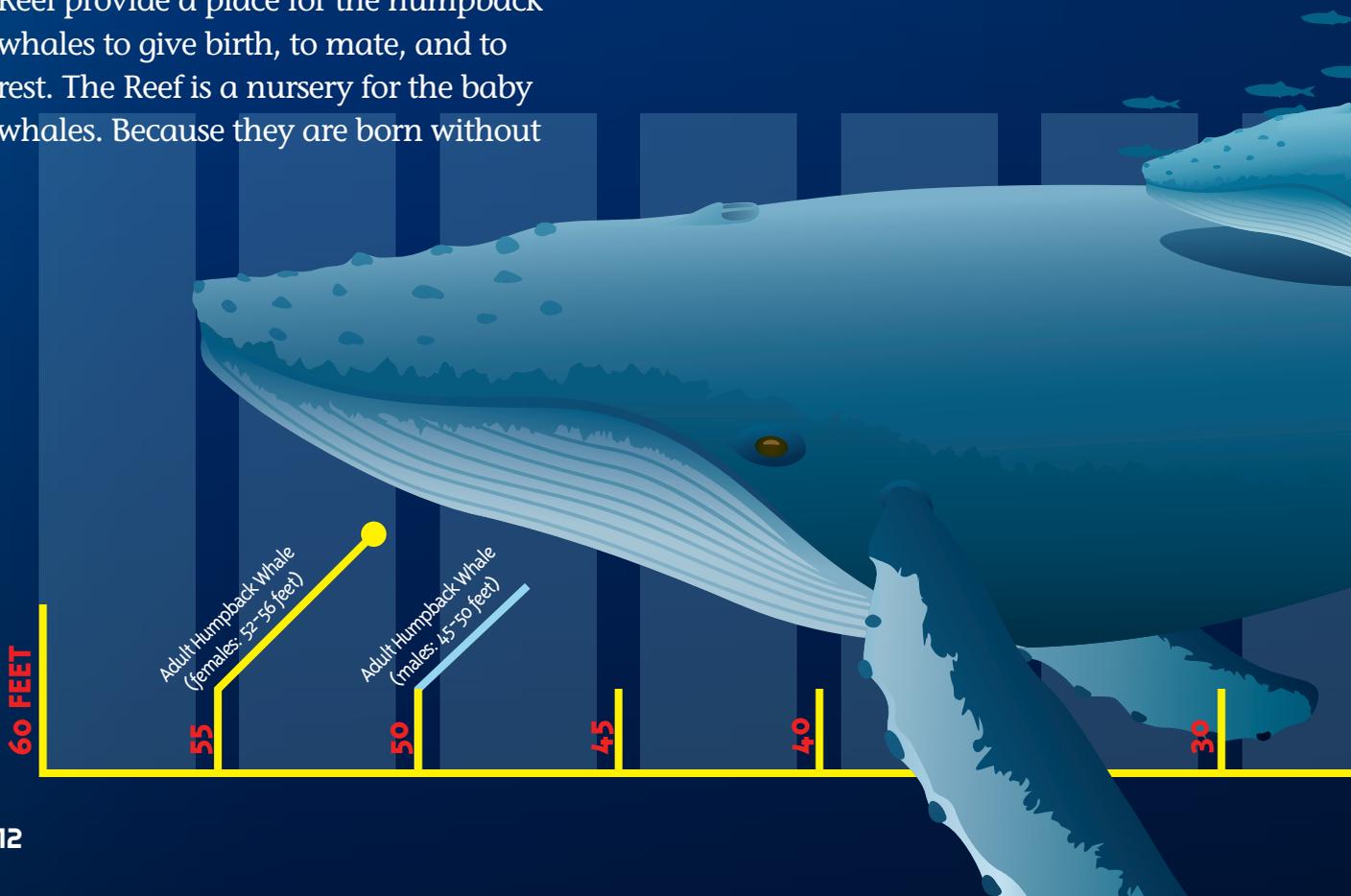
When a whale breaches, or jumps, it lifts almost all of its huge body out of the water and lands on its back.

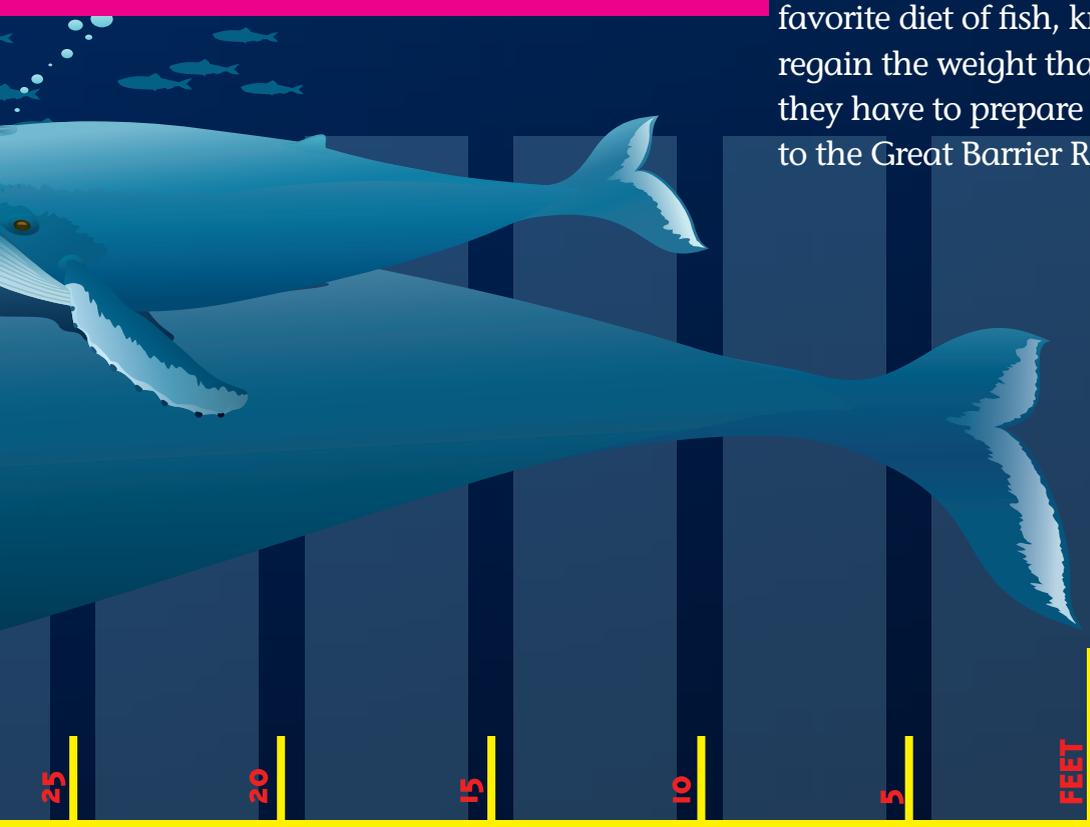


The whales consume these huge amounts of food to prepare for a 3,000-mile journey to the Great Barrier Reef. From June to September, as many as 10,000 whales leave the summer home they share with penguins. They head north to warmer waters, where they join the many creatures who call the Great Barrier Reef home. (Because they've eaten so much, the whales do not eat anything during their trip. They live off of their fat reserves.)

The powerful swimmers use their massive tails to move themselves through the water. They travel at an average of six miles per hour, steering with their 15-foot-long flippers. Sometimes, humpback whales even catch a ride on the ocean currents as they travel down the wet superhighway. This makes their three-month trip a little easier.

The warm waters of the Great Barrier Reef provide a place for the humpback whales to give birth, to mate, and to rest. The Reef is a nursery for the baby whales. Because they are born without





any blubber, newborn whales need warm water in order to survive. (Blubber is the fat that keeps whales warm in icy waters.) For four months, the newborn whales, known as calves, drink milk from their mothers. This helps them grow a thick insulation of blubber before they make their first trip to the Antarctic Ocean.

On the return trip, many of the whales are pregnant. Strong, young whales lead the pack. And the babies travel alongside their mothers, staying at the end of the group. The mother whales do their best to protect the babies from oncoming ships, fishing nets, and predators such as sharks and orca whales. (Predators are organisms that feed on other organisms.)

Except for the nursing babies, the humpback whales arrive to the chilly Antarctic waters starving. They immediately begin to feast on their favorite diet of fish, krill, and plankton to regain the weight that they lost. After all, they have to prepare for their next journey to the Great Barrier Reef.



The yearly trip (3,000 miles) is the longest migration of any mammal. It is the same distance as the entire width of the United States.

