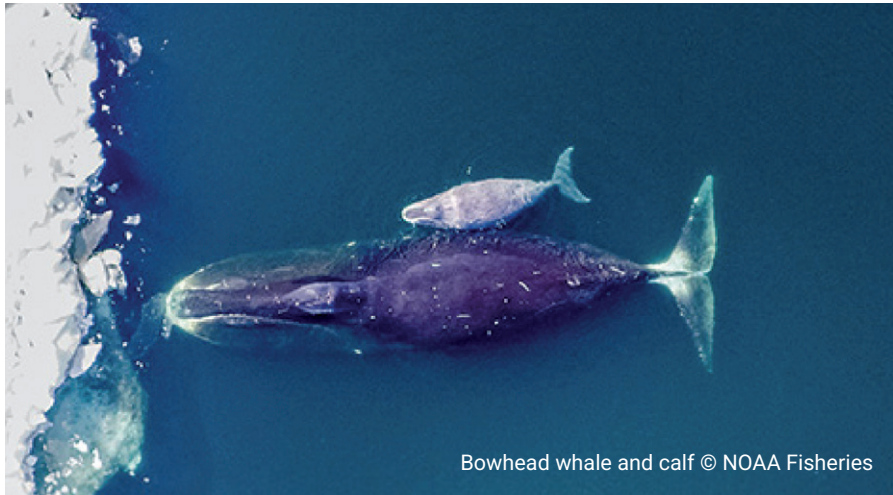


Bowhead whale *Balaena mysticetus*



Grønlandsslættibøka
 Arfvik
 Grænland hvalur
 Grønlandshval
 Grønlandshval



Bowhead whale and calf © NOAA Fisheries

The bowhead whale lives only in the cold waters of the Arctic and sub-Arctic. They are slow swimmers, generally swimming 3-6 km/h, but can swim up to 200 km per day between feeding grounds. They are known for their complex songs during the breeding season, changing their songs often. Populations were drastically reduced by industrial whaling, but nowadays they are only occasionally hunted in the North Atlantic, and populations are increasing.

Adult length 18 metres
Adult weight 75,000 kg
Maximum age >200 years
Eats zooplankton
Group size 1-3

Predators killer whales
IUCN status vulnerable (2022)
NEA abundance 8,000
Hunted in 0.2 whales/year
 mean 2019-2023

Main threats:



Climate change



Ship strike



Entanglement



Noise disturbance

FOLD

Bowhead whale *Balaena mysticetus*



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Bowhead whales are only found in the icy waters of the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, and of all whale species they are the most adapted to this cold. A blubber layer up to 30 cm thick works as insulation and keeps their body temperature warm. They have a skull that is strong enough to break through 60 cm thick ice to make breathing holes. Because of this, their head often shows scars from the sharp ice. Unlike most other whale species, they have no dorsal fin that could be in the way when swimming underneath the ice.



Large head of bowhead whale © Fernando Ugarte



Bowhead whale breaching © Olga Shpak

Finding out the age of a bowhead whale is challenging. A whale caught in Alaska carried parts of a harpoon in its shoulder bone, of a type that hadn't been used for over a century—meaning the whale was at least 115 years old! A more standard way is analysing a chemical compound in the whale's eye lens, the aspartic acid. It transforms from one form to another at a specific rate throughout the whale's life, which allows us to calculate its age. Recent studies estimate that bowhead whales can live well over 200 years (as local hunters have known for a long time).



Research: To identify individuals, scientists use markings on specific body parts of different whale species. For example, for dolphins they look at dorsal fins, for humpback whales it's the fluke. What do they use for bowhead whales?