



CAPE ANN'S OCEAN SAFARI:

WHAT MAKES AMERICA'S OLDEST SEAPORT A PREMIER WILDLIFE VIEWING DESTINATION

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MATTHEW SHEEHAN, NATURALIST AT 7 SEAS WHALE WATCH

THE CALL OF THE OCEAN IS UNDENIABLE. THE SAME CAN BE SAID FOR the lure of greater Cape Ann. As visitors and residents find peace and joy by (and on) the ocean, there is an entire world enjoying life underneath it. Whales and seals and other aquatic life are as drawn to greater Cape Ann as we are and they would love to welcome you to their waters.

Each year, spring through fall, tourists depart from this historic fishing village to embark on an ocean adventure for the chance to view nature's gentle giants. While whale watching draws visitors to the region, this activity is enjoyed by local residents as well. Whether it's your first time, or an annual tradition, hop on a boat and experience the sights and sounds of the open ocean and the magic it has to offer.

A whale watching trip out of Gloucester will take you to the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary. Situated between Cape Ann and Cape Cod, the sanctuary covers 842 square miles of ocean water and has been federally protected since 1992 for its ecological significance. Here, beneath the surface of the ocean lies a varying topography of the seafloor. When nutrient rich deep-water currents running along the ocean floor come into contact with an obstacle, such as a bank or a ledge, this shoots the nutrients towards

the surface. Here, the nutrients mix with sunlight, resulting in the formation of phytoplankton blooms, tiny plant-like organisms that form the basis of the ocean food web. These phytoplankton are consumed by animal plankton which in turn attract schooling fish. Larger predators, including the great whales, are then drawn to the area.

Gloucester is situated between two high productivity whale feeding grounds increasing your chances of successful sightings. A short boat ride to the north will take you to Jeffrey's Ledge. On the way, you'll hug the coastline, catching glimpses of beaches and the famed twin lighthouses of Thacher Island. Departing trips may also head southeast towards Stellwagen Bank, the physical underwater sandbar found within the larger sanctuary waters. Whale watch captains listen to reports and make the decision on a day-by-day basis, ensuring their passengers the best possible trip.

Weather permitting, whale watching trips out of Gloucester run from mid-April through the end of October. This coincides with the feeding season, when whales visit the area to bulk up and amass a rich layer of blubber. This fat layer will sustain them each winter as they migrate to warmer waters in the tropics to give birth to their young. Embarking on a whale watch offers the opportunity to view three species of baleen whales that frequent the area: humpback, minke and finback. Growing to upwards of seventy-five feet long, finbacks are the second largest animal on the planet, only behind the great blue whale. These animals are marked by their asymmetrical coloration, a unique trait in nature. Minke whales are the smallest of the local area baleen whale species, reaching lengths of up to twenty-five feet. Passengers can look for the white bands found on their side flippers, referred to as "Minke Mittens," which may be visible as they come up for a breath of air and break the surface.

A favorite of many seasoned whale watchers are sightings of the humpback, which reach lengths of forty to fifty feet and are known for engaging in surface behaviors. Humpbacks may be seen

Above: The fluke of a humpback whale.

slapping the water with their tails and flippers, blowing rings or clouds of bubbles while feeding on small schooling fish, or even jumping out of the water in a behavior known as breaching. They are spectacular to see and offer a more personalized viewing experience: each humpback whale is marked by a pigmentation pattern of black and white found on the underside of their tail that is as unique to each animal as fingerprints are to humans. Researchers have been naming and tracking individual humpbacks since the mid-1970s, amassing a vast catalogue of the local population over the last fifty years. Your captains and guides will likely recognize many of these individual animals, sharing their personal histories over the course of the trip.

Trips departing early in the season offer the opportunity to view more rare species of baleen whales. Spring whale watches may come across aggregations of sei whales, a species typically found farther out at sea. During April and May, this species may be seen closer to shore skim feeding on small crustaceans. Spring whale watches can also offer glimpses of North Atlantic right whales as they pass through the area on their way to their summer feeding grounds off the coast of Canada. With fewer than 400 individuals remaining on the planet, North Atlantic right whales are one of the most critically endangered whale species. A sighting of their signature V-shaped blow, or spout, may be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Along with the larger baleen whales, various toothed whale species can also be spotted off Gloucester's coast. These include Atlantic white-sided dolphins, as well as harbor porpoises. Unlike their larger baleen cousins which tend to be solitary, toothed whales travel in family units called pods. You'll rarely ever see just one dolphin, but rather an entire group consisting of dozens, or maybe even hundreds, of individuals. With their playful antics, dolphins are often a real highlight. Passengers may even catch sight of a rarer species that doesn't frequent the area quite as often, such as common or bottlenose dolphins.

While "Whale Watching" is in the name of the trip, this tour is more like an ocean safari, offering the chance to see various marine species, including harbor and grey seals, which may be seen bottling, or resting at the surface. Ocean sunfish and basking sharks also frequent New England waters. The sunfish is the largest bony fish in the world by weight, while basking sharks are the second largest shark species. Occasional sightings of loggerhead sea turtles are possible, as well as leatherback sea turtles, the world's largest turtle species. Bird watchers may catch a glimpse of gannets, shearwaters, storm petrels, and terns.

Part of the fun of a nature trip is that it's unscripted. When viewing wild animals in their natural habitat, no two trips are ever alike. There are always new things to see, including different species or behaviors. Surprises are in store, too! Summer 2024 featured sightings of a blue whale, the largest animal species to ever live, as well as pilot whales. This marked the first time both species were seen out of Gloucester in over a decade.

Seeing these gentle giants in their homes is a humbling and inspiring experience. Grab a jacket, your camera, binoculars, and we'll see you out on the water!



Top to bottom: Common dolphin, pilot whales, ocean sunfish, leatherback turtle.