

Whale sightings up from Sandy Hook to Cape May

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The number of whale sightings around New Jersey has increased substantially this year, suggesting coastal waters are clean enough to sustain humpbacks, finbacks and other species during their feeding season.

Since April, dozens of whales have been spotted from Sandy Hook to Cape May chasing schools of small fish sometimes within a mile of the shoreline.

"They seem to be staying in the same area all season long, which is something we haven't really seen before," said Amy Bergeron, a marine biologist with the Cape May Whale Watch and Research Center, which runs tours on New Jersey's southern coast. "Some are not even a mile out. We know they come here for the food, and you're seeing huge batches of bait fish close to the shore."

As of last week, the Cape May center had 37 whale sightings, compared with 15 through October last year. And Gotham Whale Watch, a group of "citizen scientists" who catalog marine mammals in New York and as far south as Monmouth County, has reported 57 whale sightings so far up from 43 in 2013.

The news has drawn thousands onto whale-watching boats hoping to see the majestic mammals gliding through the ocean and perhaps even glimpse a humpback leaping out of the water. It has prompted authorities to issue alerts to boaters fearing whales are coming too close to shore.

Academics are treating the reports cautiously, since most of the sightings come from groups associated with local whale-watching boats. But some environmental officials and marine biologists say the reports should be taken seriously.

"It's tough to definitively say there are more whales in an area without more baseline information," said Jackie Toth Sullivan, a marine mammal scientist and adjunct professor at Richard Stockton College. "That being said, an increase certainly seems plausible given the amount of anecdotal reports coming in from boaters, whale-watching boats and beachgoers alike this season."

Beginning in April, thousands of humpback whales usually pass New Jersey dozens of miles off the coast during their annual migration up the East Coast from their winter mating and birthing grounds in the West Indies. Many congregate around Cape Cod to feed on the abundant sea life near a large underwater plateau in Massachusetts Bay or head farther into the North Atlantic for food.

Cleaner waters affect the bottom of the food chain allowing plankton to flourish closer to shore. That in turn provides a food source for small bait fish like menhaden. And whales like nothing more than to scoop menhaden into their mouths for lunch.

Even though an estimated 23 billion gallons of raw sewage spills from hundreds of outfall pipes into New Jersey's rivers and bays each year, the state's coastal waters are considered the cleanest they have been in decades.

New Jersey ranked third in best water quality out of 30 states last year with 3 percent of water samples exceeding pollution standards in a report by the National Resource Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group.

"Clean water means more fish and so you have a new feeding ground," said Paul Sieswerda, founder of Gotham Whale. "You still have all these sewer pipes heading into the water, so it's not perfect but it's much improved. I remember the Styrofoam, the beer cans, the stuff that used to be so prevalent, and that's no longer the case."

Whales coming closer to shore also means boaters could hit them. After three strikes along the Eastern Seaboard last spring, including one in May in which a cruise ship dragged a 55-foot finback into the Hudson River, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and New York environmental officials issued alerts to boaters to slow down and watch out.

Sieswerda said he has seen several whales with propeller marks on their backs. "There is definitely a danger coming closer to shore," he said. "They seem to stay out of the shipping lanes."

Some question the number of sightings considering many observations are made by groups associated with whale-watching boats.

Reporting a lot of whale sightings "is a good way to get people on your boats," said Robert Schoelkopf, founding director of the Marine Mammal Stranding Center in Brigantine. "We really don't have any legitimate documentation. A lot of time you have people going out who are not sure what they're seeing. They don't know if it's the same whale or multiple whales. It could be a shark fin for all they know."

A recent report on whales by New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation credited organizations like Gotham Whale with providing important information because they are out on the water "much more frequently than most formal survey efforts could afford to be."

And not everyone is an amateur. Sieswerda, of Gotham Whale, was the curator at both the New York Aquarium and the New England Aquarium in Boston. The Cape May center employs several marine biologists and has received a yearlong grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to photograph and document the whales they see.

Sullivan, of Richard Stockton College, said the increased sightings could be for any number of reasons not necessarily having to do with an increase in the whale population.

"More food could certainly mean more whales," she said. "It is also possible that boaters are more tuned in to looking for these whales, knowing the strong possibility of seeing them at certain times of the year in specific locations. An increase in coastal populations of humans also means more eyes are on the water in general."

Last week, a Gotham Whale tour from the New York Rockaways came upon four humpbacks a mile off Sandy Hook.

"Anyone who sees these creatures up close in the wild know just how majestic they are," Sieswerda said. "They're amazing creatures."