



WHALES OFF MONTAUK

They're Back! Why they've ended their long absence **A6**

▶ Watch video of a whale-watching trip at newsday.com

PHOTO BY JOEL CAIRO



METS' LOST SEASON

Wait 'Til Next Year

Santana's done, too, but news could have been worse **SPORTS**

GETTY IMAGES PHOTO

Pitcher Johan Santana will undergo surgery to remove bone chips from his left elbow, but he should be ready for spring training.

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Back in the swim



PHOTOS BY JOEL CAIRO

- Scientists say abundant food has drawn them back
- They were absent from Montauk waters for years

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To the delight of local whale watchers, humpback and fin whales have returned to waters off Montauk where they had been largely absent for several years.

"That was a big one!" exclaimed Dylan Kay, 8, of Ridge-wood, N.J., as a fin whale surfaced less than a hundred feet from the bow of the 140-foot long Viking Starship.

Yesterday, Kay and 78 other passengers from Long Island, New York City and beyond peered out excitedly over the boat's railing as it rode the gently rolling swells southeast of Montauk Point. Despite occasional bouts of seasickness, the sight of the mammoth mammals' gleaming flanks had most riders rushing from one side of the boat to the other.

Lured by food

Researchers suspect food — including an abundance of herring — may have lured the cetaceans back to local waters. In recent months, dozens of whales, dolphins and porpoises have been spotted just a dozen miles offshore, including some individual humpback whales that normally frequent New England waters.

"The feeding areas off here have been extraordinarily productive," said Artie Kopelman, an adjunct associate marine sciences professor at Dowling College and president of the Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island, which organizes the whale watch trips from Montauk.

Yesterday, volunteers from Kopelman's group scanned the ocean for signs of whales, such as the far-off blast of water from a blow hole, then jotted

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down the location, water temperature and ocean depth where they were seen.

"It's like a puff of smoke," said Phil Austin, 55, a volunteer from Ridge who has been on nearly 40 whale-watching trips. "The higher it goes, and the wider it goes, helps you define what kind of whale it is."

Fin whales — which grow up to 75 feet long, making them the second-largest whale species — are the most abundant type in Long Island waters. But observers this year have seen a number of smaller minke whales, and dozens of humpbacks on their way up to the Gulf of Maine.

"A mix of our resident animals have been spending at least some of their year down there," said Mason Weinrich, executive director and chief scientist at the Whale Center of New England in Gloucester, Mass. "That indicates to me that there is food there . . . any animal is going to make a decision based on prey, how much they can get in one place versus somewhere else."

Lots of fin whales

No humpbacks were spotted yesterday. But after a slow start, fin whales showed up one by one as the boat moved east into deeper water. By midafternoon, Kopelman and the crew counted 15 fin whales — including a mother and her calf — four minke whales, and even a small shark of undetermined species.

A finback whale appears off the coast of Montauk, delighting Viking Starship passengers.



Bob Kurtz, left, and Dave Klauber are among those getting to spot whales yesterday.

Off LI coast, they're a sight to see

Photos depict typical members of whale species known to frequent eastern Long Island waters.



Fin whales

Size: up to 75 feet, in Northern hemisphere

The second-largest whale species, fin whales are the most abundant type in the Long Island region. Present year round, with intensive feeding within 30 miles of land happening between April and August. Typically move offshore along the continental shelf in the fall.

SOURCES: National Marine Fisheries Service, Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island (CRESLI)



Humpback whales

Size: up to 56 feet, females bigger than males.

Humpbacks are regularly found in the New York Bight but abundance varies from 20 whales to only a handful depending on the years. They migrate from cool waters where they feed during summer to warmer tropical regions where they mate and give birth.



Minke whales

Size: up to 35 feet

The smallest baleen whale in North American waters, minke whales feed on small schooling fish and krill. They move through Long Island waters as single whales. Northern minkes' range extends from the ice edge in the Arctic during the summer to close to the equator during winter.

It was a decent tally, but paltry compared with 1987, when Kopelman said they counted 200 fin whales on one trip. But as the sightings off Long Island dropped, so did the number of passengers. The Viking Fleet, which operates the boats, stopped running local cruises in 2002, although it continued offering three-day trips to watch

humpback whales out in the Great South Channel, at the southern tip of the Gulf of Maine.

This summer Viking and Kopelman's group restarted the six-hour tours after fishermen reported a resurgence of fin and humpback whales in Long Island waters. "As long as the whales show up, it's good for our whale-watching business,

said Capt. Carl Forsberg.

Their return electrified passenger Binnie Pasquier of Northport. "To think that we live on this congested little island, and then out here there is this natural beauty," said Pasquier, 55, who left the house at 5:30 a.m. to make sure she didn't miss the boat. "There's such a thrill that it's right here."