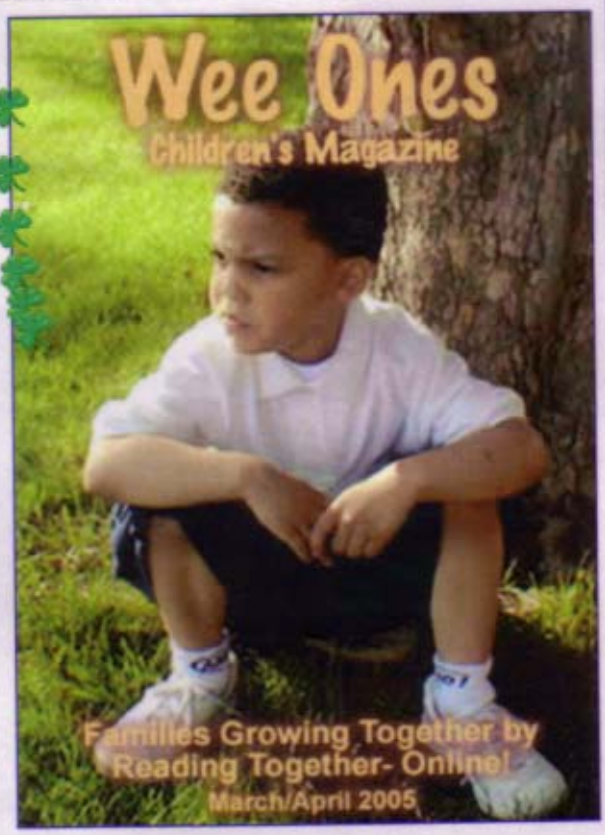


Wee Ones

Children's Magazine



Families Growing Together by
Reading Together- Online!
March/April 2005

LOOKING FOR THE TOOTHLESS GIANT

by Michelle M. Barone

Photos by NOAA



Captain Budd Christman, NOAA Corps

What weighs more than a school bus, breathes air, and sings songs? It has long flippers, and a scallop edged tail. A bump-like fin on its back helps you recognize the humpback whale. If you want to see this toothless giant, look off the shores of Alaska, Hawaii or New England. To get closer, go on a whale watch.

You'll ride a boat out into the ocean and look across the water for a "blow." That's the V shaped mist that rises 20 feet in the air when a humpback exhales. Whales exhale a single breath at 300 miles per hour! Once a blow is spotted, the boat will go toward it.

Since humpbacks usually blow many times before diving under water again, your boat may get close enough for a better look.

When the engine turns off, the humpback may swim next to the boat. You'll see the 50-foot-long dark gray or black body. It's longer than twelve kids laying head to toe. Humpbacks weigh about 45 tons or 90,000 pounds. That's heavier than 25 cars.

The humpback will be looking at you too with a large, dark eye at the end of its toothless smile. It might spy hop, or stick its head out of the water to see you better. It will have ping-pong-ball sized bumps on its flat head.

The whale could wave a pectoral, or side fin in the air. Are you surprised to know that the 15-foot-long pectoral fins have most of the same bones as you do in your arms and hands without your thumb bones? It has four, long finger bones like yours in its outer fins.

Listen closely. A squeak, or low pitched groan is the humpback singing. It may

be communicating with other whales or even with you!

If it's lunchtime, the humpback opens its jaws, expanding its throat to gulp a huge mouthful of food and water. As it closes its mouth, water squeezes out through 270-400 thin plates on both sides of the upper jaw, called baleen. Then the whale swallows the food using its 2-ton tongue.

Are you ready for a thrill? Imagine 45 tons of humpback suddenly rocketing toward the sky. It spins, holding its pectoral fins out to the side like wings, before splashing back into the sea. Whales move their tails up and down instead of sideways like fish. This mammal, bigger than most dinosaurs, is strong enough to lift, or breach itself out of the water with a few tail strokes.



The tail is last thing you'll see of the humpback as it dives under water. The whale rolls forward, head first, showing the dorsal, or back fin that gives the humpback its name. Humpbacks can dive as deep as one mile and hold their breath for 15 to 60 minutes.

If your family lives near the coasts or vacations close to the ocean, you may be lucky enough to see one of these toothless giants. You'll never forget it if you do!