

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Humpback Whales Sighted in Brewers Bay Near UVI

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ST. THOMAS -- Two humpback whales and a calf were spotted on Monday, Feb. 13, in Brewers Bay, near the University of the Virgin Islands in the early morning hours. Bystanders suspect that one of the whales gave birth to the calf last night in the bay, but this is unconfirmed. However, it was a very small calf and there is speculation that it must have been recently born. Photos were taken by UVI marine biology student Jarvon Stout using a telephoto lens on his camera after the whales had left the bay. Care was taken to stay outside the required 300 yard buffer zone for marine mammals.

"While this is the season for the Humpbacks to migrate through this area, it is the first time that I have heard of them being inside of Brewers, much less having a calf in the bay," said Dr. Paul Jobsis, director of the UVI Center for Marine and Environmental

Studies. "The number of whales spotted in the waters around the Virgin Islands appears to fluctuate from year to year. They come down from the north Atlantic waters to give birth and breed each year in the late winter and early spring."

According to [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Division](#), Humpback whales are well known for their long "pectoral" fins, which can be up to 15 feet (4.6 m) in length. Their scientific name, *Megaptera novaeangliae*, means "big-winged New Englander" as the New England population was the one best known to Europeans. These long fins give them increased maneuverability; they can be used to slow down or even go backwards.

Similar to all baleen whales, adult females are larger than adult males, reaching lengths of up to 60 feet (18 m). Their body coloration is primarily dark grey, but individuals have a variable amount of white on their pectoral fins and belly. This variation is so distinctive that the pigmentation pattern on the undersides of their "flukes" is used to identify individual whales, similar to a human fingerprint, according to NOAA.

Humpback whales are the favorite of whale watchers, as they frequently perform aerial displays, such as breaching (jumping out of the water), or slapping the surface with their pectoral fins, tails, or heads.

In the summer, humpbacks are found in high latitude feeding grounds, such as the Gulf of Maine in the Atlantic and Gulf of Alaska in the Pacific. In the winter, they migrate to calving grounds in subtropical or tropical waters, such as the Dominican Republic in the Atlantic and the Hawaiian Islands in the Pacific. The Arabian Sea humpback does not migrate, remaining in tropical waters all year.

Humpback whales travel great distances during their seasonal migration, the farthest migration of any mammal. The longest recorded migration was 11,706 miles (18,840 km), with a trek from American Samoa to the Antarctic Peninsula. One of the more closely studied routes is between Alaska and Hawaii, where humpbacks have been observed making the 3,000 mile (4,830 km) trip in as few as 36 days.