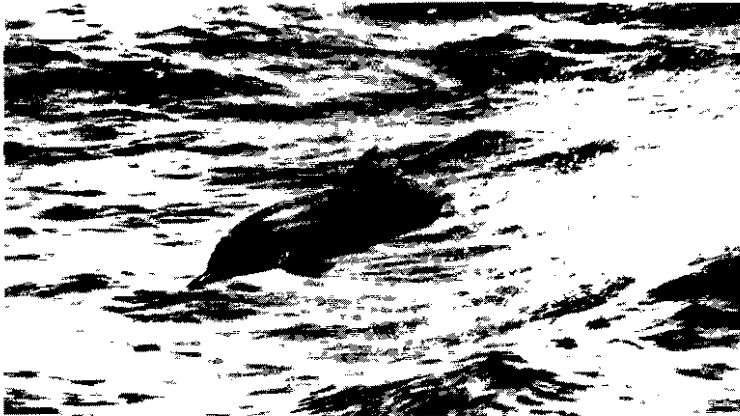


MARINE MAMMALS OF THE GULF OF MEXICO

**A FIELD GUIDE FOR AERIAL
AND SHIPBOARD OBSERVERS**



Thomas A. Jefferson
Stephen Leatherwood
Lisl K. M. Shoda
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March 1992

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Cover Photograph:

Rarely seen alive at sea until recent aerial and shipboard surveys in the Gulf of Mexico, the clymene dolphin (*Stenella clymene*) is now frequently reported and appears to be moderately abundant in the Gulf. (R. L. Pitman)

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Introduction

In October 1991, Texas A&M University, Galveston; the National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Fisheries Science Center; and the Hatfield Marine Science Center, Oregon State University began a collaborative 39 month study of marine mammals (29 cetacean species, one sirenian species and one, perhaps more, pinniped species) in the Gulf of Mexico. The project, hereafter called the GULFCET Program (for Gulf cetaceans), is funded by the U.S. Department of Interior's Minerals Management Service. One of the objectives of GULFCET is to determine the seasonal and geographic distribution and movements of cetaceans in areas potentially affected by future oil and gas activities along the continental slope in the north-central and western Gulf of Mexico. This goal will be reached through a combination of aerial and shipboard visual surveys. As in any such surveys, the quality of data begins with the accuracy of species identification. This field guide is designed to improve the ability of GULFCET observers to accurately identify marine mammals at sea.

To the beginner, it can be frustratingly difficult to identify marine mammals to species in typical encounters at sea. Often, for example, one must conclude the identity of larger species from a blow, head, back, dorsal fin, or fluke seen at some distance. Smaller species, too, are variably approachable and often must be identified from cryptic and distant looks. Even under the best of circumstances, some species are sufficiently similar in appearance to others that great care must be taken to distinguish among them. Even the most experienced field cetologists have sometimes been fooled by distant dolphins and have had to revise identifications after a closer look at approaching or bowriding animals. With practice, however, most species are identifiable in the majority of cases.

Cetaceans are creatures of a three-dimensional environment, and are usually visible to us for only the brief periods they are at or near the surface. For that reason, standard dichotomized keys used to identify specimens in hand (*e.g.*, stranded cetaceans) are of little use in surveys at sea. Observers have come to depend, instead, on guides that group whales and dolphins by size categories (large, medium, and small) and major visible features (*e.g.*, blow height and characteristics, and dorsal fin size, position, and time of appearance at the surface relative to the blow) and then present means of distinguishing among those that appear similar, whatever their taxonomic relationships.

Field guides using this approach are available for both the eastern North Pacific (Leatherwood *et al.*, 1972; 1982; 1988) and the Western North Atlantic, including the Gulf of Mexico (Leatherwood *et al.*, 1976). Each book in this series improved on the last by using newer, better photographs and drawings and by providing updated information on aspects of appearance, distribution, and natural history that are helpful in field identification. Acknowledging the increasing use of aerial surveys in studies of cetaceans, the two most recent releases in this series also included, where available, photographs and descriptions to aid in identification of whales and dolphins seen from aircraft operating at low altitudes (less than 1500 ft).

The Atlantic guide (Leatherwood *et al.*, 1976) is now over 15 years old. Although still fundamentally useful, it is limited by the lack of aids to aerial identification. It suffers further from the shortage of data and limited number of photographs available on many species at the time it was compiled. Further, as it covers a large geographical area, the Atlantic guide provides little detail on distribution, appearance, and behavior in any given area. Since 1976, much has been learned about marine mammals, including species occurring in the Gulf of Mexico. With the increasing use of surveys to estimate and monitor sizes of marine mammal populations and to characterize their responses to human disturbance, there is a need to revise and update the Atlantic guide. That task is under way, and this booklet is offered in the interim.

The purpose of this small guide is to supplement the available Atlantic guide (Leatherwood *et al.*, 1976) by providing additional information, primarily in the form of captioned photographs, to help in identifying marine mammals seen during shipboard and low-altitude aerial surveys of the Gulf of Mexico. It also summarizes current knowledge on each species' distribution within the Gulf. In preparing it, we have resisted the temptation to repeat, for sake of completeness, introductory matter and detail already contained in the Atlantic guide or its companion volumes. It is our suggestion, instead, that observers use this mini-guide in conjunction with the Atlantic guide and, if possible, the most recent version of the Pacific guide (Leatherwood *et al.*, 1988). To facilitate cross-referencing among the three, we have arranged species in this mini-guide in the same order as in the previous guides.¹ There are

¹ The only difference among the three is that beginning with the 1982 issue of the Pacific Guide (Leatherwood *et al.*, 1982), the sperm whale was moved from "Large whales without a dorsal fin" to "Large whales with a dorsal fin."

a few exceptions. Species not known from the Gulf of Mexico are omitted, and the spinner and clymene dolphins (*Stenella longirostris* and *S. clymene*), which were lumped together under "spinner dolphin" in the Atlantic guide, are separated here, to reflect recent clarifications of the taxonomy of this group (Perrin *et al.*, 1981).

Readers are asked to note that the preferred common names of some species have changed (*e.g.*, the goosebeaked whale is now called Cuvier's beaked whale and the saddleback dolphin is now the common dolphin), and the scientific names of the spotted dolphins have been changed, following taxonomic revision (Perrin *et al.*, 1987). Thus, *Stenella plagiodon* (the Atlantic spotted dolphin) has become *S. frontalis*, and what was previously called *S. frontalis* (the bridled or pantropical spotted dolphin) is now *S. attenuata*. In any case, where terms are different among the three books, this mini-guide should be accepted as the most current view.

Readers will also note that descriptions, which appear under the "portrait" illustration (drawing or photograph) of each species, are brief, shorthand references to the features most important to identification from shipboard and aircraft, rather than complete word portraits. For example, little attention is paid to such anatomical features as tooth counts of dolphins, ventral grooves of baleen whales, or throat creases of beaked whales. Similarly, figure captions only draw attention to features critical to identification that are visible in that view. Some important features simply have not been illustrated. Difficult identifications will still require reference to the larger guides, where more detail and diversity of views have been presented.

Finally, we have included a map of each species' known distribution in the Gulf of Mexico. The maps used are the same as those presented in Schmidly (1981), to which we have added additional records from: Fritts and Reynolds, 1981; Fritts *et al.* (1983), and Mullin *et al.* (1991). We have also added unpublished sightings from surveys aboard the NMFS Research Vessel *Oregon II* in 1990 and 1991 (courtesy of K. Mullin and L. Hansen) and aboard the Texas A&M University Training Ship *Texas Clipper* in 1991 (Jefferson and Lynn, in prep.), and strandings recorded from 1981-1991 by the Texas Marine Mammal Stranding Network (TMMSN) (courtesy of E. Haubold and G. Worthy). In addition to Gulf of Mexico records, we also plotted records of strandings from the extreme southeastern coast of Florida on those maps. On some maps, there may be fewer symbols than

records. This is because some sightings and strandings are reported as general localities or as concentrations in a large area, rather than as a single specific location for each record. In any case, it will be clear that almost all confirmed records are from the northern half of the Gulf and that the density of sightings declines from the coast seaward. This pattern reflects the distribution of effort of U.S.-based survey activities. It should not be taken to mean that cetaceans do not occur in other areas of the Gulf.

Although detailed instructions on how to identify cetaceans at sea are contained in the Atlantic and Pacific guides, a few words of caution are appropriate here. It will not always be possible, especially for new observers, to make positive identifications. Therefore, it is very important to carefully log and sketch all features seen, and not to simply settle on and record a species name. In some cases, such observer records of "unidentified cetaceans" may well permit other, more experienced, observers to make identifications later from descriptions and sketches. In any case, carefully completed records will be an important tool in an observer's continuing education as he/she has repeat encounters with the same species.

From both shipboard and aircraft, vigilance is a key. The animals must be seen to be counted, and once initially detected they must be kept in view until all needed data are collected. Cetaceans, especially small and wary groups, do not always make this easy. Once you have made a sighting, keep the animals (or the spot) in view at least until you are sure that others, especially the vessel captain or aircraft pilot, also have the animals in sight.

For aerial observations, observers should always be aware of altitude, as it affects apparent size of objects and animals and usefulness of the size-based groupings used in this and companion field guides. This can best be accomplished by watching changes in known-sized objects during takeoff and landing (e.g., people, cars, buildings) and during flight (seabirds, boats, logs) and by talking regularly with fellow observers to cross-check one another on perspectives and estimates of individual animal size, diagnostic characteristics seen, and numbers of animals seen or estimated.

Becoming adept at identifying marine mammals in the field requires much practice, careful observation, and attention to detail. We sincerely hope this mini-guide improves the efficiency and satisfaction with which observers in the GULFCET program identify marine mammals.

Blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*)



Fig. 1- Blue whales are characterized by: very large size (up to 26 m long); uniform bluish-gray coloration on the head and grayish-white mottling on the body; a dark chevron on the back above the flippers; a head that is broad and U-shaped from above and flat from the side; and a small dorsal fin set far back on the body. The fin appears very late in the animal's surfacing roll.

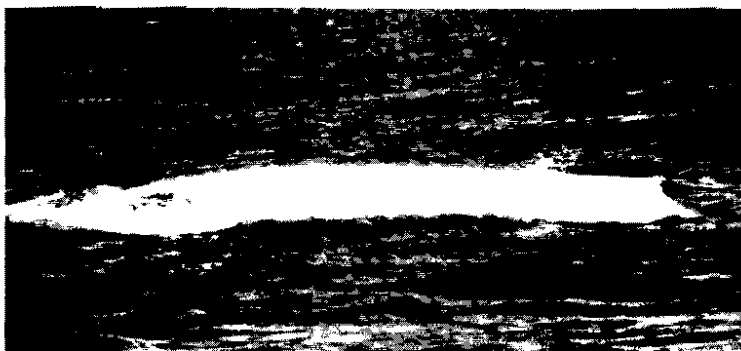


Fig. 2- Note the tiny dorsal fin set far back on the body, and the mottling on the back. (Monterey Bay: T. Jefferson)



Fig. 3- The flat profile of the head and the huge splash guards around the blowholes are clearly visible on this blowing blue whale. (Monterey Bay: T. Jefferson)



Fig. 4- From the air, blue whales can be distinguished by the uniformly colored head, which is broad and U-shaped, and the mottled back. (western North Atlantic: CETAP)

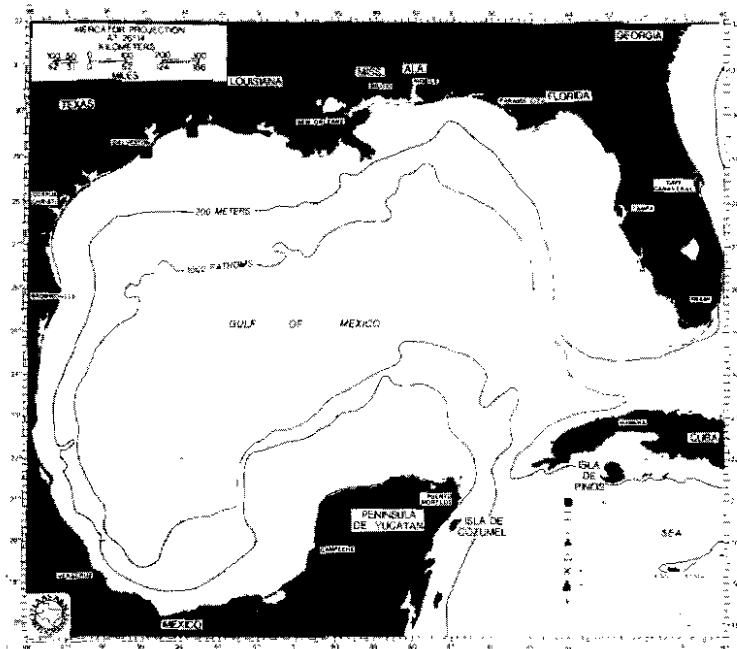


Fig. 5- There are only two records of blue whales from the Gulf of Mexico, both of strandings in Texas. Blue whale populations of the Atlantic are still depleted from whaling, so, even if blue whales were once more frequent visitors to the Gulf, they currently appear to be rare in the area. One of the strandings occurred in summer, the other in winter. However, any sighting of blue whales would most likely occur during winter, when most blue whales migrate from higher-latitude feeding grounds to tropical/subtropical breeding grounds. The exception to this would be for whales belonging to resident populations, which might be seen anytime of year. Apparently resident populations have been identified in the Gulf of California, eastern tropical Pacific, and off Sri Lanka. Blue whales are usually found in waters of high productivity, often along the continental slope.

Fin whale (Balaenoptera physalus)

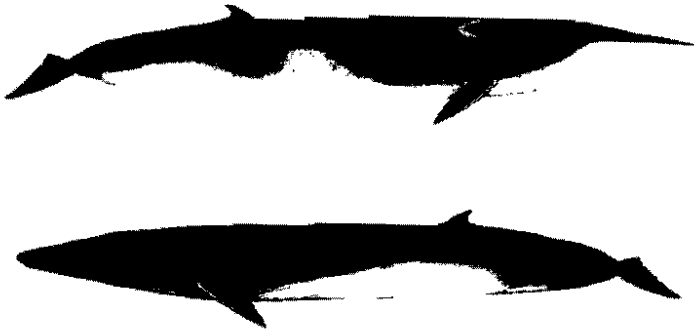


Fig. 6- The most distinctive characteristics of the fin whale are: large size (up to 24 m long); dark gray back and lighter belly, with a light gray chevron sometimes visible on the back behind the head, and light coloration extending onto the sides just above and behind the dorsal fin; asymmetrical head coloration (left side dark, right side from the lips downward white to light gray); a head that is V-shaped in profile and appears tapered slightly downward from the blowhole to the snout tip; and a prominent dorsal fin set moderately far back. The dorsal fin usually appears swept back and relatively wide-based.

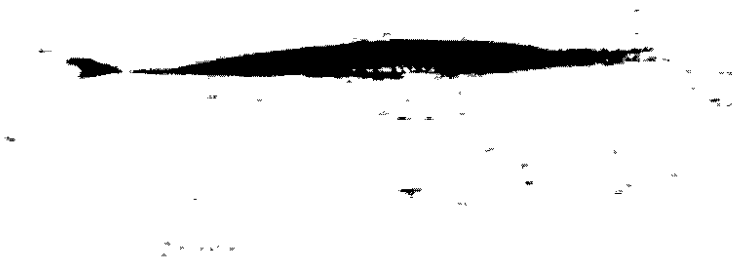


Fig. 7- Fin whales often appear uniformly dark. On a typical surfacing of a traveling fin whale, the dorsal fin emerges shortly after the head submerges. (Sea of Cortez: S. Leatherwood)

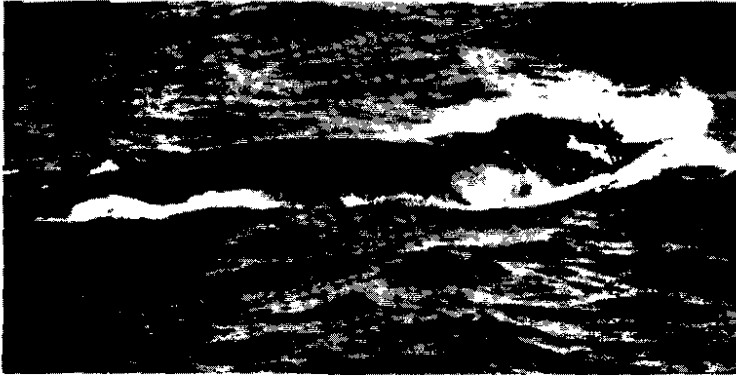


Fig. 8- In favorable light, the light gray chevron on the fin whale's back and light coloration on the right side of its head are visible. In this view, the white lower lip is submerged. The splash guards around the blowholes have just closed after a blow. (Provincetown, Massachusetts: S. Leatherwood)



Fig. 9- The pointed head, chevron, and asymmetrical head coloration can be seen in this aerial view of two fin whales in the western North Atlantic. (W. Hoggard)

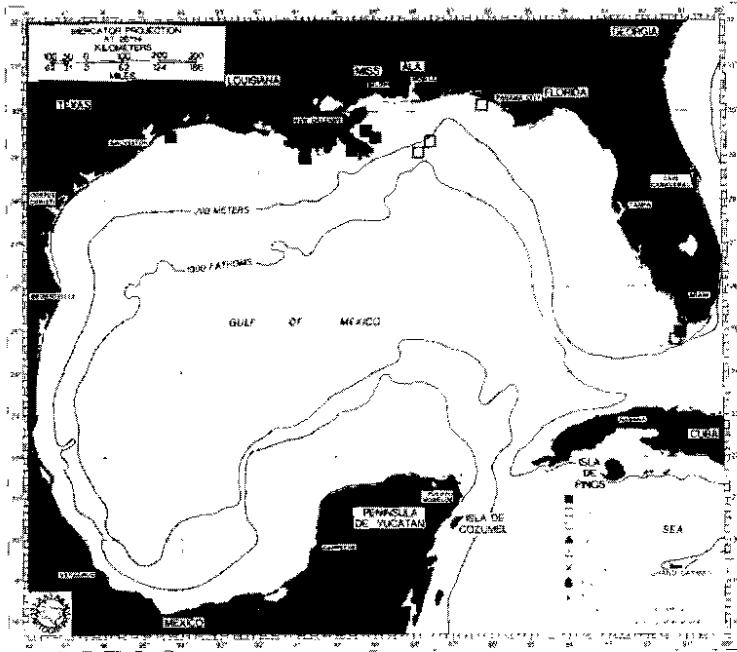


Fig. 10- Fin whales are represented in the Gulf of Mexico by only six sightings and six strandings. However, the fact that these records are scattered throughout the year has prompted speculation that fin whales may be resident in the Gulf of Mexico, as they apparently are in the Mediterranean Sea and in the Gulf of California, Mexico. Although primarily pelagic animals, fin whales do occasionally enter shallow continental shelf waters.

Sei whale (*Balaenoptera borealis*)



Fig. 11- The sei whale can be distinguished by the following characteristics: body up to 19 m long; dark steel gray coloration, often with oval grayish white scars; uniformly dark coloration on top of head and on both lips; moderately V-shaped head that in profile bends downward, especially towards the tip; and a tall falcate dorsal fin set moderately far back and rising at a steep angle from the back.



Fig. 12- Compare the size and uprightness of this sei whale's tall falcate dorsal fin with those of fin (page 8), blue (page 5), and Bryde's (page 14) whales. Also note that the fin has appeared on the surface very shortly after the blow. (Falkland Islands: F. S. Todd)

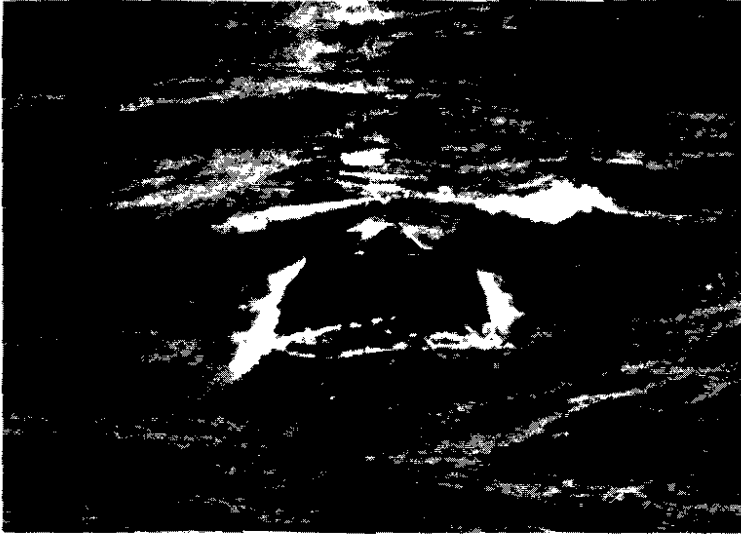


Fig. 13- The head of sei whales is moderately broad and pointed, and in profile takes a noticeable downward turn toward the tip. That bend is visible from many perspectives. The head and body are the same color and the blow is tall and slender. (Falkland Islands: F. S. Todd)



Fig. 14- In this aerial view of a sei whale from the U.S. east coast, it is clear that the inside of the mouth and baleen plates are uniformly colored, except for a small white region of palate just under the tip of the upper jaw. The mouth is wide open, and the ventral pleats are slightly distended during feeding. (CETAP)

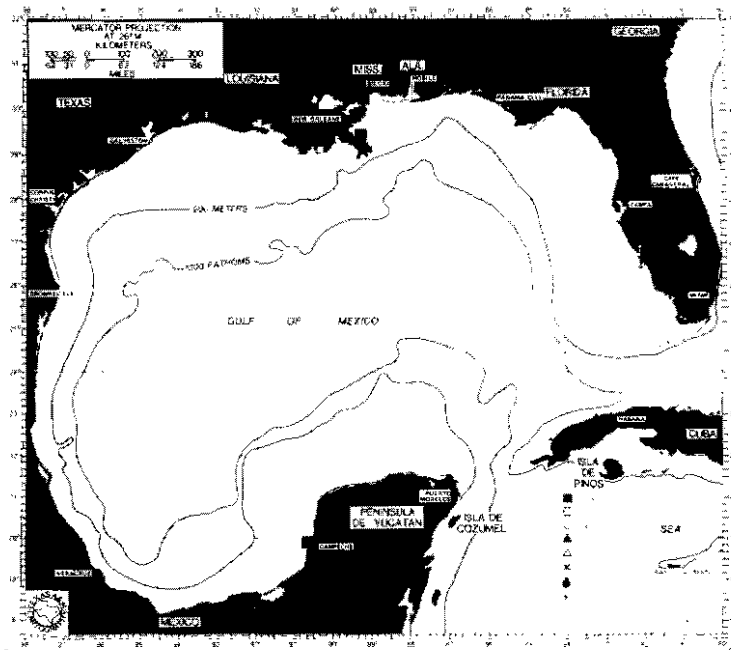


Fig. 15- There have been only three strandings and one possible sighting of sei whales in the Gulf of Mexico. The strandings have occurred in winter and spring, and it is during these seasons that sei whales are most likely to be seen in the Gulf. Sei whales seldom migrate as far poleward in summer/fall, or extend as far into tropics in winter/spring, as other large whales. They appear to prefer temperate waters in pelagic areas and rarely appear over the continental shelf.

Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*)



Fig. 16- The Bryde's (pronounced broo-duh's) whale can be distinguished by the following characteristics: body to 14 m; coloration dark gray on back and sides, lighter below; head moderately rounded from top (more like that of sei than fin whales), but with three prominent ridges on top of the rostrum (other rorquals have only one); dorsal fin prominent, variably shaped, but usually more falcate and pointed than in the sei whale; sometimes exhales underwater, and surfaces without a visible blow.

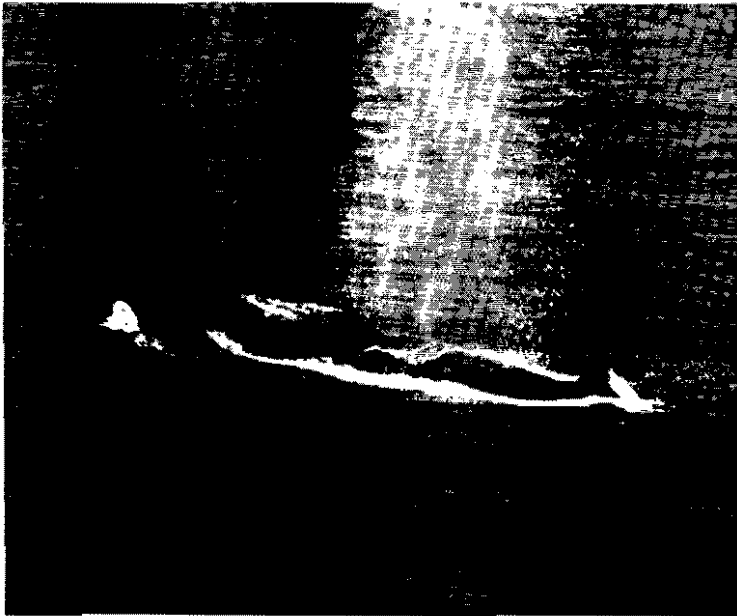


Fig. 17- The dorsal fin of this Bryde's whale has appeared immediately after the tall blow. Notice how steeply the dorsal fin rises from the back. Rostral ridges can be very difficult to see in uncooperative animals, but are diagnostic when seen. Be aware that rippling water on the heads of surfacing sei whales can look like head ridges. (Isla Margarita, Venezuela: S. Leatherwood)

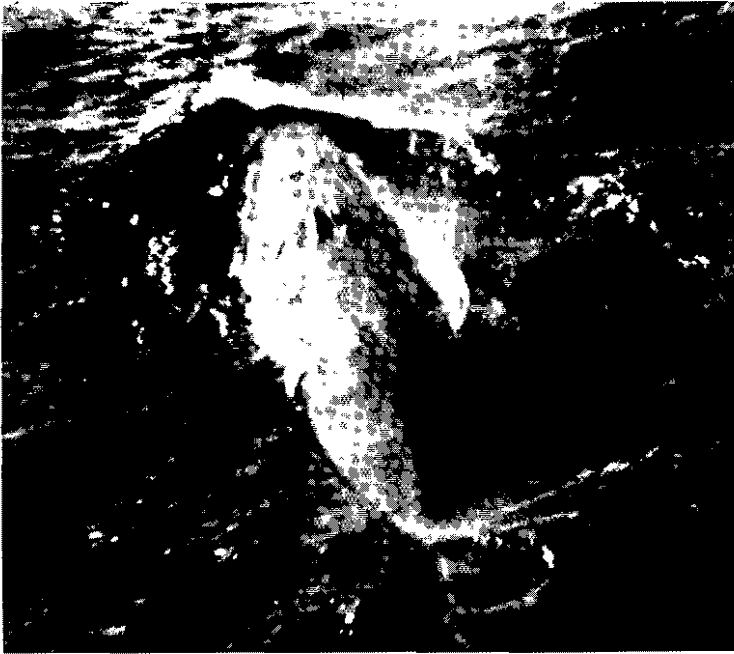


Fig. 18 - The three head ridges allow positive identification of a Bryde's whale. (eastern tropical Pacific: K. Rittmaster)

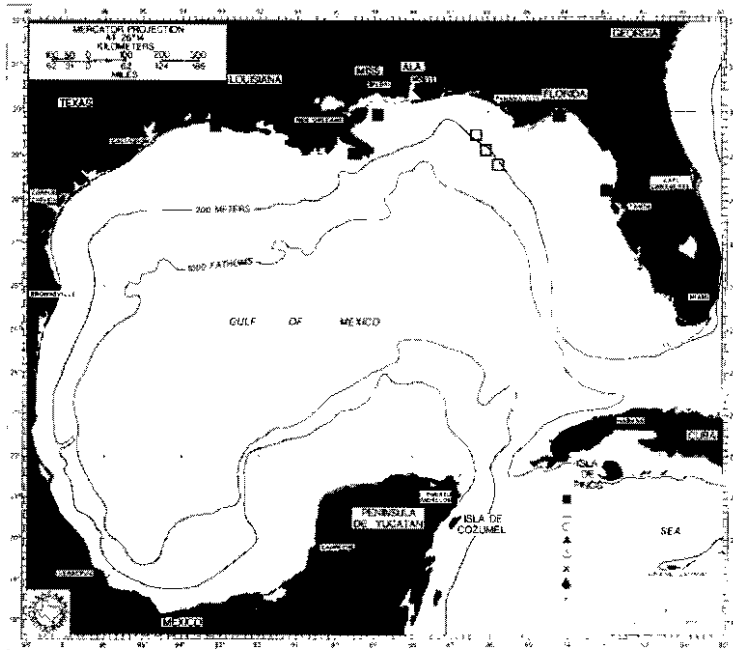


Fig. 19- There have been only six strandings and three confirmed sightings of Bryde's whales reported for the Gulf of Mexico. In areas where they have been studied more intensively, Bryde's whales are resident in tropical and subtropical waters; they occur in deep oceans, and along continental slopes. There is reason to believe that Bryde's whales will be the most commonly seen baleen whale in the Gulf of Mexico.

Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

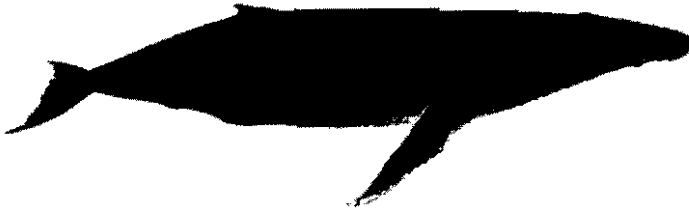


Fig. 20- The humpback whale can be distinguished by the following characteristics: body to 16 m; coloration dark gray to black on back and sides, with extensive white areas on undersides; flippers often all or partly white; head broad and U-shaped from above and relatively flat in profile; knobs on head and flippers; dorsal fin small and low (usually on hump); flippers extremely long and scalloped on leading edges; and flukes scalloped on rear margin.

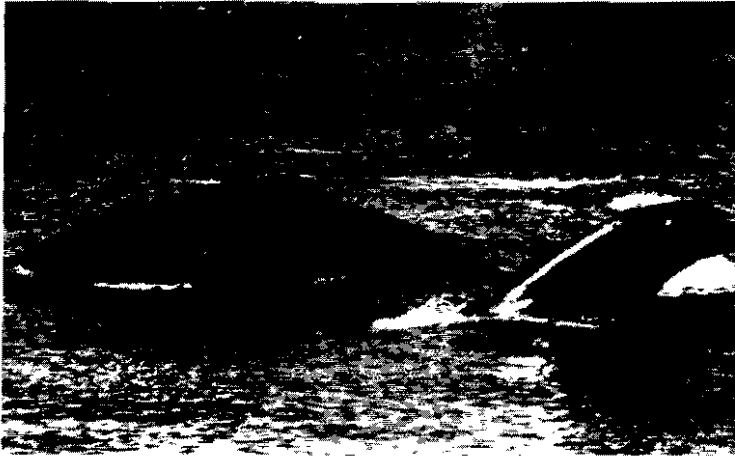


Fig. 21- The dorsal fins of humpback whales are variably shaped, but usually are low and stepped, as can be seen in the middle animal. The splash guards and moderately tall blow can be seen in the background whale. The whale in the foreground is raising its flukes, as humpbacks usually do when beginning a dive. (Southeast Alaska: T. Jefferson/Intersea Research)

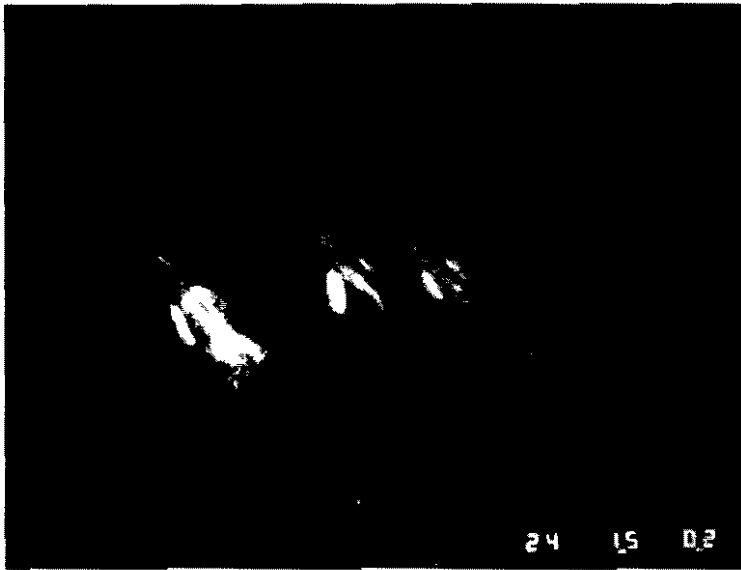


Fig. 22- From the air, the rounded heads and extremely long flippers of humpbacks are unmistakable. The flippers are often all or partly white. (U.S. east coast: W. Hoggard)

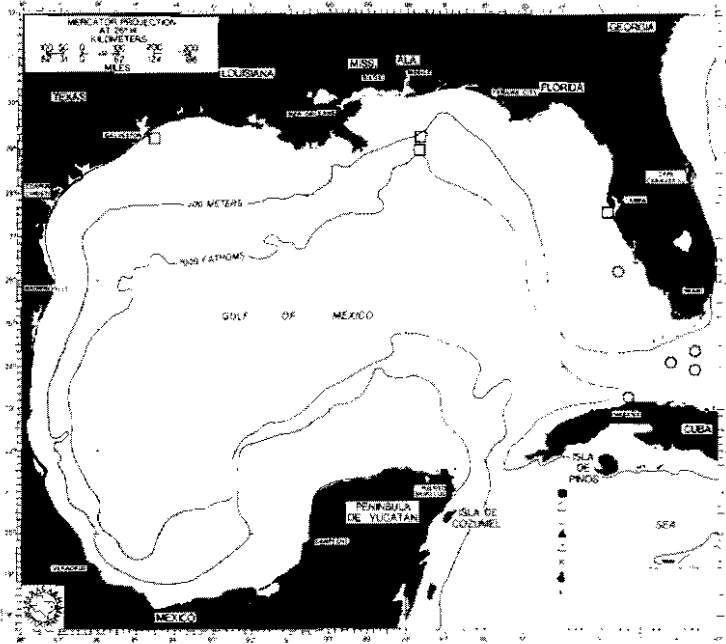


Fig. 23- Today, the major wintering areas for western North Atlantic humpback whales are in the Caribbean. However, before stocks were depleted, some whaling for this species took place in the Gulf, suggesting that this area may have been part of the normal winter range. If so, the few existing records (four sightings and five captures, all except one from the eastern Gulf) may represent not extralimital strays, but rather normal occurrences, which may well increase as the population(s) recover. Both breeding and feeding grounds are generally in coastal waters, but humpbacks do migrate through some deep, oceanic waters as well.

Northern right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*)



Fig. 24- The right whale can be distinguished by the following characteristics: body to 16 m, extremely robust and smooth, lacking any trace of dorsal fin or ridge; flippers broad and splayed; coloration dark gray to black (white patches generally present on belly); callosities (roughened areas of skin with whale lice attached) present on head; and upper jaw very narrow from above and very arched from side. (Illustration courtesy of D. J. Schmidly)



Fig. 25- When viewed from ahead or behind, the right whale's widely V-shaped blow is distinctive (please note that humpback whales also produce somewhat V-shaped blows). Note also the narrow upper jaw, arched mouthline, callosities, and smooth finless back. (Western Australia: P. Baker)



Fig. 26- The black body, light callosities and arched mouthline are clearly visible on this surfacing right whale. (Bay of Fundy; Bureau of Land Management)



Fig. 27- The extremely chunky body, nearly triangular flukes, narrow head (from above), callosities, and finless back are all apparent in this aerial photo of a right whale mother and calf. (Golfo San Jose, Argentina: B. Würsig)

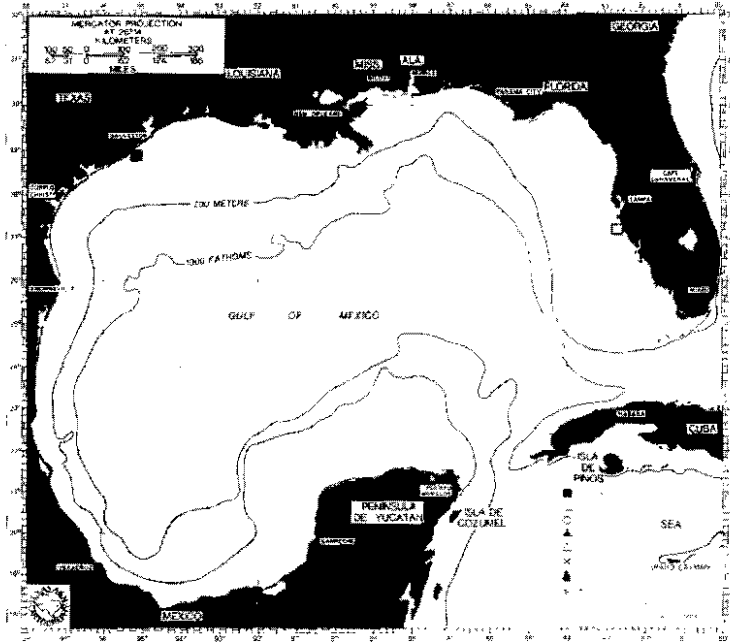


Fig. 28- Northern right whales are rare everywhere, as their numbers have failed to rebound from centuries of intense whaling. We are aware of only two records from the Gulf of Mexico (one stranding in Texas and one sighting off western Florida). Although right whales may once have bred in the Gulf, this does not appear to be a normal part of their current range. The Gulf records, from winter and spring, are probably of strays from the portion of the western North Atlantic right whale population that winters off the United States southeast coast. Right whales are largely coastal in distribution.

Sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*)



Fig. 29- The sperm whale can be distinguished by the following characteristics: body to 17 m; color black to dark grayish brown; back "wrinkled;" rounded dorsal hump (followed by knuckles on dorsal ridge); head large and squarish (from side), with single blowhole at left front; and triangular flukes with straight trailing edge.



Fig. 30- Note the huge head, unique blow (which emerges forward from the left front of the head), wrinkled back, and rounded dorsal hump on this blowing sperm whale. (eastern tropical Pacific: R. L. Pitman)

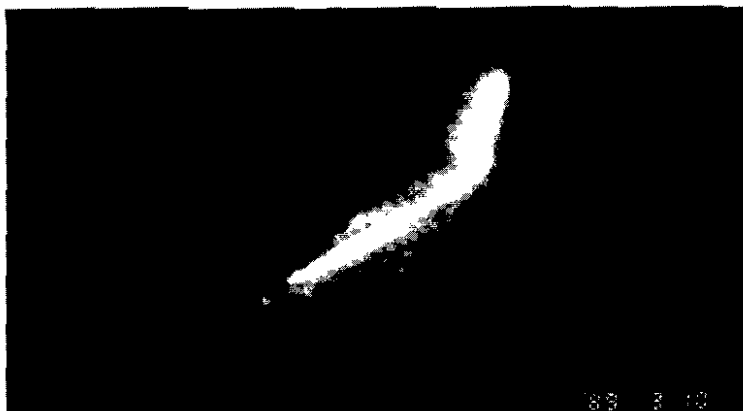


Fig. 31- Even from the air, the huge head, bushy angled blow, and nearly triangular flukes, with a flat rear margin, identify this as a sperm whale. Sperm whales generally appear brownish gray from the air. (Gulf of Mexico: C. Roden)

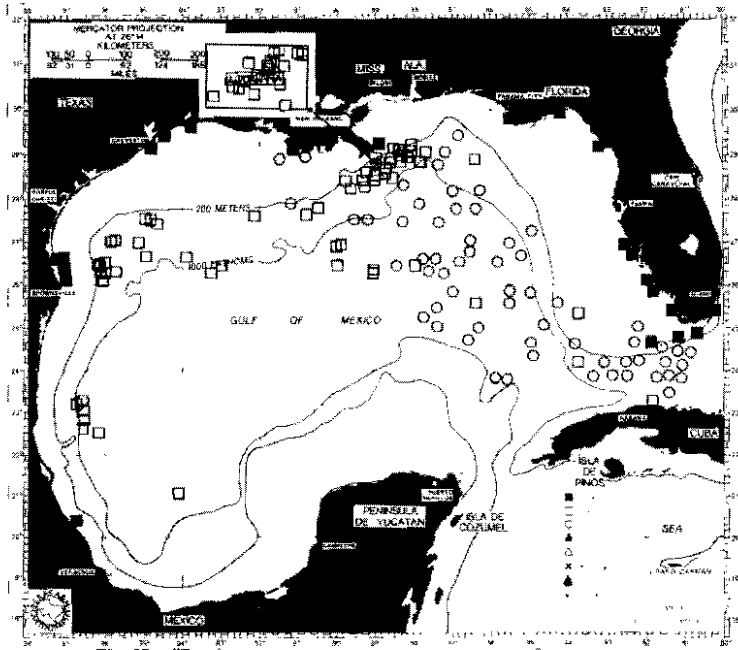


Fig. 32- Sperm whales appear to be the most abundant large whales in the Gulf of Mexico. They once were sufficiently numerous to support commercial whaling activities in the region. Recent surveys in the Gulf have resulted in many (over 100) sightings of sperm whales from widely scattered locations, and there have been 22 strandings reported. There are records from throughout the year, suggesting that at least some sperm whales are resident in the region. Sperm whales are found in deep oceanic waters and along continental slopes; in some areas they are abundant around seamounts and submarine ridges.

Minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)



Fig. 33- The minke whale can be distinguished by the following characteristics: body to about 10 m; back dark gray to black, but with crescentic swirls behind head and two light gray intrusions onto side and back below and in front of dorsal fin; flippers with white bands; head appearing very sharply pointed from above; and prominent falcate dorsal fin, which appears almost simultaneously with the low blow, which is usually invisible, and indistinct when seen.



Fig. 34- Note the prominent head ridge and pointed snout, and the white flipper bands typical of this species in the Northern Hemisphere. (South-east Alaska: T. Jefferson/Intersea Research)



Fig. 35- The flat (from the side), slender head of a minke whale is visible even at a considerable distance (animal on the right). The whale at left has just blown; notice that the blow is not visible. (Commonwealth Bay, Antarctica; S. Leatherwood)



Fig. 36- All of the species' diagnostic field characters are apparent in this photo of a minke whale just below the surface. (Dana Point, southern California: B. S. Stewart)

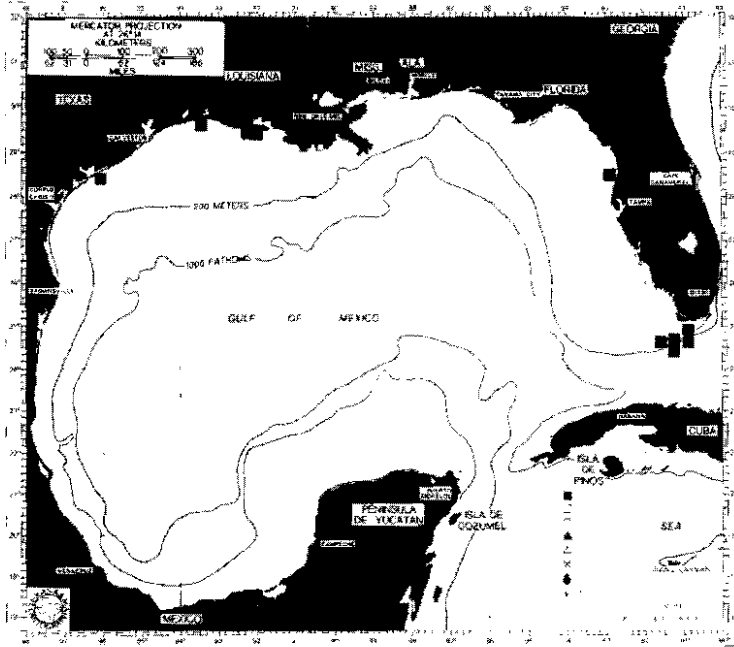


Fig. 37- The 11 strandings of minke whales in the Gulf of Mexico have involved mostly immature whales and have occurred in winter and spring, when the Gulf may be part of the species' normal range. We know of no confirmed sightings from the Gulf of Mexico. During summer and fall, minke whale populations shift northward, as far as the edges of the pack ice. Minke whales are most often seen in oceanic and continental slope waters, like other rorquals, but they do come into shallow, nearshore waters more often than other balaenopterid species.

Cuvier's beaked whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*)



Fig. 38- Cuvier's beaked whales can be distinguished by the following characteristics: robust body to at least 7 m; body usually tan with a white head, white on head extends posteriorly with age (old males may appear all white), small animals usually grayish, larger animals often heavily scarred and scratched with large oval spots; melon slightly concave in smaller individuals, bulging somewhat in older males; beak short and stubby; dorsal fin low, triangular, and somewhat falcate; blow sometimes visible (unlike in mesoplodonts); and two tusks that protrude from tip of lower jaw of adult males, sometimes encrusted with stalked barnacles.

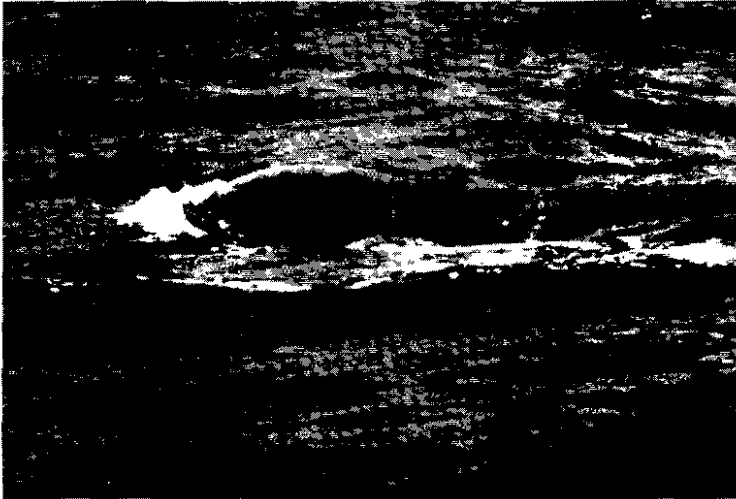


Fig. 39- Note the tan back (lighter toward the head) with multiple scratches, and the prominent dorsal fin set far back on the robust body of this Cuvier's beaked whale. (central Pacific: P. Lloyd, courtesy of K. C. Balcomb, III)



Fig. 40- A beaked whale, probably a Cuvier's beaked whale, judging from the short blunt head, light color, and robustness. (western North Atlantic; G. Carter, CETAP)

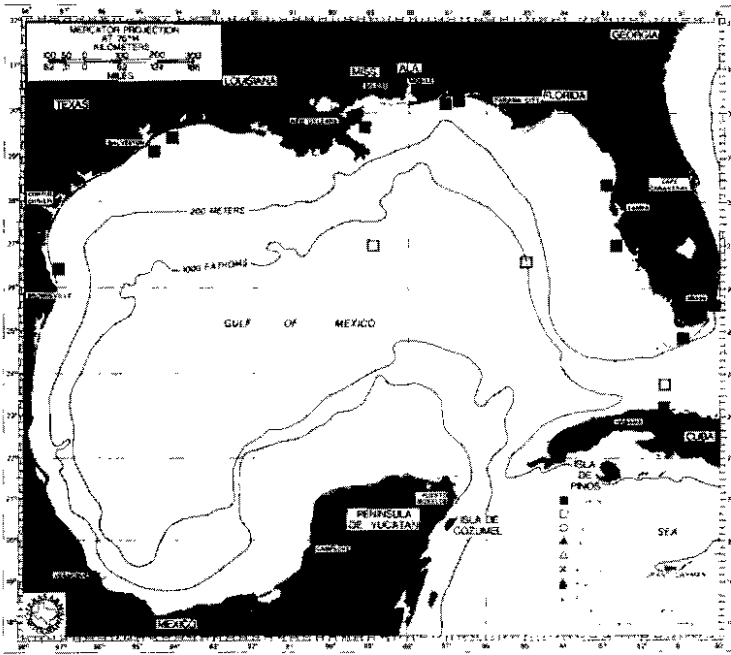


Fig. 41- Cuvier's beaked whales are probably the most common beaked whales in the Gulf of Mexico, where there are records of 10 strandings and at least seven sightings. Cuvier's beaked whales are widely distributed from the tropics to subpolar zones of all oceans. They might well be encountered widely in deep waters of the Gulf throughout the year.

Mesoplodonts

The beaked whale genus *Mesoplodon* is the most poorly-known group of cetaceans. Most of what we know about the biology of the "mesoplodonts" comes from strandings; some species have never been seen alive in the wild. Most mesoplodont species are nearly impossible to identify at sea and even then only after an excellent look by a very experienced observer. Generally, only adult males (distinguished by heavy scarring all over the body) can be identified to species. Careful attention must be paid to the relative size and position of erupted teeth. Coloration and dorsal fin shape are sometimes important, but these are unknown for two of the three Gulf species (Gervais' and Sowerby's beaked whales).

Because descriptions of beaked whale ranges are based on especially sparse data, they should not be taken as indicative of true range. So far, only three species of mesoplodonts have been identified from the Gulf of Mexico: Gervais' beaked whale, Blainville's beaked whale, and Sowerby's beaked whale. At least one other species, True's beaked whale (*Mesoplodon mirus*), is known from the east coast of Florida and the Bahamas and is thus likely to turn up in the Gulf at some point. Most species of *Mesoplodon* are primarily oceanic.



Fig. 42- Most sightings of mesoplodonts cannot be identified to species. The dark back with many scratches and small dorsal fin set far back from the head identify this whale as a mesoplodont. (46°43'S, 172°15'E: F. Kasamatsu)

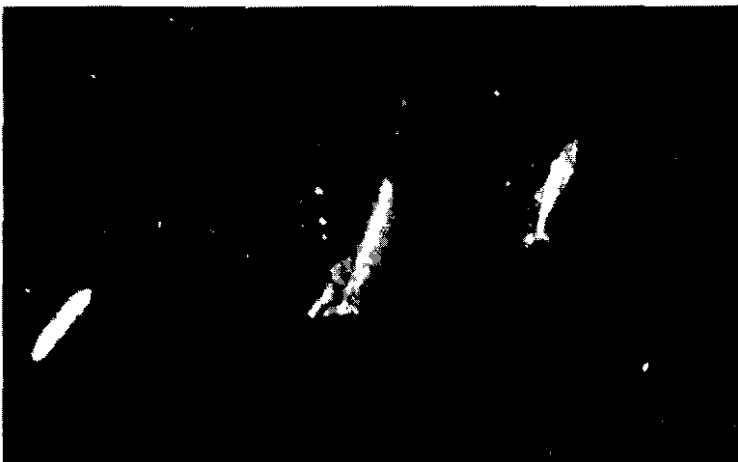


Fig. 43- From the air, the robust countershaded bodies and short snouts of these three beaked whales can be seen. (western North Atlantic: CETAP)

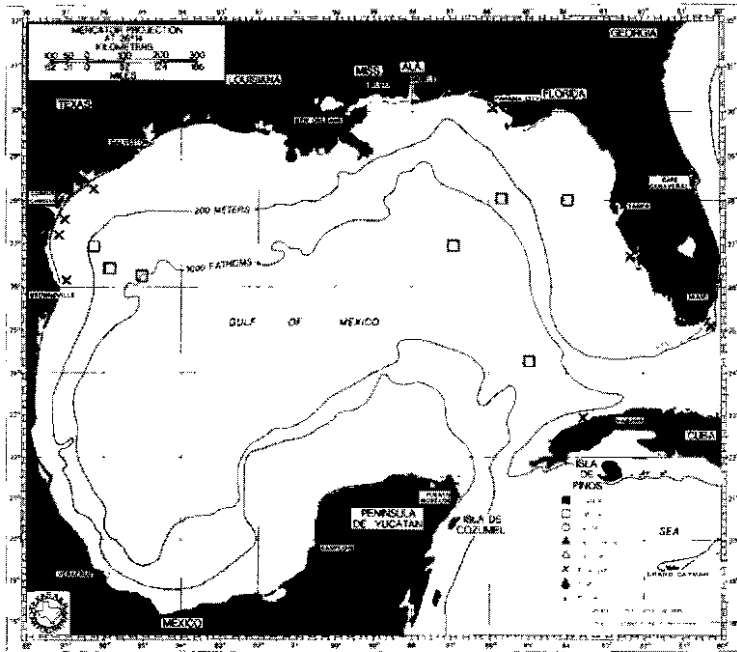


Fig. 44- The difficulties in identifying beaked whales to species result in logging of many sightings of "unidentified beaked whales," which certainly masks the real abundance or rarity of any particular species. At least 15 such sightings have been reported from the Gulf.

There are records of 10 strandings of Gervais' beaked whales in the Gulf of Mexico, suggesting that this is the most common mesoplodont in the Gulf. These whales are known primarily from warm temperate and subtropical waters of the Atlantic Ocean. They are pelagic and can be expected at any time of the year in the Gulf.

To date, there have only been two strandings and no confirmed sightings of Blainville's beaked whales in the Gulf. However, they may be more common in the Gulf area than is apparent from the number of records. This is the most widely distributed, and probably one of the most abundant, of the mesoplodonts. Blainville's beaked whales occur in tropical to warm temperate waters in all major oceans. Like other beaked whales, they live primarily in deep, offshore waters.

Sowerby's beaked whale is represented from the Gulf of Mexico by a single stranding on the west coast of Florida. It is normally a resident of cold temperate to subarctic regions of the pelagic North Atlantic; therefore, the Gulf stranding was probably an extralimital occurrence.

Gervais' beaked whale (Mesoplodon europaeus)



Fig. 45- Gervais' beaked whales are known to reach lengths of at least 5.2 m. The two small teeth of males are found near the tip of the snout.

Blainville's beaked whale (*Mesoplodon densirostris*)

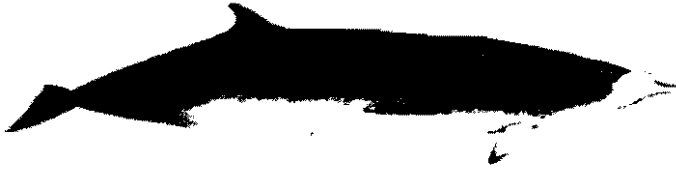


Fig. 46- Blainville's beaked whales reach at least 4.8 m in length. In adult males, the head appears flattened, surmounted by a single high arch in the middle of each lower jaw. A large tusk emerges from the top of each arch, and is sometimes obscured by a tassel of stalked barnacles.

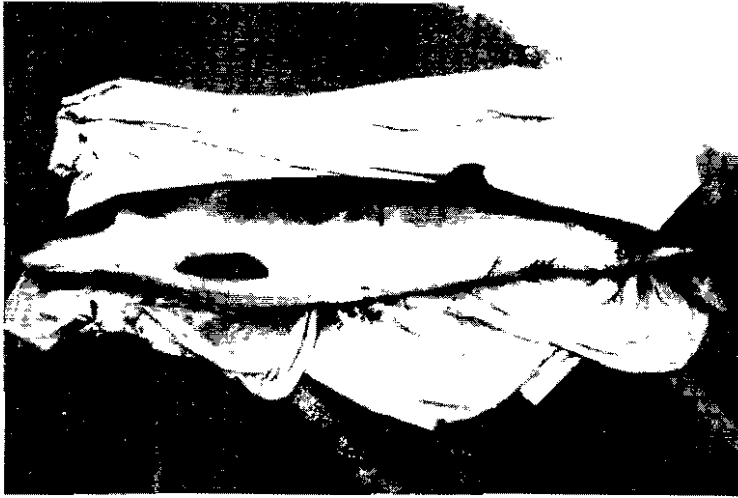


Fig. 47- The general mesoplodont characteristics are all visible on this young beaked whale (possibly a Blainville's beaked whale, judging from the arched lower jaw): throat grooves, rounded flippers, small dorsal fin, and flukes with no notch. (Monterey Bay, California: B. E. Curry)

Sowerby's beaked whale (Mesoplodon bidens)

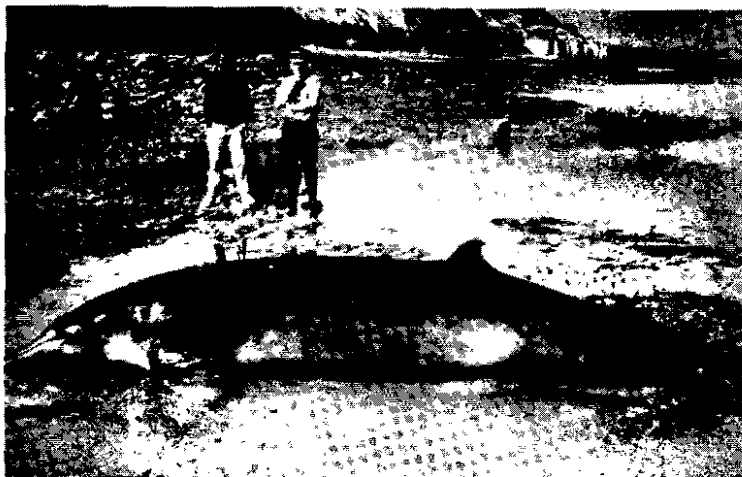


Fig. 48- Sowerby's beaked whales reach lengths of at least 5.5 m. The tusks of adult males are in the middle of the lower jaw. This female Sowerby's beaked whale stranded on the Atlantic coast of France. The long beak, with little or no apex to the melon, is characteristic of the species. (D. Robineau)

Killer whale (*Orcinus orca*)



Fig. 49- Killer whales can be easily recognized by their large robust body (to at least 9 m), distinctive black-and-white color pattern, blunt head with only a short beak, tall dorsal fin, and large rounded flippers. (Sea World of Florida: S. Leatherwood)



Fig. 50- The dorsal fins of killer whales vary with age and sex. The first, second, and fifth animals from the left are females or subadult males, the third is a juvenile (notice also its darker saddle patch), and the fourth is an adult male. (Icy Strait, Alaska: S. Leatherwood)



Fig. 51- Killer whales are easy to identify from the air. The blunt head, tall dorsal fin, light gray post-dorsal fin saddle, and white eye patch are all visible. (McMurdo Sound, Antarctica: S. Leatherwood)

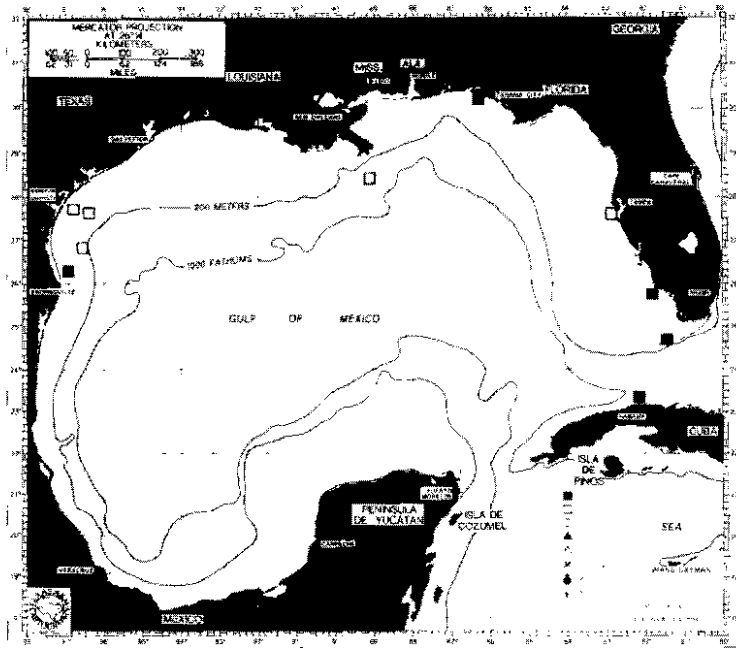


Fig. 52- Killer whales are among the easiest cetaceans to identify, as they are distinctively marked and approach close to shore and vessels. For these reasons, the paucity of records of sightings (seven), strandings (five), and captures (one) in the Gulf is taken to indicate that killer whales are relatively rare in this area. Although cosmopolitan, killer whales are much more common in higher-latitude and colder-water areas. Even so, killer whales might be seen in any area of the Gulf of Mexico, coastal to oceanic, at any time of year.

False killer whale (*Pseudorca crassidens*)

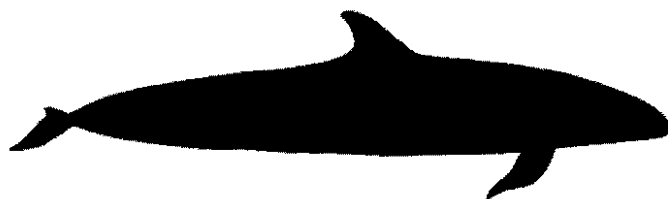


Fig. 53- The false killer whale can be distinguished by the following characteristics: body slender and long to at least 5.5 m; dark gray to black coloration (there is a faint light gray anchor patch on the chest); slightly darker cape visible in good light or when animals are bowriding; head long and blunt, but tapering slightly toward tip (no beak); flippers with distinctive hump on leading edge; dorsal fin prominent, falcate, and positioned at or just behind mid-body; and blow small and puffy.



Fig. 54- Note the long head, uniform dark gray to black coloration, shape and position of the dorsal fin, and flipper with a distinct hump on the leading edge of this false killer whale. (eastern tropical Pacific: M. Webber)

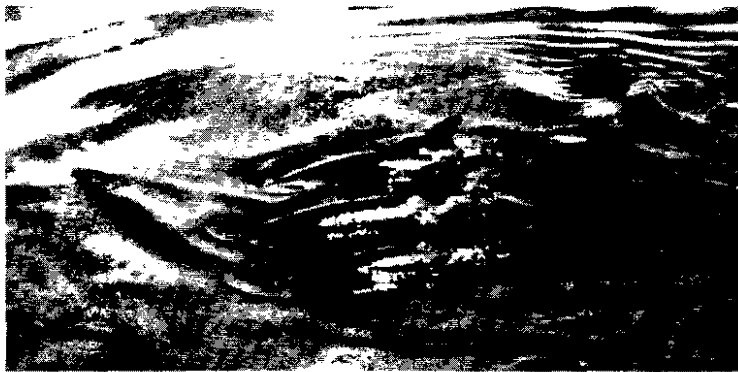


Fig. 55- The dorsal fin of false killer whales is set at mid-body (as opposed to the situation in pilot whales, in which it is set far forward near the head). (eastern tropical Pacific: M. Webber)

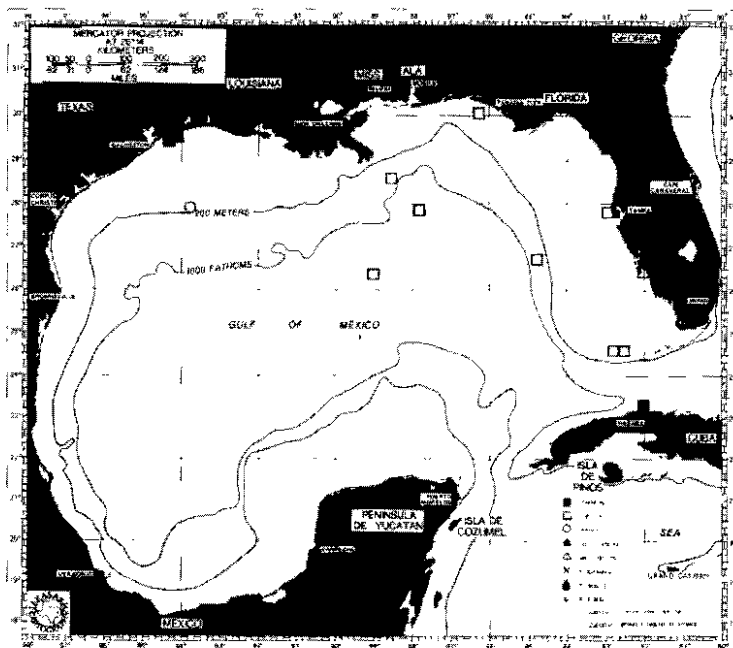


Fig. 56- False killer whales are known from three strandings, eight sightings, and one capture in the Gulf of Mexico. These are tropical/temperate animals, found in pelagic waters of all oceans. They can be expected at any time of year in the Gulf.

Short-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*)



Fig. 57- The short-finned pilot whale can be distinguished by: body to 7 m long; color dark gray to black; light gray saddle behind dorsal fin, and blazes (variable in their development) along top and side of head; bulbous head (becoming more so with age, especially in males); low, broad-based dorsal fin set near the head; and deepened tail stock.

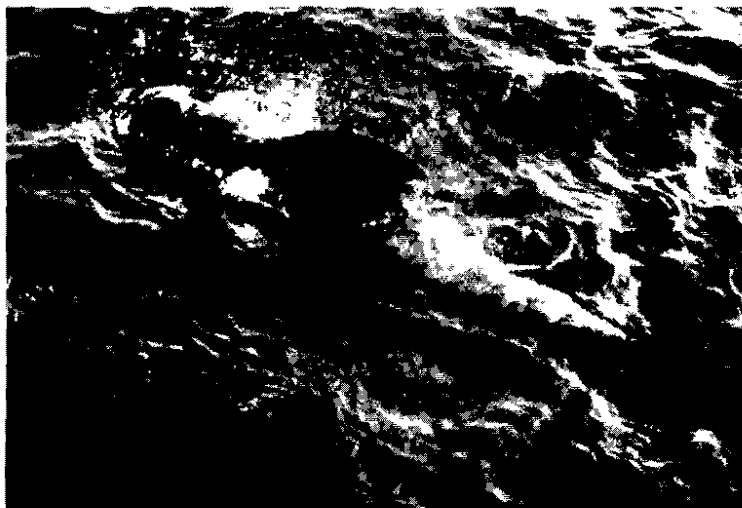


Fig. 58- On this short-finned pilot whale, note the bulbous head, shape and position of the low dorsal fin, sickle-shaped flippers located near the head, and light coloration from behind the dorsal fin in a band toward both eyes. (Gulf of Mexico: W. Hoggard)



Fig. 59- A group of pilot whales in various stages of surfacing; almost all the diagnostic characters of the species are visible. (Catalina Island, California: B. S. Stewart)

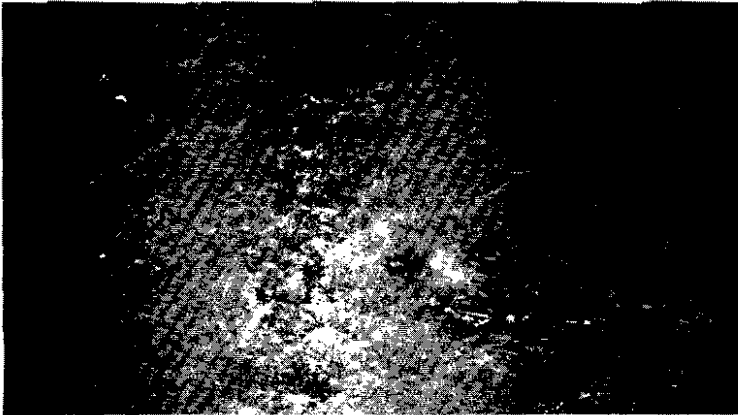


Fig. 60- The blunt bulbous head, slender pointed flippers, unique dorsal fin position and shape, and deepened tail stock can all be seen in this group of pilot whales. (Gulf of Mexico: W. Hoggard)

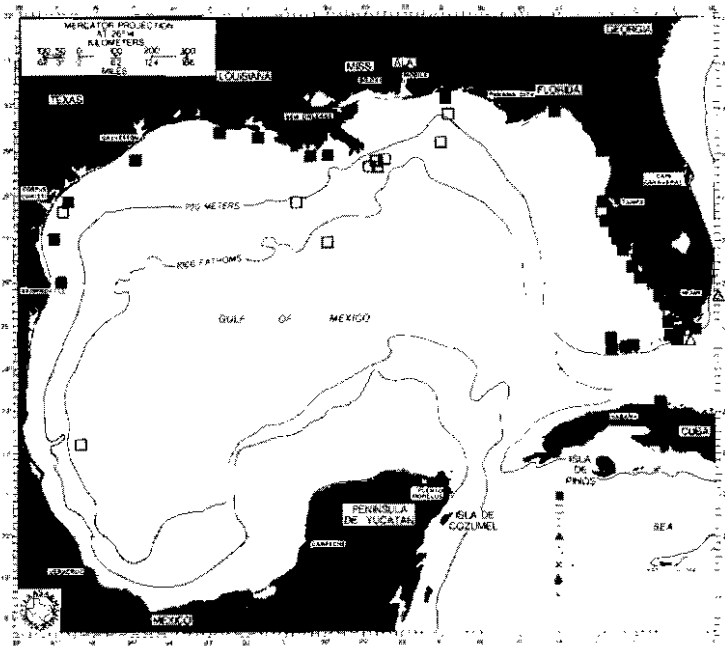


Fig. 61- There are at least 22 sighting and 37 stranding records of short-finned pilot whales from throughout the year in the Gulf of Mexico. This is probably the most common species of "blackfish"² in these waters. Pilot whales are largely oceanic, but are known, at least in other areas, to move over the continental shelf seasonally in response to movements of prey.

² The term "blackfish" refers to the large dark delphinids: killer whales, pilot whales, false killer whales, pygmy killer whales, and, usually, melon-headed whales.

Risso's dolphin (Grampus griseus)

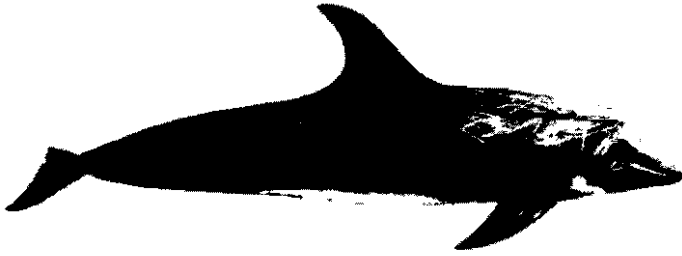


Fig. 62- Risso's dolphins reach lengths of at least 4 m, and have the following identifying characteristics: body light gray to white (young animals dark gray to brownish gray), nearly covered with scratches; head blunt and squarish (from side); vertical crease on forehead; and tall falcate dorsal fin, usually darker than body.



Fig. 63- The squarish head of this Risso's dolphin creates a "bow wave" as the animal surfaces. Note the extensive scratches and prominent dark dorsal fin. (Monterey Bay, California: T. Jefferson)



Fig. 64- Risso's dolphins do not often ride bow waves, but when they do they are easy to identify. Note the curious body shape; relatively little of the animal's mass is behind the dorsal fin. Bottlenose dolphins can be seen swimming below. (eastern tropical Pacific: R. L Pitman)

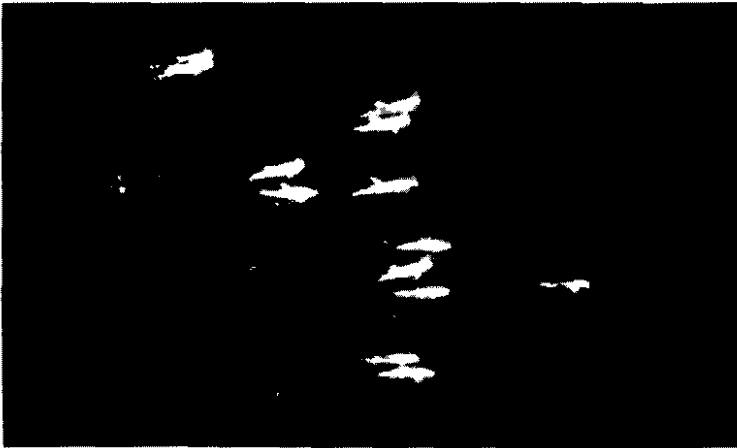


Fig. 65- The light bodies of Risso's dolphins are striking from the air. (San Clemente Island, southern California: S. Leatherwood)

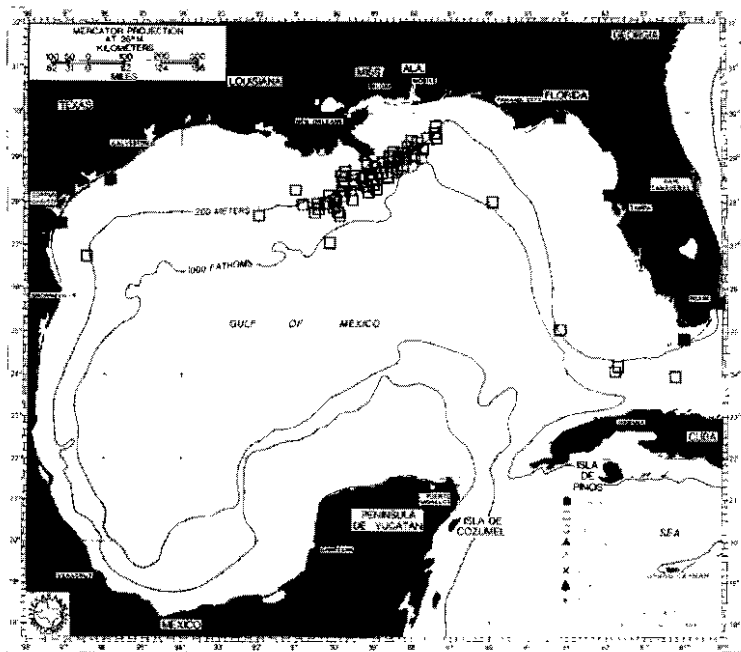


Fig. 66- Although not reported as part of the Gulf of Mexico fauna until 1968, Risso's dolphins appear to be moderately common to very common in at least some parts of the area. There have been a total of seven strandings and at least 76 sightings. They were the dolphins most commonly seen during a series of deep-water aerial surveys off the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts. Risso's dolphins occur in continental slope and oceanic waters of tropical to warm temperate zones, and can be expected in the Gulf year-round. Gulf records are mostly from over the slope.

Atlantic spotted dolphin (Stenella frontalis)

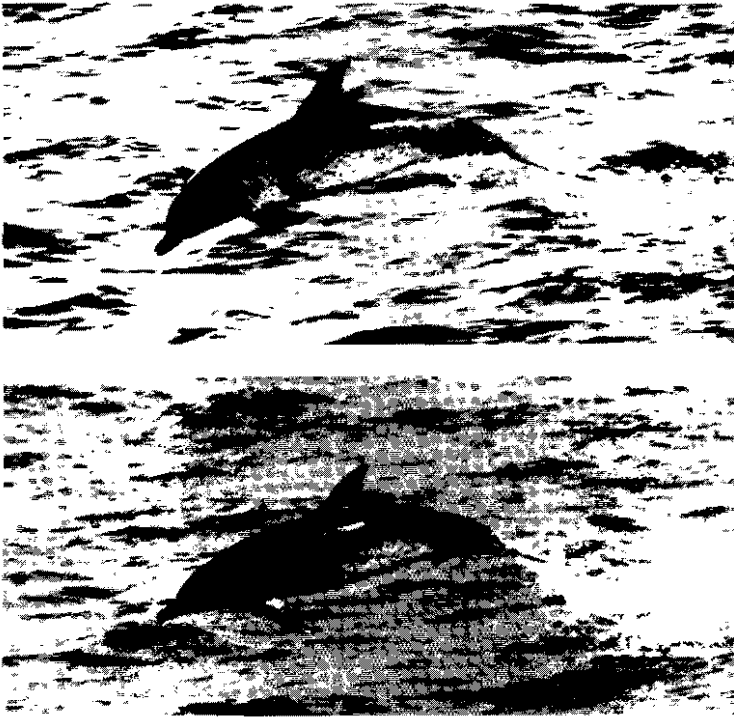


Fig. 67- Atlantic spotted dolphins, which reach lengths of at least 2.3 m, are similar in body shape to bottlenose dolphins (with which they are often confused). In the spotted dolphin, however, the cape is indistinct and a spinal blaze is present (although this may be subdued, as in these two young animals). Spotting increases with age, but all age classes are much more heavily spotted than corresponding age classes of the pantropical spotted dolphin. (Gulf of Mexico: R. L. Pitman)



Fig. 68- A group of Atlantic spotted dolphins of mixed age classes. Note the light snout tip, moderately short beak, and variable development of the spinal blaze and spotting. Notice, too, how the margin of the cape is obscured by spots; it is not sharp and distinct, as it is in pantropical spotted dolphins. (Gulf of Mexico: W. Hoggard)

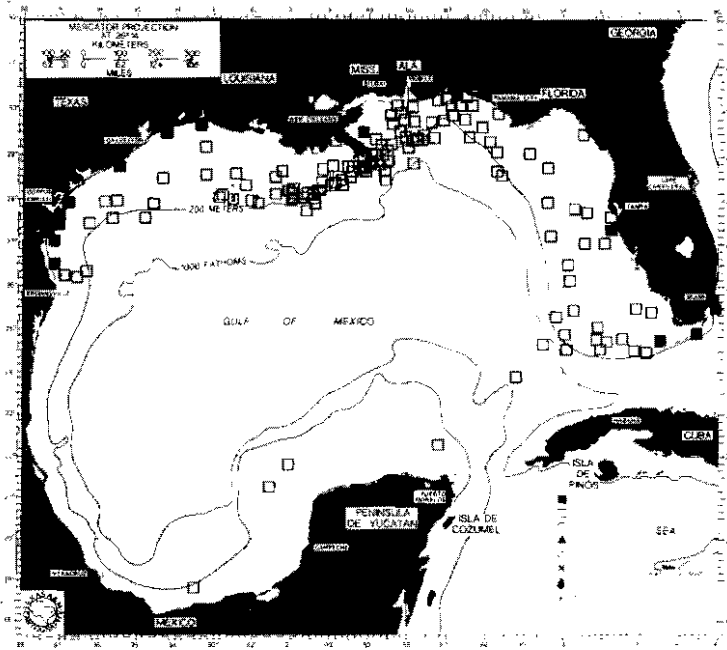


Fig. 69- Atlantic spotted dolphins are distributed only in tropical to warm temperate waters of the Atlantic Ocean, including the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico. There are numerous sighting records and 16 strandings of Atlantic spotted dolphins from the Gulf of Mexico. They and bottlenose dolphins are apparently the only cetacean species that are common in waters of the Gulf's continental shelf. Year-round, they occur primarily in waters of offshore portions of the shelf and adjacent slope and are rarely found beyond the 2000 meter contour.

Pantropical spotted dolphin (Stenella attenuata)



Fig. 70- Pantropical spotted dolphins reach lengths of 2.6 m. They can be recognized by their distinctive cape, which is narrow on the face, dips very low on the side (the lowest point is generally in front of the dorsal fin), and then rises to converge at a point behind the dorsal fin, and by their white lips and beak tip. Other features of this species that are important to identification are a prominent eye mask, gape-to-flipper stripe, very small spots on the cape (some individuals may appear unspotted), gray belly in adults, and a dorsal fin that, in profile, appears slender and gracefully falcate. (Gulf of Mexico: R. L. Pitman)



Fig. 71- Even from aircraft, these pantropical spotted dolphins can be identified by their distinctive capes and white beak tips. (eastern tropical Pacific: J. Gilpatrick)

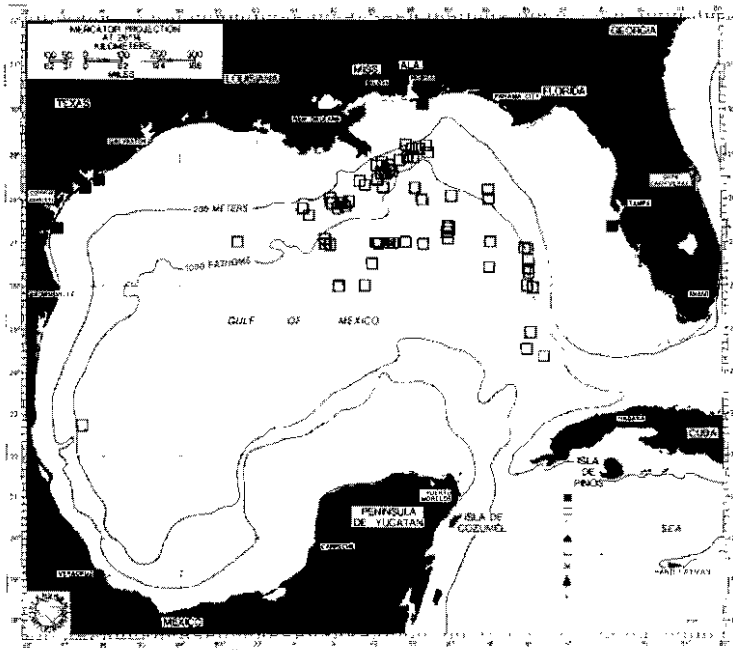


Fig. 72- There have been at least nine strandings and at least 71 sightings of pantropical spotted dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico. These are very abundant tropical and subtropical pelagic cetaceans throughout the world; they now appear to be the most common small cetaceans in oceanic waters of the Gulf of Mexico as well. They occur in the Gulf in all seasons, primarily in very deep, offshore waters.

Spinner dolphin (Stenella longirostris)



Fig. 73- Spinner dolphins attain maximum lengths of 2.2 m. They can be recognized by the presence of an extremely long beak, dark lips and snout tip, three-part color pattern, slender cape that dips slightly below the dorsal fin, and slightly falcate to triangular dorsal fin. (Selinog Island, Philippines: S. Leatherwood)



Fig. 74- These bowriding spinners offer an accommodating look at the cape and the shape and markings of the snout. Note, in particular, their long dark beak, with a black line on top. (Kona Coast, Hawaii: R. Wells)



Fig. 75- Even from aircraft, the extremely long beak and flat lower border of the cape (in front of the dorsal fin) of spinners are helpful in identification. (Gulf of Mexico: C. Rogers)

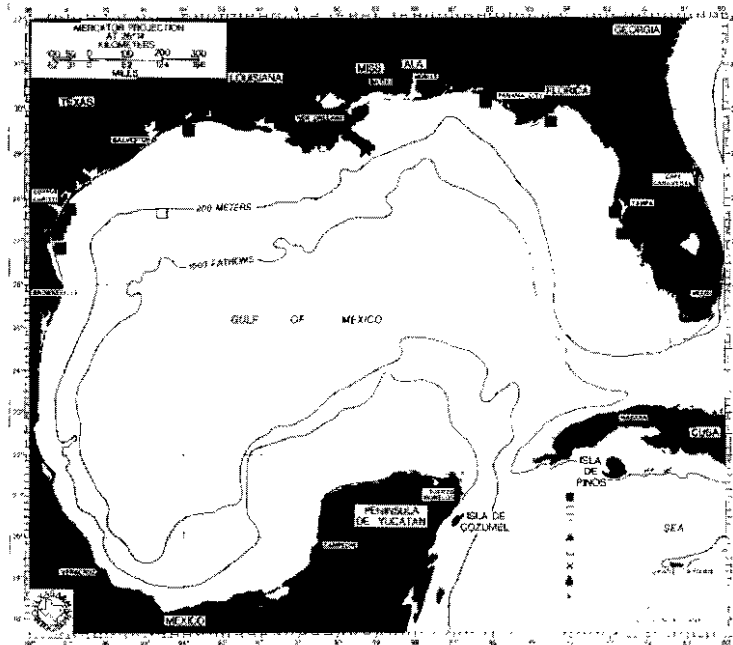


Fig. 76- There are records of only 11 strandings, and two confirmed sightings of spinner dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico, although it should be noted that some of the 35 sightings logged as "unidentified *Stenella* spp." may have involved spinners. The paucity of sightings on recent deep-water surveys suggests that these are not as common in the Gulf as other species of the genus *Stenella*, particularly pantropical spotted dolphins. Spinners are oceanic animals of tropical to subtropical zones, and they might reasonably be expected in the Gulf in any season.

Clymene dolphin (Stenella clymene)

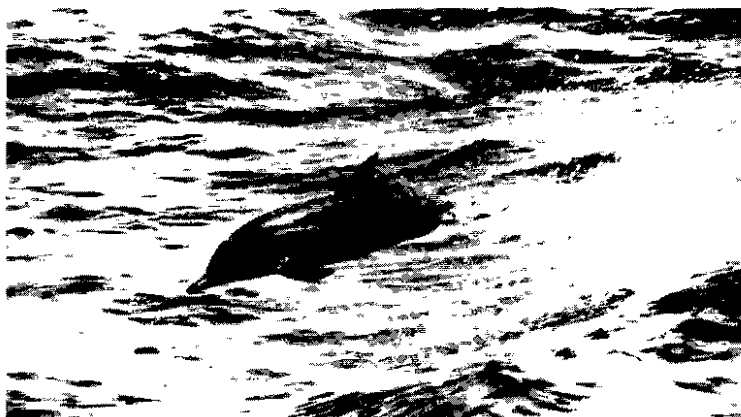


Fig. 77- The clymene dolphin, which reaches lengths of at least 2.0 m, can be distinguished by its moderately short beak; tripartite color pattern (white belly, light gray sides, dark cape that dips in two points - above the eye and below the dorsal fin); and distinctive facial markings (black eye ring, dark lips and snout tip, and dark line on top of snout, sometimes incorporating a "moustache" near the apex of the meion). The cape is sometimes obscured by blotchy patches on the sides and, occasionally, a faint spinal blaze may be present. (Gulf of Mexico: R. L. Pitman)



Fig. 78- In this view of a bow-riding clymene dolphin, the short beak, black line on top of the rostrum, and slenderness of the cape in front of the dorsal fin are visible. Note also the presence of a "moustache" marking on top of the snout, a feature that is diagnostic when present. (Gulf of Mexico - 27° 02'N, 90° 18'W: R. L. Pitman)



Fig. 79- Compare the beak length and cape of these clymene dolphins with those of long-snouted spinner dolphins (page 57). (Gulf of Mexico: W. Hoggard)

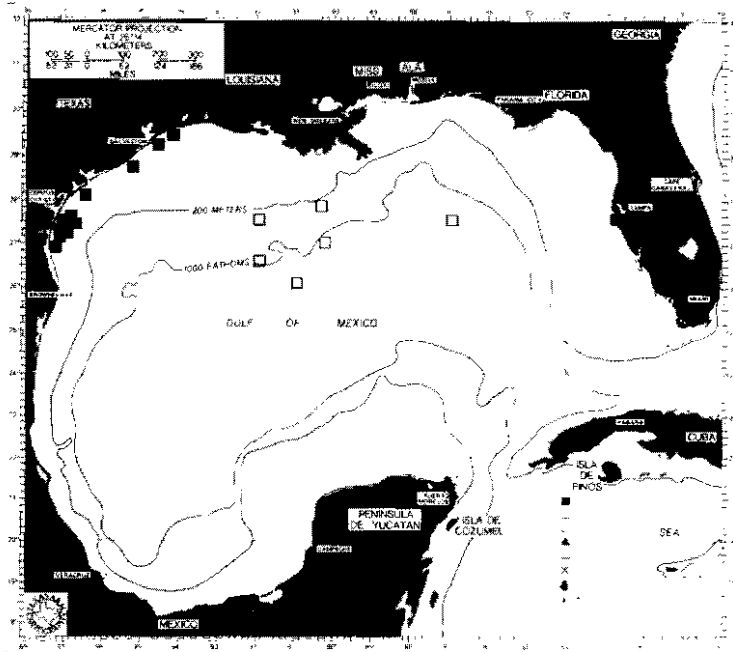


Fig. 80- There are 17 records of strandings of this species in the Gulf of Mexico, and there have been six confirmed sightings on recent deep water surveys. Not recognized as a valid species until the mid-1970's, the clymene dolphin is probably not rare, as recently thought. It is likely that many sightings reported as other dolphin species (common, spinner, striped, and spotted dolphins) from the 1970's and earlier were actually of this species. Clymene dolphins occur in tropical and subtropical waters of the Atlantic Ocean, and they are likely to occur in the Gulf at any time of year.

Striped dolphin (Stenella coeruleoalba)



Fig. 81- In these two photos, the distinctive characteristics of the striped dolphin, which attains lengths of 2.7 m, are well-illustrated: moderately short beak; dark gray cape that is very high just behind the eye and incorporates a spinal blaze below the dorsal fin; light gray sides; white or pink belly; and three side stripes (eye-to-flipper, eye-to-anus, and accessory stripe between). The three individuals in these photos also nicely illustrate some of the color variation in this species. (Gulf of Mexico: R. L. Pitman)

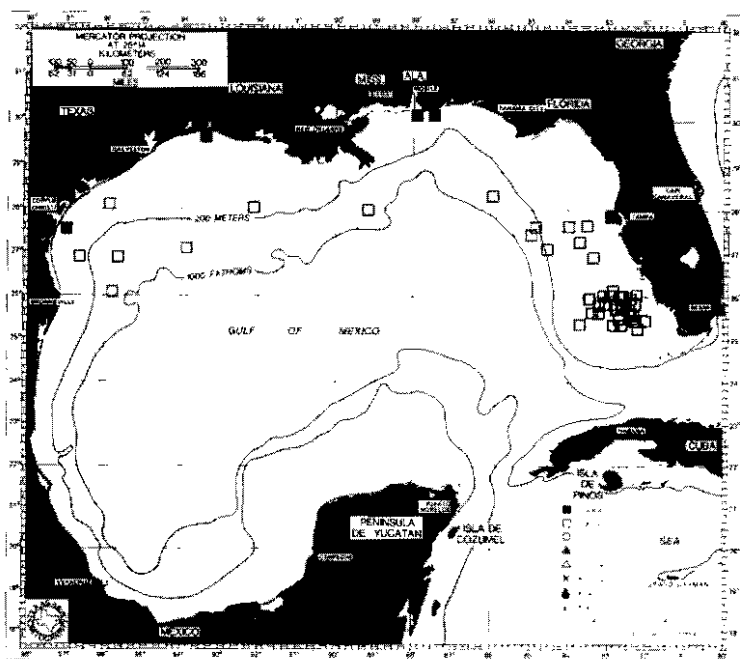


Fig. 82- There have been at least 52 sightings and five strandings of striped dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico. Striped dolphins have been seen over the continental shelf off Florida's west coast, but they are probably more common seaward of the shelf edge elsewhere. Throughout the Gulf of Mexico, records are mostly from spring through fall, but it is likely that striped dolphins occur in the Gulf in winter as well, although possibly in lower numbers. Striped dolphins occur in tropical to warm temperate pelagic waters of the world.

Common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*)



Fig. 83- Common dolphins grow to at least 2.3 m. They can be easily identified by the distinctive hourglass pattern on their sides, caused by the overlap of the buff to ochre thoracic patch and the streaked, light gray patch on the tail stock. At the intersection of their two main color components, the cape dips to form a V below the dorsal fin. Also note the complex facial markings (including an eye mask, dark lips, and chin-to-flipper stripe). (short-beaked offshore form off southern California: R. L. Pitman)



Fig. 84- The hourglass pattern and chin-to-flipper stripe on these bowriding dolphins leave no doubt that they are common dolphins. Despite considerable variation in coloration and body shape throughout the world, these features appear to be present in all areas. (short-beaked form from the western North Atlantic: CETAP)



Fig. 85- Even from the air, the light thoracic patch and the V below the dorsal fin permit identification of common dolphins. (U.S. east coast: CETAP)

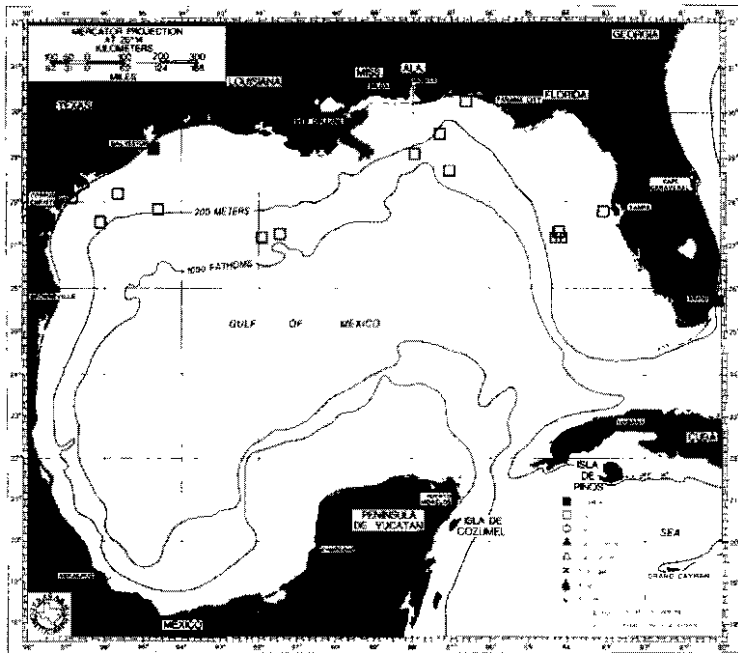


Fig. 86- Although abundant in most tropical and warm temperate regions of the world, common dolphins are represented in the Gulf of Mexico by only 15 reports. One of those is of a stranding in Texas, the others are of sightings, many of which may well have been mis-identifications. There have been no sightings on recent deepwater ship surveys in the Gulf. In many parts of the world, there appear to be two forms or ecotypes of common dolphin, a short-beaked offshore form and a longer-beaked form inhabiting more nearshore waters. Animals in at least some populations of the former are known to prefer areas of underwater ridges and seamounts to areas with less complicated bottom relief.

Fraser's dolphin (Lagenodelphis hosei)



Fig. 87- Fraser's dolphins reach lengths of at least 2.5 m. They are robust and have short beaks, capecs that extend far down the sides, dark side stripes, and small appendages.



Fig. 88- A tight group of fast-moving Fraser's dolphins from the eastern tropical Pacific. Note the robust body, small dorsal fin, short beak, and coloration (dark back, light belly, and eye-to-anus stripe of variable width and intensity). The side stripe, in particular, varies both with geographic region and with age (and possibly also with sex); it ranges from being indistinct to being dark and wide, and sometimes forms a "mask" in the facial area. (eastern Tropical Pacific: M. Newcomer)

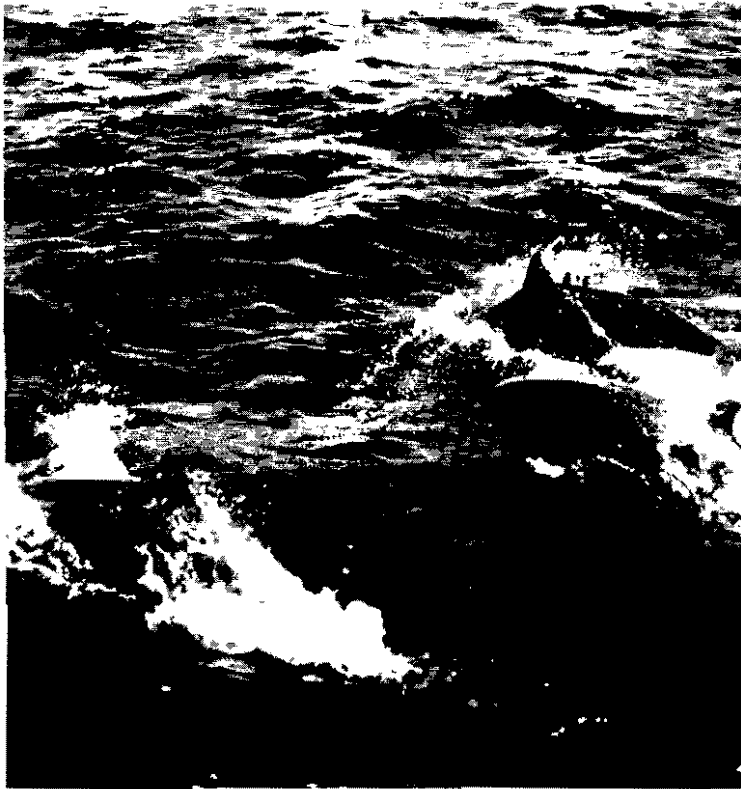


Fig. 89- Not all Fraser's dolphins have a prominent eye-to-anus stripe, but the short beak and small dorsal fin are always diagnostic. (South-eastern Negros, Philippines: S. Leatherwood)

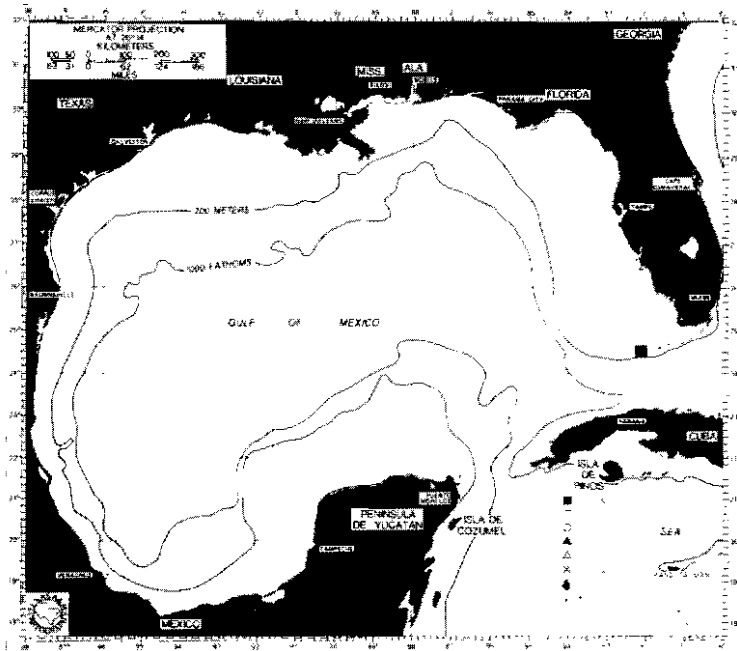


Fig. 90- Fraser's dolphins are currently known from the Gulf only by a single stranding on the eastern edge, in the Florida Keys. In most areas, this is a tropical pelagic species found along the edges of major currents. However, Fraser's dolphins approach very close to shores of some islands surrounded by deep water (e.g., the Philippines, Indonesia, St. Vincent, and perhaps Cuba). They might well occur at any time of year in the Gulf of Mexico.

Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)



Fig. 91- Bottlenose dolphins reach lengths of up to 4 m (although most Gulf of Mexico individuals would be less than 3 m); and have gray backs and sides (there is a faint cape, that is generally only visible in good light and on bowriders), white bellies (sometimes with pinkish hues), short thick beaks, and tall falcate dorsal fins.



Fig. 92- There is significant variation in nearly all aspects of coloration and body shape in this species. Bottlenose dolphins have a gray back and sides, white belly, short stubby beak, and robust body. (offshore Gulf of Mexico: T. Jefferson)



Fig. 93- From the air, the relatively non-descript light gray bodies and short beaks of these bottlenose dolphins can be seen. (off the Texas coast: T. Henningsen)

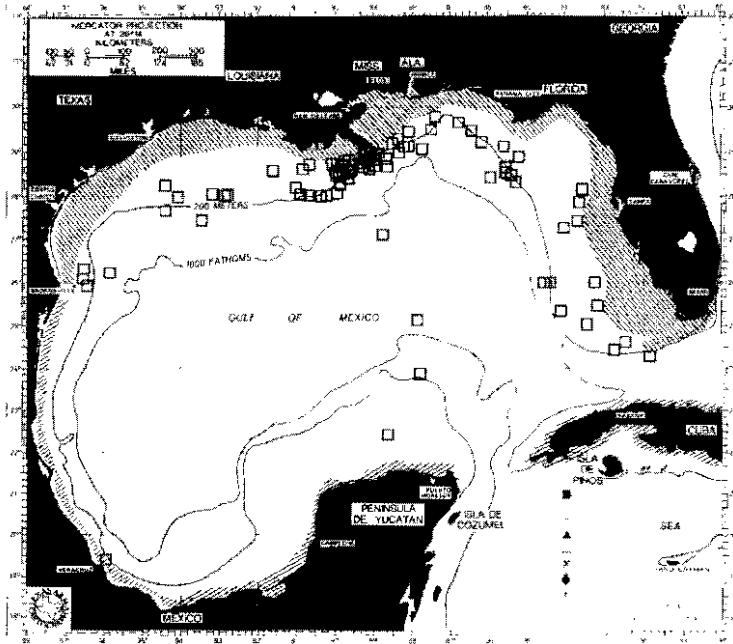


Fig. 94- The bottlenose dolphin is, by far, the most common cetacean species in nearshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico. It is found in riverine and estuarine areas, bays and channels, and shallow marine waters from the outer coasts of the mainland and barrier islands to the continental slope. Generally, the density declines with increasing water depth. So far, bottlenose dolphins have rarely been seen in oceanic or continental slope waters of the Gulf. This is in contrast to some other areas (for example, the eastern tropical Pacific), where they are found abundantly in pelagic regions as well. Separate coastal and offshore populations are known to exist in some parts of the world and are postulated to exist in others, including the Gulf. At present, coastal and offshore ecotypes cannot be distinguished in the field. Bottlenose dolphins are year-round residents of the Gulf, although some populations may exhibit seasonal inshore-offshore or north-south shifts in abundance.

Rough-toothed dolphin (*Steno bredanensis*)

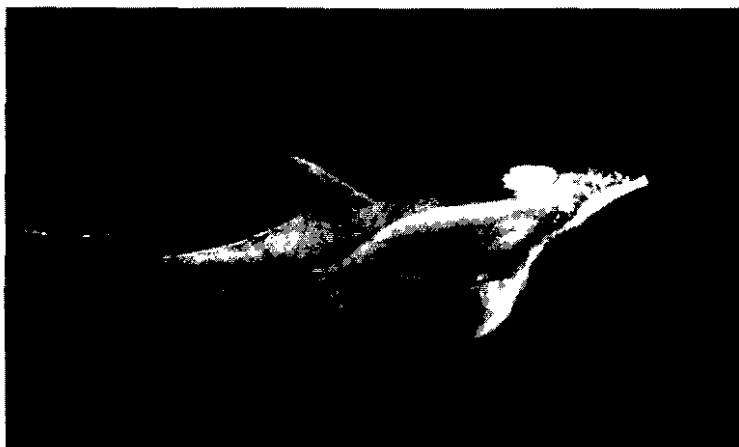


Fig. 95- The most distinctive features of the rough-toothed dolphin, which attains lengths of 2.5 m, are: large flippers; smoothly sloping head profile (with no crease between melon and beak); white lips; and extremely narrow cape. (eastern tropical Pacific; R. L. Pitman)

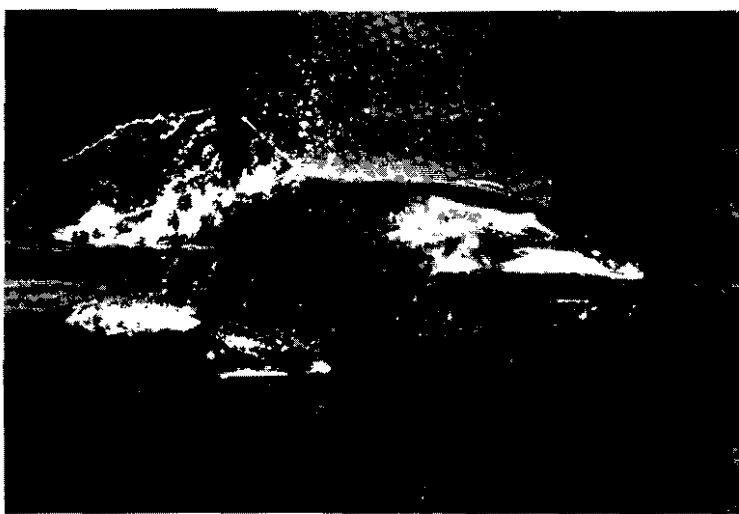


Fig. 96- Skimming along the surface is a characteristic behavior of rough-toothed dolphins. Note the head shape, white lips and lower jaw, and narrow cape. (eastern tropical Pacific; R. L. Pitman)



Fig. 97- Even from the air, the cone-shaped head and narrow cape allow rough-toothed dolphins to be identified. From this perspective, they may have a purplish hue. (eastern tropical Pacific: S. Leatherwood)

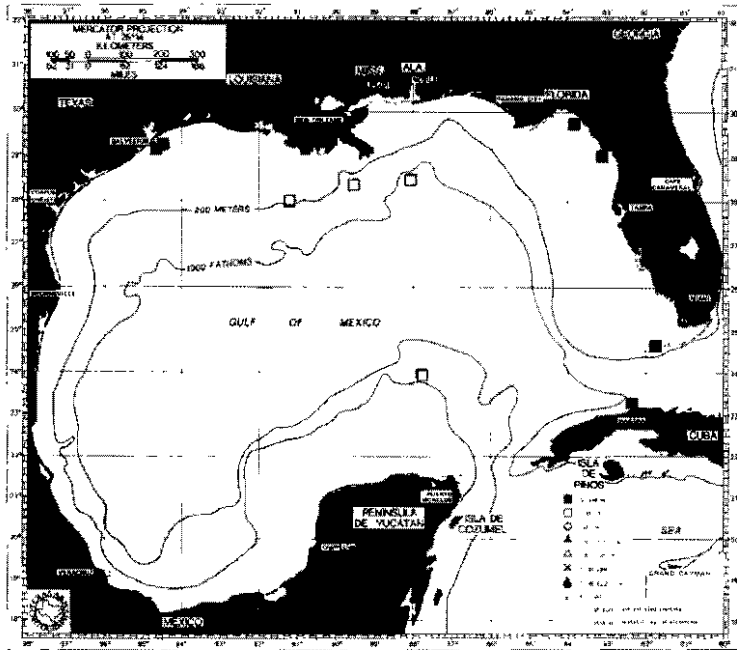


Fig. 98- Rough-toothed dolphins are represented in the Gulf of Mexico by only seven widely scattered strandings and four sightings. They are found primarily in tropical to warm temperate oceanic waters of all oceans, and they may be expected to occur throughout the year in the Gulf.

Pygmy killer whale (Feresa attenuata)



Fig. 99- Pygmy killer whales have a known maximum size of just under 3.0 m. They have a long, rounded head, slender cape (that dips slightly below the dorsal fin), prominent dorsal fin, and rounded flipper tips. Although not visible in these photos, pygmy killer whales generally have white lips. (eastern tropical Pacific - 15° 16'N, 99° 53'W: R. L. Pitman)

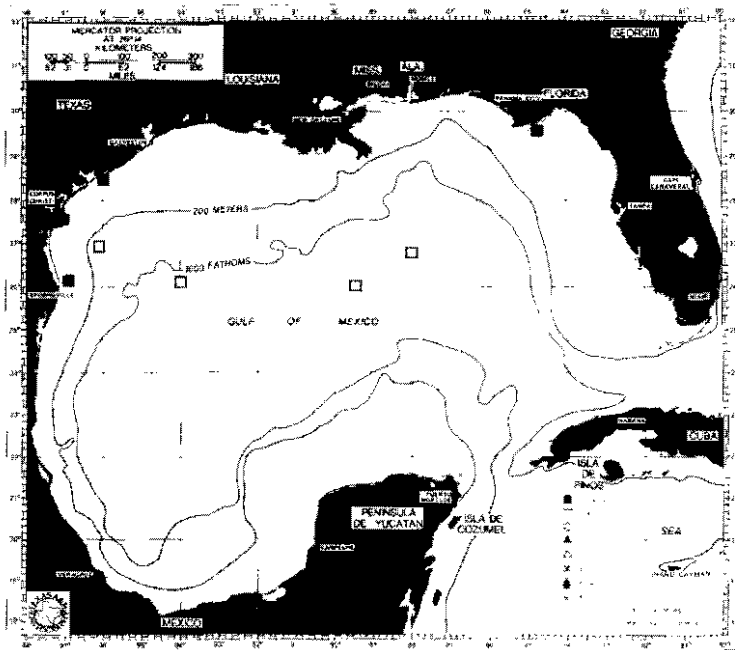


Fig. 100- Pygmy killer whales are represented by six strandings and at least four sightings in the Gulf of Mexico, in both eastern and western regions. This is a tropical and subtropical oceanic species. Pygmy killer whales probably occur year-round in the Gulf of Mexico.

Melon-headed whale (*Peponocephala electra*)



Fig. 101- Melon-headed whales are known to attain lengths of 2.7 m. They closely resemble pygmy killer whales. They are primarily dark gray to black, with white on the belly and lips. The flipper tips tend to be very pointed, and the head is nearly triangular, especially when viewed from above. The cape, though often difficult to see, dips much lower below the dorsal fin on this species than it does on the pygmy killer whale.

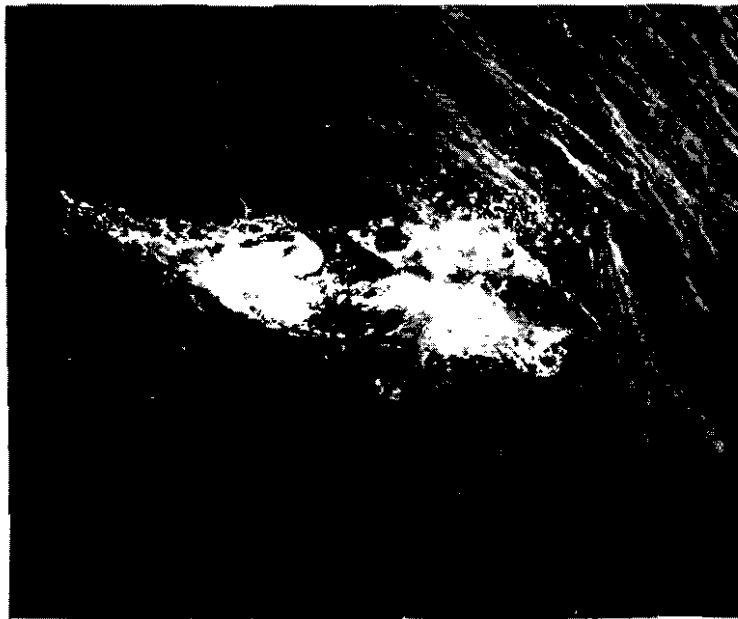


Fig. 102- Melon-headed whales have an indistinct cape, a tall dorsal fin that is shaped somewhat like that of the bottlenose dolphin, and a rather pointed head with only a slight hint of a beak. (Siquijor Island, Philippines: S. Leatherwood)

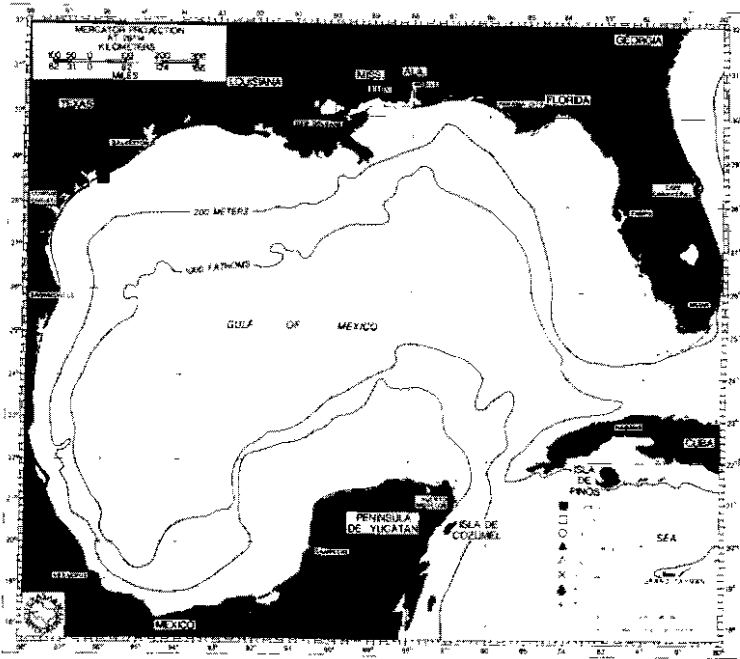


Fig. 103- There are records of only two strandings and no confirmed records of sightings of melon-headed whales from the Gulf of Mexico. Although both strandings, one in Texas and the other in Louisiana, were in summer, there are reasons to suspect that melon-headed whales occur in the Gulf's oceanic waters throughout the year. This is a tropical to warm temperate oceanic species, known to approach very close to shore of some oceanic islands (for example, Indonesia and the Philippines).

Pygmy and dwarf sperm whales (Kogia spp.)



Fig. 104- This aerial view of a pygmy or dwarf sperm whale shows the broad head, unique placement of the rounded flippers (very near the head), and dorsal cape. It is most likely a dwarf sperm whale, judging from the placement and size of the dorsal fin. (Gulf of Mexico: W. Hoggard)

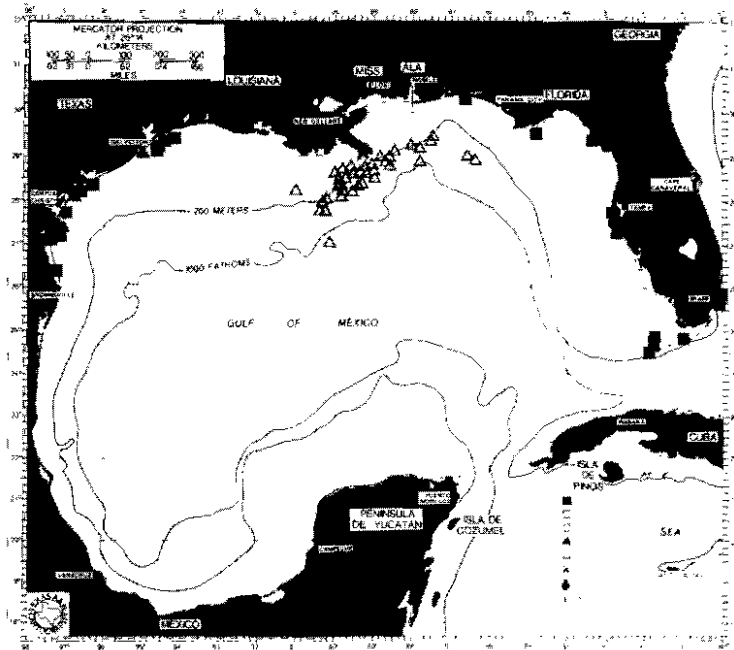


Fig. 105- The two species of *Kogia* were generally not differentiated until relatively recently and still are not distinguishable in many sightings. Generally reported as rare, pygmy and dwarf sperm whales are, in fact, commonly stranded and taken in fisheries in many parts of the world. Therefore, they are probably not rare, but rather are simply uncommonly seen because of their offshore distribution, small group size, and generally inconspicuous appearance and cryptic behavior. Animals identified as *Kogia* spp. were seen commonly during recent aerial surveys off Louisiana and Mississippi and during ship surveys in deep waters of the Gulf. In most sightings of *Kogia*, however, the species has not been confirmed. For example, there are at least 39 recorded sightings and eight strandings of unidentified *Kogia* spp. in the Gulf. There have been at least 22 strandings, but no confirmed sightings, of pygmy sperm whales in the Gulf of Mexico. Like dwarf sperm whales, pygmy sperm whales are found in tropical to temperate zones. They occur in deep waters, mostly over the continental slope and adjacent regions. The Gulf records are scattered throughout the year.

Pygmy sperm whale (Kogia breviceps)



Fig. 106- Pygmy sperm whales grow to lengths of nearly 4 m. They are dark gray above and lighter below and have blunt squarish heads, underslung lower jaws, and small dorsal fins set far back on the body.

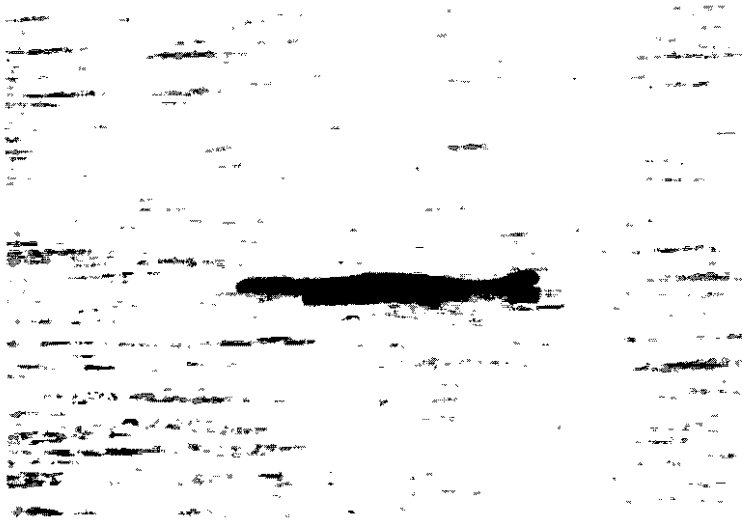


Fig. 107- This pygmy sperm whale mother and calf were photographed off the Baja California coast. Note that the rounded dorsal fins are short, rise at a shallow angle from the back, and are placed far back on the body. (M. Graybill)

Dwarf sperm whale (Kogia simus)

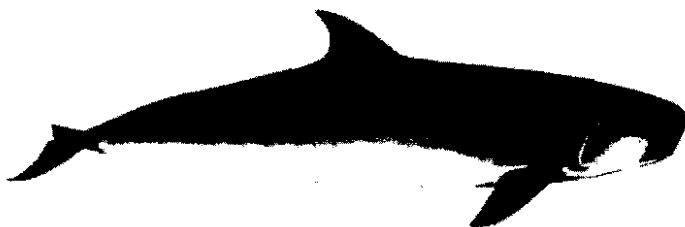


Fig. 108- Dwarf sperm whales grow to lengths of nearly 3 m. They are dark gray above and lighter below, and have blunt squarish heads, underslung lower jaws, and two short throat grooves. The dorsal fin of this species is taller, more erect, and more pointed than it is in the pygmy sperm whale. When seen, this usually allows the dwarf sperm whale to be identified.



Fig. 109- In the dwarf sperm whale, the dorsal fin tends to be dolphin-like, but placed slightly aft of mid-body. (Gulf of Mexico - 27° 33' N, 93° 26' W; R. L. Pitman)



Fig. 110- This leaping dwarf sperm whale shows the broad head, teardrop-shaped flippers, and white to pinkish belly, as well as the pair of throat grooves characteristic of this species. (Gulf of Mexico - 27° 33'N, 93° 26'W: R. L. Pitman)

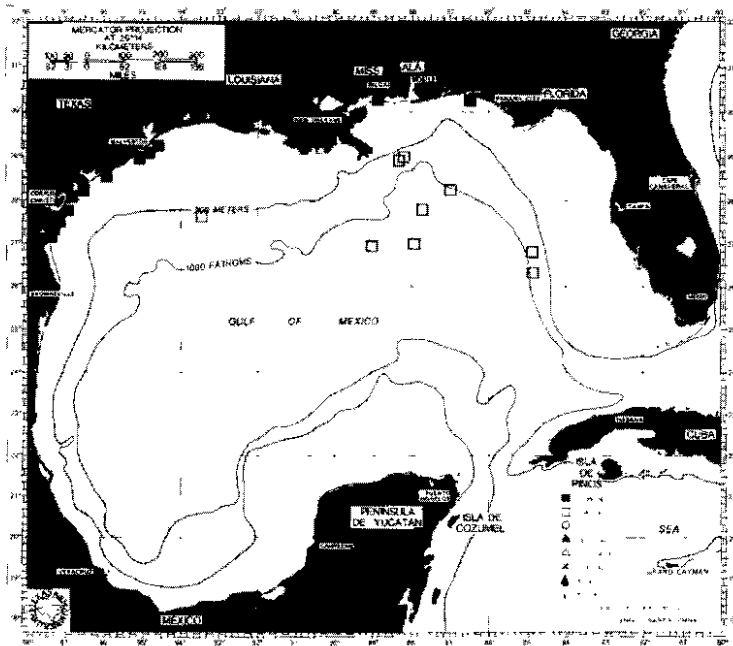


Fig. 111- We know of 14 strandings and nine confirmed sightings of dwarf sperm whales from the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, most of the sightings of *Kogia* in which the species has been confirmed are of dwarf sperm whales. These animals are largely inhabitants of offshore waters of the continental shelf and slope in tropical, subtropical, and warm temperate regions. Dwarf sperm whales probably occur in the Gulf of Mexico all year.

West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*)

There are two subspecies of manatee in the Gulf of Mexico. The Florida manatee (*T. m. latirostris*) is common throughout coastal and inshore waters of Florida and is seen occasionally as far west as central Louisiana. Although distributed more widely in the Caribbean, the Antillean manatee (*T. m. manatus*) is found mainly south of Nauka, Veracruz, in the southwestern Gulf. The distributions of both subspecies were formerly much wider and probably overlapped, at least seasonally, in the northern Gulf. There are several records of manatees in Texas, the most recent a stranding in 1986. Manatees are generally distributed in marine waters very near shore and in some estuaries, rivers, and freshwater springs. Centers of winter distribution in the U.S. are often near power plants, which serve as warm water refugia.



Fig. 112- The West Indian manatee, which reaches lengths of 3.9 m, is characterized by a small head with fleshy lips, nostrils on the top of the snout, a rotund body, long flexible flippers, and a spatulate tail. (Crystal River, Florida: J. Reynolds, courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)



Fig. 113- From above the surface, what is usually seen of a surfacing manatee is the top of the head and a bit of the broad, finless back. However, in this instance, the tail of the central animal is visible through the exceptionally clear water. (Coral Gables, Florida: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)



Fig. 114- From the air, manatees are identifiable by the tiny head, robust body, and broad rounded tail. (Crystal River, Florida: B. Powell, courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Caribbean monk seal (Monachus tropicalis)

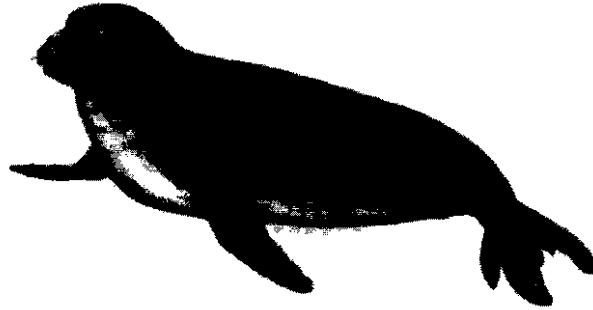


Fig. 115- Caribbean monk seals became extinct before much was known about their appearance and habits. They apparently reached lengths of up to 2.4 m, and were grayish brown on the back, lighter below. Like all phocid seals, they had large eyes and no external ear flaps. (Illustration by J. R. Quinn, courtesy of D. K. Caldwell)

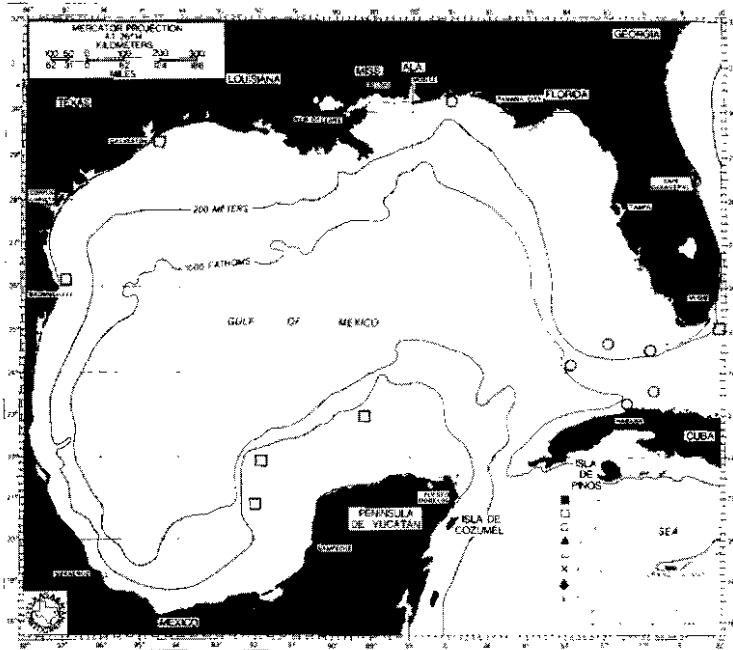


Fig. 116- The Caribbean monk seal inhabited waters of the Bahamas, the Caribbean Sea, and the Gulf of Mexico (there are records of at least six sightings and six captures from the Gulf). The last reliable report refers to a small colony known to have been present on a bank about midway between Jamaica and Honduras in 1952. Five intensive surveys since, the most recent in 1984, have resulted in no sightings; so, there is only a remote possibility that any Caribbean monk seals remain. These seals were primarily coastal; they often hauled out, and apparently bred, on sandy shoals and keys.

Hooded (*Cystophora cristata*), harbor (*Phoca vitulina*), and less frequently harp (*Phoca groenlandica*) seals are known to stray occasionally as far south as the central east coast of Florida, so extension of these species into the Gulf is possible. Reports of "seals" in the Gulf have usually turned out to be feral California sea lions (see page 90). However, any sighting of a phocid seal in the Gulf should be investigated as thoroughly as possible and documented with photographs, although care should be taken not to harass the animal.

California sea lion (Zalophus californianus)

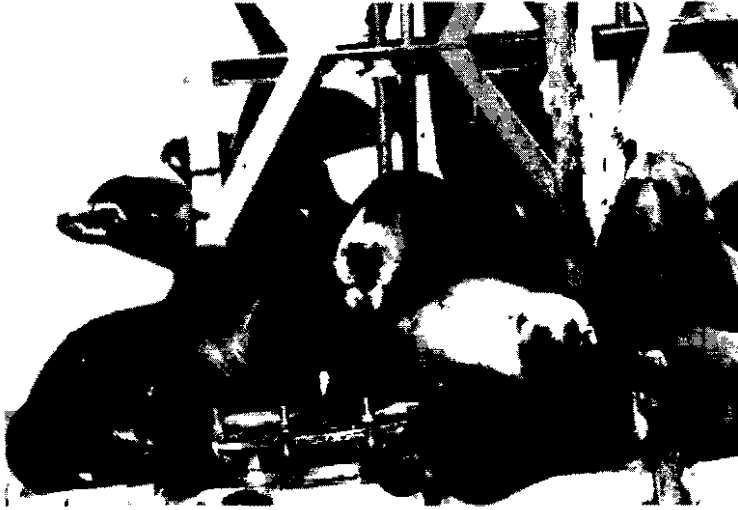


Fig. 117- The California sea lion is recognizable by the dog-like shape of its head (adult males have a prominent bump on their forehead, called a sagittal crest) and by its dark brown to light chocolate brown fur. They reach lengths of at least 2.4 m. Off the west coast of North America, California sea lions are often seen hauled out on buoys, as were the sea lions in several of the Gulf sightings. (Monterey Bay, California: T. Jefferson)



Fig. 118- When away from shore, California sea lions sometimes gather in groups, called rafts, with flippers out of the water. (Monterey Bay, California: T. Jefferson)

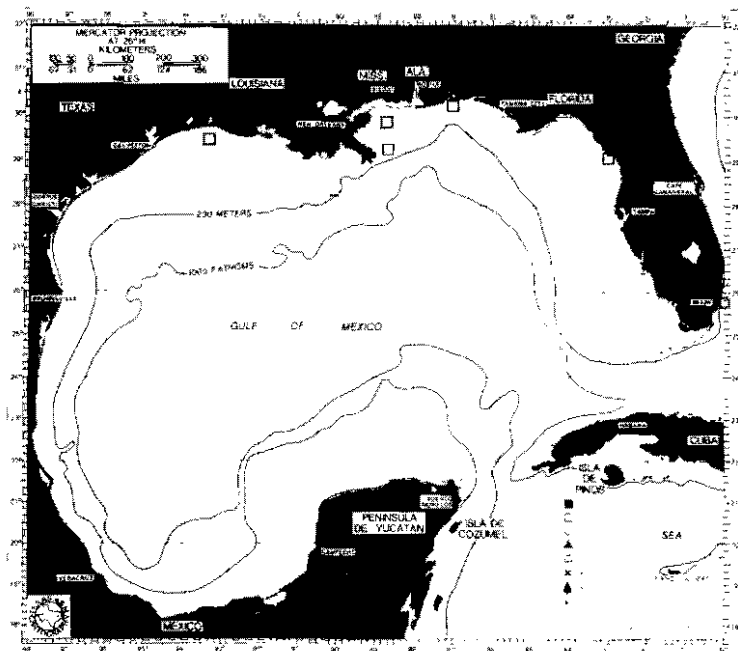


Fig. 119- California sea lions are not native to the Gulf of Mexico; however, they do exist in the northern Gulf as feral individuals, probably escapees from aquariums and animal shows at marine parks. There have been at least four sightings from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. One stranding is known, and there is at least one possible record from Texas. These sea lions are primarily coastal in distribution and, in the Gulf, have been seen most often on or near sea buoys.

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