

Whales

The whale and dolphin families have always fascinated me. Why? Because some are so large, most are very intelligent, and they are so graceful in their aquatic environment. But many are very shy and live out in the vast ocean, so that we may never see one in our lifetime. Television, DVDs and the internet mean we can see and appreciate these creatures in our homes. The other quite extraordinary features that they have in common with us humans, are that they breathe air (through blow holes on the top of their head), are warm-blooded, and being mammals suckle their young with milk for up to a year.

The largest (and also the loudest) animal ever to have lived on earth is the Blue Whale. They measure up to 100 feet in length and weigh up to 200 tons (400,000 pounds). Their hearts are the size of a small car. They can live up to 80 years. I mentioned the blue whale also being the loudest: apparently they can hear each other 1000 miles away.

They belong to the animal order *Cetacea* (from the Latin *Cetus*, meaning a large sea animal) that includes whales, dolphins and porpoises. They are further divided into two types: toothed (72 species), and non-toothed or baleen (14 species). The baleen species, which are all whales and include the blue whale, sift seawater in massive gulps and force it out through the fine sieve of their baleen (compressed hair) plates and bristles, made of keratin, like our nails and hair. They must catch 4 tons a day of microscopic shrimp called krill, which are then licked off the inside of their plates by their enormous tongues. They can submerge for 2 hours at a time. The blue whale travels thousands of miles from its Arctic or Antarctic feeding grounds to the warmer winter breeding and birthing grounds in the tropics. The cooler waters are rich in plankton because more oxygen and carbon dioxide are dissolved. During the migration they will have to fast, living off their blubber. The migration is vital, as the newborn have little blubber like their parents to insulate them. Baby blue whales consume over 600 litres of milk a day up to 7 months. Imagine that grocery bill!

For decades whales were hunted in vast numbers for their blubber to make oil and their baleen for "whalebone" corsets; 30,000 blue whales were slaughtered in 1930 alone. This period in human history, which continued until recently, exhibited the greed of fallen man and his misuse of his kingship and stewardship over God's creatures of the sea. The "Greens" and conservationists have a point in their opposition to whaling. These magnificent animals are now protected.

Orcas or killer whales are spectacular creatures with their black and white colouring, size up to 8 metres and 6 tons, large peg-like teeth, and predatory ways, in which often in teams (pods) they will hunt seals, penguins, dolphins, other whales, and fish. They are the fastest sea mammal, reaching 55Km/hr (25mph).

The dolphins are probably the best known and loved of all. They are friendly and gregarious creatures, often belonging to huge schools of up to 500. They are very

intelligent, social animals who hunt often in groups and are amazing to watch speeding through water and leaping high in the air. They are beautifully streamlined for gliding through water.

All whales and dolphins propel themselves by the up and down movement of their tail flukes (unlike fish). They give birth to a single calf after 10 months, tail first. The newborn has to get to the surface quickly for its first breath, and “aunties” help protect it from sharks who might detect blood in the water. Dolphins can stay submerged from 3 to 15 minutes, depending on their species, and like the bigger whales have very efficient lungs that extract up to 90% of the oxygen in the air compared with us humans at 15%. The dolphin was the emblem of the city of Corinth; incidentally, it is also the emblem of the Scottish clan Kennedy. They communicate with each other by clicks and whistles and can be taught to do extraordinary clever tricks. They use echo-location (sonar) in which high-pitched clicks or ultrasonic waves bounce back from an object to detect prey and predators. They live up to 25 years. They feed on squid, shrimp, eels, and other fish, and can be seen on U Tube with amazing pictures of them herding and eating a bait ball of myriads of fish, herding them with either bubbles or sand. They also help each other with midwifery and when injured. You may wonder how they sleep. The females float on the surface, blowhole uppermost, and the males stay just below the surface and come up to breathe by a reflex every so often.

The Belgic confession includes these wonderful animals in its statement regarding the creation (Article 12):

We believe that the Father, by the Word, that is, by his Son, hath created of nothing, the heaven, the earth, and all creatures, as it seemed good unto him, giving unto every creature its being, shape, form, and several offices to serve its Creator. That he doth also still uphold and govern them by his eternal providence, and infinite power, for the service of mankind, to the end that man may serve his God.

Most Bible scholars believe the creature named in Psalm 104 as leviathan is one of the whale family; this is the only reference to one in Scripture. We read in verses 24–30:

O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, **both small and great beasts**. There go the ships: **there is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein**. These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give them their meat in due season. That thou givest them they gather: thou openest thine hand, they are filled with good. Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust. Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth. The glory of the LORD shall endure for ever: the LORD shall rejoice in his works.

Have you ever contemplated that God rejoices in the works of his hands? We should also rejoice when we observe or read about these amazing creatures! Solomon was a keen

naturalist, and many of his wise proverbs come from lessons animals teach us. The diversity, beauty and various abilities of these creatures as well as God's provision for them should make us marvel. Well has the Psalmist said in Psalm 111:2 "The works of the LORD are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein." That is a good reason for every Christian to have an interest in the natural world!