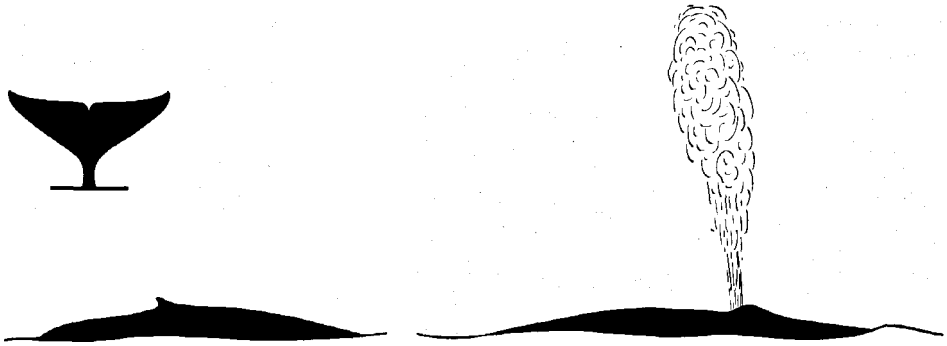


**Fig. 160 Surface - blow - dive profile**

**Can be confused with:** Blue whales can be confused with the other large rorquals, fin (p. 52) and sei (p. 54) whales. Although the great size of blue whale adults may aid in identification, the best clues for differentiating blue whales from fin or sei whales are colour pattern, head shape, and dorsal-fin shape and position.

**Size:** Most adults are 23 to 27 m long (with females growing larger than males), but an Antarctic blue whale measuring over 33 m was once taken by whalers. Newborns are about 7 m long. Adults can weigh up to 160 t.

**Geographical Distribution:** Blue whales tend to be open-ocean animals, but come close to shore to feed, and possibly to breed, in some areas.Blue whales can be seen from the equator to the pack ice edges in both hemispheres, with most poleward intrusions in both hemispheres in summer. Some blue whales are resident. others are migratory.

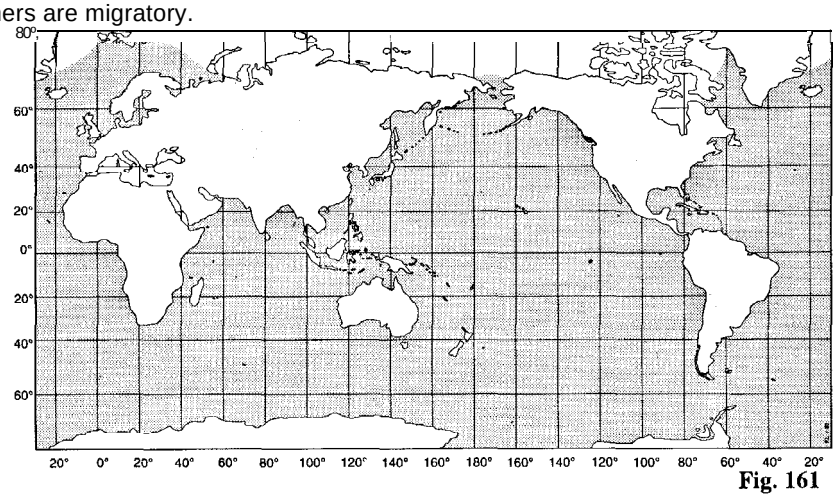



**Fig. 161**

**Biology and Behaviour:** Blue whales are usually seen alone or in pairs. However, scattered aggregations of a dozen or more may develop on prime feeding grounds. Although shorter dives are most common, dives of up to 30 min, generally interspersed with series of shorter surfacings (at 15 to 20 sec intervals), have been recorded. Fluking-up is not uncommon, although not all blue whales are “flukers.” Remarkably, some blue whales have been observed breaching.

Calves are born in winter on tropical or subtropical breeding grounds.

Krill form the major part of the blue whale’s diet, and on their feeding grounds, blue whales can be observed lunging, often on their sides or upside-down, through great clouds of these invertebrates.

**Exploitation:**From the time faster catcher boats and explosive harpoons made them catchable, blue whales were hunted relentlessly from the late 19th through the mid 20th centuries. As the largest whales, they were the most sought after of the rorquals. Although most populations remain well below pre-exploitation levels, some stocks (such as those that feed off California) have shown encouraging signs of recovery since protection by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1965. At least in the eastern North Atlantic and the eastern North Pacific, numbers appear to be on the rise.

**IUCN Status:** Endangered.

***Balaenoptera physalus*** (Linnaeus, 1758) **BALAEN Bal 4** **FIW**

**FAO Names: En** - Fin whale**; Fr -** Rorqual commun**; Sp** - Rorcual común.

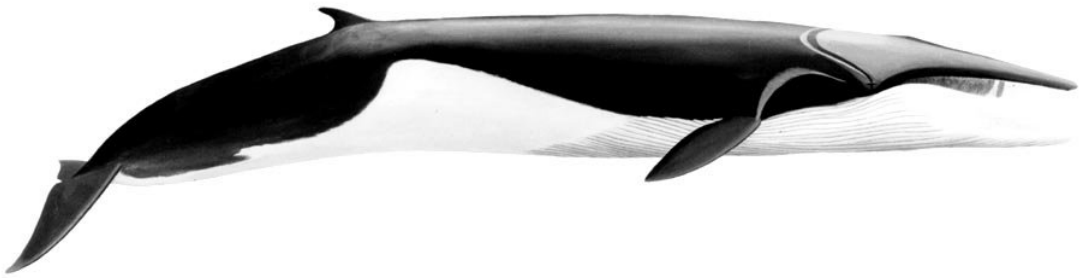


**Fig. 162** ***Balaenoptera physalus***

**Distinctive Characteristics:** Fin whales are large, but very sleek and streamlined. From above, the head is more pointed than that of the blue whale, and the dorsal fin tends to be taller, more falcate, and set farther forward on the tail stock than in the blue whale. The dorsal fin rises at a shallow angle from the animal's back.

The most distinctive feature of the fin whale, however, is its coloration. The body is black or dark brownish grey above and on the sides, and white below, but the head colour is asymmetrical. The left lower jaw is mostly dark, while the right jaw is largely white. There tend to be several light grey V-shaped "chevrons" on the back behind the head.

Fin whales have 260 to 480 baleen plates per side; the plates are dark, often striated with bands of grey and fringed with horizontal lines of yellowish white. Usually, the front one-half to one-third of the right side plates have more light pigmentation than those on the left. The 50 to 100 throat pleats are long, and reach to the navel. The thin blow is 4 to 6 m tall.

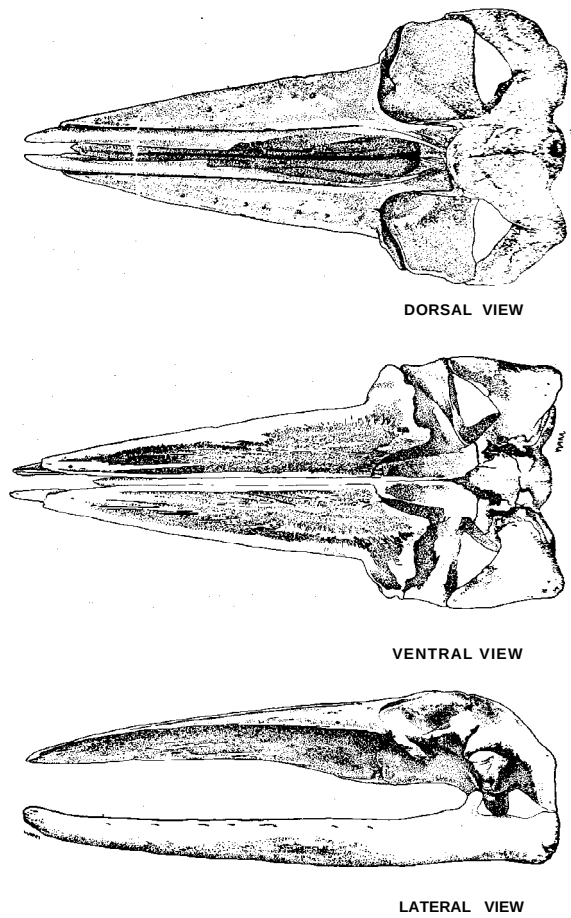



**Fig. 163 Skull**

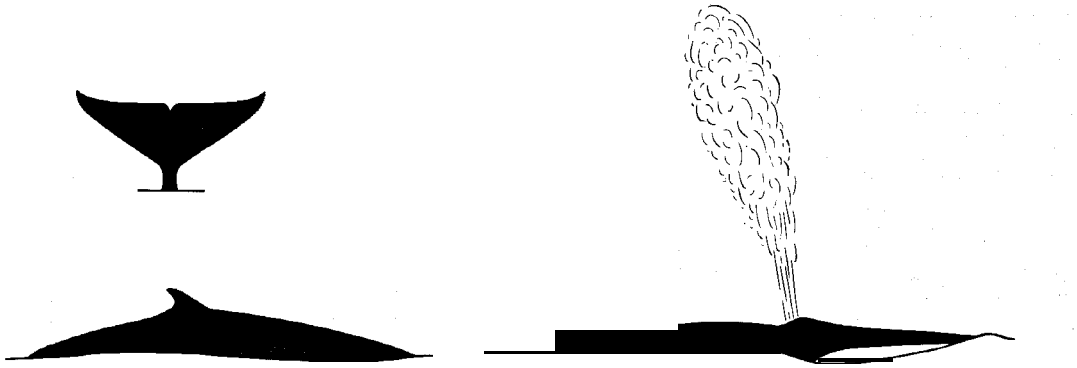


**Fig. 164 Surface - blow - dive profile**

**Can be confused with:** The other 3 medium to large balaenopterids (blue [p. 50], sei [p. 54], and Bryde's [p. 56] whales) are likely to be confused with fin whales. Careful attention to colour pattern, head shape, and dorsal fin shape and position will help to distinguish them. The head of fin whales is much more pointed than that of blue whales, and the dorsal fin is set further back and rises at a shallower angle than those of sei or Bryde's whales. The best clue to identification, however, is the asymmetrical coloration of the head.

**Size:** Length at birth is 6 to 6.5 m. Adults can reach a maximum of 27 m in the Southern Hemisphere, but most Northern Hemisphere adults are less than 24 m long. Large animals may attain weights of up to 75 t.

**Geographical Distribution:** Fin whales inhabit primarily oceanic waters of both hemispheres. They are seen near shore, most commonly where deep water approaches the coast. Fin whales can be seen in tropical, temperate, and polar zones of all oceans.

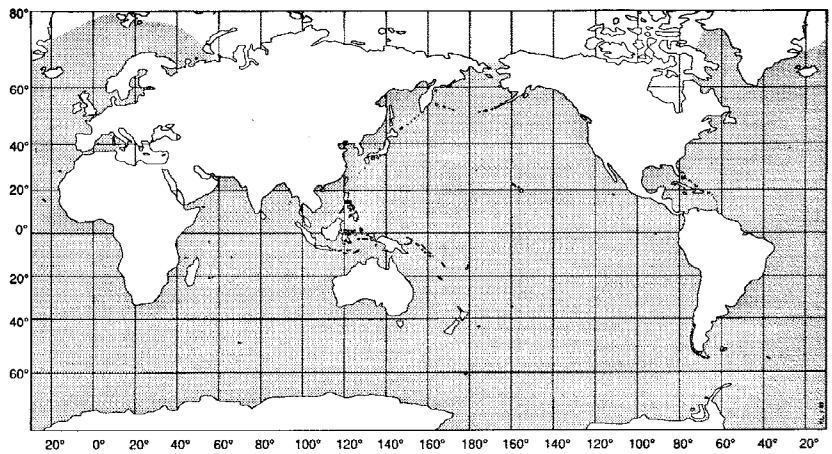



**Fig. 165**

**Biology and Behaviour:** Fin whales are capable of attaining high speeds, possibly to 37 km/h, making them one of the fastest great whales. They rarely raise their flukes on a dive, but they do occasionally breach. Fin whales tend to be slightly more social than other rorquals, gathering in pods of 2 to 7 whales, or more.

Young are born on breeding grounds in tropical and subtropical areas in mid winter.

Fin whales feed on small invertebrates, schooling fishes, and squid. They are active lunge feeders.

**Exploitation:** Following depletion of blue whale stocks, whalers shifted their attention to fin whales. Populations everywhere were substantially reduced. At present the worldwide population does not seem to appear in any immediate danger.

**IUCN Status:** Vulnerable.

***Balaenoptera borealis*** Lesson, 1828

**BALAEN Bal 2** **SIW**

**FAO Names: En -** Sei whale**; Fr -** Rorqual de Rudolphi; **Sp -** Rorcual del norte.

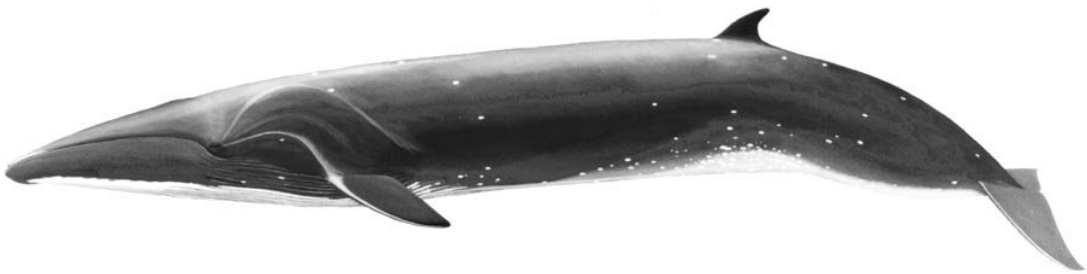


**Fig. 166** ***Balaenoptera borealis***

**Distinctive Characteristics:** Sei whales can be confused with fin and Bryde's whales, both of which also have a prominent falcate dorsal fin. All 3 have typical rorqual body shapes. In both sei and Bryde's whales, the dorsal fin rises at a steep angle from the back. However, sei whales have only a single prominent ridge on the rostrum (Bryde's whales tend to have 3), and a slightly arched rostrum with a downturned tip. Unless the head can be seen at close quarters, however, Brvde's and sei whales can be especially difficult to distinguish.

Coloration is mostly dark grey, except for a whitish area on the belly. The back is often mottled with scars (possibly from lamprey bites), and the skin surface often resembles galvanized metal.

The 32 to 60 ventral pleats are short for rorquals, ending far ahead of the navel. The 219 to 402 baleen plates on each side are black with very fine fringes of light smoky grey to white. Sei whales produce a blow up to 3 m tall.

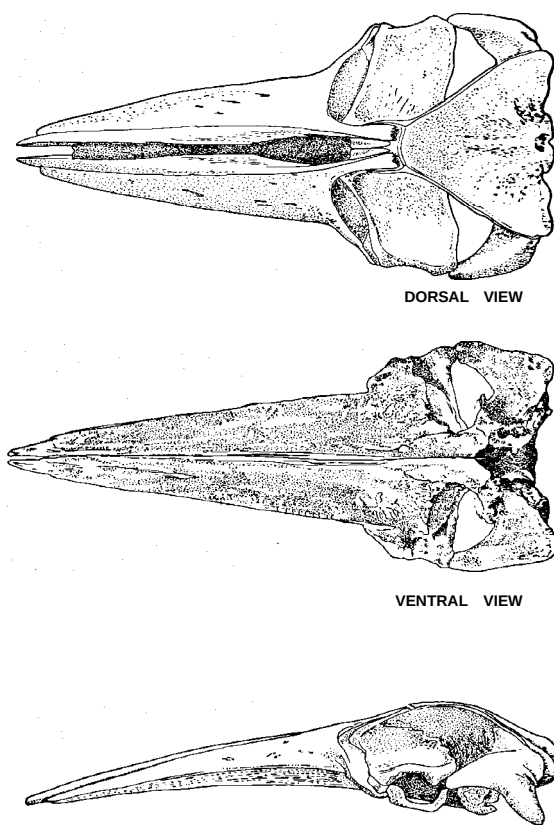



**Fig. 167 Skull**



**Fig. 168 Surface - blow - dive profile**

**Can be confused with:** Sei whales are most likely to be confused with Bryde's whales (p. 56), less likely with fin whales (p. 52). Attention to dorsal-fin shape and position, head shape, and colour patterns will help to distinguish among the 3. The 3 head ridges of Bryde's whales, and larger size and asymmetrical head coloration of fin whales will help make them distinguishable.

**Size:** Adults are up to 18 m in length. Large adults may weigh 30 t. At birth, sei whales are 4.5 to 4.8 m long.

**Geographical Distribution:** Sei whales are open ocean whales, not often seen near the coast. They occur from the tropics to polar zones in both hemispheres, but are more restricted to mid-latitude temperate zones than are other rorquals.

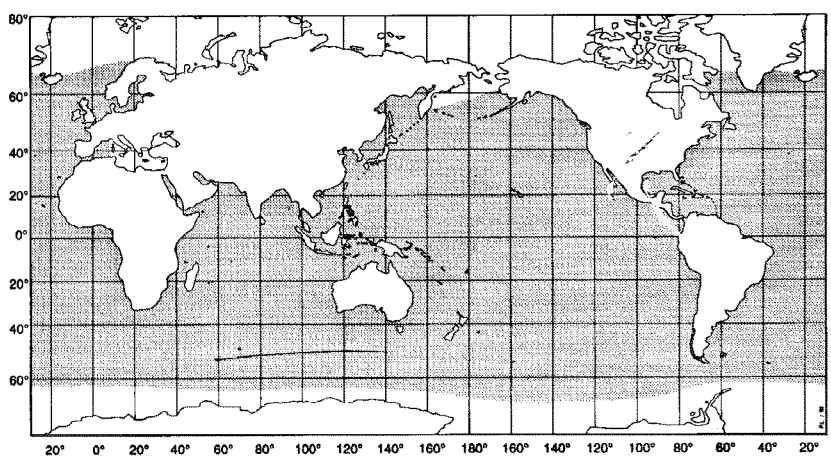



**Fig. 169**

**Biology and Behaviour:** Groups of 2 to 5 individuals are most commonly seen. Sei whales are fast swimmers, possibly the fastest of all cetaceans. When slow moving sei whales surface, their blowholes and dorsal fin are often visible above the water at the same time. Feeding sei whales tend to dive and surface in very predictable series, often remaining visible just below the surface between breaths.

Calving occurs in mid winter, in low latitude portions of the species' range.

Sei whales skim copepods and other small prey types, rather than lunging and gulping, like other rorquals. This may largely explain the relative fineness of the baleen fringes and the shortness of the throat pleats in this species.

**Exploitation:** As the larger rorquals became scarce in recent decades, hunting pressure on sei, Bryde's, and minke whales increased, largely in the Antarctic. Although heavily depleted, sei whales have recovered somewhat more successfully from hunting than other large baleen whales.

**IUCN Status:** Vulnerable.

***Balaenoptera edeni*** Anderson, 1878

**BALAEN Bal 5** **BRW**

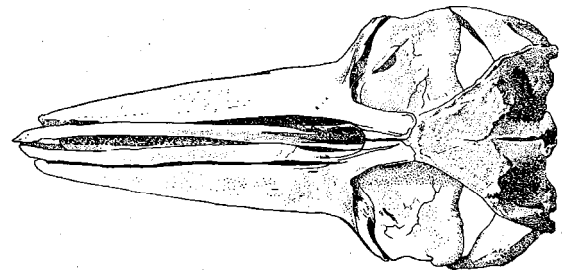
**FAO Names: En -** Bryde's whale**; Fr -** Rorqual de Bryde**; Sp-** Rorcual tropical.



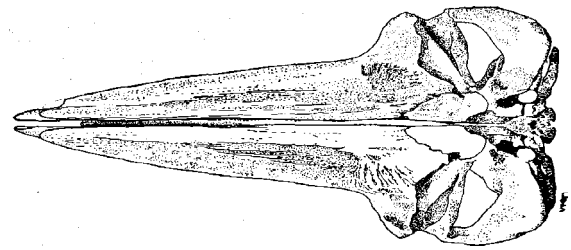
**Fig. 170 *Balaenoptera edeni***

**Distinctive Characteristics:** For many years, whalers and field observers did not distinguish between Bryde's and sei whales in their records. Now, however, whales of the 2 species can be, and are being, distinguished even at sea. Bryde's whales usually have 3 prominent ridges on the rostrum (other rorquals generally have only 1). This is perhaps the best characteristic to use, although one is best advised to consider information on other characters as well. The Bryde's whale's dorsal fin is tall and falcate and generally rises abruptly out of the back, a feature that will help distinguish this species (and sei whales) from fin whales, in which the dorsal fin rises at a relatively shallow angle from the back. The height of the blow is variable. Bryde's whales often exhale underwater, then surface with little or no blow.

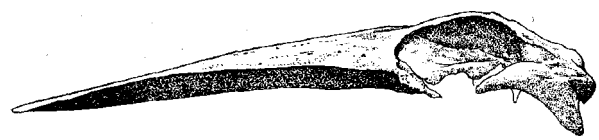
Bryde's whales are dark grey dorsally and lighter ventrally. The 40 to 70 throat pleats reach the navel. The 250 to 370 pairs of grey baleen plates have light grey fringes.



DORSAL VIEW



VENTRAL VIEW



LATERAL VIEW

**Fig. 171 Skull**

click for next page