

SPECIES SNAPSHOT

Narwhals

Did you know there is an animal known as 'the unicorn of the sea'? Unlike the unicorn, this mammal is very real and can be found swimming in the chilly waters of the Arctic. It is time to meet the narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*)!

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Narwhals are actually a type of whale. Their bodies are 3.9–5.5 m long and they can weigh as much as 1800 kg. Males are usually larger than females. Baby narwhals are born dark grey but become paler as they grow. Adult narwhals are pale-coloured with mottled black and brown markings. Narwhals have two fins, one on either side of the chest. They also have a whale-like tail called a 'fluke'.

They can dive to 1800 m deep and can hold their breath for as long as 25 minutes.

The feature the narwhal is best known for is the male's long tusk. It is this feature that leads to comparisons with unicorns. This tusk is actually a tooth that has grown through the narwhal's top lip. This tooth looks like a long, spiral horn and it can measure as long as 3 m

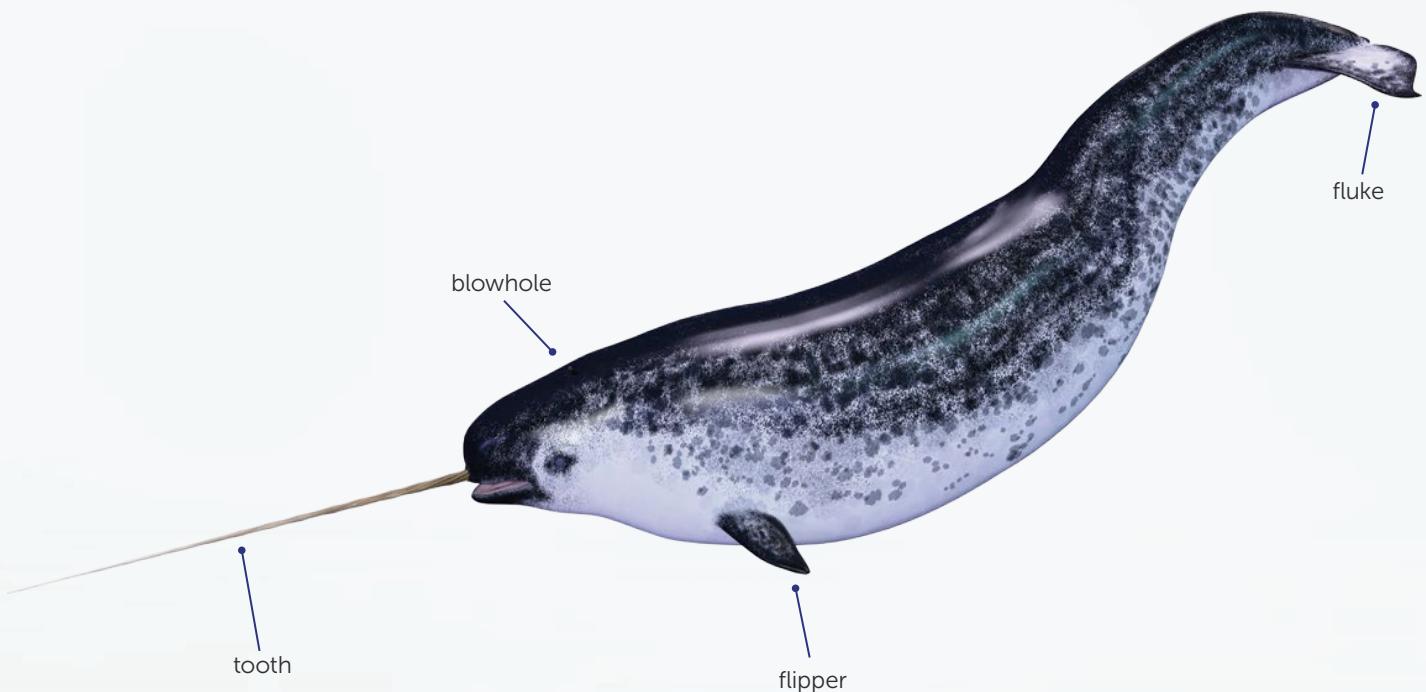
in length. Only males grow a tusk, but some females do grow a much smaller version. Scientists are unsure of the exact purpose of the tusk, but narwhals have been observed using it to hit small fish when they are hunting.

HABITAT AND DIET

Narwhals inhabit the Arctic. They can be found swimming in the waters around Greenland, Canada and Russia. They usually live in groups called 'pods', which have 10 to 100 members. However, there have been reports of pods with thousands of narwhals in them! Narwhals have special adaptations that allow them to spend long periods of time underwater, but they must still surface to breathe air. They can dive to 1800 m deep and can hold their breath for as long as 25 minutes.

Narwhals are meat-eaters, or 'carnivores'. They prefer smaller marine animals, such as fish and squid. They hunt their prey by swimming up close and sucking it into the mouth or by stunning it with a whack from the tusk.

3.9–5.5 m



LIFE CYCLE AND REPRODUCTION

Baby narwhals (called 'calves') grow inside their mothers for 14 months before they are born. A single calf of about 1.6 m in length is born at a time. Calves drink their mothers' milk for two years, staying close to their mothers until they learn to hunt for themselves.

Narwhals may live for up to 90 years. A narwhal's biggest threat is the surface water freezing while the narwhal is diving. If it cannot break the ice, it may become trapped and drown. Narwhals are also prey for orcas, polar bears, sharks and walruses.

RELATIONSHIP WITH HUMANS

People who live in the Arctic sometimes hunt narwhals for their skins, tusks or meat. Although narwhals are prey for humans and other animals, their numbers remain high, and they are not currently endangered. Shrinking polar

regions and reduced sea ice due to climate change could affect narwhal populations in the future.

Narwhals are not a threat to people. In fact, research suggests that narwhals react strangely to humans. Most animals that feel threatened respond by fighting or by fleeing. Narwhals seem to freeze. Their heart rate slows and their oxygen levels plummet. This could make them unable to think properly and result in strange behaviour and bad decisions. For this reason, it may be best for people to leave narwhals alone.

CONCLUSION

These unique 'unicorns of the sea' are a real-life wonder! Narwhals are fascinating in appearance and in behaviour.

If you ever find yourself in the icy Arctic, keep an eye out for the incredible narwhal!