

## **Gray whales in Puget Sound and surrounding waters: not just migrants**

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Gray whales are generally recognized as migrants along the west coast traveling between winter breeding grounds in Mexico and primary feeding grounds in Alaska. Recent research has determined that some gray whales may not complete the migration and utilize feeding areas in the Pacific Northwest. We examine gray whale occurrence in Puget Sound based on sightings from the public, boat surveys, strandings, and photo-identification of individuals. Additionally, a collaborative photo-identification research effort along the west coast from California to Alaska from 1998 to 2003 has allowed long-term tracking of individuals. We conclude that gray whales seen in Puget Sound fall into several categories. Some that are seen in the spring and summer in southern Puget Sound appear to be stragglers from the migration and are rarely seen in multiple years and often end up dead and emaciated. In northern Puget Sound, however, a small group of gray whales have discovered a highly productive feeding ground and return every spring typically for 2-3 months to feed. Surprisingly, few gray whales that utilize Puget Sound proper are part of the estimated 250 that feed from spring through fall along the outer coast of the Pacific Northwest.