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## Plethora of whales slows marine traffic

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In a record year for humpback whales in Glacier Bay, the national park northwest of Juneau has once again slowed marine traffic.

Tomie Lee, superintendent of Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, said it is good to have the whales around, but precautions are needed for their safety.

Thirteen pairs of mother-and-calf humpback whales have been identified within the boundaries this summer, said park Wildlife Biologist Chris Gabriele. Including Icy Strait, just outside the park, the number is 17.

"I might have found the 18th today," she said Friday.

The previous high recorded in a season was 12, she said.

"We also have some females with no calves and a number of males," Gabriele said.

On Saturday, new speed and course restrictions went into effect for vessels traveling in the northern Beardslee Entrance and waters surrounding Sandy Cove.

Meanwhile, park officials are still looking for information on the death last weekend of a 29-foot humpback whale calf, which was found on a beach after sustaining fatal injuries to its ribs and lungs, possibly through a collision with a vessel.

Veterinarian Frances Gulland from the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, Calif., determined the accident took place on July 29, the day before the whale was seen on Strawberry Island. Humpback whales are protected by the federal Endangered Species Act.

Three years ago, a pregnant humpback whale was determined to have been killed instantly from head injuries sustained in a collision with a vessel.

Lee said the new restrictions will require vessels to run no faster than 10 knots through the waters. All vessels longer than 18 feet, until further notice, are required to run no closer than a mile from shore, or at mid-channel where that isn't possible.

Gabriele said the whales are in strong numbers this summer because there seems to be plenty of small schooling fish they feed on, but she doesn't know why those fish are so plentiful now.

She said the size of humpbacks - which can grow to 50 feet - is a good reason to get excited about seeing them.

"Just to hear them breathe," she said. "If you grew up in the '60s or '70s, you probably grew up thinking you'd never have a chance to see a whale."

Mariners might think whales will avoid them, Gabriele said, but they need to pay attention. In a place like Icy Strait, the amount of marine traffic may numb whales to what is in the water, she said. Also, whale calves are inexperienced and curious.

Gabriele said that including females without calves and males, she has identified up to 85 humpbacks in and around Glacier Bay this year. She hasn't yet accounted for whales she might be counting twice. Their tails are as unique as fingerprints, she said.

Gabriele already has determined that some of the females are first-time mothers who were in Glacier Bay when they were younger.

Superintendent Lee said boaters visiting the park should learn the specific boundaries of the restricted-speed whale waters as they enter the park. All commercial traffic in the park is made aware of the restrictions, and cruise ships entering the park are informed, she added.

"The vast majority of boaters do care about the whales here," she said.

Boaters are advised to verify designations for whale waters prior to entering Glacier Bay by telephoning (907) 697-2627, or by contacting KWM20 Bartlett Cove on marine radio.

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