

Whale Watch

An Ecozoic Song for All Ages

By Sarah Pirtle

Words by Sarah Pirtle, set to the tune of "The Cruise of the Bigler," a 19th Century Irish-American ballad of the Great Lakes. John and Alan Lomax collected the song, which Sarah heard Pete Seeger sing at a People's Music Network workshop.

1. When I was the age of ten, I went to watch the whales.
They know 'em by their flukes. They know 'em by their tails.
All the flukes are different. The patterns aren't the same.
If you see a humpback tail, Then you can learn its name.

Our boat goes into Stellwagen where the whales swim free.
I've been there so many times, that the crew knows me.
I've seen the whale called *Cat's Paw*. You know, she has no fleas.
And I've met the *Cyclone* who's as gentle as a breeze.



Chorus:

Whale Watch! We're rolling! To starboard look about. Did you say that rise of spray could be a whale spout? With cameras at the ready, the scientists proclaim, We can track each humpback from the tail that tells their name.

2. Watch out for the *Drip*, a *Drip* that's sixty-five feet long.
And you may see *Salsa* dancing to the ocean's song.
There's *Lance* and there's *Torpedo*. But they won't make us halt.
And *Crystal* is the baby whose mother's name is *Salt*.

Well, some names are so corny that you gotta cringe.
One baby is named *Thread*, The mother's name is *Fringe*.
The first were *Salt* and *Pepper*. Now there's *Pinstripe* and there's *Moss*,
With all the gunk in their baleen, I'd like to call one *Floss*.

3. Our captain shouts out, "Six o'clock!" That means "Rush to the back!"
And there's a sight of lacy flukes completely shiny black.

that means that this is *Falco*, and when we see her calf,
They know her name is *Epaulet*, Her leaping makes me laugh.

Well, *Falco* she is feeding. Her giant mouth I see,
Scooping up the sand eels with great frivolity.
She weaves a net of bubbles. Her baby watches proud
As she rises up with open mouth and lunges through that cloud.

4. We're looking out for more whales and I can feel the splash
Of giant waves a-rolling as the rainy winds they blast.
I'm leaning from the railing and screaming as I see
Two great heads a-rising up and looking straight at me.

One is just a baby, and it's flopping on its back.
They say this is a new calf who gives those waves a crack.
And I would like to name that calf a name we won't forget.
With all those white dots on its flukes, I'll call it *Bubble Net*.

And so when it turned autumn, the crew did congregate
For the naming of that new whale. Raise glasses, fill your plate.
I went there and I told them what I thought the name should be.
They laughed, and then they shouted, "*Bubble Net* it's gonna be!"

Chorus:

Whale Watch! Watch out! To starboard look about.
Did you say that rise of spray could be a whale spout?
And if you see a black tail with dotted alphabet.
If it has white polka dots, it's probably *Bubble Net*.

Sarah writes: Since 1979 I've gone on over fifteen whale watch cruises into Stellwagen Bank off Cape Cod and Gloucester, Massachusetts, an area rich in tiny fish and sand eels that whales love to eat, and every time I whoop with excitement to see the whales. In the 1980s I learned that the Center for Coastal Studies in Cape Cod hosted a gathering each year where people help name the humpbacks newly sighted. I began writing this song during a whale watch when I met a boy who was equally fascinated with the varied names given to humpbacks. We collected a long list of names from the scrapbook on board. I liked imagining a child who actually gets to name one of the

humpbacks. There are fifteen humpback whales in the song, not including the invented name, “Bubble Net.”

Whale naming has a history going back to 1976, when one was named Salt. Here’s the story—

A fisherman, Al Avellar from Provincetown, started the idea of whale watching. In the mid-1970s he noticed that when he had a boatload of people fishing, they’d stop and watch the whales. Al began taking out school groups and charters. He wanted it to be scientific, so he invited Stormy Mayo, one of the three founders of the Center for Coastal Studies, to be on board as a scientist.

The Dolphin Fleet still runs trips from Provincetown. It was Al’s son Aaron who named Salt, from her white encrusted dorsal fin. In fact, Aaron figured out that by noting dorsal patterns, he could re-recognize the same whale and distinguish it from other whales. Aaron gave the whale who traveled with Salt the name of Pepper.

As portrayed in the song, researchers come together yearly to create names based upon the natural markings on the body. These gatherings used to be held in the autumn, and that’s what I put in the song. As whale watching has expanded, researchers throughout New England have met in the spring after the data analyzed about the new whales is ready.

