



GEORGIA AQUARIUM

at Pemberton Place

## ANIMAL FACT SHEET

With eight million gallons of fresh and marine water and more aquatic life than found in any other aquarium, the Georgia Aquarium is home to a wide variety of fascinating animals. The Aquarium is home to tens of thousands of animals, representing 500 species. Some of the Aquarium's most notable specimens include four whale sharks, the largest fish in the world, a manta ray, the only one in the United States, and three beluga whales. The Georgia Aquarium houses the largest collection of giant grouper, potato grouper, humphead wrasse, tarpon, giant trevally, batfish, sawfish, blacktip reef sharks, great hammerhead sharks and wobbegong sharks. Along with housing four whale sharks and a manta ray, the Ocean Voyager gallery, built by The Home Depot, contains schools of predatory trevally jacks, squadrons of small and large stingrays, enormous goliath grouper and great hammerhead sharks. In addition to beluga whales, southern sea otters and African black-footed penguins can be found playing in the Cold Water Quest gallery, presented by Georgia-Pacific. The Georgia Explorer gallery, presented by SunTrust, is a highly interactive gallery featuring a lionfish exhibit and touch pools full of horseshoe crabs, sea stars, cownose rays, bonnethead sharks and shrimp. In the River Scout gallery, presented by Southern Company, American alligators lurk in the waters, and the highly sociable Asian small-clawed otters bid you farewell as you exit. For further information on our two most popular species, the whale shark and the beluga, please see below. For more fact sheets about animals at Georgia Aquarium, please visit <http://www.georgiaaquarium.org/animalguide/>.

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**Common name: Whale shark**

Scientific name: *Rhincodon typus*

Georgia Aquarium Gallery: Ocean Voyager

***The Georgia Aquarium is currently the only aquarium outside of Asia to feature whale sharks. The exhibit is designed to house six fully grown whale sharks, the largest fish in the world.***

### Range/Habitat

- The whale shark is found worldwide in tropical Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans between 30 degrees north and 35 degrees south.
- It is usually found offshore but will come close inshore, sometimes entering lagoons or coral atolls. It has been reported to frequent shallow water areas near estuaries and river mouths, sometimes during seasonal shrimp blooms.

### Physical Characteristics

- The whale shark is the largest of all fishes; it is not a whale. Because of its size, it is impossible to weigh it accurately. The female is larger than the male, as in all shark species.
- Newborns have been found measuring 21-25 inches (53.34-63.5 cm) long.
- The largest accurately measured whale shark was 40 feet 7 inches (12.18 m), although there are reports of a 60-foot (18 m) whale shark in 1925. The average size is between 18-32.8 feet (5.5-10 m) in length.
- It has a broad, flat head, small eyes, five large gill slits, two dorsal fins on its back and two long pectoral fins on its sides with a sweeping tail.

### Diet/Feeding

- The whale shark has a HUGE mouth, which can reach up to four feet (1.4 m) across.
- It feeds on planktonic and nektonic prey, such as fish (sardines, anchovies, mackerel, small tunas and albacore), small crustaceans and squid that it strains from the water through its gills.
- The food is usually small, since its throat is small and makes a right angle to the stomach. Sometimes larger species, such as tuna, may be scooped up as they consume the smaller species, and the whale shark somehow manages to swallow them.
- Whale sharks feed by speeding up and opening their mouths. It swims through swarms of prey, such as fish eggs, zooplankton and small fish, moving its head from side to side and sucking in the food. As it swims, a steady stream of water flows through the mouth. It has gill rakers that are located at the rear of the mouth. The gill rakers filter the food. It is a passive filter feeder.
- It has 300 rows of tiny teeth along the inner surface of each jaw, just inside the lips. Many scientists believe that their teeth are used to hold whatever is scooped into their mouth, although it is probable that they are used in processing larger food items.

### Conservation Status

- The World Conservation Union (IUCN) Redlist currently lists this species as “Vulnerable.” Listed as Appendix II of CITES.
- Their population has decreased dramatically in recent years due to market demand for whale shark in Asian markets.

#### Additional Information

- The skin of a whale shark can be as thick as four inches (10 cm), which limits possible predators to killer whales, great white sharks, tiger sharks and man.
- The whale shark is a slow-moving shark that is often seen feeding at the surface.
- It is often seen in a vertical position with the head at or near the surface when feeding. When it is actively feeding on zooplankton, the shark will turn its head from side to side, with part of the head lifted out of the water. It will open and close its mouth 7-28 times per minute, with suction gulps that are synchronized with the opening and closing of the gill slits.
- It is known to be highly migratory, covering as much as 1,000 miles. It will migrate between ocean basins and national jurisdictions, but will usually return to the same sites annually. Based on tagging and DNA studies, males tend to do long-distance migrations while females migrate only short distances. Although it is the largest fish, the whale shark is not easy to find. There are only nine places in the world that are known to provide predictable whale shark sightings.
- The whale shark is ovoviviparous, meaning that the embryo is formed within eggs retained in the mother’s womb. The yolk is not connected to the mother after the egg case is formed. When the fetus reaches term and uses up the nutrients in the yolk sac, the fetus breaks free of the egg and is delivered out of the womb through the cloaca. The litter size can be more than 300 pups.

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**Common name: Beluga whale**

Scientific name: *Delphinapterus leucas*

Georgia Aquarium Gallery: Cold Water Quest

***The Georgia Aquarium is home to beluga whales. The male beluga was rescued from a privately-owned amusement park in Mexico City. The females are on a breeding loan from the New York Aquarium.***

### Range/Habitat

- The beluga whale is found entirely in arctic and subarctic waters, where water temperatures may be as low as 32 degrees Fahrenheit (0 degrees Celsius). They swim among icebergs and ice floes.

### Physical Characteristics

- The beluga whale averages between 10-15 feet (3-4.6 m) and weighs about 3,300 lbs (1,500 kg), with males weighing slightly more than females. It will reach full size at 10 years of age.
- The body of the beluga whale is stocky and has separate layers of blubber to help keep warm.
- It has 8-10 peg-shaped teeth on each side of both the upper and lower jaws, which form a distinctive beak. It has an average of 34 teeth for grasping and tearing rather than chewing.
- It has a melon or rounded structure on the top of its head, just in front of the blowhole. This melon is prominent and composed of lipids (fats). It can change shape when the whale is producing sounds; therefore the bulb is assumed to facilitate sound production.
- It has a single blowhole through which the beluga whale breathes. The blowhole is located on the dorsal (top) surface of the head and is covered by a muscular flap. This flap provides a watertight seal.

### Diet/Feeding

- Beluga whales are opportunistic feeders. They are known to prey on about 100 different kinds of primarily bottom-dwelling animals. They eat octopus, squid, crabs, shrimp, clams, snails, sandworms and various fish such as capelin, cod, herring, smelt and flounder.

### Conservation Status

- The beluga whale is listed in the vulnerable category of The World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List. Animals in this category are categorized as vulnerable when facing a high risk of extinction in the wild.
- Having beluga whales at aquariums provides the opportunity for the public to learn about these animals and how human activities impact their survival, as well as allow scientists to learn aspects of beluga whale biology that are difficult or impossible to study in the wild.

### Additional Information

- Beluga whales are estimated to live about 25-30 years.
- They are known as the canary of the sea.
- The beluga whale is extremely social: living, hunting and migrating in groups called pods.

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**About the Georgia Aquarium**

The Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta, Georgia, is the world's largest with more than eight million gallons of water and the largest collection of aquatic animals. The mission of the Georgia Aquarium is to be an entertaining, educational and scientific institution featuring exhibits and programs of the highest standards; offering engaging and exciting guest experiences promoting the conservation of aquatic biodiversity throughout the world. The Georgia Aquarium is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums. For additional information, visit [www.georgiaaquarium.org](http://www.georgiaaquarium.org).