

SEI WHALES (*BALAENOPTERA BOREALIS*) ENCOUNTERED IN THE AZORES: A NEW RECORD FOR THE REGION

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ARQUIPÉLAGO



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The sei whale is recorded for the first time in Azorean waters. Five individuals were observed in the channel between S. Jorge and Pico on 16 July 1989 heading North, which does not agree with the present knowledge of the migratory behaviour of this species. It is unlikely that sei whales would visit the archipelago to feed.

GORDON, JONATHAN, LISA STEINER & JOÃO M. GONÇALVES 1990. Baleias sardinheiras (*Balaenoptera borealis*) observadas nos Açores: primeira referência para a Região. - *Arquipélago*. Ciências da Natureza 8:97-100. Angra do Heroísmo. ISSN 0870-6581.

A baleia sardineira ou rorqual de Rudolphi é pela primeira vez referido para as águas dos Açores. Cinco indivíduos foram observados no canal entre as ilhas de S. Jorge e Pico a 16 de Julho de 1989, dirigindo-se para Norte, o que não está de acordo com os actuais conhecimentos sobre o comportamento migratório desta espécie. Não é provável que estas baleias visitem o arquipélago para se alimentarem.

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The sei whale (*Balaenoptera borealis*) is the third largest of the rorqual whales. Females grow to around 15.5 m with males being about 0.5 m shorter (HORWOOD 1987). They have sleek streamlined bodies and are believed to be the swiftest of the great whales, capable of speeds as high as 20 knots. Sei whales are found in all of the world's oceans. In the Western North Atlantic sei whales were caught by whalers off Nova Scotia and Labrador (JONSGÅRD 1977) and strandings have occurred on the eastern seaboard of America from Massachusetts to Mexico (MEAD 1977). In the Eastern North Atlantic they have been caught by whalers off Scotland, Ireland, the Faroes, Iceland, and Norway as well as off the coasts of

Spain and Portugal. In Iberian waters small numbers of sei whales were caught off NW. Spain (AGUILAR & SANPERA 1982) though they are thought not to be common there. 66 sei whales were caught from shore stations in Portugal between 1925 and 1927 and sei whales were also caught from shore stations around the straits of Gibraltar (TØNNESSEN & JOHNSEN 1982). Three solitary sei whales were spotted during a whale marking cruise off Spain (AGUILAR & al. 1983). Sei whales were never taken during traditional whaling operations in the Azores or Madeira (JONSGÅRD 1977) and there are no confirmed sightings of sei whales in the Azores.

Five sei whales in one group of three and

another group of two individuals were sighted between 07.10 and 08.30 on 16 July 1989 at 38°43.0'N 28°22.6'W, in the channel between S. Jorge and Pico, about 3 miles south of S. Jorge (Fig.1). Weather conditions were good during the encounter. The wind was an easterly force 3, and visibility was greater than 15 miles.

The sea surface temperature was 22.6°C. The whales were making dives lasting 2-3 minutes and blowing once at the surface between them. The dives appeared to be shallow. "Footprints", small slicks caused by the wash from the beat of the whale's flukes, could be seen at the surface allowing the whales to be followed while they were submerged. All the whales were heading 300° at a speed of about 5.5 knots and maintained this heading and speed throughout the encounter. The whales in each group were swimming roughly abreast. The second group (of two whales) followed an estimated 1.5 to 2 nautical miles directly behind the first (three

whales). Whales were approached closely to allow them to be observed and photographed to confirm their identity. Body length was estimated by eye and by comparison with the length of the research vessel, to be 14 m.

Sei whales can be readily distinguished from fin whales, which are typically larger and have a characteristic white lower jaw on the right hand side. However they are difficult to distinguish from Bryde's whales which have a more tropical but overlapping range. The most useful identification features are the ridges on the dorsal surface of the head. Sei whales have only one of these which runs forward along the mid-line from the blow hole to the tip of the rostrum. In Bryde's whales there are also two smaller ridges on either side of the main median ridge making a total of three. Photographs taken during this encounter (e.g. Fig. 2) shows only one ridge confirming that the animal is indeed a sei and not a Bryde's whale.

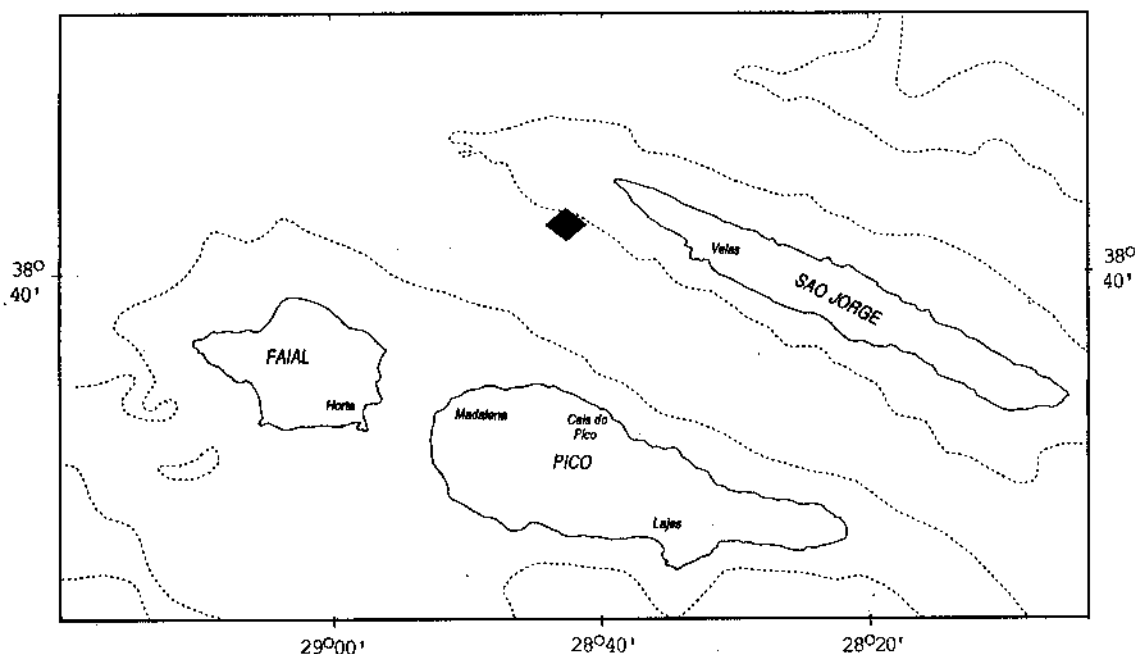


Fig. 1 - Position of sei whale sighting on 16 July 1989. Position of encounter marked (◆). Broken line (---) shows 1 000 m depth contour.

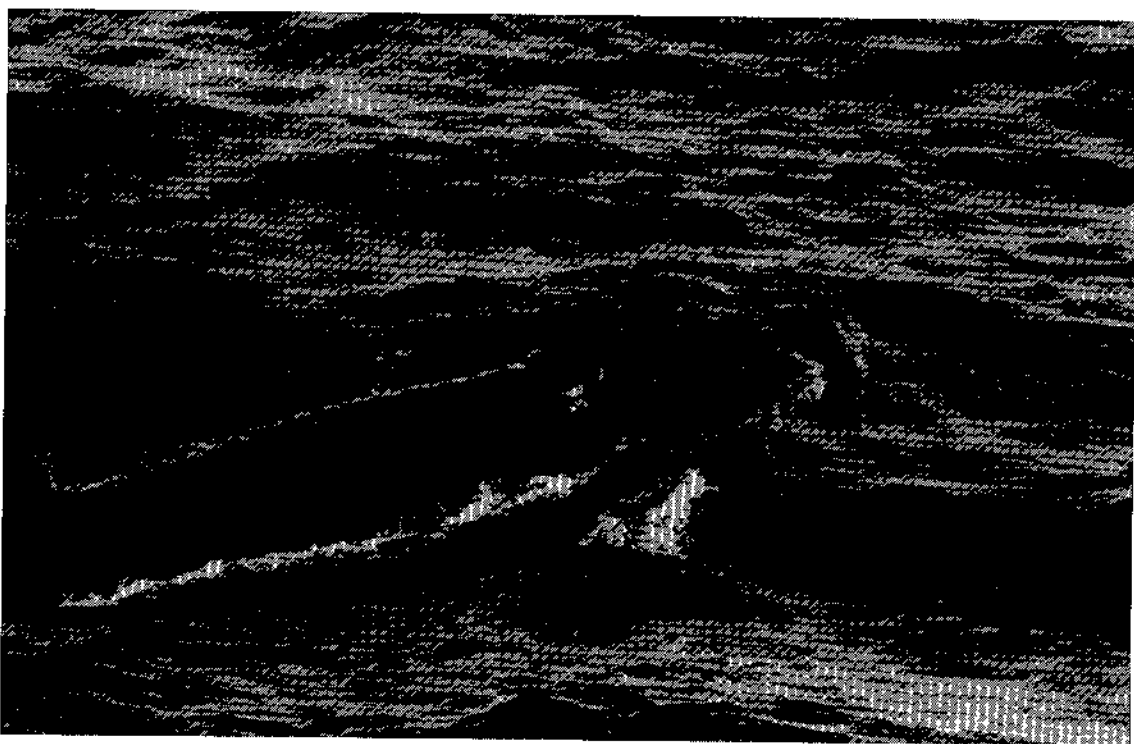


Fig. 2 - Sei whale photographed during encounter.

Sei whales typically feed on crustacean schools scooped up as the whale swims rapidly just below the surface. They are the most offshore species of the large balaenopterids and often feed just beyond the edge of the continental shelf (HORWOOD 1987). The volcanic Azorean islands have no continental shelf and are not noted as feeding grounds for baleen whales. It is unlikely that sei whales would visit the archipelago to feed.

Sei whales appear to show a seasonal north south migration in the northern hemisphere. They are in more southerly waters for the winter months which is also the breeding season and enter more northerly waters in the summer, though they do not penetrate as far pole-wards as some of the other balaenopterids (HORWOOD 1987). Peak sei whales catches on most of the northerly whaling grounds were in July and August while off Morocco catches were made in the winter (HORWOOD 1987). If

the animals in the Azores were migrating, their movements during this sighting, in a north westerly direction, suggest that they were heading north and had been diverted to the west in passing through the S. Jorge channel. A northward migration at this time does not agree well with what is known of this species' migratory behaviour, however.

It is difficult to explain the occurrence of these whales in terms of feeding or migration. This, and the fact that the species has not previously been reported from the archipelago suggests that this species is an infrequent visitor to the islands.

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