



# 2018 Minke Research Report

Elding Whale Watching started researching the marine life encountered on our tours since 2007. Crew were starting to recognise individuals and this was at the time whaling had just started to be a commercial industry in Iceland. The initial idea of the research was in the hope it could end the whaling and of course increase our knowledge and understanding of the wildlife in the bay.

Unfortunately, whaling continued despite the evidence that the same whales were being encountered on our tours and then hunted further out the bay. Steps were taken though to create a whale sanctuary, an area in the bay where whales were safe. This could not have been possible without the pressure whale watching companies put on the government allowing for the first sanctuary to be initiated in 2009.

## Location



Zone 1 is our main study area during the summer season where behavioural and environmental data is also collected during months May to September. Photo identification is taken throughout all areas.

Minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) were the most numerous species of baleen whale seen in Faxaflói Bay this year. These migratory animals are leaving Icelandic waters for winter – last individual of 2017 was seen 11<sup>th</sup> November and our first for 2018 was 19<sup>th</sup> March, and it wasn't any random minke! It was a well known individual called “Humpie”, first observed in 2011 and seen annually ever since. Humpie is an easily recognisable minke whale due to it missing half of its dorsal fin.

However, last and first sightings of the year vary and occasionally we have encountered minke whales also during the winter season from individuals staying behind and over-wintering in Icelandic waters.



“Humpie” the Minke Whale - 19.03.2018  
photo by Rodrigo Martinez Catalan

Since 2007, Elding has studied minke whales with a method called photo-identification. This non-invasive research is based on taking photographs of the dorsal fins and looking for any characteristic markings such as nicks or notches, shape and size. When we are able to identify an individual, it is added to our *minke whale catalogue*. Currently, we have over 120 individuals minke whales catalogued and many new ones waiting to be added.

Here are a few of our other ‘celebrity minkes’ seen in 2018

## ‘Tap’



**First Sighted:** 07/07/2007  
**Years seen:** 2007, 2010-12, 2014-18  
**Where:** Faxaflói



**Interesting Information:** Tap is one of our most regularly sighted whales, who is rather curious around the boats. Seen usually by himself but also occasionally with another individual called flickr.

**Reason for name:** Tap was named due to the cut on its dorsal fin, which looks like an old style tap.

## ‘Shark’



**First Sighted:** 07/08/2007  
**Years seen:** 2007-08, 2010, 2014-18  
**Where:** Faxaflói



**Interesting Information:** Shark is one of our coolest minkes and loves nothing more than coming to check us out. A very curious individual who has been seen on many occasions in all parts of the bay.

**Reason for name:** Named due to the bite like marks on the dorsal fin.

## ‘Flickr’



**First Sighted:** 14/06/2009  
**Years seen:** 2009-2011, 2014-2018  
**Where:** Faxaflói



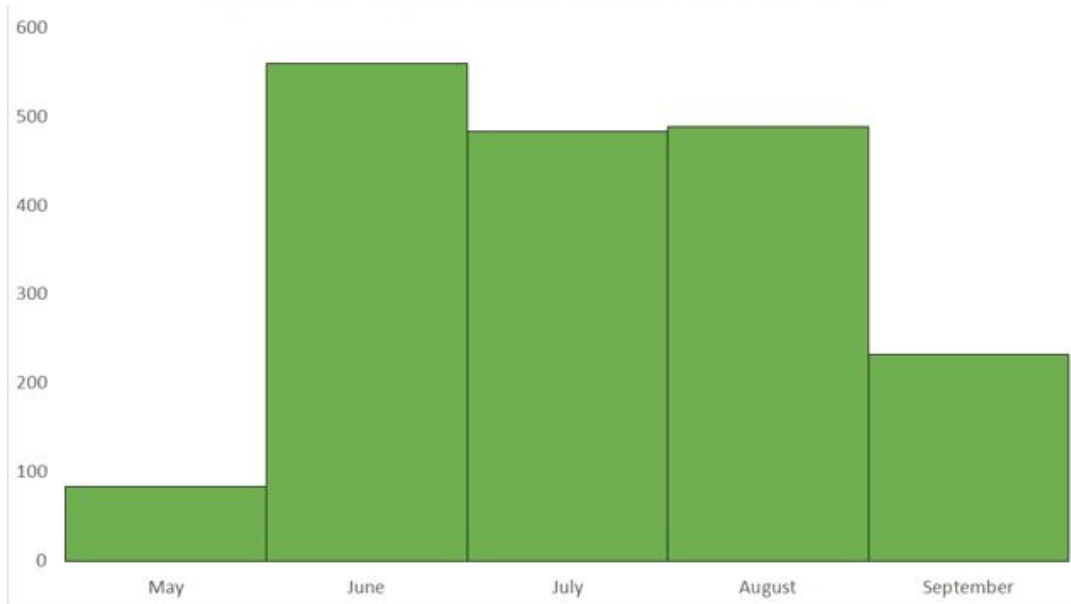
**Interesting Information:** Flickr is one of our awesome minkes, A very curious individual who has been seen on many occasions in all parts of the bay. Also, been seen breaching on too, jumping out of the water, which is very rare for a minke whale.

**Reason for name:** Named after the photo sharing platform .





Minke whales were mostly encountered in summer months: May – September, with peak sightings in June.



Graph indicating the frequency of encountering minke whales between May and September.

We didn't find any pattern in behaviour or sightings success of minke whales depending on weather or time of the day. Most of the observed behaviour was connected with feeding: animals going for short or long dives but generally staying in the same area. Food seemed to be plentiful this summer with huge flocks of birds and a lot of fishing activity, namely gill nets where minke whales were observed around. The most spectacular behaviours witnessed was minke whales rolling at the surface, we could see their white bulging throats above water. Apparently, rolling helps them to close their massive mouths after engulfing huge volumes of prey and water. These baleen whales won't swallow water but will filtrate it through their baleen plates which are like natural sieves growing down from the upper jaw.



Lunge feeding minke whale 21.08.2018 photo by Vieve Richardson

Despite seeing many whales in close proximity to one another we didn't see any social interaction between them, quite common for this species of whale in this location. Minke whales are considered elusive animals but we are trying to avoid that generalization as it seems like every animal has different personalities: some of them prefer to stay by themselves far away from vessels, others are acting neutral but some are very curious. We had amazing encounters with one individual, a young animal with little to no body scars and a clean, no nicked dorsal fin. This minke whale came to our boat and it was making slow loops continuously, looking up at us with one eye, spy-hopping (lifting the snout above water surface) and releasing bubbles from its blowholes.



Curious minke whale 14.07.2018 photo by Rodrigo A. Martinez Catalan

We saw more minke whales on good weather days, especially during rare occasions when we had a “*mirror*” flat sea. The reason for this might be very simple – minke whales can be fast and sneaky, easily disappearing between small waves due to their size. However, bad weather days were also very exciting for our passengers and for our research. In rough seas we have a higher chance of observing minke whales leaping out of the water and slamming their bodies on the surface also known as breaching.

The reason of breaching is still unknown, but scientists suspect that it might be a form of communication, a way to dislodge parasites off their bodies or they might do it in order to breath more easily, or just simply for fun!. For researchers its a unique opportunity to determine the gender of the animals – we can tell apart females from males by their genital slits, lines on their lower underside of their bodies. One of the animals which we were able to identify in that way was “*Resight Guy*”, seen for the first time in 2008, and it happened to be a female ♀.



Breaching minke whale 29.07.2018 photo by Megan Whittaker

Overall, summer 2018 was a very good season. From May to September we saw minke whales in **82,9%** of our tours, which means almost **2,000 encounters** with this species, not bad statistics at all!.



2018 was also the first year in Faxaflói when the new expanded whale sanctuary boundaries came into force, meaning half the bay was excluded from whaling. Because of the abundance of minke whales and their proximity to the harbour, Faxaflói has been the main minke whaling ground for over a decade. In 2017, Elding, in close collaboration with *IFAW* and *IceWhale*, was involved in a campaign aiming to get the entire Faxaflói Bay as a whale sanctuary. Thanks to our committed passengers, we managed to collect thousands of signatures to send a petition to the Icelandic government. Since then the minke whaling activity has become more difficult to conduct, after short attempts during the summer of 2018 by the minke-whaling company, 8 minke whales were hunted. Nonetheless, lack of minke whales in the new designated area and pressure from Elding and other NGO's, made the whaling company to stop their activities, boats and abandon any further operation for this year. We can only hope that this is the end of minke whaling in Faxaflói Bay.

