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First Minke Whale, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, Record for James Bay

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A Minke Whale carcass found 12 km south of Lakitusaki River mouth, Ontario is the first record of *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* for James Bay. This record is approximately 1200 km beyond Hudson Strait, the previously accepted westerly limit of the species range.

Key Words: Minke Whale, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, distribution, James Bay, Ontario.

Minke Whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) are distributed throughout the North Atlantic ocean in summer. The westerly limit of the species distribution has generally been accepted as the Hudson Strait. A record of a captured immature at Sugluk (= Sagluc, 62°10' N, 75° 40' West), Quebec, and several sightings in Ungava Bay form the basis for this range (Sergeant 1963). Ungava Bay is mentioned as a probable summer migration destination (Banfield 1974).

On 7 June 1986, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) pilots sighted a large whale carcass in a salt marsh on the northwestern James

Bay coast between the Opinnagau River and Lakitusaki River, Ontario. This was within a few weeks of ice breakup on James Bay. The carcass appeared to be nearly intact but there were Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*) tracks at the site.

On 5 July 1986, the senior author pinpointed the carcass' location as 54°14'N, 82°21'W, 12 km south of the Lakitusaki River mouth, on the bank of a small tidal stream. On 31 July 1986, the site was visited by helicopter. At that time, the soft tissues of the carcass were in an advanced state of decomposition, although sections of throat pleats were still present. Some bones and baleen had been

scattered by scavenging animals. Measurements made then included: total length from anterior tip of rostrum to posterior tip of caudal fluke, 8.8 m; maximum skull width across zygomatic arch, 97 cm; total skull length, 185 cm; and mandible length, 182 cm. Several pieces of yellowish-white baleen were collected and photographs of the carcass were taken. In September 1987, the skeletal remains were collected and transported via aircraft, rail and truck to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). The measurements and photographs, the baleen length and color, the triangular rostrum and the throat pleats indicate that the specimen (ROM 94335) is *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* (Hall 1981).

The circumstances surrounding the whale's arrival in James Bay are unknown. Perhaps it simply followed a food source. Capelin (*Mallotus villosus*) constitute the primary food of Minke Whales off the coast of Newfoundland (Sergeant 1963). Sergeant suggested that the summer migration of Minke Whales in the western North Atlantic follows the spawning of Capelin. Capelin also occur in Hudson Bay and James Bay and spawn during June and July, usually on beaches (Leim and Scott 1966). The whale may have been stranded while feeding. A second possibility is that the whale was sick or in a weakened condition, and that its condition led to a stranding. A third possibility is that the whale died at sea somewhere in the species' previously documented range and drifted to its resting site. The latter seems highly improbable because the distance from Hudson Strait to James Bay is over 1200 km. Surface currents within this area (Dunbar 1951) and the number of shoals and islands would provide significant barriers to a drifting carcass. It is most likely that the whale arrived at James Bay alive.

There are no previous records of Minke Whales in Hudson Bay or James Bay. However, most whale strandings probably go unseen in this vast area because of the sparse human population of the region and most of the whale sightings that are made probably are not reported. There is also the possibility that sightings of Minke Whales are

incorrectly attributed to one of the confirmed whale species. The Bowhead Whale (*Balaena mysticetus*) is the only confirmed baleen whale in Hudson Bay (Ross 1974). Other whales reported for the Ontario coast are the White Whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*), which is regular and locally common, and the Narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*), for which a single record exists (OMNR, unpublished data).

Although this single record does not confirm a range extension, the possibility of a restricted distribution of Minke Whales in James Bay and Hudson Bay should at least be considered.

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