

New York City sees Wildlife

adapted from an article by Oliver Milman



- 1 For most New Yorkers, wildlife spotting is confined to squirrels, the odd raccoon and anguished encounters with rats. But in the waters surrounding the city a very different animal experience is quietly booming: sightings of whales. According to the citizen science group *Gotham Whale* 272 whale sightings were recorded in New York City waters last year. That is an extraordinary leap from 2011, when just five of the huge cetaceans were witnessed frolicking near the most populated urban area in the US.
- 2 The sightings, almost all of humpbacks, have been logged by *Gotham Whale* members who are building a catalogue of known individuals, of which there are currently 112. “The numbers keep increasing and increasing very dramatically,” said Paul Sieswerda, founder of *Gotham Whale*. “Humpbacks were nearly hunted to extinction but the populations are coming back.”
- 3 Sieswerda said the increase in sightings was down to a number of factors, including legislation such as the Clean Water Act and Endangered Species Act that have mopped up pollution flowing from the Hudson River and helped safeguard humpbacks from direct harm. Cleaner water from the Hudson is bringing nutrients that feed a fish called menhaden. Menhaden are a key prey species for humpback whales.
- 4 Among the sightings is one of a whale that entered New York harbour in 2016 and carried on up the Hudson, startling people looking down from apartments on the Upper West Side. Another whale was photographed breaking through the water to scoop up a tight formation of fish, the Empire State Building in the background. Most of the whales are spotted near the Rockaways, along Long Island and close to the New Jersey shore.

- 5 Scientists are yet to see a full picture of the state of New York's whale population, however. In April, the *Wildlife Conservation Society's New York Aquarium* and the *Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution* announced a plan to use two new acoustic buoys. It is hoped that monitoring whales even when boats are not nearby will help detect fin whales, as well as more regularly sighted humpbacks.

- 6 Howard Rosenbaum, senior scientist at the *New York Aquarium*, said: "It's fantastic that you can go out from the Rockaways less distance than most New Yorkers commute on the subway each day and get to see some of the largest animals on the planet." He pointed out that it can be hard to ascertain if the increased sightings are down to a growing population or simply a growing number of people taking the time to look. Longer-term and more complete research will be needed. "We have to be careful when we are talking about New York whale populations, but it is safe to say whales are being seen with increasing regularity and that there is an overall recovery happening among humpbacks," he said. "Last year was amazing for whale sightings and I hope it's the same this year."

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