Blue whale returns to Maharashtra waters, last sighting was in 1914

Blue whales tend to be open-ocean species, but they do come close to the shores to feed and are either resident or migratory.

A Bryde’s whale, one of a pod spotted four times, and (top) a blue whale, one of two spotted once.

Written by Anjali Lukose | Mumbai | Updated: May 21, 2015 10:16 am

A “big shape” and a “blow” greeted marine biologists on a boat off the Sindhudurg coast two weeks ago. In search of
dolphins for a study on behalf of the Indian government and United Nations Development Programme, the team spotted Bryde’s whales just 600 metres off the coast. And it was not the first time.

On March 28, the team had sighted a bigger surprise, a pair of blue whales, near Kunkeshwar, 2.7 km offshore at a depth of 16 metres. Since then, they have spotted members of a pod of four Bryde’s whales four times — April 11, 16, 30 and May 6, near Achra, Tarkarli, Talashil and Sarjekot, at a depth of 15 m.

The blue whale, the world’s largest animal, has in particular got the research team excited as the last reported sighting was in 1914, one that washed up on the Maharashtra coast, according to N Vasudevan, Maharashtra’s chief conservator of forest, mangrove cell.

“Our boatmen suddenly saw a big shape emerge,” Ketki Jog, a member of the Konkan Cetacean Research Team, said from a trawler. “No sooner had we seen the whale than we spotted the calf and followed them for a while. We took lots of photos and left them alone as the presence of the mother meant ‘don’t disturb’.”

The research team includes Mihir Sule, Isha Bopardikar, Dipani Sutaria and Vardhan Patankar, besides Jog. It has been surveying the waters from Vijaydurg to Redi, near the Goa coast, since May last year, up to 2.25 km offshore for Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins.
Blue whales tend to be open-ocean species, but they do come close to the shores to feed and are either resident or migratory, said Sule, adding that Bryde’s whales are the most common species of baleen whales along the Indian coast and can go up to 15 metres long.

“Fewer than 10,000 blue whales, by one estimate, are on this planet and a live sighting — that too a mother and calf — is rare. We need to do further research to understand whether it is climate change or other changes in the sea that are causing these whales to come so close to the shore,” said Vasudevan.
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Charles
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