

Beluga Whale

— The canary of the sea —

It's spring in the Arctic and the frozen ocean is starting to melt and break up. Looking out to sea, you can spot blocks of ice floating across bays. But look again and you might see that some of those white blobs are alive! These are belugas, returning to the Arctic for the summer. They gather in large groups to feed and raise their calves.

Snow white

Belugas' snowy color helps them to blend in with the ice, making it hard for hungry polar bears and orcas to spot them. Belugas shed the outer layer of their skin, or molt, each year to keep themselves clean. Molting belugas gather in "whale spas" near river mouths, where the warmer water helps loosen old skin. They rub, roll, and scratch against the rough, gravelly bottom to scrape off the dead skin, as well as any little creatures, such as barnacles and parasites.

Belugas don't have a dorsal fin. This means they are able to swim up close under the heavy sea ice to reach breathing holes.

Unlike most whales, belugas can turn their heads from side to side.

Their bulging, rounded foreheads are not bone, but a soft sac called a melon.

Tweetie talk

These small, white whales have been nicknamed "the canaries of the sea" because of the birdlike sounds they make. They chatter away using squeaks, squeals, whistles, clicks, and chirps. Mothers and calves communicate by making soft buzzing or purring noises.

Did you know?

Baby belugas are born dark gray. They gradually turn white as they grow older.

Length: up to 15 feet (4.5 meters)

Weight: up to 2 tons (1.9 tonnes)