



Whaley awesome animals!



SPECIAL SPECIES: LION'S MANE JELLYFISH

You already know Clara is 56 feet long. Now meet the one animal in the ocean whose tentacles are actually longer than she is.

The lion's mane jellyfish is the largest jellyfish on Earth, and it is one of the most spectacular creatures in the entire ocean. Its bell, the round umbrella-shaped top, can reach eight feet across. But the real showstopper is what hangs below. The tentacles of a large lion's mane jellyfish can stretch over 100 feet in length, making it one of the longest animals ever documented on Earth. For comparison, the longest known specimen had tentacles reaching 120 feet, nearly 20 feet longer than a blue whale.

The name comes from the animal's appearance. The tentacles fan out in thick, flowing clusters that glow in shades of deep crimson and burnt orange, resembling the wild mane of a lion drifting in slow motion through the water. Up close, it is one of the most beautiful and eerie sights in the ocean.

Lion's mane jellyfish live in the cold subarctic waters of the northern Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, spending their lives drifting near the surface and hunting with their long, stinging tentacles. Those tentacles are loaded with stinging cells called nematocysts that paralyze small fish, shrimp, and even other jellyfish. The sting is painful for humans but rarely dangerous.

Like all jellyfish, the lion's mane has no brain, no heart, and no bones. It is made of more than 94 percent water. And yet this ancient, boneless, brainless drifter has been ruling cold ocean waters for hundreds of millions of years. Not bad for something you could see right through.

Length: 120 foot tentacles

Weight: 200 pounds

Food: Small fish, shrimp

Lifespan: 1 year (serious!)

Status: No threat

Number left: Unknown





This Month IN SPAAAAACE!

September 11 - New Moon and dark skies

September 14 - Crescent moon meets Venus

September 22 - Autumn Equinox (at halfway point between summer and winter)

September 24 - Venus at brightest point all year

September 26 - Harvest Moon (full moon)

Nature

BISON: WISCONSIN'S LOST GIANT

If you could travel back in time a few hundred years and stand on the open prairies of southern Wisconsin, you might see a herd of American bison stretching to the horizon in every direction. Bison were once part of Wisconsin's landscape, and their story is one of loss, then a remarkable comeback happening right now out west.

American bison are the largest land animals in North America. A full-grown bull can weigh over 2,000 pounds and stand six feet tall at the shoulder. Despite their size, bison are surprisingly fast, capable of running up to 40 miles per hour. Early accounts from European explorers described herds of tens of millions of animals roaming the Great Plains, a spectacle almost impossible to imagine today.

Bison once ranged across a large portion of Wisconsin, particularly in the southern and western parts of the state where open prairies and oak savannas gave them room to graze. By the mid-1800s, they were gone from Wisconsin. By the late 1800s, the species had been reduced to fewer than 1,000 individuals across all of North America. It was one of the most catastrophic wildlife declines in history.

The bones they left behind, however, are still being found. Prehistoric bison bones have turned up in wetlands, riverbeds, and lake bottoms across Wisconsin, preserved for thousands of years in the cold, oxygen-poor mud. If you want to see some of these ancient remains up close, the Polk County Museum in Balsam Lake has a display on its main floor, well worth a visit if you are ever in that part of northwest Wisconsin.

As for the bison themselves, one of the most spectacular wildlife events in the country happens every September at Custer State Park in South Dakota, just a long day's drive from Wisconsin. The park holds its annual bison roundup, where cowboys on horseback gather the park's 1,400 animals for health checks and management. Watching a thundering herd of bison move across the Black Hills landscape is the closest thing most people will ever experience to what Wisconsin's prairies once looked like.



LETTING NATURE WIN

Citizen Science

WHAT DID WE DO TO OUR BACKYARD?!?!

Three years ago, my family made a decision about our yard in the Wausau area. We were not going to fight nature anymore. We were going to invite it in.



The first thing we did was stop using synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers entirely. Cold turkey. Then we intentionally let dandelions spread across the lawn and seeded Dutch white clover throughout, which fixes nitrogen naturally in the soil and provides food for pollinators. We planted a native prairie strip along our property, seeded with a large mix of grasses and flowers. For pest control, we applied milky spore bacteria to target Japanese beetle grubs underground. We also built a chicken coop for some hilarious hens, who free range in the yard under supervision, scratching up insects and contributing to our two active compost bins while also fertilizing the ground.

Here is the part that keeps surprising us. Nature responded faster than we expected. We now observe five native bee species per square yard where we rarely saw any in the past, including metallic green sweat bees that are stunning up close. Our toad population has grown. Snakes have established along the lawn edges. Great black wasps and other native wasps have returned too, and are frequently seen carrying their prey to nesting sites. Our bluebird box is fought over by tree swallows and bluebirds every spring. Dragonflies congregate in the hundreds to pick off mosquitos at dusk.

None of this required a big budget. It required patience, a willingness to let go of the perfect lawn, and an understanding that nature knows what it's doing. You do not have to transform your entire yard. Even a small patch of native plants, a handful of clover, or a single bluebird box can be the start of something remarkable.



Featured Fossil: **Zygorhiza**

Long before whales looked anything like the graceful, streamlined giants we know today, the oceans of the Eocene epoch were patrolled by something that looked almost like a crocodile crossed with a whale. Meet Zygorhiza, one of the most important early whales in the fossil record, and a skull replica that actually travels with the Forest Whales collection to schools and libraries across Wisconsin.

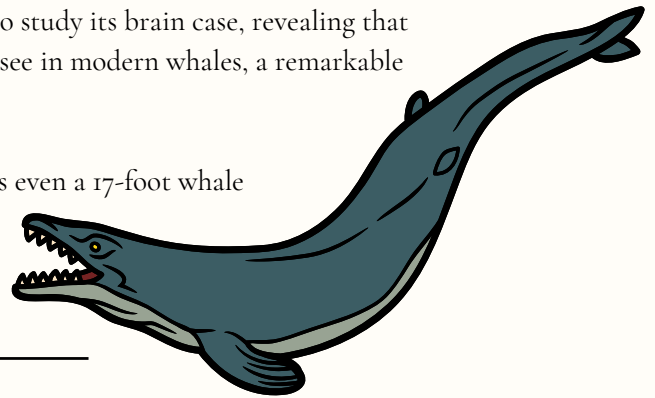


Zygorhiza lived about 34 to 38 million years ago in the warm, shallow seas that covered what is now the southeastern United States. States like Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana were underwater back then, and Zygorhiza was one of the top predators in those ancient waters. At roughly 17 feet long and weighing over 7,000 pounds, it was a serious animal.

What makes Zygorhiza so fascinating is where it sits in the whale family tree. It belongs to a group called basilosaurids, early whales that had already made the full transition to life in the ocean but still looked very different from modern whales. Zygorhiza had a long, serpentine body, a narrow skull with powerful jaws, and teeth with serrated edges designed for gripping and slicing fish and other marine prey. Unlike modern whales, it almost certainly could not echolocate, relying instead on sight and hearing to hunt.

Its name means "yoke root," referring to features of its tooth roots, and it is the official state fossil of Mississippi, where many beautiful specimens have been found. Scientists have even used CT scans to study its brain case, revealing that Zygorhiza had a brain structure that was already shifting toward what we see in modern whales, a remarkable window into how whale intelligence evolved over millions of years.

Zygorhiza shared its ancient seas with large predatory sharks, which means even a 17-foot whale had reasons to be careful. The ocean has always been a complicated place.



THIS MONTH'S SCHEDULE:

9/9 - Forest County Potawatomi, Crandon (Public Event)
9/30 - School Event



BOOK AN EVENT

Want to inspire kids with a life-size whale? Contact Dave today with questions, size requirements, schedules, etc.



Clara's Corner



Friends,

This is a big month for me. You are reading issue number 12 of Whale Mail, which means this newsletter has been swimming into schools, libraries, and maybe your own home, for a full year now. One year! Dave tells me that we are going to do 3,000 of these total. That is 250 years of newsletters. A bowhead whale born last year might actually live long enough to read every single issue. I find that very comforting.

But here is what I am really excited about: school is back in session, and I get to see kids again. October and November are almost completely full of school visits, and I cannot wait. I have been thinking all summer about how much everyone has grown since last year. I realize, of course, that all of this year's students will be meeting me for the very first time. But that is okay. I will pretend I remember them. It is what a good whale does.

**UNTIL NEXT TIME,
KEEP YOUR FINS MOVING!**

Clara

Your favorite 56-foot gray whale

FACT OF THE MONTH:

A group of narwhals is called a blessing. That is the actual term. A blessing of narwhals. You are welcome.



*I've recently realized I'm not
good at "hide-and-seek."*

*Photo taken at the Schreiner Memorial Library
Lancaster, WI*



SCHOOLS BOOKING NOW!

Some availability in Fall 2026.
Plenty of availability in 2027.

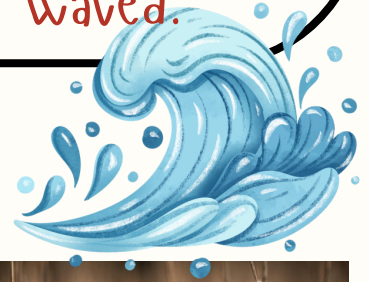


AND NOW FOR A REALLY BAD JOKE...

WHAT DID THE OCEAN SAY
TO THE WHALE?

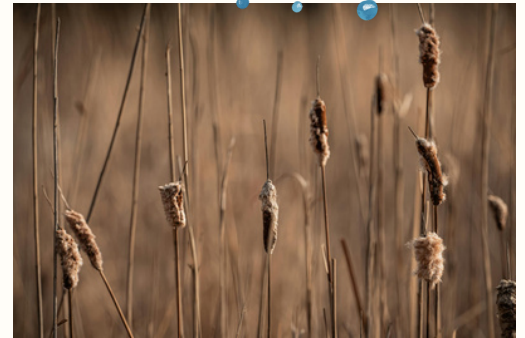
Nothing.

It just waved.



George W. Mead Wildlife Area

If you drive the stretch of Highway 10 between Stevens Point and Marshfield, you might glance north at the flat, marshy landscape and keep right on going. That would be a mistake. Just five miles north of that highway lies one of the most remarkable wild places in the entire state of Wisconsin.



The George W. Mead Wildlife Area covers more than 33,000 acres of wetlands, forests, grasslands, bogs, and flowages spread across Marathon, Wood, and Portage counties. It is one of the largest wildlife areas in Wisconsin, and it came to the state as a gift. In 1959, Stanton W. Mead, president of Consolidated Paper Company, donated 20,000 acres to the people of Wisconsin in honor of his father, George W. Mead. The governor at the time was Gaylord Nelson, who would later go on to found Earth Day. It was a fitting pairing.

The wildlife at Mead is extraordinary. Over 291 bird species have been documented on the property, making it one of the finest birding destinations in the Midwest. The wetlands support nesting loons, herons, bitterns, and sandhill cranes. Wolves, bobcats, bears, river otters, and beavers all call the Mead home.

The Stanton W. Mead Education and Visitor Center offers educational programming for schools and groups. September is a spectacular time to visit as fall migration is in full swing and the wetlands come alive with thousands of migrating waterfowl and shorebirds.

If you have never been there, it is time to go. Take County Highway "S" north off Highway 10 between Stevens Point and Marshfield, and see what has been waiting there all along.

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We were interviewed at WJFW
in Rhinelander. Click [here](#) to
watch a segment.