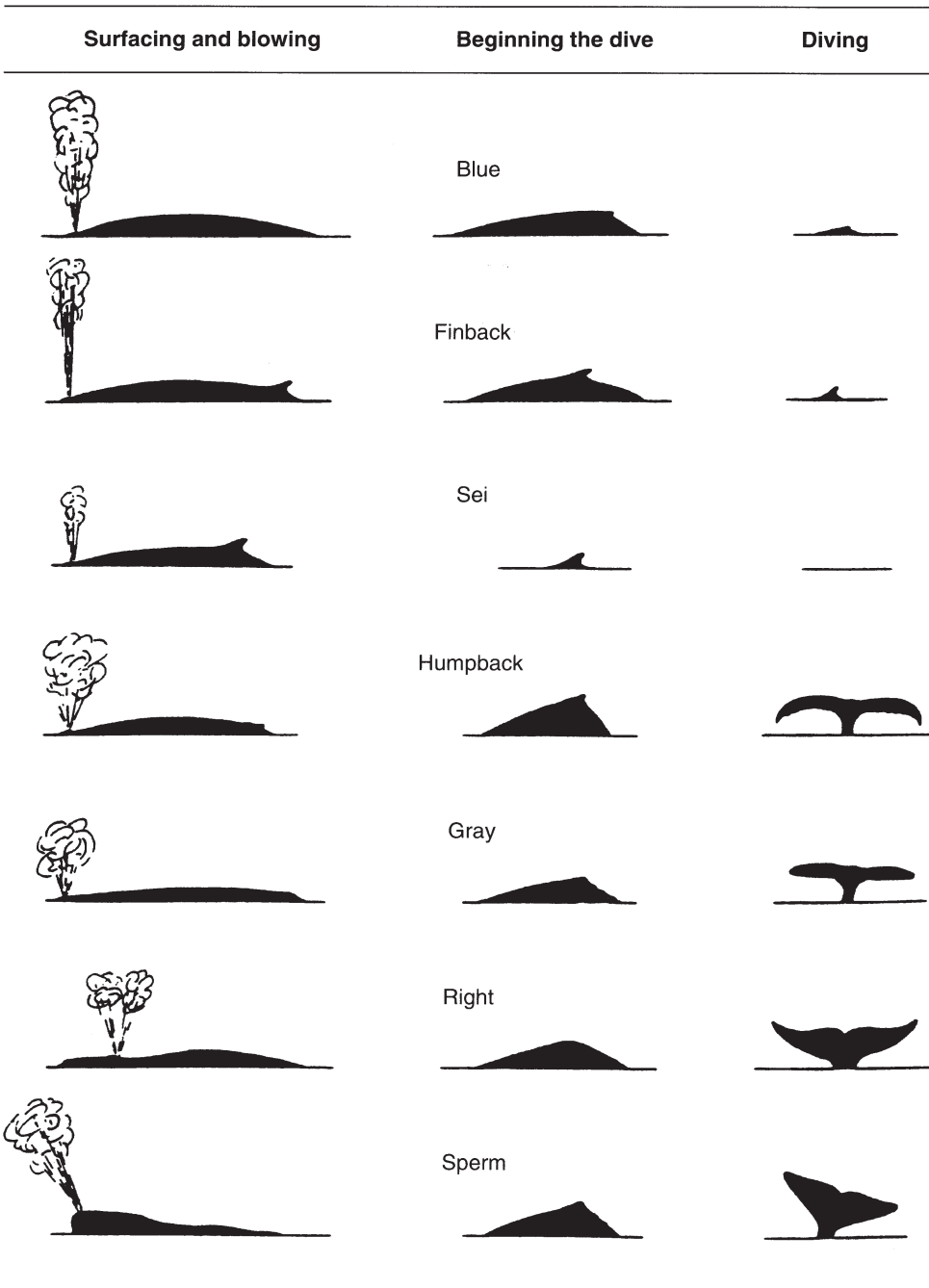


# Watching Whales

B.R. Mate

Figure 1.—Blowing and diving characteristics of some of the large whales (reproduced by permission from Gordon C. Pike, *Guide to the Whales, Porpoises and Dolphins of the North-East Pacific and Arctic Waters of Canada and Alaska*).



Marine mammals—especially whales—are really popular with the American public.

A growing interest in firsthand observation of whales brings many hopeful whale watchers to the coast. Whale watching is something you definitely get better at with practice, but it takes some patience.

Once you have seen what you are looking for, additional sightings are much easier, and you will start to see more details of whale behavior.

Even without scientific training, you can contribute to what science is learning about whales. One way to do this is to build accurate and systematic habits of observing, identifying, recording, and reporting your whale sightings.

Here are a few tips. Remember, patience is a virtue!

## When and where

1. Observe from coastal headlands that jut out into the ocean—especially those with good elevation. When shallow-water whales move along the shoreline, they usually will go around headlands very close to the point—and you are closer to deepwater species as well.
2. Pick early morning hours. Conditions usually are more favorable before winds cause whitecaps on the water's surface.
3. Choose weather that favors a calm ocean. Don't go during or just after a heavy storm. Overcast days are good for whale watching because there is little glare.

## What to look for

1. Scan the horizon and look for the *blow*—vapor, water, or condensation blown into the air up to 12 feet (3.6 m) when the whale exhales. (Backlighting by the afternoon sun can sometimes be helpful in spotting the blow initially.) See Figure 1.
2. Once you locate a blow, stay with it. Where you see one blow, you will see others either from other whales or the same whale. Getting the range (distance) to whales is a frequent problem, but once you establish it, you can focus your attention on this area.

