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The beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*) migrations along the Chukotka Peninsula: results of coastal observations

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Our knowledge about the beluga migrations in the Northern Bering Sea, Chukotka is very poor. The hypothesis is that in spring belugas migrate north along the coast towards the Chukchi Sea, and move back to the Bering Sea in autumn. This assumption is based on questionnaire data collected from local communities. Present research attempts to verify this hypothesis and is based on the data collected by the inspectors of the Beringia Nature-Ethnic Park from 1999 to 2011. The observations were conducted from 6 points on the southern coast of the Enmelen (1999-2000), Nunlingran (1999, 2007-2011), Sireniki (1999-2011), Provideniya Bay (1999, 2001-2002, 2006, 2011), Tkachen Bay (1999-2011), Senyavina Strait (1999, 2004-2011) daily. Number of belugas, behaviour, route, age structure, ice and weather conditions were recorded. In total, 25 500 whales were observed. Most of the belugas were sighted in spring and winter (135 and 65 times, respectively, all the observation points). In summer, they were spotted only 14 times (all in small numbers), and in autumn – 8 times. In winter-spring, belugas were mostly observed in the stationary coastal polynya near Sireniki (approx. 260 whales per month) and Nunligran (approx. 30 whales per month). Different group sizes (in average, approx. 90 belugas) and all age categories were observed. The most common behaviour was travelling. All whales seemed to move east along the coast regardless of season. In Sireniki, where the highest number of belugas was observed in winter months, the Anadyr current reaches its maximum speed and goes east close to the coast. We suppose that belugas inhabit off-shore waters in summer and autumn. Instrumental methods of research are necessary to check the suggestion.