NEW RECORDS OF BLUE WHALES Balaenoptera musculus (Linnaeus, 1758) IN WINTER SEASON IN THE INLET WATERS OF CHILOÉ CONTINENTAL-CHILE.

NUEVOS REGISTROS DE BALLENAS AZUL Balaenoptera musculus (Linnaeus, 1758) DURANTE EL INVIERNO EN AGUAS INTERIORES DE CHILOÉ CONTINENTAL-CHILE.

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Knowledge of blue whale Balaenoptera musculus (Linnaeus, 1758) distribution is limited, particularly in the Southern Hemisphere (Clapham et al., 1999). Blue whales sightings in Chile peak in summer and early autumn months (Branch et al. 2007). A feeding ground was described in southern Chile (Hucke-Gaete et al. 2004). Marine, aerial and land-based platforms surveys have documented the regular presence and concentration of blue whales from 2003 to present in the waters of the northern Los Lagos region (Galletti Vernazzani et al., 2008, 2009), the outer coast of Chiloé Island (Cabrera et al., 2005), the Corcovado Gulf, Guaitecas and Chonos Archipelagos and the Moraleda Channel (Hucke-Gaete et al. 2004).

In a recent article Viddi et al. (2010) showed that mysticetes were distributed disproportionately along a north–south gradient from Puerto Montt to south of Taitao Peninsula in northern Patagonian fjords, in open gulfs with oceanic influence, and close to shore. In contrast, odontocetes were observed mainly within narrow channels, areas with complex coastal morphology, peaking at different water depths.

However, the systematic research of Centro de Conservación Cetácea (Cabrera et al. 2005,) and Centro Ballena Azul (Hucke-Gaete et al. 2004, Viddi et al. 2010) work were just undertaken during the austral summer and early autumn months.

Therefore, to our knowledge, so far there is no previous work (effort) in fall in the area and there are no sightings of blue whales in winter season in the inshore waters of continental Chiloé.

In this note we report a first record of blue whales in winter season obtained in an opportunistic way during winter months in the Chilean Patagonian channels and fjords (Los Lagos region of Chile), extending its season presence and its range to the inlet waters and narrow channels of continental Northeastern–Chiloé.
The first new record corresponds to a sighting of a single adult blue whale observed by one of the authors (J.Z.A.) crossing the Gulf of Ancud around 14:30 on July 13 2009 (42°10’34”S 72°37’42”O) (Fig.1). The individual was photoidentified using marks on its dorsal fin (Fig. 2). The whale displayed no noteworthy behaviour, swimming in different directions and diving asynchronously. After 30-40 minutes, one boat approached the whale, and no change of behaviour was observed. The whale stayed in the bay for fifty minutes before swimming out to open sea.

We checked a video record of a second sighting, complementary to our record, that was done by salmon farms personnel in June 2009. The video corresponds to a group of two blue whales individuals inside the Comau fiord (42°15 “S 72°29”) (Fig.1). The whales were undertaking regular short dives and swimming parallel to the coastline between ten and twenty meters from shore.

This first record emphasize the necessity to make more effort on winter season to verify a possible year round presence of blue whales in Chiloé, probably influenced by feeding opportunities, thus highlighting the importance of the area for this specie.

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