

Voyage of the Mimi

The 1984 whale series, the boat it was named for, and Mimi's first day on the water

Two things share a name today. One is a public-television science series that a large share of American middle-schoolers watched between 1984 and the late nineties. The other is a dog going out on a pontoon boat for the first time. Below is what is actually known about each.

Part one — The Voyage of the Mimi (1984)

What it was, and why it existed

The Voyage of the Mimi was produced by the **Bank Street College of Education** in New York and debuted on **PBS in 1984**. It was not a documentary and not a drama — it was a curriculum. Each of the **13 episodes** ran two 15-minute halves: a fictional segment following a research crew aboard the sailing vessel *Mimi* counting and tracking humpback whales in the Gulf of Maine, then a nonfiction “**Expedition**” in which the young cast interviewed working scientists about the real version of whatever the story had just dramatized.

It began as a response to a **U.S. Department of Education** request for proposals in the early 1980s, with additional support from the **National Science Foundation**. Budget: **\$3.65 million**. Executive producer **Samuel Y. Gibbon Jr.** came from *Sesame Street*. An **18-member science advisory board** vetted content, and the material was tested on child focus groups before it shipped.

Principal photography ran **two months in the summer of 1983**, shot on **16mm** by director/cinematographer **D'Arcy Marsh**, working out of **Gloucester, Massachusetts** and around the Maine coast. Theme music by **Jeff Lass**.

The boat was real, and older than the show by fifty years

The *Mimi* was a **French gabare** — a shallow-draft coastal cargo barge — built in **Camaret, Brittany**. She was **72 feet** long. Her working life, in order:

- Coastal cargo hauling, then conversion to a **tuna trawler**.
- **Seized by German forces in 1942** and used to move munitions.
- Converted to a **sailboat by a French family in the 1960s**.
- Sailed across to **New England in the 1970s**.
- Bought by **Peter G. Marston**, a **plasma physicist at MIT** — who also played Captain Clement Tyler Granville in the series. The captain of the boat on screen owned the boat in life.

- Through the late 1980s and 1990s she worked as a floating classroom, running from New England to the Gulf of Mexico with “**Mimifests**” at port stops so schoolchildren could walk the deck they had watched on a television cart.
- She **sank in 2008**, was found deteriorating in East Boston, restoration attempts failed, and she was **scrapped in July 2011**.

One fact does not agree across sources. Mental Floss dates her build to **1931** in Camaret; Wikipedia says **1934**. Nobody disputes the hull, the country, or the 72 feet — only the year. Treat it as “early 1930s” unless you find the registry.

The cast

Actor	Role	Worth knowing
Ben Affleck	Clement Tyler “C.T.” Granville	His television debut, at 11 or 12 — sources split on the age and on whether it was his first or second acting job. He has said since that he did not enjoy the shoot.
Peter G. Marston	Captain Granville, C.T.'s grandfather	An actual MIT scientist and the actual owner of the <i>Mimi</i> .
Judy Pratt	Sally Ruth Cochran, graduate assistant	A Deaf actress from Gallaudet University playing a Deaf scientist. Episode 7's expedition, <i>Hands Full of Words</i> , is built around this — American Sign Language taught as a working scientific language, on national television, in 1984.
Victoria Gadsden	Anne Abrams	The lead whale researcher.
Edwin De Asis	Ramon Rojas	
Mark Graham	Arthur Spencer	
Mary Tanner	Rachel Fairbanks	

All 13 episodes

Story segment / Expedition segment.

1. All Aboard / Planet Ocean
2. Setting Sail / Whalewatch
3. On the Shoals / Mapping the Blue Part

4. Counting Whales / Whale Bones
5. Going Fishing / Scraping the Bottom
6. Home Movies / Songs in the Sea
7. Fastening On / Hands Full of Words
8. Tracking the Whale / The World's Worst Weather
9. Shipwrecked / Goosebumps
10. Making Dew / Water, Water Everywhere
11. The Feast / A New Alchemy
12. Rolling Home / Boatshop
13. Separate Ways / A Sailor and a Scientist

Episode 9, *Goosebumps*, was banned in three states including Texas. The crew is shipwrecked and treats hypothermia the correct way — skin-to-skin, in a sleeping bag, mostly undressed. That is standard cold-water first aid. It was pulled anyway.

The scientists were not actors

The Expedition halves put children in a room with the people doing the work:

- **Sylvia Earle** — oceanographer; later National Geographic explorer-in-residence and the first woman to serve as chief scientist of NOAA.
- **Katharine (Katy) Payne** — the zoologist who, with Roger Payne, established that humpback whale vocalizations are **songs**: structured, repeated, and **changing over time** across a whole population. She later did the same work for infrasonic elephant communication.
- **Kim Kastens** — marine geologist; the seafloor-mapping material.
- **Ted Taylor** — physicist, and a genuinely strange casting choice for a children's show: a former nuclear weapons designer at Los Alamos who spent his later career arguing against the thing he built.

The whale-song footnote, which is bigger than the show

Payne's research produced ***Songs of the Humpback Whale (1970)***, recorded with **Frank Watlington**. It is the **best-selling nature recording ever made** — past 100,000 copies and eventually multi-platinum. In **1979 National Geographic pressed a flexi disc of it for 10.5 million subscribers**, the largest single pressing in the history of recorded sound. An excerpt is aboard the **Voyager Golden Record**, currently in interstellar space. It entered the **National Recording Registry in 2010**.

Roger Payne played those recordings in testimony to the Department of the Interior. The **Marine Mammal Protection Act passed in 1972**; the **Endangered Species Act in 1973**.

Did any of it work? The data says yes — with an asterisk

The easy version of this story is that seventies environmentalism was mostly mood. The humpback numbers do not support that.

In **September 2016** NOAA Fisheries stopped treating humpbacks as one worldwide listing and split the species into **14 distinct population segments**. Of those, **nine were found not to warrant listing at all**. Five remain protected: **four endangered** (Central America, Western North Pacific, Arabian Sea, and Cape Verde Islands/Northwest Africa) and **one threatened** (Mexico). The West Indies population — the one the *Mimi's* Gulf of Maine whales belong to — has been growing at about **3.1% a year**. East Australia has run near **11% a year**.

The asterisk. Delisting is not the same as safe, and the threat profile has changed completely. Whaling is no longer the problem; **fishing-gear entanglement and vessel strikes are**. All humpbacks remain protected under the MMPA regardless of ESA status, and four stocks are still designated depleted. The 1984 pitch — count them, learn them, protect them — was right. What it was protecting them *from* is not what is killing them now.

The software half, which people forget

The series shipped with **four Apple II software modules** — this was a computer-literacy program as much as a marine-biology one. The **1985** set was written by **Cynthia Char, Bill Tally, Dennis Sullivan, Michael Martin and Roberta Schwartz** and published by **Holt, Rinehart and Winston**:

- **Hurricane** — weather data and forecasting
- **Lost at Sea** — navigation and position-fixing
- **Pirate's Gold** — map reading and coordinates
- **Rescue Mission** — the same, under time pressure

All four survive as disk images in the **Internet Archive's 4am Collection**, cracked and preserved in 2015. They need an Apple II emulator; they are not playable in a browser.

The Second Voyage of the Mimi (1988)

Greenlit before the first series even aired. **12 episodes**, same two-part format, this time **Maya archaeology** — the crew works ruins in **Quintana Roo, Mexico, near Tulum** while trying to stop looters. **Ben Affleck and Peter Marston both returned**. Expedition segments ranged well past Mexico: the **Royal Observatory at Greenwich**, a hyperbaric medicine center in the **Bronx**, and **cloud forest in Costa Rica**. Researchers on camera included **David Stuart** (Maya epigrapher), **Bill Fash, Peter Reynolds** and canopy ecologist **Nalini Nadkarni**.

It nearly did not happen: the Reagan administration moved to defund it, and a Department of Education official named **Frank Withrow** kept it alive. Affleck's mother, **Chris Affleck**, a Boston public school teacher, tutored the child cast in math and social studies during the Mexico shoot.

Where to watch it now — honestly

It is not on a major streaming service. Plex lists the show and its full episode guide but currently reports no sources. It was released on VHS and LaserDisc, and was posted to **iTunes U** around 2014 — a platform that no longer exists. Clips and full episodes surface and disappear on YouTube. The most durable public copies right now are the **Internet Archive** items: the software, the theme song, the tie-in book, and the ERIC document for the second series.

Part two — Mimi's first voyage

Different Mimi. Four hours, one pontoon, a lake with no swell and no traffic to speak of. As first boats go, this is close to the easiest possible version — a pontoon is a wide, flat, stable platform with a low deck and a rail, which is exactly what you would pick for a dog who has never done this.

The dock is the whole thing

The single highest-value ten minutes of the day happen before the engine starts. Let her stand on the deck while it is still tied up and moving gently. Walk on and off the boat a few times with her. Feed her something on the deck. What you are teaching is that the surface moves and nothing bad happens. Doing this at the dock is far easier than doing it at cruising speed, and the advance team is there from 10:30 specifically so there is time for it.

Rules that are not negotiable

- **Life jacket, even if she swims well.** Rental operations do not stock dog jackets — the marina's are human-sized. It has to come from home. The grab handle on the back is the actual point: it is how you lift a wet 50-pound dog over a gunwale.
- **Never tether her to the boat.** A leashed dog in a capsize is a trapped dog. Leashes are for the marina property, where they are required; on the water they come off.
- **Work out the way back aboard before she is in the water.** The swim is the fun part and the exit is the hard part. Know which corner of the deck is lowest, and who is lifting.
- **Shade and fresh water, continuously.** Lake water is not drinking water, and an aluminum-and-vinyl deck in August sun gets hot enough to hurt paws well before it feels hot to a bare human foot. Check it with the back of your hand.
- **Watch for the moment she wants out.** Panting that will not settle, pacing, trying to get low and small, or hiding under a bench. Anchoring in a quiet cove fixes almost all of it — the boat stops moving and the noise stops.

What actually goes wrong on a first trip

Rarely swimming. Usually one of three things: **heat, the noise and vibration of the outboard under way, or a bad first entry into the water** — a dog who jumps or falls in before she has figured out how to get back out. The route is built to help here without anyone having to think about it: the longest stretch under way is the first 25 minutes to Buck Pasture, after which the boat is anchored for 95 minutes. Most of her day is a stationary platform in shade, not a moving one.

Motion sickness is real in dogs and looks like drooling first, before any nausea is obvious. It is far more common in young dogs and usually improves with exposure. Nothing to do about it today except notice it, get her to the flattest part of the deck, and anchor sooner rather than later.

The tie-back, for whoever asks

The 1984 series opens with a crew getting a boat under way and immediately having to learn where they are, what the water is doing, and how to count what they came to see. Expedition 1 was called *Planet Ocean*. This is Expedition 1 for a different Mimi, on 2,700 acres of drowned valley in Sonoma County, and the whole curriculum is: the floor moves, the water is fine, and you can get back on.

Six things to say aboard

- The captain in the show owned the boat in real life, and was an MIT plasma physicist.
- The boat was a 1930s French cargo barge the Germans took for munitions in 1942. It was scrapped in Boston in 2011.
- Ben Affleck was 11 or 12, it was his TV debut, and he has said he hated it.
- A whale-song record from 1970 is the best-selling nature album ever made, was pressed for 10.5 million National Geographic subscribers in 1979, and is currently on the Voyager probe leaving the solar system.
- Nine of the world's fourteen humpback populations no longer need Endangered Species Act protection. Five still do.
- One episode was banned in Texas for correctly demonstrating hypothermia treatment.

Sources

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- [Water Safety Tips for Boating and Kayaking With Dogs — American Kennel Club](#)