



Marine Research
Station

ANNUAL REPORT 2025



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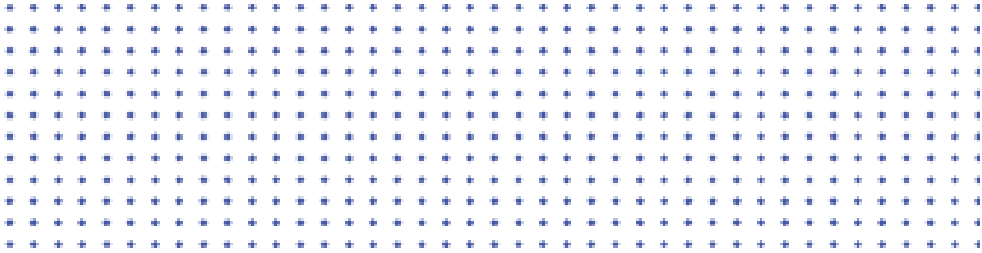


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INTRODUCTION

Two highlights marked Mériscope's 25th season: **an extremely ambitious documentary film project in collaboration with Coraxfilm GmbH and the German broadcaster NDR to portray the ecosystem of the St. Lawrence River (a four-part series), and a partnership with the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park in Canada as part of our research project on the photo-identification of minke whales.** Three students from Canada, the USA, and France, along with two Swiss high school graduates, participated in our accredited internship program and concluded it by presenting their respective research projects.



Our minke whale monitoring and photo-identification project in the St. Lawrence Estuary continued into 2025, with our team active in the field until the end of October. This project has become an indispensable part of all our research initiatives, a fact underscored by our partnerships with Coraxfilm and the Marine Park. The icing on the cake was the selection of Romain Thibault — a team member from France — **from among more than 100 applicants for an exciting doctoral project on St. Lawrence belugas at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM).**

Mériscope's **2025 fiscal year** ended on December 31, 2025, with an **annual surplus of \$10,953** (2024: \$10,223) and **net assets of \$57,858** (2024: \$46,383). **A private house in Portneuf-sur-Mer** served as the base and laboratory; excursions to sea were conducted using our two rigid-hulled inflatable boats — the **NARVAL** and the **MARSOUIN** — operating out of Les Bergeronnes and Portneuf-sur-Mer.

RESEARCH



The long-term monitoring and photo-identification project for minke whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence has enabled us to optimize our database and deepen our expertise in identifying these whales. In 2025, a total of 27 excursions were conducted, amounting to 157 hours of fieldwork; sightings included 103 minke whales, 14 humpback whales, 20 fin whales,

19 blue whales, 504 harbor porpoises, 325 belugas, 198 harbor seals, and 686 gray seals. **During the 2025 season, 19 minke whales were identified, comprising 16 re-sightings and 3 new individuals.** A significant portion of this data comes from our volunteer Guillaume Savard — a minke whale observer and captain for Croisière Escoumins — who documented 4 of the 16 re-sighted animals. **The updated minke whale catalog now comprises 314 individuals.** It is an indispensable and highly effective tool that serves as the foundation for all our research projects.

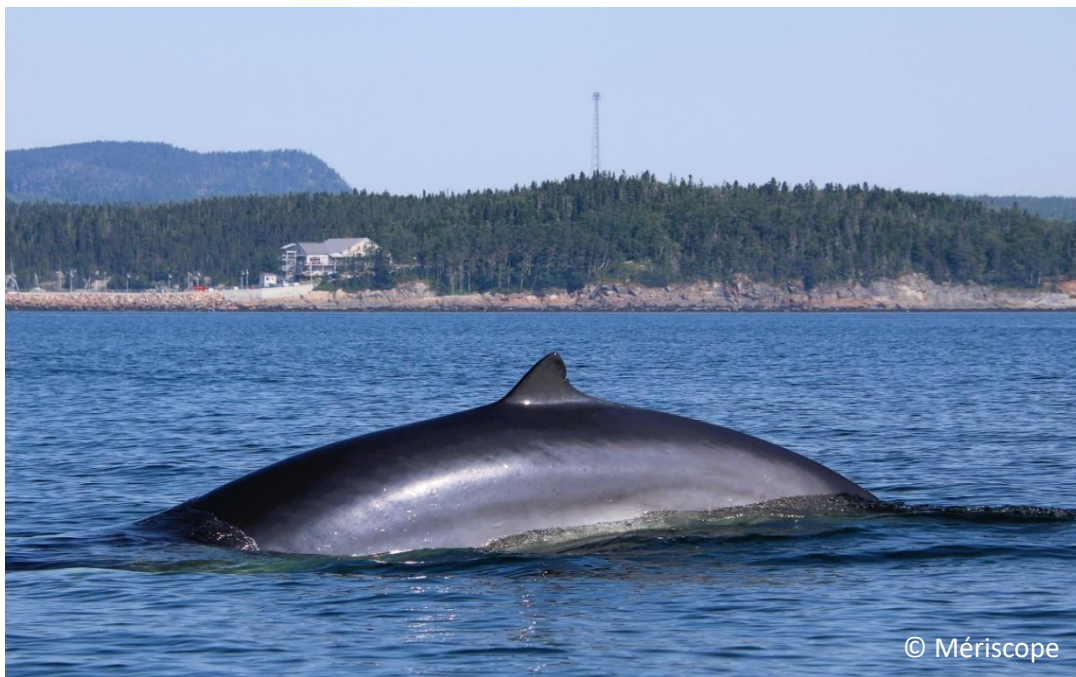
Since 2025, a new collaboration with the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park (SSLMP) has enabled us to carry out a promising project focusing on minke whales in the St. Lawrence Estuary. **Comparing the Mériscope's minke whale catalog with that of the SSLMP yielded the following results:** Photo-based data collection on minke whales in the PMSSL database spans the period from 1991 to 2011, whereas the



Mériscope dataset covers the period from 2001 to 2025 (excluding the years 2009, 2010, and 2020). While SSLMP fieldwork took place primarily within the marine park — with occasional excursions to the Îlets Boisés and Île Verte — Mériscope conducted fieldwork between Les Escoumins and Cap Colombier (an area northeast of the SSLMP) from 2001 to 2014, and between Sainte-Catherine and Forestville from 2015 to 2025. SSLMP carried out the identification and matching of individual animals visually; identification photos were stored in folders and are currently being analyzed by SSLMP staff using CatRLog. In contrast, Mériscope identifies minke whales using specialized software (DARWIN 2.2), which allows for the classification of identifications based on feature positioning and the inclusion of metadata (date and time, geographic coordinates, biopsy information, etc.). The Mériscope catalog lists 314 individuals, compared to 276 in the SSLMP catalog.



Of the 26 minke whales selected from the SSLMP catalog, 12 matched individuals in the Mériscope catalog, 12 yielded no match, and 2 lacked distinctive dorsal fin features, making a comparison with the Mériscope catalog impossible. The Mériscope team had collected biopsies from four of these matched individuals between 2016 and 2021. Of the 26 minke whales selected from the Mériscope catalog, 18 resulted in a match, while 8 had no counterpart among the individuals in the SSLMP catalog. Biopsies had been collected from 17 of these 26 minke whales from the Mériscope catalog between 2015 and 2023; this group included 12 individuals for which matches were found in the SSLMP catalog.



A striking observation regarding minke whale sightings compared to 2023 is that the animals not only arrived about one to two months later than usual — typically mid-July rather than mid-May or June — but, more importantly, appeared in significantly lower numbers. In 2025, we recorded 72 minke whale

sightings — a 78% decrease compared to 2023 — based on figures normalized to the same amount of time spent on the water (109 hours). This confirms a trend we had already observed in 2024 (94 sightings, a 70% decrease compared to 2023). This trend is further corroborated by the re-identification of our known and "star" minke whales: their numbers dropped from 19 in 2023 to 10 in 2024 (a 47% decrease) and 11 in 2025 (a 42% decrease compared to 2023, again based on normalized figures). This trend is even more pronounced regarding the number of newly identified individuals, which fell from 26 in 2023 to three in 2024 (an 88% decrease) and two in 2025 (a 92% decrease compared to 2023).

EDUCATION

In its fifth year, our Mériscope program attracted two students from Switzerland who completed a four-week internship as part of their high school graduation projects. Under the supervision of Dany Zbinden, a student from the Gymnasium Hohe Promenade in Zurich and a student from the Gymnasium Oberwil in Basel investigated topics related to whales in the St. Lawrence Estuary. **Ariane Jakob** focused on the project « **Classification of dorsal fin lesions in minke whales using artificial intelligence,** » while **Nina Studer** conducted a study on « **Monitoring demographic trends of the minke whale population in the St. Lawrence Estuary using photo-identification.** »



As for our credit-bearing internship program for university students, it enabled two students — one from the Université du Québec à Rimouski (UQÀR) and one from Boston University (USA) — to complete a six-week, credit-earning internship at Mériscope. **Sara Malo-Théberge** (UQÀR) prepared a summary on the topic of « **Impacts of climate change on Arctic marine mammals,** » while **Julia Band Orange** (Boston University) conducted an analysis on the « **Energy balance of humpback whales in changing oceans.** »

As in every one of the past 25 years, Mériscope was able to rely on highly motivated and dedicated research assistants to carry out its work. This year, two students enhanced their professional profiles by completing an internship as research assistants at Mériscope.



Romain Thibault, who held a master's degree from the University of Rennes (France) with a thesis on the fine-scale habitat selection of minke whales in the waters off the northwestern Iberian Peninsula, assisted Dany from mid-June to the end of October with all the tasks the team had planned for the season. During his internship, **Romain applied for a PhD position at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) focusing on the epigenetic clock in belugas in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.**

There were more than 100 applicants for this four-year doctoral program supervised by Dr. Jonathan Verreault — and, **to the great delight of the entire Mériscope team, our Romain was selected !!!**

For two weeks in September, **Cailin Hesketh-Jost** — who recently completed her bachelor's degree at the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba — supported the Mériscope team before beginning her master's studies at McGill University under the supervision of Melissa McKinney. Cailin will continue the project initiated by Haley Land-Miller in 2021. **Using state-of-the-art methods, the project aims to expand knowledge regarding the ecology of the minke whale in the North Atlantic** — specifically concerning population structure, migration routes, and foraging ecology. Minke whales are among the most common whale species in the North Atlantic and, as generalist predators, can serve as valuable indicators of ecosystem health. Through the use of genomic techniques and the analysis of additional samples from Northeast Atlantic minke whales, the study aims to examine population structure, stock connectivity, and local adaptations at high resolution. During her internship, Cailin participated in filming with the Coraxfilm team — and judging by her smile, she thoroughly enjoyed the experience.



OUTREACH



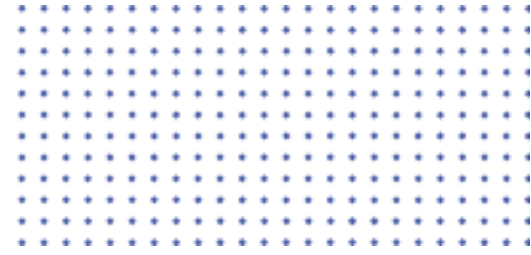
A highlight of the 2025 season was this documentary film project on the St. Lawrence River ecosystem, produced for the German broadcaster NDR in collaboration with the television production company Coraxfilm. Their team has specialized in nature documentaries for 25 years. The project aimed to capture high-quality footage to create a comprehensive

portrait of the St. Lawrence River ecosystem — spanning from its source (effectively Niagara Falls) to the Atlantic (specifically Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and Labrador). The camera crew had already spent more than two years in the Canadian Atlantic provinces before bringing in Mériscope for filming in Quebec; this involved not only the actual production but also organizational aspects (such as permits) and logistics.

This collaboration was divided into two phases: the first in winter, from February 15 to March 3, 2025, and the second in summer, from September 6 to October 2, 2025. Fisheries and Oceans Canada granted us two permits covering both filming periods — including authorization to use drones to film endangered species (beluga, blue whale, and



North Atlantic right whale). **In contrast, despite several discussions on the matter, the authorities of the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park decided against granting our request for a filming permit that would have allowed us to film marine mammals within the marine park during the summer months.**



Despite these administrative hurdles, filming in the St. Lawrence Estuary was a resounding success. The winter shoots allowed us to film migrating belugas, the Saguenay Fjord in its winter setting, and ice fishing, as well as — to our great surprise — blue whales feeding at the surface off Portneuf-sur-Mer. During the summer shoots, Almut (director and camera)

and Christoph (drone pilot) captured breathtaking footage of minke whales, humpback whales, fin whales, blue whales, belugas, and seals in the St. Lawrence Estuary, including sequences filmed with an underwater camera. In addition, the work of Mériscope was documented — both in the field (photo-identification, biopsies) and in the laboratory (minke whale catalog) — alongside the coastal landscapes and human activities that threaten marine wildlife in the St. Lawrence.

Editing of the documentary will be completed in the autumn of 2026; NDR will broadcast it as a four-part series — with each episode lasting 45 minutes — as part of its « Expeditionen ins Tierreich » program (“Expeditions to the Animal Kingdom”). Canadian singer Bryan Adams, born in 1959 in Kingston near the St. Lawrence River, composed the film's



theme song. Plans are in place to release an English-language version on Netflix in 2027, followed — possibly shortly thereafter — by a French-language version on ARTE.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ORGANIZATION



For the 2025 season, we planned a **renovation project** for our **student accommodation** with the aim of increasing the chalet's capacity from four to six people and installing a bathroom with a shower. This project was made possible by a very generous donation from « **Niagara Action for Animals** »

as well as contributions — both in terms of labor and finances — from our long-time volunteer **Andreas Baumann** (also known as « **Andyman the Handyman** »), supported by our teammate **Romain** !

As for nautical equipment, our inflatable boat **MARSOUIN** made its first outings at sea — **equipped** with a **brand-new 50 hp Suzuki out-board motor**, a **new fixed GPS unit**, and a **fuel tank** modified to meet Transport Canada specifications. The **NARVAL**, meanwhile, un-



derwent a comprehensive refit: it received a new paint job, new safety lines, a new GPS display, and an emergency position-indicating radio beacon (EPIRB).



As I look back today from my desk as **Director of the Mériscopie**, I would like to **highlight two key points**: 1) For 25 years, we have been dedicated to the St. Lawrence River ecosystem and to marine mammals. **We owe our continued activity to our interns (over 450 in 25 years), our volunteers, and our donors (totaling more than \$120,000 in donations over 25 years) !! A HUGE THANK YOU to all our interns, supporters, and donors — with a special logo designed by Johanne Lemieux, who has**

been involved for over 12 years as a volunteer, donor, and board member !!!

2) It is undeniable that **this ongoing support has enabled Mériscopie to achieve a level of performance and professionalism that, over the years, has led to partnerships with universities in Canada, Europe, and the United States, as well as with the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park.** I am convinced that these partnerships — especially when based on medium- to long-term agreements — can serve **as a model for a committed and more sustainable society and act as effective game changers** in a world increasingly feeling the impacts of climate change.

CITATION OF THE YEAR

(From Sylvia Earle, in
« Sea Change –
Message of the
Oceans »)

« Most individuals who change the course of history are not recognized publicly for their good or bad deeds. Most decisions that matter, in fact, seem too trivial to be noticed, but each and every choice made by all the world's individuals, taken together at the end of a day, week, year, or millennium shape the direction of society, cause the actions that collectively build or destroy civilizations. »