



# Humpback Whales

## Factsheet

Organisation for the Rescue & Research of  
Cetaceans in Australia



Humpback whales were nearly hunted to extinction. The last whaling station in NSW, at Byron Bay, closed in 1962 due to the lack of whales. Humpback whales are now protected throughout Australia and in NSW are listed as a vulnerable species under the Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.

### Features:

- A dark grey or black body, with white patches on its belly, pectoral fins and underside of the tail flukes. These unique black and white markings are like fingerprints, no two are the same. This fingerprint or fluke identification (ID) aids researchers in identifying individuals as they migrate along the coast.
- Their long pectoral fins are almost all white underneath, with bumps on the leading edges. Unlike any other whale, the humpback's flukes and pectoral fins are scalloped or serrated on the trailing edge.
- A slim head, or rostrum, covered with knobs with a distinctive rounded protuberance near the tip of the lower jaw.
- Large numbers of barnacles often cover both the rostrum and pectoral fins.
- A small dorsal fin located nearly two-thirds of the way down their back.

Humpback whales are baleen whales. They don't have any teeth, and feed by filtering shrimp-like krill. They have between 270-400 baleen plates which hang from the upper jaw.

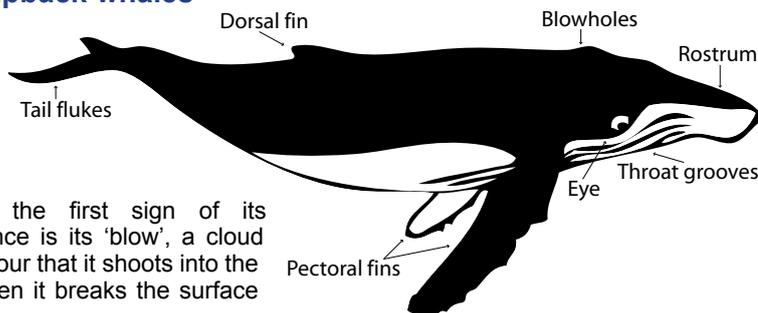
Humpback whales are also rorquals, whales which have distinctive throat grooves. They have up to 35 broad ventral throat grooves, extending at least to their navels. Their bodies are more rotund than those of other rorquals. Female humpback whales can be up to 16 m long. As with all baleen whales, the male is slightly smaller.

### What do Humpback whales look like?

The Humpback whale is one of the most easily recognisable of the large whales.



Often the first sign of its presence is its 'blow', a cloud of vapour that it shoots into the air when it breaks the surface to breathe.



Humpback whales get their name from the humped area of blubber anterior to their dorsal fin which is accentuated by the arching of their backs when diving.



They will often roll forward to dive until only their tail flukes stick out of the water. This is called a fluke-up dive.

When you see this image on the right, the animal is waving its extraordinarily long pectoral fins.



They may do a leisurely body roll which ends with a splash as their pectoral fin smacks the surface of the water, the sound of which can be heard from quite a distance.

Humpback whales can launch themselves out of the water in a spectacular motion called breaching. There are theories as to why whales breach. They may be communicating to other whales across vast distances, trying to attract other whales (including a mate), to warn off vessels or other males, or perhaps to cool off, remove parasites such as barnacles, or just for fun! Seen from any distance, this action is one of the most dramatic and awe-inspiring in the animal kingdom.

### What do they sound like?

Humpback whales are one of the most exuberant of all whale species, and are celebrated for their energetic antics and haunting 'songs'.

During migration, male humpback whales often 'sing' complex, lengthy and distinctive songs to communicate their presence to females to entice them to mate. They use syllables and rhyming phrases with a complex sequence of clicks, moans and eerie high-pitched wails that can last for a few moments or an hour. The sounds range from canary-like chirps to deep rumbling sounds that carry for hundreds of kilometres. The 'songs' change subtly each

year and different Humpback populations have different songs.

### When can you see them?

During the hotter months of the year, from November to May, Humpback whales feed in the waters of the Antarctic. They then migrate north to their subtropical breeding grounds off the Queensland coast and the Coral Sea.

They can be observed along the NSW coast:

- between May and July, heading north.
- from September to November, on their way back to the Antarctic. On this southern migration it is possible to view the mother and calf pairs as they slowly make their way down south.

### Facts

#### Weight:

Adults up to 50 tonnes;  
Calves 2 tonnes at birth

#### Gestation:

11 to 11.5 months

#### Weaning Age:

up to 11 months

#### Calving interval:

2 to 3 years

#### Physical maturity:

Age: 12 to 15 years

Length: 13 to 14m

#### Sexual maturity:

Age: 4 to 10 years

#### Length:

11.6m Males

12.1m Females

#### Mating season:

June to October

#### Calving season:

June to October

#### Cruising speed:

7km/hr

#### Blow pattern:

Small and bushy, up to 4m

#### Protected:

Since 1965

Photographs:

© Wendy McFarlane,

© Wayne Reynolds,

© Wayne Reynolds.



Please report all marine mammal sightings and incidents

24 hour Hotline – (02) **94153333**