

Ningaloo Coast

World Heritage area

fact
sheet

Dolphins

The Playful Ones

Dolphins are one of the most loved and charismatic marine animals. Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops aduncus*) are perhaps the most common dolphin in Western Australia and can be seen in all coastal waters, including the Ningaloo Coast.

Good Looks

Bottlenose dolphins are named after their short nose or rostrum that resembles a bottle.

Home

Bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops spp.*) can be found in warm and cold waters all over the world, including along coasts and in estuaries and offshore in the open ocean. For the Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin, many call the Ningaloo Coast home.

Favourite Foods

Bottlenose dolphins eat up to 15kg of fish, squid and octopus per day. They are highly intelligent creatures using echolocation to find food. The clicking sounds they make travel through the water hitting objects up to 200 metres away and echoing back allowing



Echolocation

them to work out the size, speed and distance of their prey. They work together in groups to hunt, swimming around schools of fish herding them together

and taking turns to feed. They have been seen deliberately to beaching themselves onshore to eat their prey. They also use their rostrum to dig out fish buried on the sea floor. Dolphins do not drink water instead they get all of the water they need from the fish they eat.

Playtime

Dolphins are highly social animals. They are inquisitive and playful, and are often seen bow-riding vessels and surfing waves. When socialising together they chase one another and can be seen rolling over each other, leaping up to 10 metres out of the water!



At Ningaloo Reef, you can see Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins foraging and socialising in the shallow lagoon waters.

Credit: Tim Hunt, CEBEL, Flinders University

Family

Bottlenose dolphins live together in families called pods. The pods have close bonds with extensive interaction such as playing, touching and communicating with noises. They sometimes merge with other pods to form superpods of hundreds of animals!

A bottlenose dolphin lifespan is typically 30 -50 years, and they begin to reproduce from about 6 years of age. A calf is born after a 12 month gestation period and their mother pushes them to the surface to take their first breath. Like other mammals, calves drink milk from their mothers. Bottlenose dolphins typically stay with their mother for 3-6 years.



A cheeky, playful young Indo-Pacific Bottlenose dolphin. Dolphins are born less than 1 m long, tail first so they don't drown. They drink their mother's milk for 18 months and start eating fish at 6 months

Credit: Tim Hunt, CEBEL, Flinders University

More on Dolphins

Adults reach approximately 2-4 metres in length and weigh between 150-650 kilograms kg.

They are air breathing mammals so must come to the surface to breathe through their blowhole but they can hold their breath for up to 7 minutes.

They belong to the group known as 'toothed whales'.

Unlike a fish, the tail is flat which provides extra propulsion allowing them to swim up to 40km/h.

A hook shaped back (dorsal) fin midway along the body.

Sleek, streamlined bodies with dark to light grey colouring, fading to white on the belly.

A prominent melon on the forehead which contains oily fat and is where the blowhole (their nostril) is located.

Eyes are located at the side of their heads providing nearly 360 degree vision. They have good vision both above and below the water and can see well at night.

A short bottle like nose which is called a rostrum and contains pointed teeth.

Dolphins produce high-frequency clicks that humans can't hear. They use these clicks in a sonar system called echolocation.

Friends and Foes

At Ningaloo, Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins are often seen in groups with another dolphin species - the Australian humpback dolphin (*Sousa sahulensis*). The Australian humpback dolphin is endemic to coastal waters of northern Australia and southern New Guinea. They can be distinguished by their long, thin rostrum and triangular dorsal fin. In most adult humpback dolphins the dorsal fin often has a prominent white colour along the edges, caused by loss of pigmentation as the animal gets older. Humpback dolphins are similar in size to their bottlenose dolphin friends, but tend to be shy of boats. Not much is known about our Aussie humpback dolphins, but researchers are working hard to learn more about this endemic species.



This dolphin has discarded fishing line tangled around its dorsal fin

Credit: Holly Raudino

Helping Hand

The Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin can be impacted by human activities; including litter such as plastic bags and fishing line, boat strikes, and habitat destruction.

You can help:

- keep their environment clean by taking all your rubbish and fishing gear home
- give them space to go about their natural activities
- if you see an injured dolphin, report it to your local Parks and Wildlife Service.



Spot the difference: Which dorsal fin belongs to the Indo pacific bottle nose dolphin? The fin at the front which is larger and more rounded. The other smaller, more triangular fin is their friend the Australian humpback dolphin

Credit: Tim Hunt, CEBEL, Flinders University