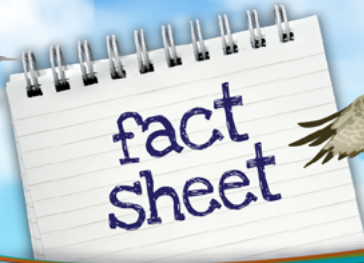


Ningaloo Coast

World Heritage area



Humpback Whales

Giant Migrants

The Ningaloo Coast and neighbouring Exmouth Gulf is the winter playground for the charismatic humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*).

Good Looks

Humpback whales are named after their distinct, hump-like fin on their back. They are the 5th largest of the great whales.

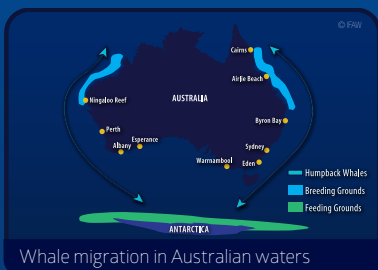


Watch these humpback whales in action

Credit: Lyn Irvine

Home

Humpback whales are winter visitors to Ningaloo. After spending summer in Antarctica feeding and fattening up, they migrate 6000km up the Western Australian coast to mate and calf. They start their southbound migration in September and females with calves stop off in the Exmouth Gulf to nurse and rest until November.



Whale migration in Australian waters

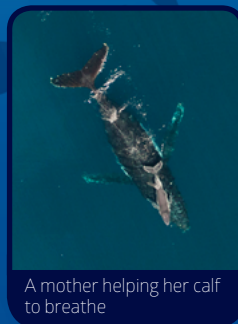
Family

The West Coast population has been increasing at about 10% per year after they were nearly eliminated by whaling. In 2014 the population was estimated to be 30,000 individuals. Aerial surveys allow scientists to estimate populations and whales movements.

Humpback whales have a unique life cycle. When sexually mature around 4-10 years, they use the warmer northern waters to mate and give birth. At birth, calves are the size of a small car, up to 4.5m long and weigh 1 tonne but have no protective

blubber. To build up their blubber so they can survive in Antarctica, calves drink up to 240 litres of milk from their mother per day (containing 45%-60% fat content).

A nursing calf can gain more than 45 kg a day during its first weeks of life. A female has a calf on average every 2-3 years. Often male whales (known as escorts) will accompany new mothers in the hope of being able to mate.



A mother helping her calf to breathe

Credit: Lyn Irvine

Favourite Foods

Despite their size, humpback whales eat krill which is smaller than your pinky fingernail. Feeding techniques such as 'lunge feeding' and 'bubble netting' are used to gulp up large volumes of water and filter out krill through their broom like baleen plates. They are known to feed both alone and co-operatively.

They can eat up to 1000kg of food each day which helps them build their huge layer of blubber to keep them warm in the freezing Antarctic waters. During their northward migration they live mostly off their fat reserves, however opportunistic feeding has been observed at Ningaloo.

Friends and Foes

On the southern migration, humpback calves are vulnerable to predators like killer whales so they tend to stay closer to shore, hugging the reef for protection. Male 'escorts' will also help mothers protect their calves.

More on Humpback Whales

Adults reach 14-15m long and weigh up to 45 tonnes - the equivalent of roughly 12 fully-grown elephants and their two lungs are the size of a small car. Females are usually larger.



They have a layer of blubber up to 15-50 cm thick that keeps them warm.



The average dive is typically 5-10 minutes, but they can be submerged for up to 40 minutes and can dive to depths of over 150m. Often the first sighting of whales is the 'blow' which is their breath rushing out and can reach up to 4m high.

Humpbacks are thought to live for 50 years or more. Scientists can estimate their age by looking at the wax plug in their ears.



A broad and rounded head covered with knobby bump-like growths known as tubercles, which are thought to serve a sensory function.



Arched lower lip of a whale can often make it look like it is smiling!



They don't have teeth but broom like baleen plates made of keratin, the same material as human fingernails.



The shape of their dorsal fins are unique to each whale and the markings on the dorsal fin and underside of their tails allow individuals to be identified.



Long, knobby pectoral fins which can grow up to a third of their body length. They have a bone structure similar to a human hand.



Other whale species that visit the Ningaloo Coast include the:

Killer whale (Orca):

Their annual visits to Ningaloo coincide with the humpback whale migration which is a major food source for them. They are highly social, forming groups of mixed sex, with calves and juveniles. A photo ID program has shown the Ningaloo family consists of up to 20 killer whales. The dorsal fin of a male adult killer whale is straight and tall (up to 1.8 metres high) and they have a predicted lifespan of up to 90 years.



Dwarf minke whale:

Occasionally seen at Ningaloo, these fast-swimming whales can be both elusive and inquisitive. Look for the pale grey markings on their bodies.



Pygmy blue whale:

Also travelling up to the Kimberley and beyond to Indonesia mainly staying offshore in areas like Scott Reef and Rowley Shoals. They can grow up to 24 metres long.



Playtime

Humpbacks are one of the marine megastars. They are playful, inquisitive creatures and often put on spectacular acrobatic displays of breaching, rolling, spy-hopping and tail and pectoral fin slapping.



Whale Play - a double whale breach



Whale Play - a double pectoral fin slap

Credit: Lyn Irvine

This is for play as well as communication between whales. They sleep by catnapping on the surface at short intervals whilst still moving their drooping tails to help keep their blowholes above the surface.

Helping Hand

Humpback whales are a protected species and their populations are recovering.

You can help:

- Follow the Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching
- Support the growing whale watching ecotourism industry
- Dispose of litter responsibly as rubbish ending up in whales' stomachs can be deadly
- Report any injured, entangled or stranded whales.