

Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

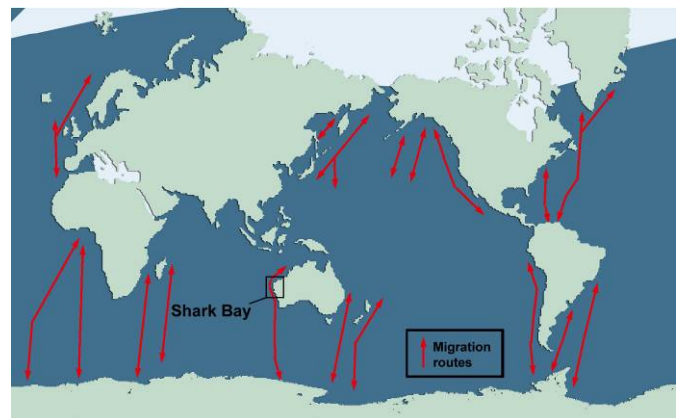
What does it look like?

The humpback whale is named for its small, hump-like dorsal fin that shows as the whale arches its back while diving. It is also easily distinguished from other whales by its long, knobby flippers, which may be a third of its body length. Its body is black on top and white underneath, with long 'pleats' running down its throat. These pleats let the whale's throat expand as it feeds. Since the humpback has no teeth, it feeds by taking an enormous gulp of water and then straining zooplankton (krill and other tiny animals) out of the water through its baleen – the bristly, comb-like horny plates hanging from its palate. A humpback can eat nearly one tonne of food a day! The richness of the zooplankton and the buoyancy of the water mean the whale can grow to an enormous size. Males average 14.6 m long but females can reach 18 m and weigh up to 45 tonnes!



Where does it live?

The female is probably larger than the male to cope with the long fast required while bearing and feeding her young (called a calf) during her annual migration. Each year humpbacks swim thousands of kilometres between their breeding grounds in the tropics and their feeding grounds in Antarctica. A layer of blubber up to 50 cm thick keeps them warm in even the coldest seas.



The population that migrates along the coast of Western Australia numbers more than 20,000 and is the largest in the world (migration routes marked in red on map). It is genetically different to all other humpback populations. Whales migrating north are often too far off-shore to be seen from the shore or small boats, but whales travelling south with calves swim in the protected, shallower waters much closer to the coast. Humpback whales pass Shark Bay from July to October, mostly skirting the islands in the bay's west. They often put on spectacular displays, breaching and rolling their body, slapping their flippers and generally having a 'whale of a time'!

How does it breed?

Humpback whales are famous for their haunting songs. Only the male sings, perhaps to attract mates. Some songs can be heard from 185 km away! Whales reach maturity when they are about 11.4 m long (from 4–10 years of age). Females calve once every three years, from June to October after a pregnancy of about 12 months. A newborn calf is about 4.5 m long and can weigh 1.5 tonnes! Its mother's milk has a 35% fat content and a nursing calf can gain more than 45 kg a day during its first weeks of life. By the time it is weaned, at 11 months of age, the calf can be up to 9 m long.

Any threats to its survival?

The humpback whale was hunted almost to extinction. A whaling station in Carnarvon, on the edge of the Shark Bay World Heritage Area, contributed to the species' demise in the region. Just 5–6% of the prewhaling population remained by 1963, the year it became a protected species in Australia. It is now making a comeback, although entanglement in fishing gear and disturbance by boats remain a threat. In Western Australia the whale is still considered vulnerable to extinction.