

# Whales and Dolphins

## IDENTIFICATION GUIDE

Forty-three species of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) are known to occur in Australian waters. Sightings reports provide important information for the conservation and management of these animals. National Cetacean Sightings and Strandings Databases are maintained by Wildlife Australia. You can provide valuable assistance by recording sightings, strandings and entanglements of cetaceans and reporting them as soon as possible to Marine Species Section, GPO Box 787, CANBERRA, ACT, 2601. Telephone 1800 803 772.

Cetaceans are divided into two groups - those with teeth (Odontocetes), and those with baleen (Mysticetes). Baleen is a fibrous, bristle like substance used to sieve small prey from the water.

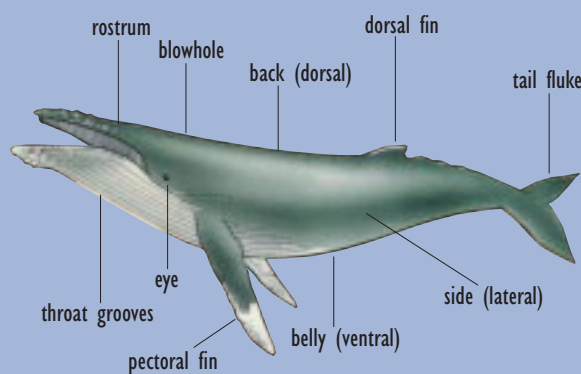


Odontocete (Teeth)



Mysticete (Baleen)

The blow hole is another distinguishing feature. Baleen whales have a double blow hole, while toothed whales have a single blow hole.



This diagram shows the external features of a cetacean used for identification. These features are referred to in the descriptions below.

## BALEEN WHALES (MYSTICETES)

### HUMPBACK WHALE

*Megaptera novaeangliae*



- medium/large (to 16m)
- back dark grey; underside of body, fins and flukes white
- dorsal fin extremely variable in size and shape but usually distinctive
- very long pectoral fins (1/3 body length)
- may raise flukes on diving; serrated trailing edge; white and black patterned undersurface; body arched strongly when diving
- tubercles (lumps) on rostrum; throat grooves present
- bushy blow to 3m - sometimes V shaped, sometimes tall & slender
- Australian distribution:  
Inshore along length of east & west coasts between about April and December

#### Other baleen whales found in Australian waters:

- Blue whale (to 30.5m);
- Fin whale (to 27m);
- Sei whale (to 21m); and
- Bryde's whale (to 15.5m).

### SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE

*Eubalaena australis*



- large (to 17m) stocky whale
- bushy V-shaped blow
- black body with white callosities (bumps) on head
- no dorsal fin; broad paddle like pectoral fins
- may raise flukes on diving; trailing edge smooth; dark underneath
- Australian distribution: Inshore waters south of around Sydney in the east and Perth in the west between about May and October.

### MINKE WHALE

*Balaenoptera bonaerensis*



- medium (to 10.7m)
- dorsal fin tall and hooked
- don't raise flukes when diving
- sharply V-shaped head; throat grooves present
- blow and dorsal fin often appear simultaneously
- blow often indistinct, but maybe columnar
- black/dark grey back; wavy boundary to white underside
- may "ship-seek" or be erratic and evasive in movements
- Australian distribution:  
Generally offshore in Australian waters during winter migration.

# TOOTHED WHALES (ODONTOCETES)

## SPERM WHALE

*Physeter macrocephalus*



- large (to 18m); huge head and bluff
- body dark grey-brown to brown; white around mouth
- head may be heavily scarred; body wrinkled behind head
- dorsal 'hump' (fin) followed by knuckles along spine
- single blow angled forward 45° and slightly left
- flukes raised high on diving; trailing edge may be scalloped/serrated
- may dive for long periods and surface nearby
- may lie quietly at the surface and blow repeatedly after deep dive
- Australian distribution:

All states in deep water (>200m) off continental shelf.  
All seasons with generalised movement south in summer.

## BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN

*Tursiops truncatus*



- small (to 3.1m); distinct rostrum
- dark grey to light grey above fading to whitish underside
- distinct, curved dorsal; relatively small, pointed pectoral fins & flukes
- highly social, can occur in very large groups
- Australian distribution:

All waters from tropical to temperate regions.  
All seasons.

## KILLER WHALE

*Orcinus orca*



- medium (to 9.8m)
- distinctive black and white colour pattern
- male dorsal is taller than female, more-or-less straight; female dorsal is curved, more erect than a minke whale's
- low bushy blow, usually distinct
- highly social, form lifelong family groups; occasionally seen singly or in small groups.
- Australian distribution:

All waters from polar to tropical. All seasons.

## LONG-FINNED PILOT WHALE

*Globicephala melas*



- small/medium (to 6.2m); bulbous forehead
- slate grey to black; grey post-dorsal saddle; post-ocular patch;
- white patched on throat and ventral surface
- low curved dorsal fin with broad base
- low bushy blow
- highly social, sometimes in very large groups
- often lie or swim quietly at surface
- Australian distribution:

All waters, often oceanic.  
All seasons.

## OTHER SMALL CETACEANS



Common Dolphin



Spinner Dolphin



Risso's Dolphin

- wide range of sizes and shapes
- can be seen bow-riding, leaping, surfing
- usually seen in groups
- Australian distribution:

All waters, open ocean and inshore.  
All seasons.

## GUIDELINES FOR WHALE AND DOLPHIN WATCHING

Watching whales and dolphins in their natural environment is a very rewarding experience. It is important to remember that our actions can be disruptive to cetaceans. Whale and dolphin watching regulations are in place in all Australian waters and you can minimise disturbance by following these carefully.

The key point to remember is that –

**“your actions should not interrupt the normal behaviour patterns of the animal”.**

When near cetaceans remain quiet. Do not throw rubbish in the water or attempt to feed or touch the animals. Always approach cetaceans as shown in the diagrams opposite, and do not go any closer than the minimum approach distances given.

