

Description

The humpback whales are the 5th largest species of whale growing up to 16m in length. Their pectoral flippers are unusually large growing up to 5m and lead to the scientific name Megaptera, meaning large winged. The South Pacific population has distinctive counter shading with dark grey on the dorsal side and varying shades of white on their ventral side. The name humpback comes from their appearance of a humpback as they dive. Humpback whales have small protuberances mainly around the head region known as tubercles. These have a single hair follicle in the centre and it is thought that the hair can detect changes in water pressure.

Distribution

Humpback whales are found in all major oceans around the world and are known for their long migration journeys in search of food and warmer waters to give birth and mate. The southern hemisphere population feed in the nutrient rich oceans around Antarctica, only coming close to both the east and west Australian coast to mate and give birth.

Diet

Humpback whales are members of the Balenopterida family or baleen whales. Instead of teeth these whales have between 250 and 500 specialised baleen plates hanging from the upper jaw. Humpback whales use the baleen to sieve through the water in search of tiny plankton, namely krill. One Humpback will eat up to 2500kg of krill in one day. Humpback whales have been extensively studied on the feeding behaviours and have been observed working in groups, or blowing bubbles to herd krill.

Breeding

Gestation is around a year and only one calf is born at a time. The mother suckles her calf for a further year during which time she can become pregnant again. In general females will give birth every 2-3 years. Males fight for the chance to breed with a female often leaving weaker males with large battle scars. Calves are born around 4m long without any blubber for insulation. Calves then suckle from their mothers fatty milk to rapidly put on weight for their migration back down to cooler waters.

Threats

Humpbacks were once hunted to the brink of extinction for their thick blubber that was refined to oil to make products such as margarine, shoe polish, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals to name a few. The southern hemisphere population was decreased from 15000+ down to less than 500 individual whales. Fortunately they became protected in 1966, and are increasing at a rate of 10-12% each year. The main threats to Humpbacks in the present day are pollution, reduction of their food source krill due to overfishing, entanglements in shark nets, and they may also be targeted in the scientific lethal whaling program.

NAME: Megaptera Novaengliae

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Sub Phylum: Vertebrata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Cetacea

Sub Order: Mysticeti

Family: Balenopteridae

