



Humpback Whale - *Megaptera novaeangliae*

The Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) ranges from 12-16m in length and weighing 36 tonnes. It's scientific name *Megaptera* means 'Giant Wing' and refers to their long pectoral fins, which are up to 1/3 of their body size. The increased surface area of these fins help Humpbacks to regulate their body temperature when migrating between warm and cold climates.

A Humpback Whale can be easily identified by its stocky body with an obvious hump and stubby dorsal fin 2/3 down its back. The head and lower jaw are covered with knobs called tubercles, which are actually hair follicles typical of a mammal. The broad tail flukes are scalloped on the trailing edge that helps to identify individual whales. Humpbacks are blue-black to dark black in colour with a pale to white underside.

The Humpback is a species of baleen whale. They have 270-400 greyish-black baleen plates on each side of their mouths. They are also in a group of whales known as 'Rorquals' meaning they have ventral grooves running from below the mouth back to the navel. These allow the mouth to expand immensely when feeding. Rorquals feed by gulping in water and then pushing it out through the baleen plates with their tongue. They feed on crustaceans such as krill but also fish such as herrings and sardines.

Humpbacks can stay under water for roughly 30 minutes before they need to surface and breathe again. Their exhalation is a bushy, heart shaped blow that can reach 6m high. After their exhalation, they breathe in again and dive down to up to 200m.

Humpbacks are renowned as 'singers'. Both male and female humpbacks vocalize, but only males produce the long, loud and complex. Each song typically last from 10 to 20 minutes but Humpbacks may sing continuously for more than 24 hours. Whales don't have vocal cords, so they generate their songs by forcing air through their massive nasal cavities.

Found in all major oceans, Humpback Whales migrate up to 25,000 kms each year, one of the longest known migrations of any mammal. They feed only in summer in polar waters and migrate to tropical waters to breed and give birth in the winter. During the winter, Humpbacks fast and live off their fat reserves.

Like other large whales, the Humpback was and is a target for the whaling industry. Due to overhunting, its population fell by an estimated 90% before a whaling moratorium was introduced in 1966 by the International Whaling Commission. Stocks have since partially recovered; however, entanglement in fishing gear, collisions with ships, and noise pollution also remain concerns. There are at least 80,000 Humpback Whales worldwide.

Once listed as vulnerable, the Humpback is now considered as least concern by the IUCN. It is, however, still listed as vulnerable and migratory under the EBPC Act in Australia.

Did you know?

The Humpback Whale is one of the most energetic of the large whales and is well known for its spectacular breaching, spy-hopping, lob-tailing and fin-slapping. These behaviours are thought to be forms of communication.