

Whales



Whales: Order Cetacea

Baleen whales: Suborder Mysticeti (14 species)

Toothed whales: Suborder Odontoceti (75 species, one possibly extinct)

There are more than 89 species or kinds of whales. Whales are mammals. That means they are born live, are warm-blooded, have hair (at some point in their development), and breathe air.

Whale Basics

Flippers: All whales have two "pectoral" flippers. They use them for stopping and turning. A whale's flipper has a similar bone structure a human hand and arm.



Tail Flukes: All whales have tail flukes. Each side of the tail is called a "fluke." Tails vary in size and shape depending on the kind of whale and the individual. Scientists identify individual animals just by the color pattern, shape and scarring of the tail in some species.



A sperm whale's tail can be 16 feet wide. That's as long as a utility vehicle.



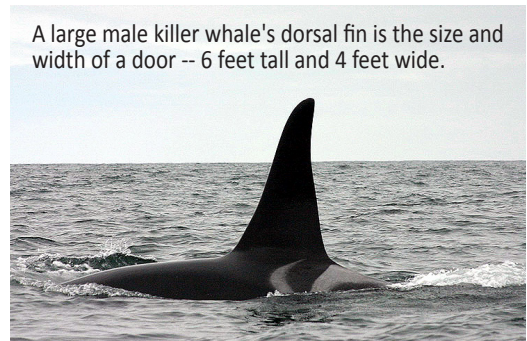
Northern right whale dolphins do not have dorsal fins.

Dorsal Fin: Some whales have a dorsal fin. Some do not. Vaquitas and killer whales have a dorsal fin. Northern right whale dolphins, beluga whales, and gray whales do not.

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The size and shape of the dorsal fin depends on the kind of whale and the individual. Scientists identify some individual animals just by the color pattern, shape and scarring of their dorsal fin. The dorsal fin helps keep the whale warm or cool by releasing or retaining heat. In the warm waters of the Gulf of California, a larger dorsal fin might help the vaquita stay cool.



A large male killer whale's dorsal fin is the size and width of a door -- 6 feet tall and 4 feet wide.



A gray whale's blow is heart shaped.

Blowhole: Whales breathe air. A whale's nose is on top of its head. It is called a blowhole. Toothed whales have one opening or nostril. Baleen whales have two. When whale watching, you can look for the whale's blow -- or when it exhales. A gray whale's blow is heart-shaped.

Other Whale Highlights

Size: The largest is the blue whale. It reaches lengths up to 90 feet long. Some of the smallest whale species include vaquita at 4 to 5 feet (1.2 to 1.5 m) long and the Commerson's dolphin at 3.9 to 5.6 feet (1.2 to 1.7 m) long.

Social behavior: Baleen whales, like blue whales, tend to travel alone. Though baleen whales can be found in small groups in breeding and feeding areas. In general, toothed whales tend to be more social and travel in small and large groups. Common long-beaked dolphins often travel in large groups of 100 to 500 dolphins. Sometimes they're found in gigantic herds of more than 1,000 dolphins.

At night, spinner dolphins form herds of hundreds of dolphins. They hunt in deeper water. When they rest during the day, spinner dolphins are found in smaller groups of 12 or so animals.

Though vaquita are sometimes found in groups of three, they are most often found alone or a mother and calf together.

An aerial view might be the only way to photograph an entire blue whale!



Spinner dolphins are found in large and small groups depending on the time of day.

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Diet: What a whale eats depends on the kind of whale. Baleen whales eat plankton such as krill and small fish. Depending on the kind of toothed whale, it might eat fish, squid, crabs, shrimp, seastars, sharks, seals, sea lions, penguins — even other whales, dolphins, and porpoises.

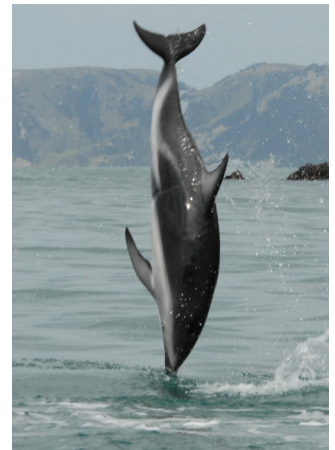


Distribution: Whales are found all over the world. You can find whales, like the beluga, narwhal, and bowhead in the seas near the arctic. In Antarctica, you might find blue whales, humpback whales, and Arnoux's beaked whales.

Many people are surprised to discover there are whales living in some freshwater rivers. You might see an Amazon river dolphin if you visit the Amazon River in South America. Some whale species, like killer whales, live in all oceans of the world.

Status of whales

Many years ago, people hunted baleen whales for the blubber, baleen, meat, and bones. Before we had plastic, the baleen was used to make corset stays, combs, and even buggy whips. Before modern synthetics and other replacements, whale blubber was an important commercial product. People melted it to make oil used for heating, lubrication, and lamps. It was also used in the processing of soap, candles, paint, textiles, margarine, and rope. The blubber was melted down and used for oils. People also ate meat (and sometimes blubber).



An acrobatic dusky dolphin off the coast of New Zealand.

Whaling became illegal decades ago throughout the world. Today, in some rare cases whales are hunted for meat. In general, this is mostly done by indigenous people who rely on whale meat to survive. For those cultures, hunting whales and marine mammals is a part of their heritage -- and may be a major food source. Generally, subsistence hunting is regulated and does not affect the population as a whole.

However, human impact didn't stop when whaling stopped decades ago. Whales all over the world face challenges from growing human populations and our demand for seafood. This leads to human-caused problems such as competition for food, bycatch, drift nets, and habitat destruction.

In 2006, scientists announced they could no longer find any baiji (also called the Chinese river dolphin). None of have been sighted since. It is believed to be extinct.

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Today, the most endangered species include the vaquita and northern right whale. Right whales haven't been hunted in nearly a century, yet their numbers remain low. There are about 465 northern right whales. A slight increase from a few years ago. Sadly, the vaquita population continues to drop. There are 30 left. That's a drop from the estimated 50 in 2016. The vaquita population has been destroyed by legal and illegal fishing. Though people do not fish for vaquita, nets set for other seafood also catch vaquita. Scientists fear vaquita will become extinct in the next couple of years.

There are some bright spots. Many species of whales are not threatened or endangered. Many populations have increased since whaling has decreased. The number of blue whales has slowly begun to increase in some parts of the world. Humpback whale populations also continue to show strong growth. The eastern Pacific gray whale was almost extinct decades ago. Today, the population is so large it was removed from the endangered species list.



The eastern Pacific gray whale was removed from the endangered species list.

We can help save whales. What can you do to help whales? Choose sustainable seafood. Reduce, reuse, and recycle. Find other ways to reduce how YOU impact the environment.

Whale species mentioned in this fact sheet:

- Amazon river dolphin (*Inia geoffrensis*)
- Arnoux's beaked whale (*Berardius arnuxii*)
- blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*)
- bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*)
- Chinese river dolphin (*Lipotes vexillifer*) **EXTINCT**
- Commerson's dolphin (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*)
- common long-beaked dolphins (*Delphinus capensis*)
- dolphin dusky (*Lagenorhynchus obscurus*)
- gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*)
- humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*),
- killer whale (*Orcinus orca*)
- Beluga whales (*Delphinapterus leucas*)
- narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*)
- northern right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*)
- norther right whale dolphin (*Lissodelphis borealis*)
- spinner dolphin (*Stenella longirostris longirostris*)
- vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*)

Other Resources

[Whales of Oregon](#), Oregon Coast Aquarium's Oceanscape Network

Photos Courtesy NOAA: CREDITS: Bottlenose dolphin/Adam Li, NOAA NMFS SWF; Killer whale/Josh Pederson, Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary; northern right whale dolphin/Chad King NOAA NOS NMS MBNMS; gray whale/Steven Swartz NOAA NMFS OPR; spinner dolphins/Claire Fackler NOAA National Marine Sanctuaries; krill/NOAA NMFS SWFSC AMLR; Atlantic brief squid/Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary NOAA; Dusky dolphin/Mridula Srinivasan NOAA NMFS OSTA MD; gray whale and calf/Steven Swartz NOAA NMFS OPR