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Humpback Whales Of Hervey Bay

QUEENSLAND: The calm safe waters of Platypus Bay, off the north-western coast of Fraser Island in the Hervey Bay Marine Park, have become known world wide as a prime whale watching area. From August to October humpback whales on their migration south to the Antarctic stop to rest, play and nurture their calves in the bay. They put on spectacular displays for more than 80,000 tourists a year as they take time out of their migration schedule to socialise in the calm waters of Fraser - one of only two places in the world where this happens.

The whale watching industry was originally started by a local fisherman who took out friends to see the whales. Now visitors have the choice of eleven local operators who conduct whale watch trips from Fraser Island and Hervey Bay on the mainland. Now, some eleven commercial vessels taking around 80,000 people whale watching each season.

The latin name, *Megaptera novaeangliae*, is derived from Greek words *me-gas* for large pteron for *wing* the Latin word *novus* for *new* and the Middle English *angliae* for *England*. Humpback whales belong to the group of mammals called Cetacea. This group includes all of the dolphins, whales and porpoises.

There are two populations of Humpback Whales in the world, one living in the southern hemisphere and the other in the northern hemisphere. Humpback Whales are marine mammals and like other mammals they are warm blooded and air breathing. They give birth to live young and their young suckle milk. At some stage of their life they have some hair on their bodies.

Whales and dolphins are divided into two groups; those with teeth, the *Odontocetes* and those without, the *Mysticetes*. Humpback Whales belong to the latter and have hundreds of thin plates called baleen. Large gulps of water and food are taken into the mouth cavity and the baleen acts like a sieve, trapping food and expelling water.

Humpback Whales are the fifth largest species of all the great whales - with adults growing up to 15 metres and weighing up to 40 tonnes. A new born calf is around 4.5 metres long and 1.5 tonnes in weight. They are easy to identify as they have the longest pectoral fins of all whales, around 5 metres in length, and have large heads that are covered with knobs the size of golf balls called tubercles.

The lifecycle of the Southern Humpback Whale brings them into Hervey Bay on Queensland's Fraser Coast.



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They leave the rich feeding grounds of Antarctica in May and make the annual 5000 kilometre journey to the breeding grounds in the warm waters of the Whitsundays, north of Fraser Island. Some of the females will give birth, while the others will mate.

After spending a short period of time in the Whitsunday area the whales start the long journey south, many of them coming into Platypus Bay for as long as five days, some staying for only a day.

It is believed that the shallow calm waters provide shelter giving the whales the opportunity to socialise and to give the new-born calves a chance to grow stronger before they continue south.

When born, Humpback calves suckle their mother's milk which is 35 percent fat, compared to two percent in human milk. A suckling calf will increase its weight between five and eight times before nursing ends at about 11 months when it has grown to 8 metres in length.

The Humpback calf will suckle up to the rate of 400 to 500 litres a day. The calf needs to grow quickly and put on a good fat layer in preparation for the long swim south to the colder waters of Antarctica. During the first part of the season you will see pods of mainly adult and sub-adult whales. Mothers and calves arrive towards the end of the season.

Imagine watching as an animal the size of eleven elephants propels most of its body out of the water and lands with a great splash on the surface OR looking a Humpback straight in the eye as it raises its head from the water and spy hops near the boat - it's eco-tourism at its finest.

Whale watchers may also see tail or pectoral fin slapping or even be lucky enough to be on a boat that gets *mugged* by the whales when the whales come right in close to the boat and have a really good look, sometimes as close as 1 or 2 metres and staying around the boat for as long as 10 minutes or more.

It is estimated around 20,000 humpbacks that pass along the east coast of Australia will venture into the bay. Whale experts believe it is possible that the whales coming in to Platypus Bay on their migration may be forming a separate sub-population.

In pre-whaling days the numbers were believed to be more than 10,000 (migrate up eastern coast) and probably closer to 30,000 in the whole of Antarctica. When the hunting of whales was banned in 1963 the number thought to be left was only about 200 individuals.



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Numbers are increasing at the rate of 8% to 11% per year. Various groups carry out research in the bay with the main objective being to monitor the recovery of the population.

Humpback whales often show their tails before diving under the water and each tail has markings that make it unique. By taking photographs researchers can monitor the movements of individuals and over 1000 whales have been identified this way.

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