

# Humpback Whales

Humpback whales are enormous and adults can grow to lengths of up to 19 metres. They are famous for their haunting, magical songs which can be heard from over 20 miles away. Despite their large size, humpbacks are friendly and inquisitive and are a popular species for whale watchers to observe. Sadly, due to an increase in the whaling industry during the 20th century, humpback whales are still considered to be an endangered species. However, numbers have been growing in recent years and it is thought that there are currently 80,000 humpbacks alive today!

## Appearance

Humpback whales have a distinctive and unique appearance. They have a large, knobbly head, a black **dorsal** and long **pectoral fins**. In fact, they have the longest fins of all marine mammals and their scientific name is 'megaptera noveangliae' meaning 'giant wings'. As is the case with most whales, female humpbacks are larger than males and can weigh up to 36,000kg; this is six times as heavy as some elephants!



## Life Cycle

The **gestation** period of humpbacks is just under 12 months and when calves are born, they measure approximately 6 metres in length. Humpback whales tend to live alone or in small groups (pods) with the exception of mothers and their calves who stay together for up to one year. Humpbacks live for approximately 50 years although they have been known to live to almost double that age. Humpback whales are found in oceans around the world. They tend to feed in colder, polar waters and then migrate to warmer, tropical seas in the winter in order to breed and give birth. Their diet consists mostly of krill (small crustaceans) and small fish and they feed by swallowing large mouthfuls of water which contain their prey.

### Behaviour

Humpbacks are famous for their acrobatic and playful behaviour and one of the most awe-inspiring sights is that of a humpback whale **breaching**. Male humpbacks sing songs that last for up to 20 minutes and differ depending on what ocean they are in. Scientists are not entirely sure why they sing but one theory is that they do it to attract female whales. Humpbacks have been observed interacting with other species and they have even been seen protecting other **cetacea** from predators such as sharks and killer whales.

### Glossary

**Dorsal:** The upper side of an animal or mammal.

**Pectoral fins:** Fins on the side of a fish/whale used to control movement and speed.

**Gestation:** The period during which a baby grows inside its mother.

**Breaching:** When a whale jumps out of the water and splashes its fin and tail back down on the surface.

**Cetacea:** A group of aquatic mammals including whales, dolphins and porpoises.



## Questions

1. Find and copy a word which means the same as **curious**.
2. What adjectives are used to describe humpback whales?
3. Tick true or false for these statements.

	True	False
Humpback whales look similar to other whales.		
Mother's carry their calves for 6 months.		
Humpbacks travel to warmer waters to give birth.		
Scientists know why humpback whales enjoy breaching.		

4. Why do you think the author chose to compare the weight of a humpback whale to six elephants?
5. What is the collective noun for a group of whales?
6. Why do you think that the scientific name for a humpback whale is 'megaptera noveangliae'?
7. Explain why humpback whales have a distinctive appearance.
8. Fill in the missing words in this sentence.  
Humpbacks have been observed interacting with other species and they have been see protecting \_\_\_\_\_ such as sharks and killer whales.