

# Learn about: Humpback Whale



**As Gaeilge:** An Míol mór dronnach

**Scientific name:** *Megaptera novaeangliae*



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## What is it?

Whales are marine mammals, they belong to a group called **cetaceans** (pronounced *set-AY-shans*), which includes both dolphins and whales.

Humpback whales are a large species of **baleen whale**. They are black in colour with a white throat and belly, and long flippers.

They have a large tail with a wavy edge, which they stick up in the air as they dive. Humpbacks don't actually have a hump on their back, but they do bend their back when diving. Their head is covered with bumps called tubercles. Each bump contains at least one stiff hair, believed to help detect movement in the water.



## How big is it?

Humpback whales are usually about 13m long but can reach up to 16m long. The females are bigger than the males. They weigh up to 36,000kg!

## Where does it live?

Humpback whales are widespread throughout the world's oceans. In the colder months they stay in warm, tropical waters where they give birth to their calves. In the warmer months they migrate to colder waters further from the equator to feed. The best time to spot humpback whales in Irish water is July and August, where you might spot them off the Cork or Kerry coast. Humpback whale can live to be 50 years old.

## What does it eat?

Humpbacks are filter feeders, feeding on plankton, krill (shrimp) and small fish like herring and sprat. For this reason, they don't have teeth, instead they have baleen. Baleen looks like the fibres in a sweeping brush and is made of



keratin (just like your nails and hair). These whales take in a mouthful of water, push it out through the baleen, the remaining plankton gets trapped in the baleen and the whale uses their tongue to lick the plankton off. Yum!



Humpback whales can blow bubbles to create a fish trap called a "bubble net"

## Threats:

The main threats to humpback whales are being hit by large ships, and noise pollution caused by these ships, which disturbs the whales.

They are also threatened by marine litter and chemical pollution, and decreased food availability. Humpback whales were almost fished to extinction in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, but due to international whaling laws their populations have recovered.



## Whale song

Humpbacks spend 90% of their time under water, coming up to the surface to breathe through their blowhole. They are often seen jumping up out of the water and crash back down, known as breaching.

Scientists think that this may be used to warn other whales of danger, to communicate, to clean their skin or even just for fun.

Humpback whales are also very vocal, and communicate over large distances through complicated songs. The male humpback whale has the longest and most complex song known in the animal kingdom.

## Links:

Learn more about humpback whales and Ireland's other whales and dolphins from the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group:

[www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie)

Or check out National Geographic:

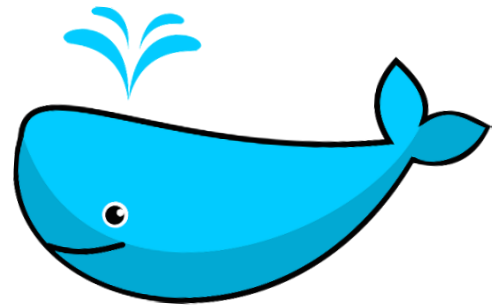
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/h/humpback-whale/>

## Your Turn!

### Whale Video:

Find out more about humpback whales by watching this short video clip from the Netflix documentary Our Planet:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gixUJLceEEjA>



### Quick Quiz:

- Name one thing a humpback whale eats.
- Where do humpback whales hang out during the colder months?
- What length is a humpback whale on average?
- What do you call the brush-like structure in the humpback's mouth?
- Name one threat to humpback whales.



If you're stuck for an answer, read back over the fact sheet!