

exhilarating
exciting
endangered

Southern Right Whales © P. Gill

*beautiful, amazing creatures
exploring the oceans blessing us with their
graceful, awe inspiring displays.
whales of the earth deserve
our respect & admiration*

whales

of the Southwest
Coast of
Victoria

Whale watching is a fun activity and this brochure is a guide to the whales most commonly found along the southwest coast of Victoria



Many indigenous societies all over the world have close contact and historical links with whales. It is no different here in Western Victoria where the Dhauwurd-Wurrung language group, and its' clans the Kilcareer, Gilgar, Ylgar (of Gunditjamarra country) regularly feasted on the whales which washed ashore along the coast. In 1831 a whale feast was interrupted by a dispute with white whalers who wished to claim a washed up whale as their own. This dispute cost the lives of many of the Dhauwurd-Wurrung at a massacre site now known as the Convincing Ground.

The whaling industry impacted heavily on whale numbers and in response they were granted international protection in 1935. In due course the Federal and State Governments of Australia legislated (from 1980) to make it illegal for Australians to participate in the killing or harassing of whales. All whales and dolphins are protected in Australian waters and these species have the following national conservation status: blue whale – Endangered; Southern Right whale – Endangered; and Humpback whale – Vulnerable. When a species is Endangered it means it is facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future. A species is Vulnerable when it is not endangered but is facing a high risk of extinction in the wild in the medium-term future. Whales that visit the southwest coast are in a critical situation and it is vital that threats to their survival are reduced and that population numbers increase in order for the species to maintain existence.

Up to 44 species of whales and dolphins may occur off the coast of Victoria. The large whales most commonly seen along the coast are southern right whales, and occasionally humpback whales.

These days whale watching is a popular activity, and throughout the year the southwest coast of Victoria offers wonderful sites to watch whales. At Logans Beach in Warrambool you can watch southern right whales in their nursery. At Port Fairy you can see Southern Right whales from the lighthouse on Griffiths Island and in Port Fairy Bay. Around Portland you can see Blue Whales and Southern Right whales from Cape Nelson, Cape Bridgewater, Portland Bay and surrounding coastline. The occasional humpback whale has been sighted during its northerly migration during autumn and Southern migration journey in spring.

Southern Right Whale blow © P. Gill



Humpback Whale lobtailing © P. Gill



Of these behaviours,

blowing is the only common one; more often whales are simply seen resting quietly, moving from one place to another, or in the case of blue whales, feeding.

The Blow: This is often the first sign that whales are present. As a whale exhales through its blowholes, its breath condenses to form the vapoury 'blow' which has a characteristic appearance for each species. The Blue whale's blow is tall and straight, up to 10m high, while the Southern Right whale's blow is V-shaped and bushier, both species have twin blowholes. Whale breath smells like fish oil.

Spyhopping: A whale spy hops by raising its head vertically above the surface of the ocean, allowing the whale to get an above view of its surroundings.

Lobtailing: The most powerful part of a whale is its tail. Smacking the tail flukes forcefully onto the water surface makes a loud noise that can be heard by other whales. This may be used to communicate a whales location, signal aggression or simply for enjoyment.

Pec wave: Southern Right whales are often observed with one pectoral fin (their arm) extended from the water as if waving. Humpback whales also wave their extremely long pectorals, while blue whales usually only show theirs when rolled onto one side to feed.

Breaching: Southern Rights and Humpback whales sometimes breaching headfirst from the water, and falling back with a mighty splash. Blue whales seldom breach. Breeding is thought to have a number of possible purposes including communication, dislodging parasites, expressing aggression, or simply high spirits.

Southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*)

Southern right whales visit the coast from may to October, migrating annually from the deep Southern Ocean where they mate and calve. Their thick (up to 30cm) blubber allows them to fast during the breeding season, until they return to southern waters in spring to feed. The whales can be seen off the coast of Portland, Port Fairy, and Warrambool's Logans beach, which is visited by nursing females to care for their young. The female is pregnant for 11-12 months and gives birth every 3 years. The 5-6m long calf is born tail first. The newborn instinctively swims to the surface for its first breath, and within 30 minutes it can swim. The calf is nurtured with its mother's fat-rich milk and is weaned after 12 months.

Southern right whales can often be seen just beyond the surf line, and are distinguished by large white bumps (callosities) on the top and sides of the head. Each whale has a unique pattern enabling identification of individuals. Unlike all other large whales in Australian waters, they have no dorsal fin. The flippers are rounded and the tail flukes, which have a broad smooth rear margin separated by a deep notch, may be lifted out of the water as the animal dives. Southern right whales are predominantly dark brown to black in colour, grow up to 18m in length and may live up to 60 years.

Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)
Humpback whales do not feed or breed in Southwest Victorian waters, but simply pass through on their migrations between summer feeding in Antarctica and their winter breeding grounds inside the Great Barrier Reef. The Humpback is most susceptible to entanglement due to their body shape i.e. long pecs and long flukes.

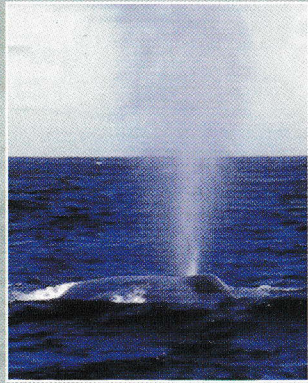


Southern Right Whale breaching with newborn calf © P. Gill

Blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*)

The Blue whale is the biggest animal that has ever lived on earth! They come to southwest Victoria between November and May, when the Bonney Upwelling brings cold, rich water onto the continental shelf, stimulating an explosion of plankton, which feeds vast swarms of small crustaceans called krill. Blue whales gulp huge mouthfuls of seawater and krill into their vast expanding throat pouches, and filter out the krill with their fibrous baleen, which hangs from the upper jaw. A large Blue whale may eat 3-4 tonnes of plankton each day. This is one of only a handful of Blue whale feeding areas in the Southern Hemisphere, and one of the few areas in Australia where Blue whales may be frequently sighted from headlands such as Cape Nelson and Cape Bridgewater. They sometimes come very close to shore but are often several km offshore – look for their tall strong blows and silver – grey bodies.

Blue whales are also the loudest animals on earth, with calls louder than a jet aircraft. These simple, repetitive very low frequency sounds may be used to navigate, to locate food and to attract and find mates over long distances. They spend the winter breeding season somewhere in the tropics. The Blue whale's skin is usually grey with pale or dark spots, but often appears luminous blue underwater. Blue whales grow to 25 metres or more and often weigh well over 100 tonnes. For their size they have a very small dorsal fin, located about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way toward the tail. Their 'pecs' are up to 7m wide. Blue whales have a layer of insulating blubber about 12cm thick, and may live to 80 or more years.



Blue Whale blowing © Blue Whale Study

Observing whales from land is a 'whale friendly' way to observe whales and can be an exciting and exhilarating experience. Remember to bring along weatherproof clothes, binoculars and a camera! Whales can also be viewed from boats and aircraft. Strict regulations apply regarding separation distances from whales (and dolphins). Swimmers and boarders – 30m, recreational vessels- 100m. Within 300m a vessel or watercraft must also adhere to a range of regulations that are available from Department of Sustainability and Environment. When observing whales watch out for blows, spyhops, pec waves, lobtails or breaches.

Power boats are excluded completely from the Logans Beach area between the 1st of June and the 31st of October annually. To report a breach of these regulations, please note a description of the boat and ring 136 186 at any time.

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