



# Marine mammals count

Share the coast



Humpback whale. Photo: Kim Westerskov

*New Zealand is renowned for the many different marine mammals living in our waters – almost half the world’s cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) have been reported here. Some of our marine mammals, like Hector’s and Māui dolphins and New Zealand sea lions, are found nowhere else*

## Marine mammal facts

Seals, whales, dolphins and one species of porpoise occur in New Zealand waters. They are found all around New Zealand, although several have restricted distributions. Some, like the Bryde’s (pronounced ‘broodas’) whale, live in our waters year-round; others pass through New Zealand waters during their annual migrations.

Whales, dolphins and porpoises belong to two main groups: baleen whales and toothed whales.

### Baleen whales

Baleen whales don’t have teeth: they have plates of baleen in their upper jaws instead. These plates are made of keratin – the same substance your hair and nails are made of. The whale uses these plates like a sieve to filter prey (usually small crustaceans and fish) from the water. There are two main feeding strategies.

- ‘Gulping’ – some baleen whales gulp large volumes of water and food into their mouths and expanding throats. Water is then forced out through the baleen, leaving small prey behind to be swallowed.
- ‘Skimming’ – right whales swim along with their huge mouths agape, continuously filtering small prey from the water.

New Zealand waters are home to nine species of baleen whale. They range in size from the 7 m pygmy right whale to the 33 m Antarctic blue whale – the largest animal to ever live on the planet.

### Humpback whale/paieka

Humpback whales journey past New Zealand during their annual migrations between summer feeding grounds near Antarctica and their winter breeding grounds in tropical (or near-tropical) waters. Male humpbacks are the singer-songwriters of the ocean: their complex songs may be up to 30 minutes long, and they sometimes sing them for hours at a time.

### Southern right whale/tohorā

Most southern right whales spend the summer months feasting on copepods and krill (small crustaceans) in the waters north of Antarctica. In the winter and spring some of them move up to breeding grounds around the Subantarctic Islands. A few are also seen around mainland New Zealand. The New Zealand population is estimated at less than 12% of its pre-exploitation size.

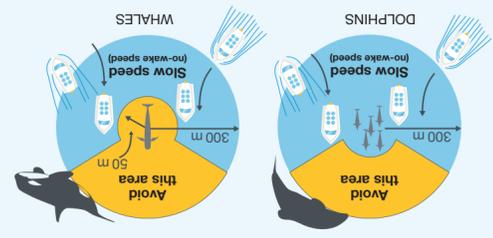
You can identify southern right whales in two main ways: a) they do not have a dorsal fin, and b) the large white spots (callosities) on their heads, in patterns unique to individuals. Callosities are thickened patches of skin that are often infested with whale lice, giving them a white or yellow appearance.

Photographs are very useful for identifying species and (sometimes) actual individuals. Depending on the species, the most useful pictures are of:

- the dorsal fin
- the underside of tail flukes
- facial markings (left side of head)
- the full length of the body, particularly showing any identifying marks. We are also interested in shark sightings: great white sharks, whale sharks and basking sharks.

Identification tips, posters and flip cards can be found at [www.doc.govt.nz/marinemammalsightings](http://www.doc.govt.nz/marinemammalsightings)

If there is a stranding or you encounter a distressed or injured marine mammal, call 0800 DOC HOT (0800 362 468) immediately.



Remember that marine mammals, like humans, need time to feed, socialise and rest. They are also wild animals and will defend their territory if they feel threatened. For your own safety and to help our marine mammals thrive, enjoy watching them from a distance. In particular:

- Give marine mammals space when at sea: approach from the side or from behind only, at no wake speed. Some marine mammals are particularly susceptible to vessel collision because of where they live. For example, Bryde’s whales are often at risk of being struck by boats and ships in the busy waters of the Hauraki Gulf.
- Be careful around seals on land: one panicked seal can start a colony chain reaction, where pups may be crushed by adult seals rushing to safety at sea.

For more information about marine mammals and how to behave around them, visit [www.doc.govt.nz/marinemammals](http://www.doc.govt.nz/marinemammals) or [www.doc.govt.nz/sharingscoasts](http://www.doc.govt.nz/sharingscoasts)

## Living with marine mammals today

Marine mammals are slowly recovering from past exploitation as a result. New Zealand is a leader in marine mammal conservation, especially in tourism and stranding management. It is an offence under the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978 to harm, harass or disturb any marine mammal. You could be fined or imprisoned. Our marine mammals still face many threats from human activities – vessel collisions, marine debris, fishing, noise pollution, harassment and loss of habitat.

### Toothed whales

Toothed whales, including dolphins and porpoises, are extremely social, often hunting and travelling in groups (pods). They are exceptional hunters, preying mainly on squid and fish using echolocation – in the form of high-frequency clicks – to help them ‘see’ their environment. Toothed whales in New Zealand waters include sperm whales (including the diminutive pygmy and dwarf sperm whales) and 12 species of beaked whales. Sixteen dolphin species and one porpoise – the spectacled porpoise – are also found here.

### Sperm whale/parāoa

The largest of all toothed whales, sperm whales are usually found offshore as they prefer deep water. They hunt at great depths, sometimes over 2,000 m – the length of about 20 rugby fields!

In New Zealand, sperm whales are most common around the submarine canyons near Kaikoura. There is no other area in the world where sperm whales are routinely found so close to the coast.

### Orca (killer whale)/maki

Orca are the largest members of the dolphin family. They are adept hunters, preying on fish, stingrays and other marine mammals. Between 150 and 200 orca are estimated to reside in New Zealand waters.

### Hector’s and Māui dolphin/tūpoupou/popoto

Hector’s and Māui dolphins live only in New Zealand. Hector’s dolphins spend their lives in shallow coastal waters, mostly around the South Island. Māui dolphin, a sub-species of the Hector’s dolphin, is only found off the west coast of the North Island.

These dolphins are greatly threatened by the effects of fishing, particularly set net fishing. From a population of about 30,000 in the 1970s, the Hector’s dolphin population is now thought to be around 15,000 individuals and is listed as Nationally Endangered. The Māui dolphin status, however, is Nationally Critical: scientists estimate fewer than 100 Māui dolphins remain, with a dramatically reduced population since the 1970s. DOC is working with the Ministry for Primary Industries to manage these threats.



Orca. Photo: Kim Westerskov

### Seals

Three seal species breed around New Zealand’s coastline and on outlying islands: the New Zealand fur seal, the New Zealand sea lion and the southern elephant seal. Other species, like the leopard seal and the subantarctic fur seal, are occasional visitors.

### New Zealand fur seal/kekeno

Although New Zealand fur seals are marine mammals, they spend much of their time on land at their rocky shore breeding colonies or at resting sites called ‘haul-outs’. They are sometimes found unexpectedly in backyards, drains and streets! Although increasing numbers of fur seals live and breed around our coast, the population is still a fraction of what it was before humans arrived.

### New Zealand sea lion/whakahaio

New Zealand sea lions are only found in New Zealand – and with an estimated population of less than 12,000 they are one of the rarest sea lions in the world. Once common on the mainland coast, they now breed primarily on the subantarctic islands. A few recently returned to breed on the Otago and Catlins coasts, and on Stewart Island/Rakiura.



Male New Zealand sea lion. Photo: Kim Westerskov



Photo: DOC

### Take your rubbish home

Rubbish can be lethal to marine mammals. They can mistake floating rubbish for food or something to play with, and may ingest the rubbish or become entangled in it. Please dispose of rubbish and recycle responsibly.

### Troubled waters

Our marine mammals still face many threats from human activities – vessel collisions, marine debris, fishing, noise pollution, harassment and loss of habitat.

### Count me in

You can report sightings of whales, dolphins, New Zealand sea lions, fur seals with tags, and other rare seal species to DOC using the online sighting form: [www.doc.govt.nz/marine-mammal-sighting-form](http://www.doc.govt.nz/marine-mammal-sighting-form). Call 0800 DOC HOT (0800 362 468) immediately if you see a Māui or Hector’s dolphin in the North Island. If you can, we would like the following information:

- the date, time and location of the sighting (GPS coordinates if possible)
- the number seen, and whether any were calves
- the direction they were travelling
- your contact details.

# Marine mammals of New Zealand

New Zealand's largest whale is thought to be the **pygmy blue whale**, a slightly smaller subspecies of its close relative, the Antarctic blue whale. Pygmy blue whales (including mothers with calves) have been seen foraging offshore in the South Taranaki Bight in summer. We are still learning how often, for how long, and how many blue whales use New Zealand waters.

**Bryde's whales** are usually found in the Bay of Plenty, Hauraki Gulf and off the east coast of Northland.

Between 150 and 200 **orca** (killer whales) live in New Zealand waters. They are periodic visitors to many parts of our coast, including offshore islands.

**Māui dolphin**, a sub-species of Hector's dolphin, is one of the rarest dolphins in the world.

Resident **bottlenose dolphins** are found off the east coast of the North Island, off the top of the South Island, and in Fiordland.

**Common dolphins** tend to stay a few kilometres from shore. Generally preferring warmer waters, they are particularly common in the Hauraki Gulf, Bay of Plenty and off Northland.

**Southern right whales** can be seen in winter and spring at their breeding grounds near the subantarctic islands. A few sightings are also reported around mainland New Zealand.

Much of our knowledge of **Gray's beaked whales** is based on strandings rather than sightings. There are 11 other species of beaked whale in New Zealand waters.

**Pygmy sperm whales** are usually seen alone or in small groups. Unfortunately, they are more frequently found stranded than at sea.

**Humpback whales** are often seen in winter, migrating up the New Zealand coast to their breeding grounds in the tropics. They later return to their summer feeding grounds near Antarctica.

**Long-finned pilot whales** are actually part of the dolphin family. They regularly mass-strand on the New Zealand coast.

**New Zealand fur seals** are found all around the coast, spending much of their time on land at their rocky shore breeding colonies, or at haul-outs.

**Dusky dolphins** are found near shore around most of the South Island, and the southern part of the North Island.

Two species of **minke whale** occur around New Zealand. The dwarf minke is most often seen; the larger Antarctic minke is mostly found south of New Zealand, feeding on krill in the Antarctic Ocean.

Although **New Zealand sea lions** breed primarily on our subantarctic islands, a few have recently returned to breed on the Otago and Catlins coasts, and on Stewart Island/Rakiura.

**Hector's dolphin** is New Zealand's only endemic dolphin and is one of the smallest in the world, reaching no more than 1.5 m in length.

**Sperm whales** are common in New Zealand's deep offshore waters. Semi-resident 'bachelor' males regularly feed in the submarine canyons near Kaikoura.

**Chatham Islands**

## Subantarctic Islands



## Key

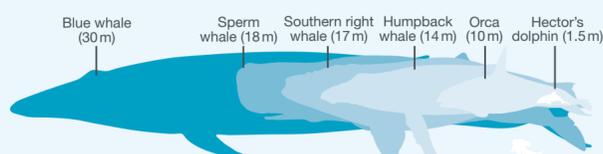
- New Zealand fur seal breeding colony
- New Zealand fur seal haul-outs
- New Zealand sea lion habitat (frequently seen in these areas)
- New Zealand sea lion habitat (local population base)
- Māui dolphin range
- Hector's dolphin range
- Whale summer migration route (heading south)
- Whale winter migration route (heading north)

## Sharing the coast with marine mammals

Take your rubbish home to prevent marine mammals ingesting or becoming entangled in it.  
Give marine mammals space.

Call the 0800 DOC HOTline (0800 362 468) to report:

- marine mammals that are entangled, seriously injured or being harassed
- stranded whales or dolphins
- unusual sightings and sightings of rarer species.



The species illustrations on this poster are not to scale. This graphic indicates relative sizes of some species.