



# Whale Routes...



*Humans aren't the only ones with a penchant for travel. There are some that enjoy a lengthy 'cruise.' Every year southern right whales and humpback whales make a migration along the South African coastline that in turn attracts thousands of whale loving, international human visitors. So why does anyone go on holiday? Warm waters, sunshine, relaxing days, a little love. Well, for whales, all the above.*

*words - Brenda du Toit and photos by Marine Dynamics biologists and crew.*



*Southern Right Whale breaching  
Image credit - Sandra Hoerbst*





## Southern Right Whale

The southern rights head from the sub-Antarctic to the waters of the Western Cape from June to November, sometimes staying a little longer on either side. They enjoy the sheltered bays off the coastline and congregate in areas such as De Hoop, Gansbaai, Hermanus, and Cape Town. The journey is up to 3000kms and can take about six weeks. They arrive to mate and calve in these waters. The area from Rooi Els to Gansbaai is not called the Cape Whale Coast for nothing. Southern right whales

were sadly once the 'right' whale to hunt, hence their name. Now they certainly are the 'right' whale to view, whether from land, sea or air.

Southern right populations are also seen on the shores of Argentina and Australia, but these seem to be distinct populations. The annual aerial survey of the southern right whales has been done for the past forty years by the Mammal Research Institute Whale Unit, and it has been determined that on average the whales show a



Image credit - Sandra Hoerbst



three-year cycle of mate, calve, rest, although this could be shifting to between five years between birthing. Gestation is twelve months. Their assumed life span is between 50 to 100 years. A sighting on the 2019 aerial survey showed a distinctively marked female – a white 7 pattern on her back – that was first seen in 1984 and not seen in South Africa since 2013. She was travelling with a calf. Occasionally whales are born white which will darken to grey/brindle. This generally

## CONSERVATION PROFILE

affects males and can be seen in about 3 to 6% of southern rights. The whales are not albinos, but rather this colour variation is due to a recessive gene. Each whale has a distinctive pattern of callosities on its head – raised calcified skin patches that over time are colonised by barnacles and whale lice – which help in identification.

The southern right whale population in South Africa is doing very well, increasing at its biological maximum of approx. 7% per annum. Global numbers are estimated to be 15 000 individuals, approximately 5000 of which utilise the southern African coastline. This is still only 10% of what the population was estimated to have been prior to whaling. The numbers visiting our coastline have created a little concern. In 2018 there was a bumper year with over 1000 individuals – including 532 calves.

Whilst 2019 would then technically be a rest year, scientists are still concerned that the 2019 aerial survey only showed about 200 individuals. There are some further studies assessing if there may be a possible food problem in the sub-Antarctic. Interestingly, 2017, whilst a good viewing year did not have that many individuals mating so it is possible some did not make the migration the previous year, but no one can be sure.

There are a few southern right whales who decide not to make the migration back and they tend to feed up the West Coast. These would usually be the 'early' arrivals people see around May. The main food source for southern right whales in South Africa, off our west coast, are minute planktonic animals called copepods.

Further south in the southern ocean, mass feeding opportunities are available for the whales, but off South African waters they feed on larger zooplankton, called Euphasiids. Feeding behaviour is rarely observed as the southern rights are here to mate and calve and they build up their reserves before making the migration - They can eat an incredible 600 to 1600kgs of food per day during their feeding months. However, feeding behaviour has been witnessed off the South African coastline as the whales will not miss an opportunity to feed should one arise.

Both southern right and humpback whales are filter feeders using their baleen plates to sift out the plankton, copepods or krill. Each jaw will hold over 200 baleen plates that are over 2 metres long.



# HumpbackWhale



*Image credit - Hennie Otto - Slashfin Skipper*





Humpback whales, so named for the curving of their backs when they dive, make the 3000 km migration from the sub-Antarctic islands towards Mozambique's warmer waters. Their objectives are the same – to mate and calve. Some calves are born on the northern migration and they continue the journey together – true family travel.

The whales spend time in the Antarctic from December to April. Their migration route is split into two broader routes, one up the west coast to Angola, Congo, Gabon and offshore islands; and one up the east coast of Africa to Mozambique, Tanzania, Madagascar and the Indian ocean island groups.

One Humpback whale has been recorded visiting off the coast of Brazil in 1999 and again off Madagascar in 2001 a year later, an epic migration of 9800 kilometres. Humpback whales can be seen moving past the Western Cape coastline between June to August, and then on return migration November/December. This year there was quite a party to attend and hundreds of humpback whales were seen off the West Coast lunge feeding on krill.

Humpback whales belong to a group of whales known as 'rorquals' which is a term that refers to the grooves that run from the underside of the lower jaw to the naval. These grooves allow for throat expansion when feeding enabling the whale to engulf large quantities of prey at once. The throat grooves contract and push out the excess water and the baleen plates trap the food.

The Humpback whale is famous for its incredible breaching behaviour and its beautiful 'singing.' It's white wing-like flippers are unmistakable, and its tail has a distinctive pattern which is used to distinguish individuals.

Humpback whales are believed to calve every two years and their population is doing well, with a global population estimate of up to 140 000 individuals. They are believed to live between 20 to 50 years, having distinctive social groups of about 3 to 15 individuals.





## Bryde's Whale

Some whales prefer not to go too far from home. South Africa has an inshore population of Bryde's whales which do not migrate although there is a seasonal shift in the summer to the south-east coast.

The Bryde's whales generally satisfy their nutritional and reproductive needs within their warm, temperate distribution, freeing them from making latitudinal migrations. The name is pronounced "Broo-dess" or 'brewdus' as it was named after a Norwegian by the name of Johan Bryde.

This whale feeds on shoaling fish like sardines, anchovy, juvenile maasbanker and maybe zooplankton, so will generally be seen where there is a feeding opportunity, and often following the large groups of common dolphin.

They are quite a hit with divers on the annual sardine run. Off Gansbaai, they are often found just off Dyer Island but are not always the easiest whale to observe as they can spend up to 20 minutes underwater. However, guests on Dyer Island Cruises have been lucky enough to capture some of their incredible lunge feeding behaviour.



## DID YOU KNOW?

All whales are under threat. We all know that any journey has its perils and for whales these migrations could lead to possible death. Some of the threats whales face are:

- boat collision
- entanglement
- pollution
- offshore gas and oil developments
- even whaling in some areas

# Know your whales...

## Bryde's Whales

Scientific Name:	<i>Balaenoptera brydei</i>
Size:	12-15m
Weight:	Up to 21 tons
Blow:	Single tall blow
Identification:	Small dorsal fin

Image credit - Sandra Hoerbst





## Humpback Whales

Scientific Name:	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>
Size:	13-15m
Weight:	Up to 30 tons
Blow:	Single bushy plume
Identification:	Small dorsal fin

## Southern Right Whales

Scientific Name:	<i>Eubalaena australis</i>
Size:	14-16m
Weight:	Up to 60 tons
Blow:	V-shaped plume
Identification:	No dorsal fin / Callosities



Image credit - Wilfred Chivell





*Image credit - Wilfred Chivell*



*Image credit - Wilfred Chivell*



*Image credit - Hennie Otto - Slashfin Skipper*



## CONSERVATION PROFILE

*A curious whale coming in for a closer look*



### DID YOU KNOW?

In South Africa permitted whale watching vessels can approach whales from 50m (most vessels have a 300m limit).

However, a whale can approach the vessel. Whales are often very curious and provide some incredible viewing opportunities for guests on board.

A case of who is watching who!







# See these whale species off the coast of Gansbaai, South Africa, with Dyer Island Cruises

Dyer Island Cruises, part of the Marine Dynamics tourism hub, is based in Gansbaai, a town on the Cape Whale Coast, and it is here that you can see both these species, as well as the more resident Bryde's whale. Dyer Island Cruises is Fair Trade Tourism certified and the vessels, Whale Whisperer or Dream Catcher both have Blue Flag status. This is a company that believes Your Choice Makes a Difference and is involved with critical conservation and community work with the Dyer island Conservation Trust.

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