

When are whales euthanased?

DEC wildlife officers, with the assistance of qualified vets, always carry out a clinical assessment of sick or injured whales before deciding on the best course of action in each case. Some beached whales die within hours while others may take many days. Euthanasia may be the most appropriate course of action available. The euthanasia technique used is largely determined by the animal's size and location. Generally, a suitable calibre firearm is the most humane and effective method for smaller animals while the focused implosion method, which involves explosives, is the safest and most effective method for larger animals. This method, which is internationally recognised, has been developed and refined over 20 years and results in an instantaneous death while managing risk to the public and staff involved.

Can I help the wildlife officers?

Safety is a primary consideration at strandings. Whales can roll onto people in the water near them, so we ask that you maintain a safe distance from any animals and follow the instructions of DEC staff. Whales and dolphins are powerful animals and can cause serious injuries. They may also carry zoonotic diseases. It is important that members of the public do not attempt to push stranded animals back out to sea as experience has shown that they will re-strand, causing severe stress, injury and death. Volunteers are always needed and are welcome to assist during mass stranding rescues. Volunteers must be registered and follow the directions of DEC staff.

What happens with mass strandings?

The largest mass stranding of whales dealt with in WA occurred in 1996 in Dunsborough. It involved 320 long-finned pilot whales. All but 20 animals survived in this case, however, multiple factors at play including location and weather can affect the survival rate. DEC's incident control system provides a clear reporting structure and well defined roles that have been very effective since it was first applied to a mass stranding at Augusta in 1986. During a rescue first aid is provided to whales, such as keeping the blow hole clear and keeping their skin wet and cool, while plans are made to return the animals to the sea. This may involve transporting whales to safe holding areas where they are treated to counter the effects of being stranded. When wildlife officers carry out rescues, they develop a strategy to deal with the prevailing conditions and take great care to carry the animals gently in slings to minimise distress and prevent damage to tissue and internal organs. Once they are ready to be released they are guided out to sea using boats. The reason why these mass strandings occur is still unknown. There are many theories including the shape of the coastline being a contributing factor, whales responding to distress calls from other whales, or groups following a leader into shore.

Who do I call if I see a stranded whale or dolphin?

To report a stranding, entanglement or a marine mammal in distress, please call **DEC's Wildcare Helpline on 9474 9055**.

To find out more visit www.dec.wa.gov.au

What to do:

1. Think about your safety first.
2. Call the **Wildcare Helpline on (08) 9474 9055** – an available officer will arrive at the earliest opportunity.
3. While waiting for assistance, try not to make much noise.
4. Keep the animal's skin moist with buckets of water where possible.
5. Listen to the instructions of the wildlife officer.

What NOT to do:

1. **DO NOT** put your safety or the safety of others at risk.
2. **DO NOT** stand close to the tail or head.
3. **DO NOT** touch the animal more than necessary – do not push or pull on the flippers, flukes or head, or cover the blowhole.
4. **DO NOT** attempt to push the animal back out to sea – this will only add to its suffering.
5. **DO NOT** apply sunscreen even if the animal's skin is burnt.

Whale and dolphin strandings

Pygmy blue whale



To report a stranding call the
Wildcare Helpline on
9474 9055



Department of
Environment and Conservation



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Please dispose of this brochure responsibly

Pygmy blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus brevicauda*)



Blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) are the largest living animals on Earth. The pygmy blue whale is the smallest of three subspecies of blue whale and the most commonly encountered off the WA coast.

Description: Its huge size, mottled bluish-grey colour and small stubby dorsal fin well back on the body distinguishes the blue whale from other whales. When viewed from the air, its streamlined, slender shape is obvious. It also has a broad, flat U-shaped head, topped with a central ridge in front of the blowholes, and slender pointed flippers.

Pygmy blue whales can reach up to 22 metres in length, making them smaller than the two other subspecies of blue whale which can reach as much as 30 metres long (average length 24-26 metres at physical maturity) and a mature female can weigh as much as

160 tonnes at the end of the feeding season. When compared with the two larger blue whales, it has a larger relative head to body size, broader and shorter baleen plates and a shorter tail that gives it more of a tadpole-like shape. It also has a different diving behaviour in that the dorsal fin and caudal peduncle submerge simultaneously. It is darker and has a different shaped blowhole.

Status and distribution: Pygmy blue whales only occur in the southern hemisphere and are found in the southern part of the Indian Ocean and the south-western Pacific Ocean, north from the sub-Antarctic zone. They are regularly observed off Perth and Geographe Bay during October and November. Pygmy blue whales are the only identifiable subspecies to be found regularly in tropical waters and they are believed to be more numerous than the other subspecies with an estimated 10,000 individuals.

Blue whales have been severely depleted by whaling, with nearly 30,000 caught in one season alone.

Breeding: Pygmy blue whales cover thousands of kilometres each year, migrating between tropical waters, where they give birth in winter, and polar regions, where they feed. Breeding takes place in the Indian and South Atlantic oceans. The season differs by about six months from other subspecies.

Feeding: Off the WA coast, pygmy blue whales feed in the canyon west of Rottnest Island during the summer months, and they also feed in the Antarctic. They are usually solitary or seen in pairs, but may be found in larger groups in feeding areas. They feed principally on dense swarms of krill (tiny shrimp-like crustaceans) taken from depths of more than 100 metres through to near the surface.

Blue whales may live an impressive 80 years or more. Sharks and killer whales may attack and kill young, wounded or diseased animals.



Photos— D K Coughran

Frequently asked questions

Strandings in Western Australia

The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) is responsible for wildlife conservation in WA and DEC officers are usually the first people called to a marine mammal stranding. DEC wildlife officers have gained vast experience with strandings over the years and are highly respected in Australia and internationally, regularly exchanging advice and information through networks and workshops. DEC also works closely with local authorities, volunteers and service providers during stranding incidents.

Which whales and dolphins live in Western Australian waters?

A total of 35 cetacean (whale and dolphin) species have been recorded in WA waters, which is more than 80 per cent of the 43 species found in or close to Australia. Humpback whales are among the most frequently sighted great whales in WA waters. Their annual 13,000 kilometre migration takes them from Antarctica to the warmer waters off the state's northwest to breed and give birth from May to June and they return with their new calves by December. The west coast humpback population, once hunted to near extinction, is currently estimated at more than 22,000 and is recognised as one of the most successful populations in the world to recover from whaling.

Southern right whales are a much anticipated in-shore visitor, although only few more than 2000 individuals visit Australia during their breeding season on the south coast to give birth and nurse their calves. Some of them move up the west coast, as far north as North West Cape, and may be seen close to shore, just behind the breakers, which can lead people to mistakenly believe they are about to strand. Other marine mammals that we are fortunate to encounter include bottlenose dolphins, blue whales, long-finned pilot whales and false killer whales.

What happens when a marine mammal strands?

Strandings of marine mammals – many of them single animals – occur much more frequently than most people realise along the extensive coastline of WA. Not all strandings are reported as they often happen in remote and unpopulated areas. There are many successful rescue stories involving toothed whales and dolphins of small to medium size. However there are also many sad cases when rescue is not possible and in most instances, particularly involving baleen whales such as humpbacks, the animals will only come ashore when they are very sick or dying. There is little wildlife officers can do to help stranded humpbacks as these whales can weigh in excess of 40,000 kilograms and they are too big to move without causing severe damage and injury. Intervention in these situations represents a serious risk and DEC's most important priority is to the safety of the public and staff. The death of beached baleen whales can take many days and DEC must determine if the provision of palliative care to allow the whale to die naturally or euthanasia to end the animal's suffering is in the animal's best interests.