

(Megaptera novaeangliae)

Humpback whales in Costa Rica

Costa Rica's Bahía Ballena, Isla del Caño Biological Reserve and Bahía Drake are some of the best places on the planet to catch a glimpse of the humpback whale. These sites are located in the northern and southern Pacific coast of our country. According to National Geographic, Ballena Marine National Park is one of the 10 best places to spot humpback whales. The Guanacaste coast is great as well!

Regardless of whether you're relying on patience or luck, watching humpback whales and their calves jumping and performing acrobatic feats in the ocean is something we should all see at some point in our lives.

Humpback whales travel long distances from their feeding areas in cooler waters, including the polar oceans, to their breeding areas in the warm waters of Costa Rica.

These giants remain in Costa Rica for a total of 10 months per year, with groups coming from different hemispheres in each half of the year. This gives the country the longest humpback whale watching season in the world, thanks to the presence of whales from the northern and southern hemispheres.

Characteristics of the species

Humpback whales (Megaptera novaeangliae) are marine mammals belonging to the rorqual family (Balaenopteridae) of the suborder Mysticeti (baleen whales) and the Cetacea order, which includes whales, orcas and dolphins.

The name "humpback" is due to its distinctive short, stout dorsal fin. Its Spanish name, *ballena jorobada* comes from *joroba*, the Spanish word for "hump".

The scientific name, Megaptera is a compound word consisting of the greek words mega, large and ptera, fin: a reference to the animal's massive pectoral fins, which can reach up to one third of its body length, around 5 meters.

Northern Hemisphere Population

From their feeding areas on the southern Pacific coast of Canada and the entire western coast of the United States, humpback whales migrate to their breeding areas in southern Mexico and throughout Central America. In Costa Rica, they congregate in specific areas (see list on the right of the poster) of the northern and southern Pacific.

December-April (dry season)

The whales that migrate from the northern hemisphere arrive during this period, traveling an average of 5,200 km on their way here and the same amount back to their feeding areas.

Southern Hemisphere Population

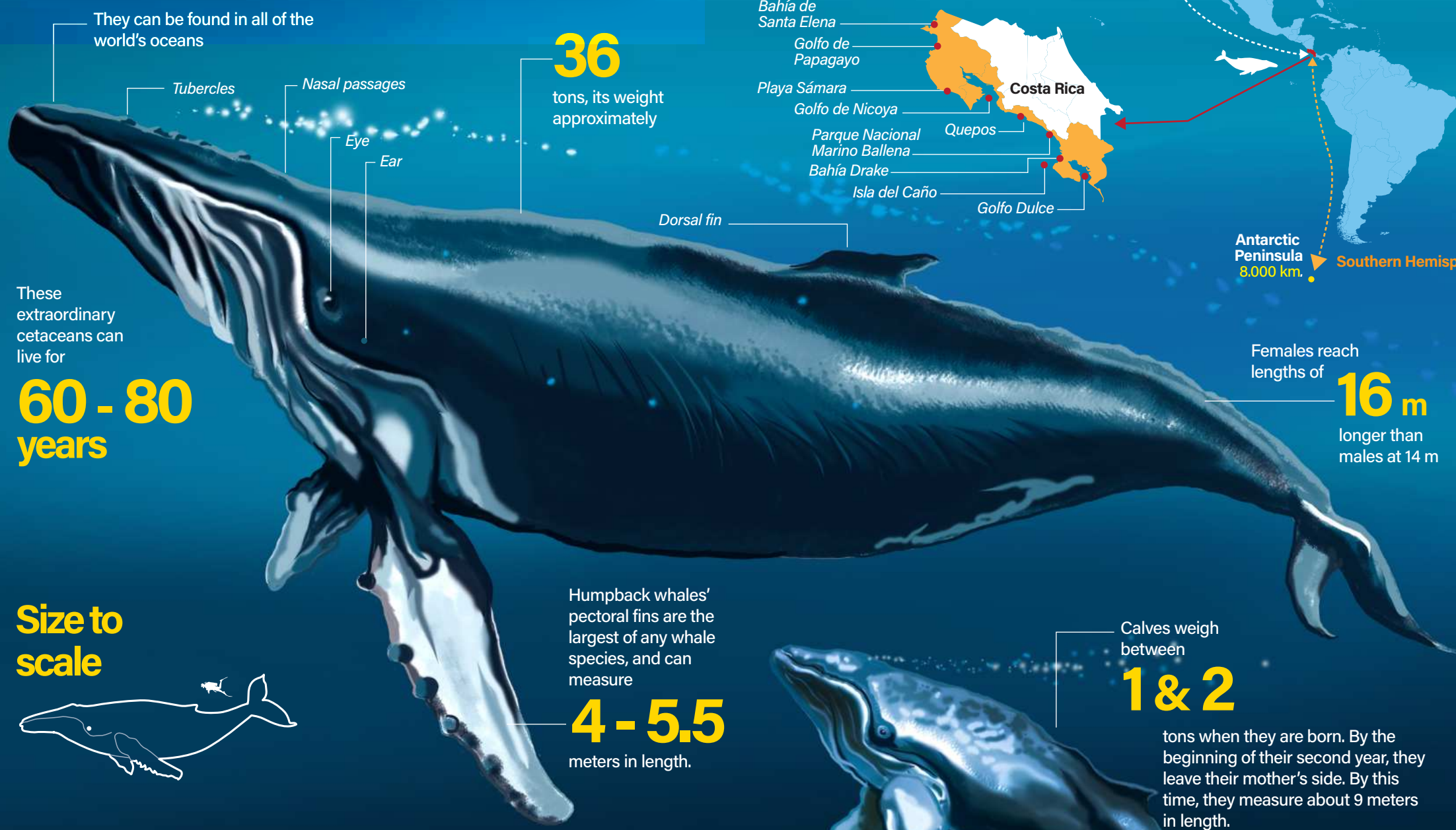
From their feeding areas around the Antarctic Peninsula and southern Chile, humpback whales migrate to their calving sites in northern South America, Panama and Costa Rica. In our country, the whales congregate in certain sites in the southern and (to a lesser extent) northern Pacific coast.

July-November (rainy season)

The whales that migrate from the southern hemisphere arrive during this period, traveling an average of 8,400 km on their way here and the same amount back to their feeding areas. This is the longest permanent migratory route of any mammal!

WHERE THEY COME FROM

Migratory movements are part of most whales' annual lifecycle: they spend the summer in their feeding grounds (high latitudes) and migrate to tropical waters (low latitudes) in the winter to reproduce and raise their calves.



Main areas of sightings in Costa Rica

Whale watching services are available on the following beaches in Costa Rica:



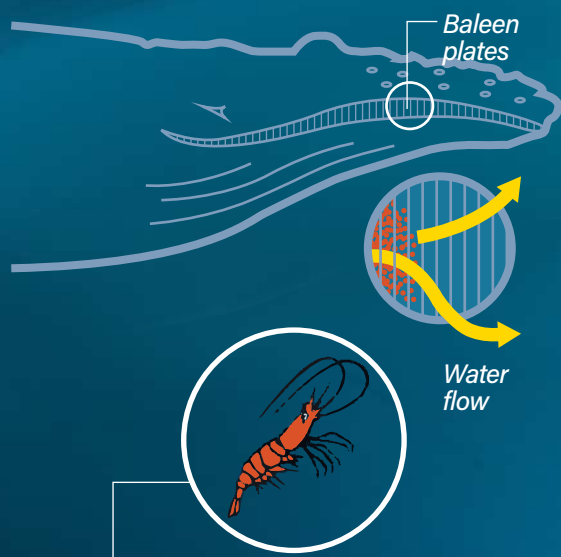
- Cuajiniquíl
- Playas del Coco
- Sámara
- Cóbano
- Jacó
- Quepos
- Herradura
- Domaticalito
- Bahía Rincón
- Bahía Ballena/Uvita
- Drake Bay
- Puerto Jiménez
- Playa Zancudo
- Cabuya
- Isla del Caño por Sierpe
- Isla del Caño por Bahía Drake
- Golfo de Nicoya
- Mal País
- Montezuma
- Tambor
- Curú
- Paquera
- Puntarenas
- Isla Tortuga
- Sierpe

What do they do?



FEEDING:

Humpback whales possess between 270 and 440 grayish-black baleen plates on each side of the jaw, measuring 70 to 100 cm in length, which allow them to filter out water in order to obtain their food of krill and small fish.

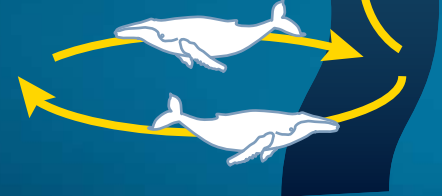


Krill is whales' main source of food. It is a crustacean similar to shrimp, measuring 1-6 cm. Whales can eat **1,400 kg** in a single day.

C Whales open their mouths, capturing the krill. Their baleen filters the water when they close their mouth

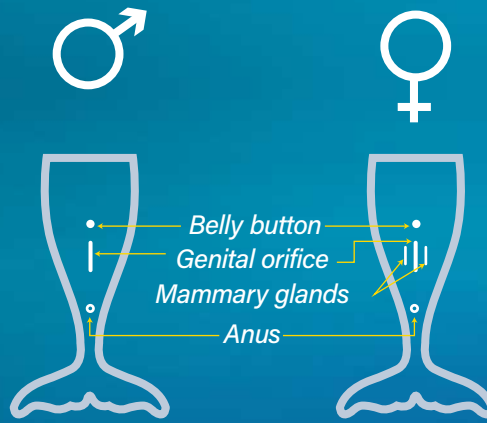
B They begin their ascent quickly

A The whales circle the school of krill, sometimes creating a circular "curtain" of bubbles.



Sex of whales

Both sexes have a genital slit, which contains the penis in males and the vagina in females.



SEXUALITY

Sexual maturity is reached between 6 and 11 years, at a size of between 12 and 14 m. The reproduction period lasts for a period of 4-5 months.

HOW ARE THEY BORN?

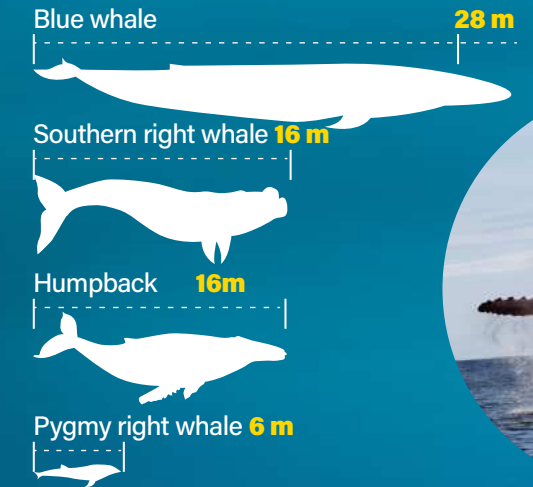
1 The mother whale begins her contractions and the calf starts to leave the mother's body. Calves are born tail-first, not head-first.

2 The umbilical cord breaks off once the calf leaves the mother's body.

3 In order to take its first breath, the calf is helped to the surface by its mother.

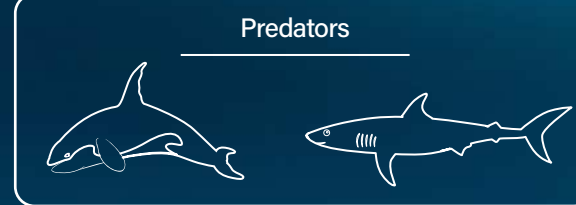
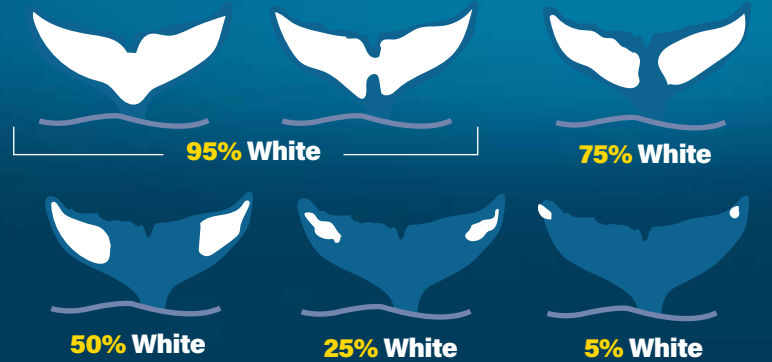
4 The calf consumes between 60 and 70 liters of milk each day.

SIZE TO SCALE:



IDENTIFICATION

Humpback whales can be identified by means of the white marks and the unique pattern of the jagged trailing edge of their tails. This does not change from birth, and allows the identification of individuals. They serve as the whales' "fingerprints" and help to classify whales within a group.



MOVEMENTS ON THE SURFACE



BREATHING:

Whales breathe through their blowhole (nasal orifices) situated in the upper part of their heads. They open and close their nasal passages in order to hold their breath underwater for **up to 45 minutes**. Under normal conditions, whales breathe every 3-9 minutes.

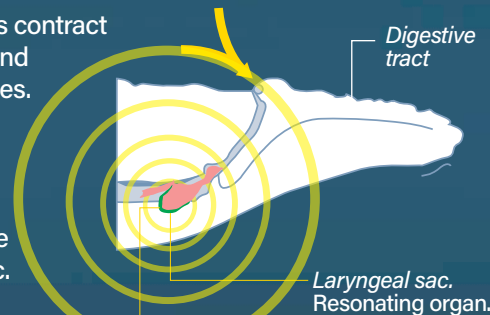
SONGS:

Male humpback whales emit long-lasting sounds called songs during the reproduction period. These can last from 10 to 15 minutes and can be interpreted after a few minutes or repeated continuously for up to 22 hours.

1. The whales contract their throat and thorax muscles.

2. Air flows through the lungs and the laryngeal sac.

3. The alternating expansion and contraction of these organs take air through the U of the larynx (in green), making it vibrate and produce the sound.



Ballena Marine National Park

To protect this valuable site, the government of Costa Rica created Ballena Marine National Park (PNMB) as a sanctuary for these and other marine species including pantropical spotted dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, manta rays, clownfish and mackerel. Isla Ballena is also an important nesting site of the American white ibis. The bird species found in the park also include frigatebirds and the brown booby.



The PNMB is the first Costa Rican protected area created exclusively for its marine resources. It is also the first marine park in Central America (UCR-FUNDEVI 1995/SINAC) and is the eighth-best site for whale watching in the world, according to National Geographic.

Links:

- www.sinac.go.cr
- www.youtube.com
- www.youtube.com/watch
- mongabay.com
- www.nacion.com

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