DOLPHINS & SMALL WHALES OF NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

IDENTIFICATION GUIDE

SMALL WHALES & LARGE DOLPHINS (OCEANIC)
From 5 to 10 metres (16-30 feet) long

RELATIVELY SMALL FIN SET FAR BACK ON BODY

DWARF MINKE WHALE *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*
Size: up to 7.8m | Baleen Plates: 231-285 pairs of short, white/cream colored plates
Small, sleek, dark body. Usually seen singly or in small groups. Dwarf minke whale tends to be inquisitive and circle boats. The Antarctic minke whale, *Balaenoptera bonaerensis* may be sighted from May-August.

CONSPICUOUS BLACK AND WHITE MARKINGS

KILLER WHALE *Orcinus orca*
Size: up to 9m | Tooth Count: 10-14
Highly social. Groups (2-200+ individuals) often travel together, particularly in coastal areas. Fast swimmers with unpredictable movements and behaviour, sometimes inquisitive and approachable.

RECURVED FIN SET MID-BACK ON BODY

FALSE KILLER WHALE *Pseudorca crassidens*
Size: up to 6.1m | Tooth Count: 7-12
Group size varies from 10 to 100s, typically scattered over several kilometres. Fast-moving and energetic, very acrobatic and frequently bow-ride.

SHORT-FINNED PILOT WHALE *Globicephala macrorhynchus*
Size: up to 7.2m | Tooth Count: 7-9
Pilot whales form large groups. There are two species, not easily distinguishable at sea. The short-finned pilot whale, *Globicephala macrorhynchus* is most likely to be sighted around Northern Australia.

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**BEAKED DOLPHINS**
Less than 5 metres (16 feet) long

### MEDIUM BEAK

#### COASTAL: DISTINCT MELON ON FOREHEAD, LARGE FIN

**INDO-PACIFIC BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN**  *Tursiops aduncus*

*Size: up to 2.6m | Tooth Count: 21-29*

Generally playful, approachable and inquisitive. Occasionally bow-ride, although groups can also be shy and less playful. Distinguished from other inshore dolphins by their high, curved dorsal fin.

#### OCEANIC: LARGE FIN & LARGE GROUP SIZE

**COMMON BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN**  *Tursiops truncatus*

*Size: up to 3.8m | Tooth Count: 18-27*

Large, strong swimmer, that spends a lot of time at the surface. Group size from 10 to 100s. Very playful, frequently bow-ride, with numerous associated acrobatics.

#### SHORT-BEAKED COMMON DOLPHIN**  *Delphinus delphis*

*Size: up to 2.4m | Tooth Count: 41-57*

Distinct ‘hourglass’ colour pattern on sides. Usually seen in open ocean, often in large schools.

#### STRIPED DOLPHIN**  *Stenella coeruleoalba*

*Size: up to 2.7m | Tooth Count: 40-55*

Fast, energetic swimmer, bow-rides in some areas. Black eye-to-flipper stripe and shoulder blaze the main distinguishing features.

### LONG BEAK

#### COASTAL: LOW, WIDE DORSAL FIN

**AUSTRALIAN HUMPBACK DOLPHIN**  *Sousa sahulensis*

*Size: Up to 2.7m | Tooth Count: 31-35*

Slow moving coastal species that rarely bow-ride or leap out of water. Usually seen in small groups of up to six animals. Mottled light to dark grey in colour, with patches of whitish/pink on dorsal fin and head in older adults.

#### OCEANIC: LARGE FIN & LARGE GROUP SIZE

**SPINNER DOLPHIN**  *Stenella longirostris*

*Size: up to 2m | Tooth Count: 40-62*

Some groups rest in shallow coastal waters and oceanic islands during the day, however most groups primarily oceanic. Very small, fast, highly acrobatic dolphin which can ‘spin’ when leaping.

**PANTROPICAL SPOTTED DOLPHIN**  *Stenella attenuata*

*Size: up to 2.5m | Tooth Count: 34-48*

Extensive spotting over body is visible when close to individuals, young animals unspotted (some populations little or no spotting visible). Fast and acrobatic, frequently bow rides. Lips and beak tip usually white.

**ROUGH-TOOTHED DOLPHIN**  *Steno bredanensis*

*Size: up to 2.7m | Tooth Count: 19-28*

Usually sluggish and does not porpoise out of the water when traveling. Often swims shoulder-to-shoulder with others in group, with beak and tip of chin out of water. Occasionally leaps out of water. Sloping forehead the main distinguishing feature.
BLUNT HEADED DOLPHINS & DUGONG
Less than 5 metres (16 feet) long

**LARGE DORSAL FIN**

**COASTAL: ROUND HEAD & SHY**
- Distinct neck, with bowling ball shaped head
- Small rounded dorsal fin
- Dark brown dorsal surface, light brown body, white belly

**OCEANIC: LARGE BODY SIZE**
- Bulging head and bulbous face
- Conspicious white mouthline
- Grayish body colour (juveniles), changing to extensive scarring and whitish look (adults)

**RISO'S DOLPHIN** *Grampus griseus*
- Size: up to 4m | Tooth Count: 2-7 (lower), 0 (upper)
- Often active at the surface, forming lines when hunting.
- Group size of 5-50+. Often extensive scarring over body.

**SMALL DORSAL FIN**

**AUSTRALIAN SNUBFIN DOLPHIN** *Orcaella heinsohni*
- Size: up to 2.3m | Tooth Count: 11-22
- Occurs singly or in small groups, sometimes up to 20 individuals. Commonly sighted near mangrove, river habitats. Shy and does not bow-ride, keeps low on the surface.

**OCEANIC: SMALL BODY SIZE**
- Triangular dorsal fin
- Cape dips down below dorsal fin
- White lips

**MELON-HEADED WHALE** *Peponocephala electra*
- Size: up to 2.8m | Tooth Count: 20-25
- Fast swimmer, porpoising regularly in low leaps with much spray, highly gregarious. Dark cape dips down below dorsal fin. Flippers have pointed tips. White chin/lips.

**DWARF SPERM WHALE** *Kogia sima*
- Size: up to 2.7m | Tooth Count: 7-13 (lower), 3 (upper)
- Smaller size with tall, pointed dorsal fin distinguishes the dwarf from pygmy sperm whale. Inconspicuous surfacing similar to pygmy sperm whale.

**OCEANIC: SMALL BODY SIZE & VERY SHORT BEAK**

**PYGMY KILLER WHALE** *Feresa attenuata*
- Size: up to 2.8m | Tooth Count: 8-13
- Commonly sighted in small groups of 6-10 individuals, which roll synchronously shoulder-to-shoulder. Often a slow sluggish swimmer. Dark cape sweeps down slightly near dorsal fin. Flippers have rounded tips. White chin/lips.

**PYGMY SPERM WHALE** *Kogia breviceps*
- Size: up to 3.5m | Tooth Count: 10-16 (lower), 0 (upper)
- Difficult to detect unless sea conditions calm. Typically rises to surface and floats motionless with blowhole and back out of water, then sinks below surface without rolling.

**FRASER'S DOLPHIN** *Lagenodelphis hosei*
- Size: up to 2.7m | Tooth Count: 38-44
- Usually seen in open ocean off the continental shelf. Fast, aggressive swimmers with a lot of splashing. Commonly in large groups of 100s to even 1000s.

**DUGONG** *Dugong dugon*
- Size: up to 3.3m
- More robust and slow moving than a dolphin. Round grey-brown body, usually seen singly or in small aggregations, although large groups of 100’s can sometimes be seen.
**Coastal species identification**

**AUSTRALIAN SNUBFIN DOLPHIN**

*Orcasius heinsohni*

- **Fin:** Small, triangular, rounded tip
- **Colour:** Brownish to grey
- **Face:** Blunt, no snout
- **Length:** Up to 2.3m

**Habitat & Behaviour:**

Endemic to Australia, occur in coastal waters within 10km of coastline and less than 15m depth, very site attached, usually found within 20km of estuary mouths. Feed and socialise in just 1-2m of water in estuaries (which are their critical habitat). Often found in groups of 5-6 dolphins. May spit water as a method of herding fish.

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**AUSTRALIAN HUMPBACK DOLPHIN**

*Sousa sahulensis*

- **Fin:** Low & wide, triangular, pointed tip
- **Colour:** Pale grey, adults have pink patches on snout & dorsal fin
- **Face:** Long, pointed snout
- **Length:** Up to 2.7m

**Habitat & Behaviour:**

Usually seen in coastal waters less than 15m deep (but up to 30m), feed in or near estuaries, in water depths of 2-5m (slightly deeper than snubfins). Usually found in small groups of 2-5 animals, but groups of up to 10-30 animals have also been reported. Known to follow trawlers as a method of hunting fish.

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**INDO-PACIFIC BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN**

*Tursiops aduncus*

- **Fin:** Tall & curved
- **Colour:** Light to dark grey
- **Face:** Distinct forehead, medium length snout
- **Length:** Up to 2.6m

**Habitat & Behaviour:**

Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins can be found inshore in shallow coastal waters including estuaries, mangroves, beaches and bays. Very approachable, occasionally bow-ride and exhibit aerial activity. Found in groups of 1-10, but can occur in groups of 20s in some areas.

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**DUGONG**

*Dugong dugon*

- **Fin:** No fin
- **Colour:** Grey to brown
- **Face:** Blunt, no pronounced snout
- **Length:** Up to 3.3m

**Habitat & Behaviour:**

Dugongs generally live in warm shallow waters where their primary food source, seagrass, occurs. Commonly found in water depths of 10 metres or less. Seagrass beds form part of their critical habitat. Known to travel distances of up to 600km. Usually shy and avoid boats.