MEETING OF THE WATERS

A journey on the marine side of Australia’s Coastal Wilderness

Part 4 – The Marine Mammals and Reptiles
Marine Mammals and Reptiles

Conspicuous mammals to be seen here are the Australian Fur Seals and the New Zealand Fur Seals. One of the best viewing places is Montague Island - the northern gateway to Australia’s Coastal Wilderness. You can get to Montague Island via a short boat journey from Narooma, or longer trip up the coast from Bermagui. Montague Island is home to a large colony of Australian Fur Seals. There are also colonies also at Gabo Island, accessed either by air or boat, and also at Green Cape for those who prefer to drive. On Montague Island and at Green Cape there are restored, heritage-listed lighthouse accommodations which can be booked in advance through the National Parks and Wildlife Service for those wishing to spend a relaxing few days bird, seal and whale watching. The front verandahs of these lighthouses are prime wildlife viewing seats.

Some wayward seal visitors from Montague Island are found on the local beaches from time to time, while a small group of Australian Fur Seals are permanent residents on the breakwater of Snug Cove at Eden. And keep a look out for Sabrina, an Australian Fur Seal who makes a temporary home at Merimbula Bridge each year. She first appeared in 2000 in an emaciated condition, but has since regained her health and strength. She is now lovingly referred to as “Merimbula’s Mermaid”, and was last sighted in 2010.
An occasional visitor is the leopard seal. These large predatory seals are normally restricted to Antarctic waters but will venture north in search of warmer waters when sick or dying. Over the past decade three leopard seals have been recorded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the region, the last dying peacefully on an oyster rack in the middle of Merimbula Lake.

**Cetaceans - whales and dolphins**

The region enjoys one of the highest incidences of cetaceans of any coastal region in the world. Blue Whales and Southern Right Whales loll offshore, Bottlenose Dolphins joyride in boat bows, and rare killer whales such as the Pygmy and Killer Whales also hunt here. The legendary Humpback Whales have put the whaling history behind them, trusting us anew by feeding in our bays and interacting with whale watching vessels.

Most whales are migratory, moving up from Antarctic waters during the winter to warmer northern waters. One of the star species is the Humpback Whale, with over 15,000 adults passing the coast en route to and from Antarctica. In the winter months, you can see whales travelling up both west and east coasts of Australia, but this region is the only place on the entire east coast of Australia where the humpbacks are known to stop their long migration, and actively eat and play. It is not unusual to watch a female humpback and her calf playing in Horseshoe Bay while doing your shopping in the main street of Bermagui. At the right time of year, if you take a casual lunch at the pub (hotel) in Bermagui main street, or either the pub on
the hill at Narooma, or in Tathra, you can watch the whales as they pass by. These pubs are ideally placed for some refreshment while watching the wildlife. For a longer stay to watch whales and seals, you can book (in advance through the National Parks and Wildlife Service) the heritage-listed lighthouse cottages at Green Cape. The whales can be seen quite easily from the ‘front row seats’ on the cottage verandahs. A park ranger tells of seeing a Killer Whale take a seal from the rock platform below – a truly ‘Attenborough’ experience.

Other migratory cetaceans encountered on this coast are Blue Whales, Sperm Whales, Minke and Sei whales, Common and Risso’s Dolphins and various species of Beaked Whale.

In a rare victory for the planet’s wildlife, numbers of some species of whales have recovered spectacularly from the population crashes caused by commercial whaling. Whale watching is thus an activity enjoyed by large numbers of people up and down the Australian coast. But this region is very special because it is the only known place on their journey up the east coast where the whales stop for one or a few days to feed, play and show their calves how things are done. This experience is set against the backdrop of Australia’s premier forested coastal wilderness.

**BLUE WHALES**

- **Description**: Blue-grey or slate blue. Head has a distinctive broad based pointed arch shape.
- **Surfacing/diving**
- **Fins/flukes**: Small dorsal fin, long pointed pectoral fins.
- **Blow**
- **Other characteristics**: May travel in pairs, often alone.

Where you might see them:
Open ocean, rarely seen near coast. Southern waters, western Bass Strait and offshore from Perth and south-western coast.
Size: Largest whale species (to 30m).

**SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALES**

- **Description**: Black body with white callouses (bumps) on head.
- **Surfacing/diving**
- **Fins/flukes**: No dorsal fin, short paddle-like pectoral fins.
- **Blow**
- **Other characteristics**: May raise flukes on diving.

Where you might see them:
Inshore waters particularly along southern coastline between May and October. Also seen on the southeastern and south-western coastlines. Have been known to enter Sydney harbour.
Size: Large, stocky whale (to 17m).

**MINKE WHALES**

- **Description**: Sharply V-shaped head, throat grooves present. Black/dark grey back, wavy boundary to white underside.
- **Surfacing/diving**
- **Fins/flukes**: Curved dorsal fin, short pectoral fins.
- **Blow**
- **Other characteristics**: Blow and dorsal fin often appear simultaneously.

Where you might see them:
Generally offshore in Australian waters during winter migration.
Size: Medium (to 11m).

**HUMPBACK WHALES**

- **Surfacing/diving**
- **Fins/flukes**: Long pectoral fins (about 1/3 body length).
- **Blow**
- **Other characteristics**: Humpbacks are a most spectacular whale – often doing full body breaches, rolls and tail slaps.

Where you might see them:
Inshore along length of east and west coasts between May and December.
Size: Large (to 16m).
Description: Dark grey back. White underside, fins and flukes.

**BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS**

- **Where you might see them**: All waters from tropical to temperate, all seasons.
- **Size**: Small (to 3m).
- **Description**: Dark grey upper body with light grey underside, oblong head with a short and stubby bottle shaped beak for which the species is named.
- **Other characteristics**: Highly social, can occur in very large groups.

**COMMON DOLPHINS**

- **Where you might see them**: All waters, open ocean and inshore, all seasons.
- **Size**: Small (to 2.6m).
- **Description**: Dark grey upper body, white belly, distinctive dark stripes sweeping down body, some tan - ochre/yellow on flanks.
- **Other characteristics**: Often seen bow-riding, and usually in large groups.
The rarer visitors include

![Killer Whale](image1)

![Pygmy Killer Whale](image2)

Whale migrations are epic. The following map records the movement of 16 tagged Humpback Whales tagged as they travelled south off Eden.
Reptiles – turtles and snakes

Marine reptiles are also a treat to encounter, with both Green and Leatherback Turtles reported in these waters. A rare Hawkesbill Turtle was also rescued from Bournda in July 2011, and rehabilitated at the Merimbula Aquarium before its successful release near Montague Island.

Whilst not commonly seen along these shores, you might see a Yellowbellied Sea Snake that is common to the seas adjacent to the countries of the Pacific Rim. Rare visitors include the Yellow-lipped Sea Krait.