



# Sighting Guide Notes for Cetaceans

Organisation for the Rescue & Research of  
Cetaceans in Australia

---

Printed June 2012

ORRCA Inc. ABN 19 416 546 368  
Registered under the Associations Incorporation Act (NSW)  
24 Hour Marine Mammal Rescue Hotline - 02 9415 3333  
Email: [orrca@orrca.org.au](mailto:orrca@orrca.org.au) [www.orrca.org.au](http://www.orrca.org.au)

---

---

## Introduction

Sighting whales and dolphins in the wild is difficult due to the fact that they spend so little time at the surface. Unless they are resting, feeding or breaching there will be only fleeting glimpses of the animals when they surface to breathe. Therefore, those few moments in which you make a sighting are very important.

We recommend that you concentrate on answering the following questions about the key features of the animal you see:-

- How long is it?
- What is its head shape?
- Does it have a dorsal fin?
- What is the length of the pectoral fin?
- Are there any distinctive markings?
- What is the shape of the blow?

If there is more than one animal in view, it is usually best to concentrate on recording the features of the largest one.

For the novice, the first few attempts at observing and recording whales and dolphins may be frustrating. However, that frustration will disappear with practice. There are times when even the most experienced observer cannot record the key features because the animal is either too far away, visibility is poor, or the light conditions mask the colours and patterns.

Thank you for participating in ORRCA's research. Your sighting log report will help us to determine the number of whales and dolphins living near, or migrating along, our shores.

## Instructions for Completing the Whale and Dolphin Sighting Log

We ask for your name, address and phone number in case we need to check any details, or to pass on to you further information about your sightings.

For your sighting location, please print the name of the headland, bay or boat where you were watching for the animals. If you are in a boat offshore, it would be useful to know:-

- Latitude
- Longitude
- Water depth and
- Water temperature

The date, start and finish times are important whether or not you see any animals.

## Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	1
<i>Instructions</i> .....	1
<i>Length of Animal</i> .....	2
<i>Head Shape</i> .....	2
<i>Dorsal Fins</i> .....	3
<i>Pectoral Fins/Flippers</i> .....	4
<i>Markings and Patterns</i> .....	4
<i>Blow</i> .....	4
<i>Species Illustrations</i> .....	5
<i>Surface Behaviours</i> .....	6
<i>Whale and Dolphin Species</i> .....	9
<i>Migaloo - Special Status</i> .....	12
<i>Legal Distances for approach</i> .....	10
<i>About ORRCA</i> .....	13

For example, knowing that no whales or dolphins were observed from your location may mean that the animals were travelling further offshore than when they were observed at different locations on that day. So even 'no sighting' reports may help us to establish that the animals avoided particular parts of the coast, possibly due natural events (e.g. currents, water temperature, rough inshore waters) or man-made disturbances (e.g. boats, jet skis, swimmers).

At the bottom of the form there is room for you to include your comments about what else you observed. For example:-

- Were the animals close to shore, near the horizon, or somewhere in between?
- Did you notice any wildlife such as sea birds, schools of fish, seals, sharks, rays?
- Were there boats, jet skis, surf boards, swimmers in the area?
- Would you describe the sea as calm or rough?
- Was it a clear day with good visibility to the horizon?

## Length

Estimating the length of a moving animal can be difficult but we would like to know whether you consider the animal is small (up to about 4 metres), medium (between 4 and 10 metres) or large (more than 10 metres).

On page 10 you will find the lengths of some whale and dolphin species recorded in New South Wales for both adults and calves.

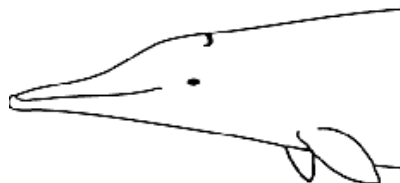
## Head Shape

Which of the following illustrations most closely resembles the shape of the front of the head of the animal you sighted?

### 1. Short, stubby beak



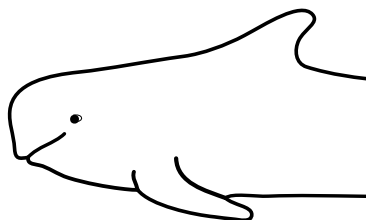
### 2. Long, narrow beak



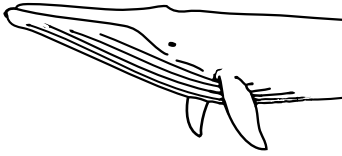
### 3. Rounded at front



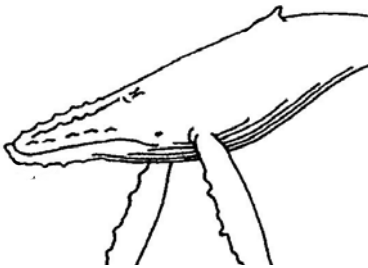
### 4. Bulbous, pot shaped



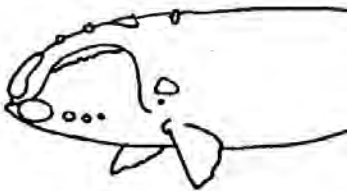
**5. Large head, flat on top**



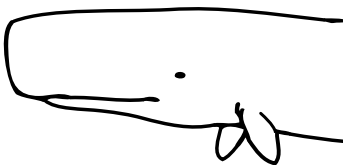
**6. Large head with small bumps**



**7. Large dark head with light coloured patches (callosities)**



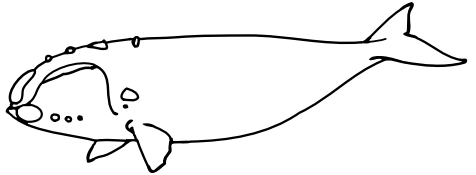
**8. Blunt, squarish**



**Dorsal Fin**

Which of the following illustrations most closely resembles the back and dorsal fin of the animal you sighted?

**1. No dorsal fin**



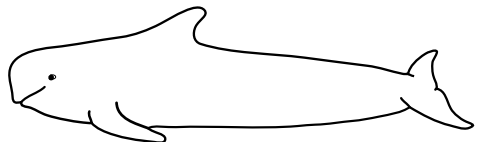
**2. Bumps or ridges behind small dorsal fin**



**3. Dorsal fin in the middle of the back**



**4. Dorsal fin closer to the head than the flukes**



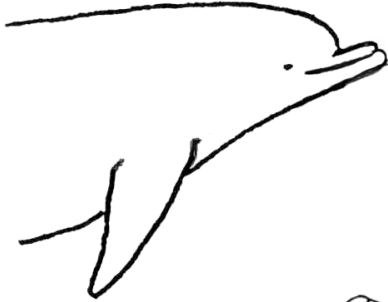
**5. Dorsal fin more than halfway along back**



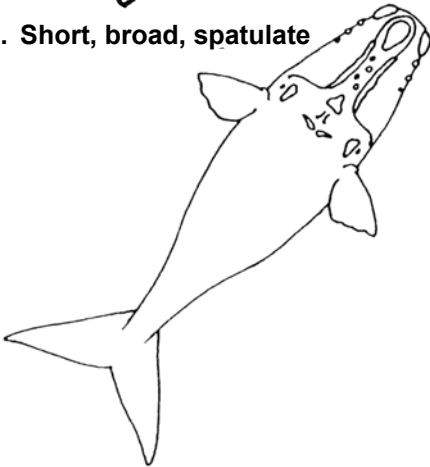
## Pectoral Fins or Flippers

Which of the following illustrations most closely resembles the pectoral fin of the animal you sighted?

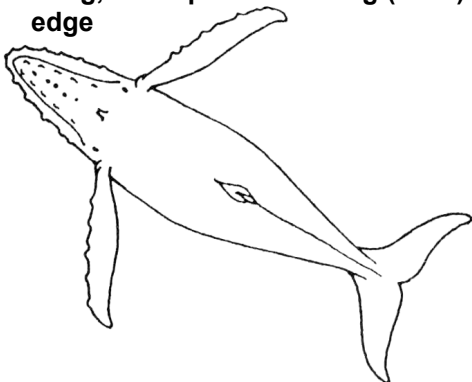
### 1. Tapered



### 2. Short, broad, spatulate



### 3. Long, scalloped on leading (front) edge



## Markings and Patterns

Which of the following descriptions best describes the animal you sighted?

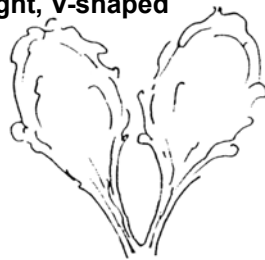
1. Grey all over
2. Grey on the dorsal surface (the back) but lighter colour on the flanks (the sides) and belly
3. Dark grey on body, large light colour patches on the head
4. Dark grey on body, white patches on pectoral fins and flukes
5. Crisscross or hourglass pattern on the flanks?

## Blow

In calm conditions, the large whales have distinct blows.

Which of the following illustrations most closely resembles the blow of the animal you sighted?

### 1. Upright, V-shaped



### 2. Upright, broad and busy



### 3. Upright, tall column



### 4. Forward pointing



## Species

The following are drawings of a few of the whales and dolphins commonly seen in our waters. Does any illustration resemble the animal you sighted?

### 1. Southern Right Whale

Key features:

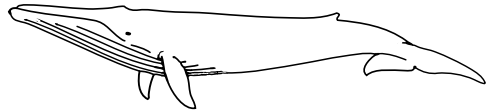
- Large head
- No dorsal fin
- Light colour (white or yellowish) patches on head
- Paddle-shaped pectoral fins
- Calf up to 6m
- Adult up to 18m



### 2. Rorqual Whales (Blue, Fin, Sei, Tropical (Bryde's), Minke or Humpback Whale)

Key features:

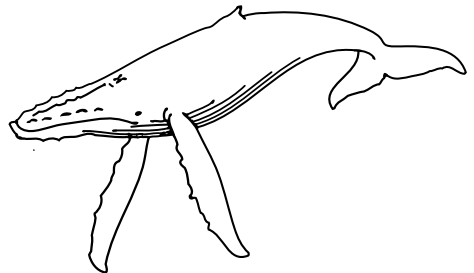
- Ventral pleats (extending from under the lower jaw to behind the pectoral fins)
- Dorsal fin in rear third of the back



### 3. Humpback Whale

Key features:

- Very long pectoral fins
- Small bumps (tubercles) on head
- Ventral pleats
- Calf up to 5m
- Adult up to 15m



### 4. Sperm Whale

Key features:

- Blunt, squarish head
- Series of bumps along back
- Single blowhole at front left hand side
- Calf up to 4.5m
- Adult up to 18m



## 5. Pilot Whale

Key features:

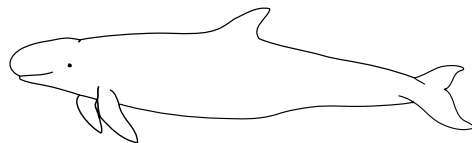
- Bulbous head
- Dorsal fin closer to head than flukes
- Fairly long pectoral fins
- Very dark grey in colour
- Calf up to 1.9m
- Adult up to 6.5m



## 6. False Killer Whale

Key features:

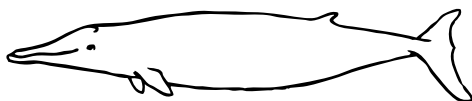
- Rounded head
- Prominent dorsal fin in centre of back
- Dark grey colour
- Calf up to 1.9m
- Adult up to 6m



## 7. Beaked Whale Family (over 20 members)

Key features:

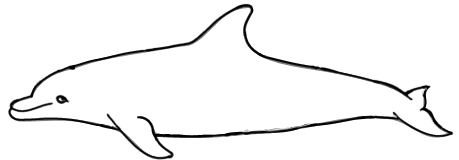
- Dorsal fin in rear third of body
- Beak
- Small pectoral fins



## 8. Bottlenose Dolphin

Key features:

- Short beak
- Prominent dorsal fin in middle of back
- Medium grey colour
- Calf up to 1.3m
- Adult up to 3.9m



## Surface Behaviours

When you sight a whale or dolphin you may see a variety of behaviours, including flukes or pectoral fins in the air or the head held high above the surface. To help you record the whale and dolphin behaviours, the following descriptions explain some of their common surface activities.

### Blow

This word refers to the cloud of condensed water vapour produced when the whale or dolphin exhales.

The blow forms when the warm air and oil secretions expelled from the lungs comes into contact with the cold sea air. (The same thing happens to our exhalation on a cold winter day when our breath appears as steam.)

On a clear, windless day the blow of the large whales may be visible for a few seconds. The blow of the smaller whales and dolphins is usually very low and indistinct and therefore is difficult to see.



---

The height and shape of the blow of the large whales helps to identify each species. For example, the Southern Right Whale has a V-shaped blow up to 5m high, and the Humpback Whale has a bushy blow up to 3m high. The frequency of the blow relates to the whale's activities. For example a migrating humpback whale typically breathes up to five times, about twenty seconds apart, then dives for approximately five to ten minutes.

### **Breaching**

There are a few types of breaching. Each one starts with the whale exploding through the surface, and ends with a loud splash.

In some instances when in mid-air, the whale twists, and then lands on its back, or on its side, or even belly flops. In most breaches the flukes remain submerged but in a true breach the whale leaps clear of the water.

Sometimes the whale will breach over and over again. One Humpback whale was observed breaching 130 times in 75 minutes. Although breaching occurs at any time, it seems to be more frequent when there is a change in weather conditions such as rising winds or approaching storms.

### **Breathing**

Whales and dolphins breathe differently to us: they cannot breathe through the mouth, they are voluntary breathers (we are reflex breathers), and they breathe less frequently than we do. When they exhale their breath (blow) is often visible.

### **Diving**

The depth and duration of the dive varies between species, and reflects their food preferences.

Some species are quite shallow divers because their food is near the surface.

The Sperm whale, however, may dive several thousand metres to find the large squid on which it feeds. When a whale makes a long deep dive it is called the terminal dive, or sounding. Prior to sounding, the whale makes a series of short dives; it then arches its back and lifts the flukes clear of the surface. Whales and dolphins also dive to avoid predators.

### **Feeding**

There is great variation in the feeding behaviour of whales and dolphins. The Odontocetes (whales and dolphins with teeth) feed mainly on fish and squid.

The Mysticetes (whales with fibrous plates called baleen which hang from the upper jaw) prefer small crustaceans and fish.

Toothed whales and dolphins use echolocation (reflected sounds) to detect food.

In the past it was felt that it was unlikely that you would see Humpback whales feeding in our waters as their main feeding ground is in the Antarctic where they spend the summer months constantly eating krill. However, Humpback whales have been seen regularly feeding both on their northward and southward migrations, thus proving that they are opportunistic feeders.

---

## **Flipper or Pec Slapping**

These words describe the action a whale takes when it lies on its back or side and raises the pectoral fin high above the surface. It then slaps the fin on the surface making a distinct cracking sound which on calm days can be heard a kilometre or more away. The animal may flipper / pec slap for several minutes. Humpback whales often lie on their backs and use both pectoral fins to slap the surface. This behaviour is also called finning or flippering.

## **Footprints**

This refers to the smooth, 'oily', roughly circular patches of water which follow in the wake of a whale that has submerged.

When the whale swims beneath the surface, it moves its flukes up and down, and these movements create upwellings about a metre wide. If the seas are calm it is possible to track a submerged whale by its footprints.

## **Porpoising**

This word relates mainly to the smaller whales and dolphins, and refers to the way they leap clear of the water when travelling quite quickly.

Often a group of dolphins will porpoise along together, making long, low leaps every few seconds.

## **Resting**

As whales and dolphins are voluntary breathers, they have to remain conscious so that they 'remember to breathe'; otherwise they would suffocate. They cannot sleep as we do. Instead they take short rests at, or near, the surface.

During the rest, the animal turns off one side of its brain while the other side remains alert to control breathing and to watch out for predators. When the animal is resting, it will barely move and its blows will be slow and rhythmical. This resting behaviour is sometimes called 'logging' because the animal looks like a log floating in the water.

## **Spy Hopping**

This is when the whale or dolphin lifts its head high above the surface, and takes a look around. The purpose of spy hopping may be to get a bearing from natural objects (sun, stars, headlands etc.) but the animals regularly spy hop when vessels are nearby, or when there are loud noises or disturbances.

## **Swimming**

Whales and dolphins have powerful muscles in the rear third of the body. These muscles move the flukes up and down, and propel the animal forwards. There is a great variation in the swimming speeds of the whales and dolphins.

Some of the larger animals swim around 4-5 knots but they can reach a cruising speed of about 10 knots. When alarmed, they go into sprint mode of about 15 knots. However they cannot sprint for long periods. Killer whales have been timed sprinting at 20 knots, dolphins at 23 knots and pilot whales at 26 knots.

## **Tail Slapping**

In this activity the whale or dolphin does a headstand and raises its flukes above the surface. It then slaps the flukes down so strongly that on a calm day, a

---

is thought to be a way for the animal to communicate with other members of the group; it is also a sign that the whale or dolphin is uncomfortable about an intruding vessel or swimmer. This behaviour is also called lobtailing.

## **Whale and Dolphin Species Recorded in New South Wales**

There are 90 known species of whales, dolphins and porpoises in the world. Only 35 of these species have been recorded along the NSW coast.

The following is a list of those we've most frequently observed. The scientific name of each species is in brackets. Beside each species are two lengths; the first is the length of the calf, the second of the adult.

### **Mysticetes**

These are also known as baleen whales; they have two blowholes.

#### **Southern Right Whale**

*(Eubalaena australis)*

**Calf** 6.0m **Adult** 18.0m

#### **Fin Whale**

*(Balaenoptera physalus)*

**Calf** 6.5m **Adult** 22.0m

#### **Blue Whale**

*(Balaenoptera musculus)*

**Calf** 7.0m **Adult** 27.0m

#### **Minke Whale**

*(Balaenoptera acutorostrata)*

**Calf** 2.8m **Adult** 10.0m

#### **Sei Whale**

*(Balaenoptera borealis)*

**Calf** 4.8m **Adult** 16.0m

#### **Tropical (or Bryde's) Whale**

*(Balaenoptera edeni)*

**Calf** 4.0m **Adult** 14.5m

#### **Humpback Whale**

*(Megaptera novaeangliae)*

**Calf** 4.5m **Adult** 15.0m

### **Odontocetes**

This group of whales and dolphins have teeth and only one blowhole.

#### **Southern Bottlenose Whale**

*(Hyperoodon planifrons)*

**Calf** 3.5m **Adult** 7.5m

#### **Scamperdown Beaked Whale**

*(Mesoplodon grayi)*

**Calf** 2.4m **Adult** 5.6m

#### **Ginkgo-toothed Beaked Whale**

*(Mesoplodon ginkgodens)*

**Calf** 2.1m **Adult** 5.2m

#### **Straptooth Beaked Whale**

*(Mesoplodon layardii)*

**Calf** 3.0m **Adult** 6.2m

#### **Densebeak Whale**

*(Mesoplodon densirostris)*

**Calf** 2.6m **Adult** 6.0m

#### **Sperm Whale**

*(Physeter macrocephalus)*

**Calf** 4.5m **Adult** 18.0m

#### **Pygmy Sperm Whale**

*(Kogia breviceps)*

**Calf** 1.2m **Adult** 3.4m

#### **Dwarf Sperm Whale**

*(Kogia simus)*

**Calf** 1.0m **Adult** 2.7m

---

### **Shortfin Pilot Whale**

*(Globicephala macrorhynchus)*

**Calf** 1.9m **Adult** 6.5m

### **False Killer Whale**

*(Pseudorca crassidens)*

**Calf** 1.9m **Adult** 6.0m

### **Melonheaded Whale**

*(Peponocephala electra)*

**Calf** 1.0m **Adult** 2.7m

### **Killer Whale**

*(Orcinus orca)*

**Calf** 2.5m **Adult** 9.8m

### **Pygmy Killer Whale**

*(Feresa attenuata)*

**Calf** 80cm **Adult** 2.6m

### **Risso's Dolphin**

*(Grampus griseus)*

**Calf** 1.7m **Adult** 3.8m

### **Bottlenose Dolphin**

*(Tursiops truncatus)*

**Calf** 1.3m **Adult** 3.9m

### **Pantropical Spotted Dolphin**

*(Stenella attenuata)*

**Calf** 90cm **Adult** 2.4m

### **Striped Dolphin**

*(Stenella coeruleoalba)*

**Calf** 1m **Adult** 2.5m

### **Common Dolphin**

*(Delphinus delphis)*

**Calf** 90cm **Adult** 2.4m

## **Legal Distances for Approaching Whales and Dolphins**

*Information obtained from OEH*

In New South Wales, whales and dolphins are under the protection of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, and the Fauna Protection Regulations.

To ensure that whale and dolphins are not harmed or disturbed while in our waters, the following are the minimum distances which must be observed by everyone. Any breach of these distances can incur a fine of up to \$100,000 and/or two years goal.

Water-based whale watching is becoming more popular in NSW especially when the Humpback whales travel north to the tropics where the pregnant females will give birth. On their return to the Antarctic, the mothers and calves take their time and you may be lucky to view a mother nursing her calf off one of the beaches. Another area that the Humpback whales frequently visit with their newborn calves is Jervis Bay. Therefore, we can all appreciate that disturbance by vessels has the potential to adversely affect these whales.

Harassing whales will severely stress them - which could ultimately cause accidents, should the whale/s feel under threat, not only to the whales but humans too. This is especially important in the case of adults with calves, which may be either suckling or resting. Research has proven that whales are highly sensitive to engine noises. Another point to be aware of is that when males are competing for females that there can be very rough physical contact.

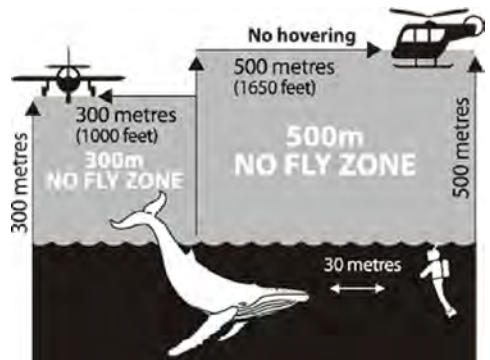
There are regulations set in place for whale watching as whales are protected. These regulations have been designed to allow whale watching to be enjoyable and safe, without interference to the whales.

The basic rules when near whales and dolphins are to:

- Remain quiet and do not try to feed or touch them.
- Be alert and watch for whales and dolphins at all times.
- When in a vessel, do not approach closer than **300m** to any mother and calf, **100m** to any adult whale or **50m** to any dolphin.



- For a prohibited vessel, the approach distance is always **300m** from a whale or dolphin.
- Helicopters or gyrocopters must not get closer (in height or distance) than **500m** to a whale or dolphin.
- Other planes must not get closer (in height or distance) than **300m** to a whale or dolphin.



- The caution zone for vessels is the area within 300m of a whale and 150m of a dolphin. No more than three vessels are allowed within the caution zone at any one time and vessels should operate at no wake speeds within this zone.
- Approach whales and dolphins from parallel to, and slightly to the rear - not from directly behind or head-on.
- When leaving whales or dolphins, move off at a slow (no wake) speed to the outer limit of the caution zone (300m) from the closest animal before gradually increasing speed.

- 
- Keep a lookout and avoid disturbance to mother whales or dolphins and their calves. Mother and calf will be close together and the calves are sometimes difficult to see.
  - If there is a sudden change in whale or dolphin behaviour, move away immediately at a slow steady pace.
  - Whales and dolphins sometimes form social groupings and may approach your vessel - if this happens place the engine in neutral and let the animal(s) come to you; or slow down and continue on course; or steer a straight course away from them.
  - Do not get into the water if you see a whale or dolphin. If you're already in the water do not disturb, chase or block the path of a whale or dolphin and if possible, return to your vessel or the shore.

**Migaloo has been given “special status” in both NSW and Queensland, with hefty fines imposed for breaching the approach zones for observing this animal.**

In NSW, the approach distances are **500m** for a vessel and **600m** for jet ski and aircraft.

### **Negligible wake**

Wake that does not create waves big enough to make nearby boats move.

### **Prohibited vessels**

These are vessels that can make fast and erratic movements and not much noise underwater, so there is more chance they may collide with a marine mammal. Such vessels include personal

motorised watercraft like jet skis, parasail boats, hovercraft, hydrofoils, wing-in-ground effect craft, remotely operated craft or motorised diving aids like underwater scooters.

### **Vessels**

These are watercraft that can be used as transport including motorised or non-motorised boats, surfboards, surf skis and kayaks.

If at any time you observe a situation where you consider the whale or dolphin is being disturbed or harassed, please phone our 24-hour Hotline (02) 9415 3333.

### **About ORRCA**

ORRCA is a not for profit all-volunteer organization with charity status and was established in 1985 to assist the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) with stranded whales and dolphins.

Since that time our responsibilities have increased: we also provide care and protection for seal visitors, and have a major role in marine mammal research and community education.

ORRCA is the only wildlife carer group in New South Wales licensed to be involved with marine mammal rescue, rehabilitation and release.

### **Administration**

The organization is administered by a committee of ten members who are elected at our annual general meeting.

Our funding is membership and workshop fees and donations (which are tax deductible). We do not have

---

any paid staff, or an office; all our income is devoted entirely to the rescue and care of the animals.

## **Rescue**

Our major expense is the maintenance of the 24-hour Rescue Hotline. This is the lifeline not only for stranded animals but for the seals which haul out along our coast.

When the Hotline is notified of an animal in distress we promptly send trained rescuers to the site to investigate the situation, assess and assist the animal.

## **Research**

On the last Sunday of June each year ORRCA undertakes a survey of the whales and dolphins nationally. This program initially commenced within NSW waters.

This research provides a reliable data base and is frequently called upon by other organizations.

Another form of our research relates to whale and dolphin carcasses.

Our post mortem team is licensed by NPWS to examine, measure and photograph carcasses, collect specimen tissue and prepare skeletal material for display.

## **Workshops**

Since 1986 we have conducted over ninety workshops on marine mammal rescue.

The majority of these workshops are for our members however, each year we hold two or three workshops for more specialized groups such as NPWS.

## **Education**

Throughout the year ORRCA receives many requests for presentations to schools, community groups and other wildlife organizations.

One aim of these presentations is to increase public awareness of the need for the prompt reporting of sightings of whales, dolphins and seals to the 24 - hour Hotline.

New members are always welcome.

If you would like more information about ORRCA, please visit our web site:

[www.orrca.org.au](http://www.orrca.org.au)

**email:** [orrca@orrca.org.au](mailto:orrca@orrca.org.au)

## **Facebook:**

“Like” us on

[www.facebook.com/marine.mammal.rescue](http://www.facebook.com/marine.mammal.rescue)

Cover Photography © Wendy McFarlane

---

ORRCA Inc. ABN 19 416 546 368  
Registered under the Associations Incorporation Act (NSW)  
24 Hour Marine Mammal Rescue Hotline - 02 9415 3333  
Email: [orrca@orrca.org.au](mailto:orrca@orrca.org.au) [www.orrca.org.au](http://www.orrca.org.au)