

CARIB Tails

A Gallery of Humpback Whale Behaviors on the Breeding Ground in the Caribbean

Perhaps the most familiar of the great whales, the humpback whale is best known for its acrobatic displays and its haunting songs.

A humpback's flamboyant acrobatics, whether exploding in a full-bodied breach, whacking its flukes repeatedly on the water's surface, or lifting its massive flippers in a giant salute, make it not only visible but a source of curiosity.

The distinctive physical features and behaviors of these whales help with species' identification at sea. Their long, wing-like flippers, the longest of any cetacean (whale or dolphin), appear a light sea green under the water and make the humpback whale virtually unmistakable at close range.



Fluking—

From a distance, a humpback whale is easily recognized by its diving behavior. These whales frequently lift their massive tail flukes—which can span more than 16 feet across—into the air to help thrust their robust bodies into more steeply angled descents to deeper waters. This behavior is called fluking. The photos (above left) show a humpback whale embarking on deep or “sounding” dive. A sounding dive may last up to 30 minutes in tropical waters.



“The breaching humpback whale is the most gamesome and lighthearted of all the whales, making more gay foam and white water than any other of them.” — H. Melville

Breaching—

Why does a humpback whale heave its 40-ton body out of the water? The reasons are probably varied. Scientists speculate that a breaching whale may be trying to dislodge its heavy load of barnacles or attempting to stun fish or even communicating with other whales. Young calves may be mimicking adults or merely playing in wind and water!

Breaches range from a full leap clear of the water to a more leisurely surge, in which only half the body emerges. The same wind that sailors revel in is apparently also a jovial playmate to a humpback whale.



Blowing—

What appears to be a puff of steam—the “blow” or “spout” of a whale—is actually a cloud of condensed air and atomized water droplets produced when it breathes out or exhales. The characteristic shape of a humpback blow, depending on weather conditions, is often bushy and of medium height, about 10-16 feet (3 to 5 meters). A humpback whale typically breathes three to five times in a row at the surface, usually ten to twenty seconds apart, closing its blowholes to seal off its lungs between breaths.



Lobtailing—

As the name implies, this behavior entails lifting the tail flukes out of the water and then slapping the water's surface, often quite forcefully. A quick smack or two of the humpback's tail flukes on the water generates a shock wave that may even stun the prey below or make a loud sound useful as an aggressive display or for communication.



Logging—

Lying motionless at the surface of the water, the three humpbacks photographed here are logging or resting at the surface. It is believed that, as voluntary breathers, whales do not actually sleep (as we do) but rest half their brain at a time during this inactive state. The “awake” half maintains surveillance for threats.



Flipper Slapping—

Humpback whales sometimes roll over at the surface to slap their flippers onto the water with a splash—sometimes more than 20 times in a row. At other times, they may lie on their backs and wave both flippers in the air. Since whales do not have sweat glands, in some instances this behavior may be a means of releasing excess heat.



Spyhopping—

Humpback whales sporadically poke their heads above the surface of the water, perhaps to have a look around. This is called spyhopping. The eyes are located just above the corner of the mouth, where the jaw articulates. The animal is checking out its surroundings and it may turn 90-180 degrees around before slipping back into the water.