

International Programs

Tips for Photographing Humpback Whale Flukes

Humpback whales can be excellent nature photography subjects, and photographs of their tail flukes can become an important contribution to humpback research.

Photographers on yachts in the Caribbean Sea can play a special role as a CARIB Tails citizen scientist. Photographing the distinct patterns on the undersides of the tails of humpback whales can help researchers track the movements of these whales between their North Atlantic feeding grounds and breeding grounds in the wider Caribbean region.

The key to a good shot is a combination of timing, location and, of course, luck. Even though these elements might be largely out of your control, here are a few tips to get your best photo if and when moment presents itself.



Keep your camera ready and nearby.

- Make sure your battery is fully charged, and store an extra charged battery, if possible.
- Clear your memory card for more available space, and have an extra card available.
- Always keep your camera in a handy, accessible place.

Observe the whale's behavior.

Keep a safe distance and *never* approach a whale head on. Approach from behind to keep both you and the whale safe. You cannot get a good shot if you are too close, and you will not get that perfect "waterfall" shot or the whale's flukeprint if you use a head-on approach.

Keep watch to see if a whale is preparing to dive. If so, it often spreads its pectoral fins like wings prior to a dive to brace itself for the effort required to push its huge body under the surface. As it arches its back, the tailstock and fluke lift out of the water.

As the whale exposes the *underside* of its flukes, quickly take the photo before the flukes disappear below the surface.

Photo credits: Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), Center for Coastal Studies (CCS) and SBNMS.



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Improving Your Photographs

Use a fast shutter speed.

Use a fast shutter speed for shooting active whale behaviors. Slower shooting speeds will give a blurrier photo.

On automatic cameras, use the sports setting, if possible.

If you set your camera for three-shot bursts or continuous shooting, you may get several shots of the flukes. Later, select the best one.



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Control the glare.

Try to keep the sun behind you or off to the side. With the sun in front of you, a whale's tail will be in its own shadow and the exposure will be too dark.

A polarizing filter will reduce glare from reflected sunlight on the water.

Take a horizontal photo.

If you use the camera on your smart phone, keep it in the landscape orientation. The wider photo will give you more space to frame the whale's entire tail fluke.



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Add information when possible.

Photographing the shape of the dorsal fin and any prominent scars on the animal is also useful.

Send photos to: caribtails@gmail.com

For more information, including safe boating tips around whales: www.caribtails.org