Humpbacks & High-Rises

Whale Tails 2020/4

This is our quarterly newsletter bringing you a summary of the urban marine mammal world. Facts, Stories and Events. Join us on the largest mammal migration on earth!

Quarter Summary

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The breacher! This humpback whale calf from October is now our record holder of the most breaches per minute. 254 breaches in 2 hrs.

Season Summary 2020

We are in the last two weeks of 2020. What an "interesting" year it was. Anyone working in tourism, research and education felt and will continue to feel the impacts and consequences of the 2020 pandemic strongly. This year also has shown us how important health is and that we need to support each other in such difficult times. I hope that our final newsletter for this year finds you in good health and spirit.

I like to thank the many volunteers and supporters that made the 2020 whale season possible and who have helped us over the past 10 years. We are a 100% volunteer organisation with no funding from the government and we fully rely on community support to be able to continue.

In 2020 we spend 730 hrs observing and recording detailed information on 2749 whales (half were monitored during land based surveys), which is the highest number since the start of our surveys in 2010. We had 98 volunteers who registered with us for the 2020 whale season and data were recorded from Byron Bay to the Sunshine Coast. I am also excited to announce a new partnership with Noosa Oceanrider for 2021. If you like to read more on 2020 whale season numbers head over here.

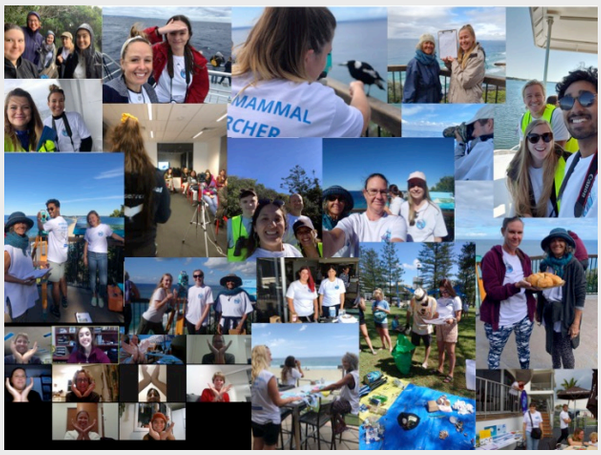
Congratulation to our 2020 award winners Linda Ray (Best Whale Surveyor), Caitlin Adams (Best Campaigner) and Karlien Paas (Best Researcher). I also like to give a special mention to some of our most outstanding 2020 volunteers Nicole, Nat, Sharon, Laura and Ella as well as Laura from Wild Byron. I feel privileged to have spend time with such dedicated and passionate board members this year who have helped to bring us forward. Jasmine Rasmussen is thanked for her contribution as secretary and Jo McGrory will take over her role in 2021. All other board members have been re-elected in their roles and I am looking forward working with them for the protection of marine mammals.

HHR made headlines around Australia and even overseas with the delivery of the stop whale entanglement petition in June just after 4 whales were caught in nets within 4 weeks. We organised stand ups at the beach and wrote a letter to the minister for fisheries asking to finally replace the shark nets during the whale season. The call for change signed by 130k people and 16 organisations was ignored but we will not stop until Australia stops catching and killing whales in shark nets every year.

On better news, we have seen another publication coming out of our work further underlining the importance of the Gold Coast bay as a resting area for humpback whales. We have launched the Gold Coast bay Hope Spot as part of the Mission Blue world wide initiative to create areas of marine protection. This is an important status and will drive further protection for our marine mammals together with alliance members. Last but not least, HHR is a proud collaborator of the Whales & Climate Program showing that local action can have global impact. All this is a light of hope and many good reasons to continue.

I wish you all a wonderful Christmas break and good start into 2021. May the whales be with you.

Olaf Meynecke
CEO HHR



We are HHR - our volunteers in action surveying thousands of whales across south-east Queensland.

2020 Whale season in numbers
by Karlien Paas

Before the start of this 2020 whale season we (like everyone else) were hit by COVID-19 restrictions, and it was unknown if and how we were going to survey at all this season. We started planning for an alternative season, which would focus on land-based surveys. Fortunately for us, the restrictions were lifted in time, so we could start our whale season on Burleigh Hill. After approximately 6 weeks of land-based surveys where we conducted 86 surveys in 43 days, spotting 382 pods with 760 whales, we were slowly allowed back on the boats again. Our first boat-based survey was done on 11 July 2020 with two volunteers!

Despite bad weather (9 trips) and fully booked whalewatch-partners (22 trips), we managed to do a total of 97 boat-based surveys (86 at Gold Coast, 11 at Sunshine Coast) and 5 research expedition, where we surveyed a total of 626 humpback whales (472 at Gold Coast, 62 at Sunshine Coast, and 92 at research expeditions) between mid-July and 1 November. Not only did we see whales during these trips, we also spotted 336 dolphins (143 bottlenose dolphins, 184 common dolphins, 13 unknown), 8 turtles (2 green, 3 loggerhead turtles, 3 unknown), and 3 juvenile hammerhead sharks! Special mention here to Sharyn, Laura, Ella, and Nicole on the Gold Coast, and Adriana at the Sunshine Coast for joining/leading many of our boat-based surveys! And Nina, thanks for organising the Sunshine Coast roster!

Despite restrictions being lifted, and we could go out on the boats again, our land-based surveys didn't stop. The ongoing enthusiasm for these land-based surveys at Burleigh Hill from Linda, Nicole and Josh was inspiring, and they managed to inspire new volunteers to join. Special mention here for Nat and Sam who both only started in September, but continued until the end of the whale season. During these 55 self-organised surveys (46.61% of the days) our volunteers spotted 320 pods with 584 humpback whales! And best of all, they continued until they had 2 consecutive days of no whale sightings before discontinuing their surveys. That is dedication in my book.

Besides our own organised surveys, there were also whale-sightings recorded by our supporters: 213 entries (=515 whales) by Laura from Wild Byron, 92 entries (=218 whales) by Paul from Boat Time Yacht Charters, and 5 entries (=12 whales) by members of the general public. Thank you!

Not only have we managed to do both land-based and boat-based surveys, we accomplished a beach clean-up (1 March), a stall at the Ocean Film Festival (11& 12 March), a mini-whale festival (24&25 October), and at the moment we have 130K+ votes on our petition to stop whale entanglements by removing shark nets. And last, but definitely not least, Teleri managed to sew a lot of facemask, scrunchies, and other items to sell! There were just too many to count!

In summary, we went from the fear of thinking that we could not survey any whales at all this season, to running the most successful whale season in the 10-year history of HHR! We couldn't have done it without our partners, sponsors, and our 98 active volunteers this year in both Sunshine Coast and Gold Coast! Thanks everyone, and we are looking forward to 2021!

Wise Words from our Secretary
by Jasmine Rassmussen

As I write the secretary's report for this years AGM, I have to reflect on the amazing people who have helped cultivate my achievements in this role. At the beginning of the season, with all the uncertainty of what was to come, we managed to bring together an amazing team of volunteers for land based surveys, both old and new recruits. It was a perfect escape from lockdown restrictions, and allowed us to continue our research. Karlien organised the rosters which was an amazing effort that allowed everyone to experience the lbs, and ensured our research was consistent. I also was able to be present in the delivery of our shark net petition to the minister in Brisbane city, and felt so much pride when participating in the stand ups on the beaches as our signature numbers kept rising. It was an honour to be a part of a movement consisting of over 125,000 people, and the consistent efforts of Olaf over almost a decade to be a voice for the entangled marine life in 60 years of shark nets that would almost match that number. I can't begin to describe the feeling of being united with that many people over a common cause that inspires so much passion. Working with HHR serves as the constant reminder as to why I do what I do, and makes all the stress worth it. Knowing that I get to be involved in such rewarding research is the ultimate motivator for studying science. One exciting achievement for this year is the completion of new flyers for HHR, designed by Mandy Cheung and coordinated by Olaf, Viv and myself. However, I could only fulfil this role with the assistance of some significant members and wish Jo Mcgrory all the best in this role for 2021. I can't wait for what the 2021 season will bring.

The Gold Coast "Mini" Whale Fest took part at the Palm Beach Surf Life Saving Club at the end of October.

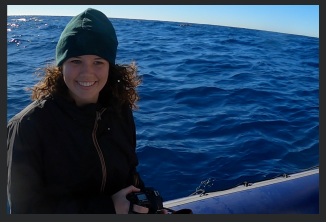
Gold Coast Whale Festival & 2020 events
by Olaf Meynecke

While 2020 was certainly an eventful year it wasnt full of events. We were lucky enough to have had three larger events organised: A beach clean up at Burleigh Heads as part of our annual Clean up Australia Day contribution; the Ocean Film Festival and the Mini Whale Fest at Palm Beach Surf Club.

On Sunday 3rd March we organised a beach clean up at Burleigh Heads with over 40 volunteers joining and after 2 hours and a huge effort from all involved we had collected large amounts of rubbish from all over the beach, the dunes, and the parks. It took almost as long to count and tally the rubbish we collected as it did to collect it. We collected over 100 pieces of hard plastic, 2 large bags of soft plastics, 60+ glass bottles and pieces, 80+ pieces of paper/cardboard, 22 bottle caps and lids, 28 pieces of plastic cutlery, 12 straws, 16 aluminium cans and 150+ cigarette butts.

The Ocean Film Festival was a great opportunity to meet and talk to like minded people over the course of two evenings. And once again we were able to introduce HHR on stage to hundreds of people.

Our Whale Festival had to be shifted and adjusted due to CoVid-19 restrictions but fortunately Palm Beach Surf Life Saving Club came to the rescue and let us run a small version of our festival at their place. Over two days from 24th-25th October we had a number of stalls, kids activities and musicians giving a little taste of the hopefully much bigger whale festival in 21. We were able to reach out to hundreds of people and had great chats with visitors. Many thanks to Stacey and all the staff from Palm Beach Surf Club for all their support.



Stories from the field
by Holly Summers

On Friday the 17th of July, myself and five other excited individuals who were undertaking the HHR Expedition took our seats around a table, eagerly awaiting to hear what Dr. Olaf Meynecke and Jasmine Rasmussen had to say. While I can't speak for the others, I was utterly enthralled.
The next day the surf was unruly, making it near impossible for us to go outside the Seaway, so we spent the day porched on one on the Burleigh Hill Lookouts, watching the whales come by and taking the necessary data.
Saturday and Sunday were spent on the water, and what an incredible two days it was. In fact, while writing this, I found it difficult to properly explain the sights and emotions in a manner that gives these events the justice it deserves. Meeting at the boat ramp nice and early, we boarded a small research boat and set out for the day. For about an hour or so, we could not find a single whale, and truthfully, the energy of the boat shifted as we grew disheartened. Its surprising how elusive these 30-ton animals can be.

From nowhere, a burst of air broke the silence as two whales, presumably a female and a male escort, were discovered on their journey. What was most likely a young male also emerged and attempted to join the duo, however the other male did not take kindly to this. In retaliation, he displayed a behaviour referred to as 'tail cocking', where he lies ventral side of his body facing skywards and with great force, slaps his tail against the water's surface, creating a deafening crack. Their little dispute fuelled by testosterone and the presence of a female, left every one of us in the boat amazed as all three oceanic mammals began to launch themselves from the water in a remarkable fete of strength and grace. We were also fortunate enough to witness multiple double breaches, were the whales jumped out of the water together, perfectly synchronised. The energy on the boat was simply electric as we cheered for every single breach. We were witnesses to 36 breaches that day within the span of about an hour.

This behaviour is surprisingly useful for scientific research as when they breach, their entire body weight hits the surface of the water with such force, that it creates a ' whales footprint', which is comprised primarily of dead skin. After every breach, the vessel would hurry over to the footprint to sieve the water's surface for pieces of skin before it sunk and became fish food. From these skin samples, skin cells can be collected and used to identify individuals.

When we regretfully had to come back to land, we were lucky enough to see a beautiful mother whale, who must have been around fourteen metres long, with her new calf. This young whale was a light grey colour and still had an in tacked foetal flap, meaning that this calf could not have been more than two weeks old. This young whale was filled to the brim with energy and curiosity as it approached us, performing behaviours like lunging their head out of the water and slapping their tail against the surface. While I'm sure the little guy was doing their best to show off, we all could not help but awe at his antics. The drone was deployed under a special research permit and we were able to capture a special moment where the now tired calf was being held up by his mother's strong pectoral fins.

As boats of various sizes encircled the now stressed mother and calf, at times, nearly running over the top of them, it became apparent that the public still understand very little about how to respect these animals and keep them safe during such a critical time period.

The following morning, we had resigned ourselves to the fact that there was no chance we would be as lucky as we were the day before. Similarly, not a single whale was spotted for about an hour. We were soon proven wrong when we met two, highly curious whales. For around half an hour, these whales surrounded us, circling and swimming underneath the boat. They would also rise vertically from the water, exposing their eye so they can take in their surroundings, a behaviour referred to as ' spy-hopping'. We couldn't contain our excitement as we cheered and raced from one end of the boat to the other to see where they'd pop up. I could look these incredible animals in the eye, and to say it was humbling would be an understatement.

We should consider ourselves privileged that we have the opportunity to see these whales when the embark on their annual breeding migration. From humpback whales helping seals, sealions, smaller whale species and their calves evade orca attacks, to the enchanting songs that they echo throughout the ocean, humpback whales are without a doubt, utterly fascinating. Yet we have hardly scratched the surface. If these whales have piqued your interest too, then I cannot recommend the Humpbacks and Highrise's Research Expedition highly enough. A word of caution however, you will be captivated by these breath-taking animals, and want to keep volunteering like I did.

Happy Days with our special whale research expeditions. Small groups and being close to large whales is a unique experience. Join one of our tours in 2021.

HHR Research Experience
by Sarah McCulloch

On the first weekend of October a group of keen volunteer whale researchers hopped on board with Humpbacks and High-Rises and Sea the Gold Coast for one of our annual whale research expedition trips. The team got acquainted and learnt all the tricks of the trade on Friday night, and we all started to get excited for the weekend ahead. On Saturday the wind and swell wasn't exactly in our favour, with waves washing over the front of our vessel, soaking us and our data sheets in the process. We set up a 'human shield' to protect the data at all costs! Our team was rewarded with an incredible encounter with a couple of mother and calf humpback whale pairs. We were so excited to see the whales, and the whales may have been too – we recorded one calf recorded performing over 200 breaches in just the 2 hours we were with it. Luckily the weather calmed down a little for the rest of the day and we were able to spend some time with more mother and calf pairs as they displayed more breaching, some peduncle slaps, and a few tail slaps! Our researchers were recording behaviours, number and locations of whales, direction of travel, water depth, and some environmental conditions too.

We ventured out again on Sunday morning and found that the whales had turned quite elusive. Much longer down times (the time the whales spend under the water) meant these whales were a bit harder to track. Luckily we were still able to fly the drone to record the whales for size and health measurements. We were also able to collect some skin samples that we located in the water after a whale had breached or performed another surface active move.

Our afternoon finished with a land-based survey over at Burleigh Hill. After setting up the theodolite and grabbing our binoculars, we started searching for signs of whales. We again spotted a lot of mothers and calves heading south, a few of them displaying some surface active behaviours – it was a great end to our weekend expedition.

We would love to thank our volunteers who came out with us over that weekend for their amazing commitment to these whales, and for making the weekend research so successful and fun!

Upcoming Events & volunteer opportunities

You can help making a difference and be part of our growing group of whale and dolphin researchers.

- Join our dedicated volunteer team and sign up for the 2021 whale season with the first training planned to be in May 2021
- Join us for Clean Up Australia Day on the 7th March 2021 at Burleigh Heads
- Meet us at the Ocean Film Festival in March 2021 on the GC
- Want to be part of the core team and get the real deal? Join our dedicated team that runs HHR at our monthly general meetings. Held at the end of each month now on Zoom and easily to access. Next meeting 15th February 2021 at 1830 until 1930. Check our Fb event page for the zoom link.
- Become an intern with HHR and help with data, event and outreach.
- Continue to support and share the open letter Stop whale entanglement and request alternative methods to be put in place and developed. The fight is over when whales stop being caught.

How to support Humpback whales:

Report a whale sighting – You can help our research by reporting a whale sighting! Head over to our online form or download the Whale & Dolphin Tracker app.

Membership – For only $5 a year you can become a member and support our research.

Volunteering – When you want to be more involved than just being a member, you could become a volunteer and take part in whale surveys. Our first training seminar for 2021 whale season will be in May 2021.

Research Expeditions – If you are very keen to see whales and help with our research you could sign up for one of our 3 day - research expeditions with our founder Dr Olaf Meynecke! New dates will be published early next year for the 2021 whale season.

Adopt a Whale – There is no better way to show your support for the wild! You can adopt a whale for yourself or someone else. You will receive a certificate of your adoption, and you will support our research focusing on the humpback whales.

Web shop – We are an NGO that runs on volunteers, donations, and sales from our webshop. We have some awesome hand-made ocean themed scrunchies and facemasks, whale mugs, HHR keep-cups, and some other merchandise.

Donate – If you want to support our research but you are not interested in all of the other options just described, you can simply donate to support our research! All of the money supports the research and the whales!

HELP URBAN MARINE MAMMALS

You can support whale protection and research in south-east Queensland; a small donation goes a long way.

DONATE NOW

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