



**WATER
COLUMN**

*By Douglas
David Seifert*



WHALE WATCH: a dwarf minke whale seen near the surface at Ribbon Reefs in Australia
All photography by Douglas Seifert

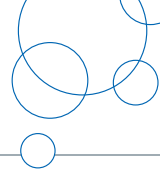


TO EYE EYE CONTACT

What is it about a close encounter with a whale that provides such a striking connection? **DOUGLAS SEIFERT** seeks out the dwarf minke whale to find out



THE EYES HAVE IT: a close encounter with a whale, focusing on its attention-grabbing eye



Whale watching is increasingly popular. Each year millions of tourists are drawn onto boats of every description to see the leap of dolphins or the

fluke of a diving whale. For some people, however, seeing a whale from a boat is not enough...

But to get in the water with a whale is both difficult (usually far from shore) and mostly illegal (severe fines and the threat of prison) around the globe. Perversely, a world that tolerates commercial whale hunting, forbids humans to come into physical proximity with a whale in grandiose intentions of protecting the whales from 'being disturbed' and the misguided belief of protecting the people who would swim with whales from hypothetical injury.

For anyone who has ever had a dream to interact with a whale in its own element there is a place where such dreams can come true.

From June to August on a stretch of Australia's Great Barrier Reef, a few hundred whales of a particular species gather. These are dwarf minke whales, small, members of the rorqual whale family in the suborder of baleen whales. They were not known to exist prior to 1985 and are as yet taxonomically in limbo as debate among cetologists tries to find a consensus as to whether they are a subspecies of the northern hemisphere minke whale (*Baleoptera acutorostrata*) or a separate species. It is agreed, however, that they are a completely different species from the southern hemisphere minke whale (*Baleoptera bonarensis*). Dr Peter Best first described the dwarf minke whales in 1985 based on animals stranded in South Africa and compared it with descriptions of similar animals reported taken at the shore whaling station at Durban.

Since then, cetologists have pieced together reports from around the world and have determined that the dwarf minke whale's distribution appears to be South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. However, only in Australia can it be found with any predictability, and only in a limited space and time.

Why these whales seasonally visit Australia's Ribbon Reefs is a mystery. None have been observed feeding nor has mating behaviour been observed, although a few calves have been glimpsed over the years, leading to speculation that the warmer waters of the Coral Sea may be of benefit to the mothers and newly-born calves.

The new species differs from the southern hemisphere minke in terms of size (a maximum size of 7.8m instead of the 10.7m attained by southern hemisphere females) and colouration. Whereas the southern hemisphere minke is often found without dramatic lateral shading and shoulder and fore-flipper markings, the colouration of the dwarf minke is distinctive and asymmetrical but with variations by individual.

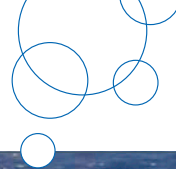
The (still unsolved) question was raised as to why does the dwarf minke whale have similar patterning to the northern hemisphere species when that species' range does not extend below the equator – where all dwarf minke whale sightings have occurred? DNA analysis shows the dwarf minke to have more in common with the northern minke than the southern hemisphere species, but that does not answer the differences in colour pattern among two species (or subspecies) of whales which, at least theoretically, have overlapping ranges.

Prior to Dr Peter Best's scientific publication in 1985, no one was aware such an animal existed or that it frequented Australian waters. But, during the dive industry and tourism expansion in the 1980s, more and more sightings of this whale were reported. The eventual discovery of a few individuals found stranded along the Queensland coastline afforded whale researcher, the late Dr. Arnold the opportunity to study the physical characteristics of this new minke whale and to learn of its anatomical differences.

Meanwhile, the liveaboard encounters with these whales were increasing. During the Australian winter, as winds gusted hard, liveaboards went about their routines of anchoring or tying up to a mooring for certain favoured dive sites inside the Ribbon Reefs. From time to time, whales would approach a boat at anchor. Often these whales could be observed

“The whale is closer now, and its eye locks with yours”

circling the boats for hours. Initially, the whales would keep a prudent distance, but over time, that distance decreased. Divers found that as they were returning to the boat, the whales would pass closely by. Some people would try to swim towards the whales, which almost always made them expand their perimeter distance further away from the boat or human. Clearly, the whales would decide how close they would come to humans and not the other way around. Under Australia's Whale Protection Act of 1980, minke whales, like all cetaceans, are protected from commercial 'taking' in its waters and by vessels under the Australian flag. All cetaceans are also protected from human interaction. While it is illegal to 'interfere with any whale' in Australian waters, chance encounters with a whale, where the animal initiates the contact by swimming up to a human of its own free will, seem to fall into a grey, albeit legally permissible, category. In 1996, a permit was granted to Dr Peter Arnold of the University of Queensland and the liveaboard dive vessel, Undersea Explorer, under the leadership of John Rummey, to conduct the first minke whale research expedition. (I was one of the original participants.) »



During that first season and in the years since, Dr Arnold, along with his colleague Dr Alastair Birtles from James Cook University, have studied the effects of and best protocols for a successful human-cetacean ecotourist interactive experience with minimal impact on the marine environment. Both scientists focused on the behavioural aspects of the whale interaction and with a keen eye towards the behaviour of the tourists themselves. To some degree, it has been an ongoing study of watching the whale watchers.

During the voyage out to the Ribbon Reefs, all passengers are given extensive briefings about the life history and behaviour of the dwarf minke whale. When a minke whale is sighted, a 'thar she blows' alarm is raised so all can observe. Thick polypropylene ropes are quickly deployed from the stern with buoys intermittently attached so the line maintains flotation across its span. Snorkellers – no scuba diving is permitted – enter the water and take up positions along the rope, trying to space themselves apart by 3m.

Dr Birtles is usually the first person in the water and always the last one out. He spends hours every day floating in cooler waters, attached at the end of the line, 30m from the stern of the boat. In addition to his mask, fins and snorkel, he is equipped for his mission of documenting dwarf minke whale physical identification with a small digital camera and a sheaf of waterproof pages with minke whale templates.

Upon entering the water, you can feel your heart beating loudly and rapidly in your chest. All the rush-rush to get your wetsuit on quickly, put on fins, clean your mask and make certain your snorkel is in place, all the while looking at broad gray back of a whale breaking through the surface of the sea – all that is a blur.

You are now looking into the blue. Visibility is perhaps 25m. You hand over hand along the rope. The water is cool and the seas are rolling. It takes effort to keep water out of your snorkel. All the while you are looking in a slow pan left to right and down and up. Gradually, then suddenly, you realise you see a whale through the scrim of visibility. Its body turns slightly and the sun illuminates its eye, which sits between two lined folds that function as eyelids, and is roughly the size of a horse's eye.

The whale is closer now and its eye locks with yours. Instantly you have a connection, a sign of recognition and you are overwhelmed with feelings of wonder and a bit of fear before greatness.

The whale swims past, your gaze follows long after it disappears into the concealing gray-blue visibility and the moment passes.

Having a 5m whale swim within close proximity of you is a life-changing experience, looking into that eye and making a connection, however brief, of two species from worlds as different from each other as imaginable is emotional. You wonder why more people don't make the effort to experience one of the truly great human-animal



TAXING ISSUE: the taxonomy of dwarf minke whales is still unresolved [main photo]; snorkellers meet one of the whales [inset]

interactions on the planet.

One day, researchers may unravel the mysteries of where the dwarf minke whales come from and go for the rest of the year when they are not on the Great Barrier Reef and a fuller picture of the whale's natural

history may become better understood. But for now, the only place to experience these seemingly curious whales is on the Ribbon Reefs in the Australian winter. There is no better opportunity to look a whale into the eye and see it looking back into yours. ●

- Douglas encountered dwarf minke whales on trips organised by John and Linda Rumney of Eye to Eye Marine Encounters, Port Douglas, Australia www.marineencounters.com.au. Special thanks to Dr Alastair Birtles of James Cook University and www.minkewhaleproject.org.