Close encounters of the whale kind

YOU don't need an expensive boat to go whale watching this season. An unusually high number of humpbacks and their calves are popping up as close as 30m to shore. Close encounters of the whale kind have been experienced at Rainbow Beach, Double Island Point, Noosa, Sunshine Beach, North Stradbroke Island, Lady Elliot Island and Byron Bay. The ocean mammals have been rearing out of the sea near surfers, swimmers, kayakers, jet skiers and divers, leaving them in awe.

Whale-watching boats are generally restricted to a 100m distance from humpback whales – but the ocean giants have been coming between 30m and 100m from shore. Researchers attribute beach sightings to a number of possibilities, including the mother whales escaping traffic on the southern migration highway.

University of Queensland researcher Kathy Townsend said another reason could be that the east Australian current – which they travel – was closer this year.

“It does appear to be an unusual year this year,” Dr Townsend said. “They’ve also been popping up near divers at Lady Elliot Island where we do research. I’ve been going there five to six years and I’ve never seen that before. This year, there have been 12 really close whale interactions.”

An estimated 14,000 whales are heading south to feed in Antarctic waters this summer. The population is increasing about 10 per cent a year, said Oceania Project researcher Wally Franklin, which may be another reason they were more obvious.

Noosa portrait photographer Tito Antonio recently snapped this humpback whale frolicking only 60m off Sunshine Beach, on the Sunshine Coast.

Mr Antonio was taking pictures of his surfing daughter Isabela, 3, when the whale reared 30m from them. “I felt like swimming out and being a whale rider,” he joked. “To see a big whale like that, it was amazing. I just stopped and enjoyed the moment.”

Kathleen Donaghey
The east Australian humpback population in 2012. This population was probably about 30,000 before commercial whaling and as low as 104 after it ceased in the 1960s.

The weight of an average humpback whale’s four-chambered heart, equivalent to three average adult human beings.

The amount of plankton, krill and small, schooling fish an average-size humpback whale consumes each day.

The fine for breaking special Queensland and Federal Government legislation that prohibits jet-skis and aircraft approaching too closely.

The number of whales Japan aims to kill in Antarctic waters for so-called scientific research during each southern winter season.

The number of beats per minute whales slow their hearts to, in order to conserve oxygen. They collapse their lungs and rib cages to withstand pressure in dives.
AUSSIE WHALE SPECIES

Eight species of baleen whales (blue, fin, sei, Bryde's, minke, humpback, southern right, pygmy)
Thirty-five species of toothed whale (including sperm, orca, pilot, melon, strap-toothed, beaked)
Nearly 60 per cent of the world's whales, dolphins and porpoises are found in Australian waters.
There are three types of whales commonly seen from the shore in Australia:
Southern right whales
Humpback whales
Ocas 'killer whales'

RECENT SIGHTINGS

Rainbow Beach: Three whales entertain beachgoers from inside the shark nets, about 150 m from the main beach
Noosa Main Beach, Sunshine Coast: Swimmers and surfers stunned by the arrival of humpbacks only 30 m off the groyne at the main beach
Mooloolaba Beach, Sunshine Coast: Two adult humpbacks and a calf surprise a kayaker by appearing beachside of the Mooloolaba rock wall
Cylinder Beach, North Stradbroke Island: A mum and calf glide only 50 m from the beach, thrilling early-morning walkers