

Humpback Whale Migration: Where and When to See Humpback Whales in New Zealand

This guide focuses specifically on the humpback whale migration through New Zealand waters, particularly during winter. Other marine wildlife and natural phenomena in New Zealand are covered in separate guides.



Photo: Whale Watch Kaikōura; Credit: Miles Holden

Humpback Whale Migration in New Zealand: At a Glance

- **Phenomenon:** Humpback whale migration — one of the world's longest mammal migrations as whales travel between Antarctic feeding grounds and tropical breeding areas
- **Best months:** June – August (winter migration peak)
- **Best locations:** Kaikōura, Canterbury (South Island), where the Hikurangi Trench brings deep ocean close to shore
- **Why New Zealand:** New Zealand's unique underwater canyons allow migrating humpback whales to rest and refuel close to land, offering some of the world's most reliable and accessible whale-watching experiences.

Why New Zealand Is One of the World's Best Places to See Whale Migration

[Kaikōura](#) is considered one of the world's premier whale-watching destinations and the best place in New Zealand to see humpback whales, thanks to its unique coastal geography. The town sits beside the Hikurangi Trench and Kaikōura Canyon - a two-kilometre-deep underwater canyon system that draws nutrient-rich currents close to shore, creating one of the country's most reliable marine feeding grounds. Where warm northern currents meet colder southern waters, nutrients rise to the surface, supporting a rich ecosystem of plankton, krill, fish and larger marine mammals.

The best times of year to see whales in Kaikōura

- **Year-round** - giant sperm whales can be seen year-round, often just offshore.
- **May through September** - humpback and southern right whales are most spotted between this time.
- **Winter (June through August)** - humpback whales migrate past Kaikōura as part of one of the world's longest mammal migrations, travelling up to 10,000km from Antarctica to the tropical South Pacific. The canyon allows these whales to rest and refuel close to land, making Kaikōura one of the most reliable places to witness spectacular behaviours such as breaching, tail-slapping and social interactions.
- **Summer (December through February)** - Blue whales are also spotted from time to time during summer, adding to the region's diversity.

Expert Insight on Whale Migration in Kaikōura

Dr Krista van der Linde (Marine Mammal Research Programme Manager at Whale Watch Kaikōura, and co-founder of [LeopardSeals.org](#) and [Moana Mark](#)):

Whale migration insights are informed by ongoing marine mammal research conducted in Kaikōura, where tourism and science actively support one another.

- “There's something quite special about Kaikōura that's hard to explain until you're out there. We're incredibly lucky to have the Kaikōura Canyon sitting just offshore - it brings deep ocean right up to the coastline, which means animals like sperm whales are here year-round. That in itself is pretty rare globally.”
- “But for me, what really makes it memorable isn't just seeing a whale - it's the feeling of being in their world. You're out on the open ocean, surrounded by mountains, and then suddenly this 15-metre animal surfaces beside you. There's often this moment where everything goes quiet, and you realise you're sharing space with something that lives a completely different life to us.”
- “Because we see many of the same individuals over time, there's also a deeper connection - these aren't just “whales”, they're individuals with histories. As a marine mammal biologist,

that's something I find incredibly powerful - we're not just observing a species, we're recognising individuals and, in many cases, following their stories over many years."

- "What makes it even more meaningful is that these experiences are not just tourism - they're also contributing to science. At Whale Watch Kaikōura, we run a research programme alongside our tours, so every trip is an opportunity to collect data and better understand these animals. It means that visitors aren't just watching whales - they're part of something bigger. In many ways, they become citizen scientists, contributing to knowledge that helps protect the very species they've come to see."
- "There's also a wider community effort here in Kaikōura. For example, tourism operators like South Pacific Helicopters and EcoZip or accommodation providers like Hapuku Lodge and Treehouses support local initiatives such as Moana Mark, which is a not-for-profit organisation which in turn helps fund research and conservation in our moana. It's that collective approach where tourism gives back that really makes the experience feel purposeful as well as memorable."

Humpback Whale Behaviours to Look Out For

- "One of the most iconic moments is when a sperm whale prepares to dive. They'll spend time at the surface breathing - usually quite rhythmically - and then you'll see them lift their tail high out of the water as they go down. That tail fluke moment is pretty unforgettable, and it's also the point where they're heading into a deep foraging dive, often for 45 minutes or more."
- "If you're lucky, you might also see more active behaviours from other species - humpback whales breaching, tail slapping, or pectoral fin waving. Dolphins are often a highlight too - they can be incredibly playful, leaping out of the water."
- "From a scientific perspective, those behaviours all tell us something - whether it's feeding, communication, or social interaction. And that's something I always try to share with people on board - what you're seeing isn't random, it's part of a much bigger story about how these animals live."

Tips for visitors hoping to see whales and other sea life in Kaikōura:

- "The biggest tip is to come with a bit of flexibility and an open mind. Nature doesn't work to a schedule, and every trip is different - that's part of what makes it special."
- "Kaikōura is unique in that we have sperm whales here year-round, so there's no single "best season" for seeing whales. That consistency is also what makes this place so valuable scientifically - it allows us to build long-term datasets and understand how these animals use the area over time. That said, different times of year bring different species, so every season offers something a little different."
- "In terms of time of day, conditions matter more than the clock. Calm, clear days make a huge difference - not just for spotting whales, but for really enjoying the experience. Morning trips can sometimes have calmer seas, but it really varies."
- "I also suggest visitors stay engaged while out whale-watching. Ask questions, look around, and take in everything, not just the whales. The more you tune into what's happening around you, the more rewarding the experience becomes. And knowing that your trip is also contributing to ongoing research often adds an extra level of appreciation for what you're seeing."

How to experience whale watching in Kaikōura

By boat

- Whale Watch Kaikōura – www.whalewatch.co.nz

By air

- Wings Over Whales – www.whales.co.nz
- Air Kaikōura - www.airkaikoura.co.nz/
- South Pacific Helicopters - www.southpacifichelicopters.co.nz/
- Kaikōura Helicopters - <https://gchaviation.com/kaikoura-scenic-flights/>

Other Wildlife You May See in Kaikōura

Beyond whales, Kaikōura offers some of the richest wildlife encounters in New Zealand, with marine life visible year-round. **Dusky dolphins** are resident in the area, with their behaviour changing seasonally and sometimes forming impressive super-pods, while **orca** visit sporadically throughout the year and are more commonly seen in warmer months. Along the coast, **New Zealand fur seals** can be seen all year, with November to February marking a particularly special season as seal pups turn the rocky shoreline into a playful nursery. Visitors can kayak or swim alongside these curious animals in sheltered waters. Above the ocean, the deep Kaikōura Canyon attracts a remarkable array of **seabirds**, including several species of **albatross**, with encounters especially reliable during the cooler months when feeding activity peaks.

- Dolphins: Dolphin Encounter - <https://www.dolphinencounter.co.nz/>
- Albatross: Albatross Encounter - <https://www.albatrossencounter.co.nz/>
- Seals: See [Seal Pups in New Zealand: Where and When to See New Zealand Fur Seal Pups](#) guide

Quotes from Dr Krista van der Linde:

- “Kaikōura is a bit of a wildlife hotspot, so there’s always something happening.”
- “Dusky dolphins are a favourite - they’re incredibly acrobatic and often travel in large groups. We also regularly see fur seals along the coastline, and they’re always entertaining to watch.”
- “For bird life, there’s a lot to take in - albatross, petrels, shearwaters - some of these species travel huge distances across the ocean, so it’s pretty special to see them up close. From a scientific perspective, those seabirds are also really useful indicators of what’s happening in the ecosystem as they often tell us where productive feeding areas are.”
- “And then there are the unexpected moments - things like blue whales passing through, or orca sightings. You never quite know what you’re going to get, which is part of the magic of Kaikōura. From a research perspective, those rare encounters are often some of the most exciting, because they help us build a more complete picture of how different species are using this environment.”

Active Ways to Experience Kaikōura's Coastline

Got some extra time in Kaikōura and looking to stretch your legs? Give the [Kaikōura Peninsula Walkway](#) a go. At 11.7km, this coastal track takes around three hours, leading you along a dramatic rocky headland where **seal sightings are highly likely**, thanks to the thriving colonies around Kean Point. Expect a mix of sweeping ocean views, rugged limestone cliffs, and the chance to spot dolphins, whales, and even orca passing just offshore as you walk