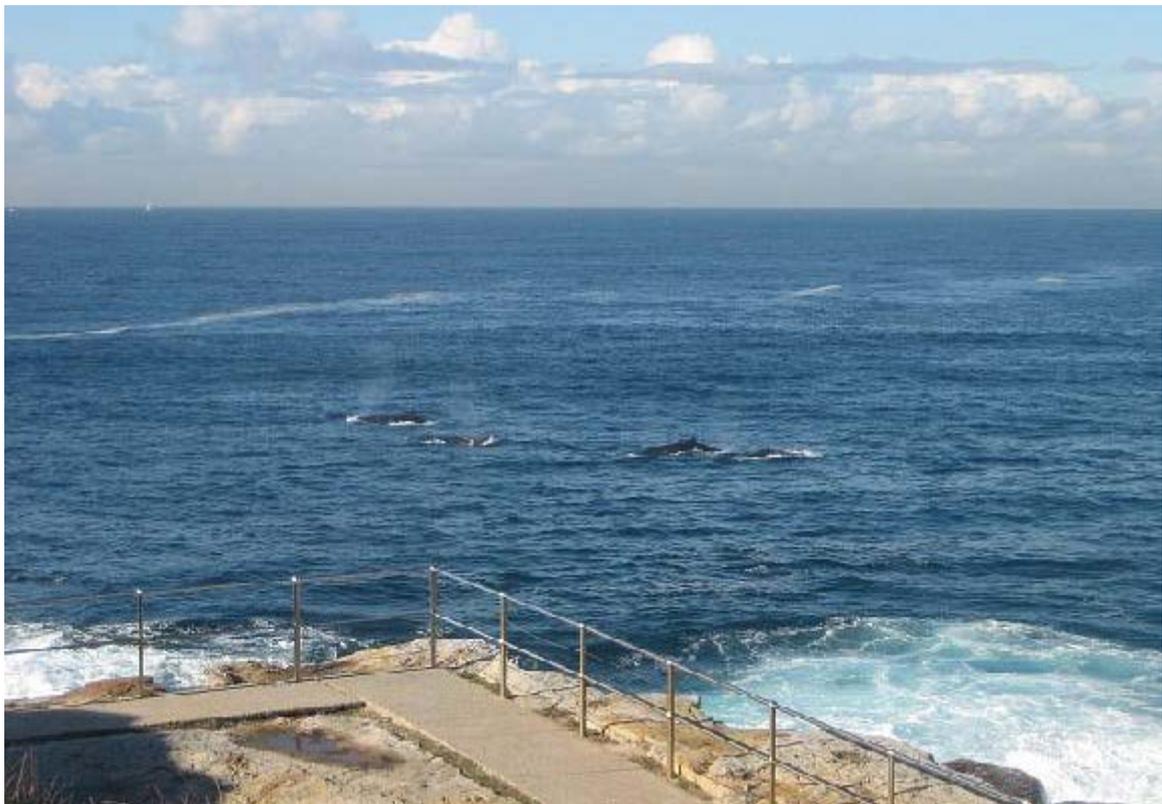


Waverley: a whale's tale

The migratory pattern of humpback whales ensures that the beaches in the Waverley Council area have a grandstand view of the annual event. During the winter months, particularly in June and in the first week of July, humpback whales make their way north to their winter breeding grounds. The whales repeat the journey in September and throughout the summer months, but are often further out to sea, and harder to observe from the shore.

The stretch of coastline along Sydney has been dubbed the 'Humpback Highway' due to the particular undersea topography of the area. Several deep sea channels funnel the migrating whales into a relatively small area of water within sight of the coast, at times coming within two kilometres of the shore. Due to the proximity of these channels, whales often come into the harbours and bays to rest before continuing on their journey.



Whales off North Bondi headland, 6 June, 2007.

The earliest known recording of the whales' migratory movements in the Waverley area is an Aboriginal rock carving at Mackenzies Point. A whale and its calf are scored into the rock beside the path between Bondi Beach and Tamarama. These carvings- otherwise known as petroglyphs- are made by 'pegging' hundreds of tiny holes in the rock, then creating grooves between each hole. These petroglyphs are estimated to be 2,000 years old.

The predictability of the migratory route has made whale watching an extremely popular local attraction. On 29 June 2008, the annual humpback whale census counted 567 sightings in one day along the eastern coast of Australia. During the course of the day a family counted over 20 humpback whales passing Bondi Beach. Other species of whales that have been sighted off our coast are the southern right whale (the most common) and occasionally Minke whales. The best times of day for whale sightings are late morning and early afternoon.

There are no records of any whale beachings on Bondi, Tamarama or Bronte Beach. However, sadly, there are records of whales being washed up dead on two separate occasions. In July 1834 a dead whale was washed up on Bondi Beach. The other recorded incident was in 2001, when a Strap-toothed whale was washed up dead on Bronte Beach. This particular type of whale is rarely seen on the ocean's surface. The 5.4 metre whale was already dead when it was left on the beach by the outgoing tide early in the morning on Saturday, 21 April. Possible causes of death were suggested to be old age, or the result of an infection.

Close encounters with whales are a pretty remarkable event, and more common than you would think. However, some of these close encounters have come a little too close, breaking laws which determine how close it is permissible to come to whales in the wild. In 1999, a local surfer rode the tail of a pregnant southern right whale at Bondi Beach. Later that year on August 18, another local man rode the back of the same whale at Ben Buckler headland, off North Bondi. Both men were fined, \$1,500 and \$3,000 respectively. In 2008, a swimmer and a surfer off Tamarama beach approached a southern right whale and her calf. No charges were laid, though the pair came within 30 metres of the whales.

There are stringent laws in place for the protection of whales, in particular pregnant whales or females with calves. No boat, swimmer or surfer is allowed within 200 metres of a whale with a calf. For whales without young there is a limit of 30 metres for swimmers and divers, 100 metres for boats and surfboards, and 400 metres for jet skis.

In July 2007, Waverley Council adopted a humpback whale as part of the Humpback Whale Migration Icon Project. The project was an initiative of the International Fund for Animal Welfare. Councils and communities placed along the humpback migratory route were asked to adopt a whale after humpbacks were added to the Japanese scientific whaling quotas. By 2008 over forty councils had adopted whales.



Mural of Liberty, Waverley's adopted whale, at Bondi Beach.

A competition was held amongst local school children to name Waverley's whale. In November 2007 it was announced that the whale would be called 'Liberty', with the name chosen from over one hundred entries, by the Minister for the Environment, Peter Garrett. Individual humpback whales can be identified by the markings on their tail flukes. Each whale has distinctive markings, particularly on the underside of the tail. 'Liberty' can be identified by the scalloped edge on the left side of her tail and the black jelly bean shaped marking on the underside of her tail.



The tail of Waverley's adopted whale, Liberty.