

Search for the Dwarf Minke Whale

by Rod Klein

While many countries have banned programs where visitors can swim with whales, a very organized (and unpublicized even in Australia) swim with whales industry has developed in waters off the northern Great Barrier Reef based on the voluntary approaches of Dwarf Minke whales. In addition, an official research program is focused on learning more about Dwarf Minke whales and their interactions with divers and snorkelers. The goal is to learn more about this little known species and, most importantly, to ensure the encounters have minimal impact on the whales.

Starting out in L.A, I first flew to Sydney, Australia and then connected on to Cairns, where I was to board the Nimrod Explorer. Having traveled to Australia before, I made sure to have a couple of days in Cairns just to make sure that any jetlag was history and I was fresh and ready to go when it was time to get on the boat.

Anything Minke

Once on board I immersed myself in anything “Dwarf Minke” since I was a total “newbie” to this experience and it didn’t take me long to realize that I had come to the right place.

The Nimrod has an excellent Dwarf Minke whale educational program with lectures, videos, and briefings to insure that all guests are properly informed about both whale behavior and proper etiquette while in the water with the whales. In



The Nimrod has an excellent Dwarf Minke whale educational program
All underwater images shot with Nikon D2X in a Subal Housing

addition, all on board have the opportunity to participate in the research program that was started by the CRC Research Center and James Cook University. After each day’s encounter guests are asked to complete a brief questionnaire designed to assess both whale behavior and their responses to the direct contact with humans.

What is important to understand is it is the whales that initiate the contact. The local dive operators, including the Nimrod Explorer, do not go out to blue water areas in order to seek out the whales, but go to the normal divesites that they frequent year round. During the May-July season, for a reason still a mystery, the Dwarf Minkes are attracted to both the diveboats AND divers and once on a mooring, the whales may stay around all day. It is also not uncommon for the whales to actually follow the boat for some distance once it is underway, and we could see whale breaching behavior frequently from the divedeck.





Minke Whales

Until recently, it was thought that there was a single, variable species of Minke whale throughout the world's oceans. The 'true' Minke whale, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, is known only from the Northern Hemisphere. There is also the Southern Minke or Antarctic Minke whale, which is found mostly in the Southern Hemisphere. Although the smallest of the great whales, the normal Minke may still reach 33 feet (with females tending to be larger than males) and exceed 10 tons. Minkes are distinguished by their very pointed heads.

Minke whales are the most abundant baleen (filter feeding) whales and it is estimated that there are about 800,000 Minke whales worldwide. Some countries that still hunt whales, including Japan, have indicated that they will continue hunting Antarctic Minkes. Since it is believed that Australia's Dwarf Minke population spends some time in that region, it remains to be seen how this hunting will affect the encounters on the Great Barrier Reef.

Dwarf Minke Whales

It was originally thought that there were only the 2 species of Minke

whale but in the mid 1980s Dwarf Minke whales were first recognized as a distinct form and although they are known to be only from the Southern Hemisphere there is, otherwise, very little known about them. They have attracted great attention in northern Great Barrier Reef waters because they regularly approached close to boats and swimmers, and, of course, this is why I was there. The Dwarf Minke whale is identified by its white shoulder and flipper base, with a dark gray tip on the flipper. Unlike the Antarctic Minke whale, it has a large dark patch extending onto the throat. Female Dwarf Minkes are on average about 6 feet shorter than

Antarctic Minkes (in baleen whales, the female is larger than the male). The largest Dwarf Minke whale that was accurately measured was over 25 feet long and weighed 5-6 tons, with the average being 15-18 feet.

Dwarf Minkes are highly maneuverable and can jump from the water like a dolphin. They can swim in bursts of 12 knots but cannot maintain this speed. They have been seen repeatedly circling a vessel that was cruising at 8.5 knots. Like all whales, Minke whales are air-breathing mammals and their paired nostrils (blowholes) are on the top of the head and they will surface to breathe every 1-12 minutes.



Very little is known of the life history of Minke whales. Females are thought to give birth to one calf at a time every 1-2 years. Mother-calf pairs are rarely observed, although in the past several years researchers have started to see what is thought to be independent calves (based on their size) with a probable mother staying in the general vicinity, but not directly with the youngster. The calf will spend 10 months in the womb and up to six months nursing. The young Minke whale will mature sexually after six to eight years and might live up to 40 or 50 years, but its true lifespan is not known for certain.

Diving with Dwarf Minke Whales

It is important to note that the swim with whales program is quite organized and all liveboards (the location of the northern ribbon reefs is too far for local day dive boats, although there have been reports by day boats of encounters on the southern reefs) follow a strict set of guidelines to allow researchers to gather consistent data. When we would moor up at a divesite the captain and crew would keep a keen lookout for any sign of the Minkes. If it was determined that one or more



were in the area, 2 long 30-meter drift lines would be set out off the rear swimstep. With mask and snorkel, swimmers would quietly slip into the water and take a position on one of the lines and allow the Minkes to approach at their leisure. Once the whales began interacting, with time they would gain more confidence and begin what can only be described as “close encounters of the third kind”. Once started, these encounters typically lasted as long as we stayed at the divesite and during my time on the boat 5-6 hour encounters were not unusual.

Of course, Minke whales are wild animals and did not always show

up exactly on cue. When that was the case, we would simply do our normal reef dive as planned. It was on these occasions where my most thrilling encounters took place.

Divesites like Pixie Pinnacle or Lighthouse Bommie are small, intimate areas where the reef top extends to within 1 meter of the surface. The moorings are directly adjacent to the divesite and the dive area of the Nimrod was no more than 20-30 meters away. The combination of the dive boat, the reef site and the divers are like a siren call to the whales and normally by the end of our first dive at any site frequented by the Minkes, I could usually see at least 2



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large whales cruising the reef.

It was an amazing feeling to sense the presence of a large Minke, see the shadow of its body cross over mine, and look up and only 20 feet away was this magnificent creature. As part of the research, I was allowed to go in the water of scuba to photograph the whales. Although we were told that the whales were most likely sensitive to divers bubbles, my experience while on scuba was that there was little change in their behavior as long as I was calm in the water, kept perfect buoyancy, and did not directly approach the whales. I

could hang on the edge of the reef, observe the whales, and hope for that close encounter.

In several very special encounters, as I was swimming slowly back to the hangbar on the

Nimrod, the five whales that had been with us during the dive followed me back seemingly as curious about me and I was about them. As I hovered in the water at about 30 feet the whales made pass after pass around me and I was able to see their large, intelligent eyes assessing me. I wondered what they were thinking.

What the Future Holds

This trip was great adventure and wonderful education and my thoughts, even now, are with the Dwarf Minke whales. Even though Minkes are not endangered and are now the most abundant of the great whales, their populations have been depleted by whaling in the North Atlantic and the western North Pacific, as well as in some parts of the Southern Ocean. At one time it was thought that Minkes might increase in numbers in the Southern Hemisphere because they had increased amounts of food available after the decimation of the larger baleen whales, but there is no evidence that they have increased.

Dwarf Minke whales were

taken during commercial whaling in until this ceased in 1975. Sixteen Dwarf Minke whales were taken in the Japanese research whaling program but since 1993, no takes have been reported to the International Whaling Commission. There is talk that commercial whaling might resume in the Southern Hemisphere and it would target Antarctic Minke whales. It is possible that some Dwarf Minke whales would also be taken incidentally which would have a direct impact on the incredible encounters that we experienced here in the north barrier reef of Australia.

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