

# WILD OCEAN

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## Species Identification Guide

The following species all play a role in the magnificent annual feeding frenzy captured in *Wild Ocean*. Each participates as predator and prey in the delicate food web of the South African oceanic ecosystem.



**Plankton** are organisms that drift in ocean waters, providing the vital nutrients needed for the food web. In many ways, these tiny organisms fuel the entire ocean ecosystem. The many varieties of Plankton are grouped into three categories: phytoplankton (plant-based), zooplankton (animal-based), and bacterioplankton (bacteria-based). The availability of Plankton depends upon the availability of light and natural nutrients within the ocean. For this reason, even the tiniest organisms of the sea can be at risk and threaten the survival of the food web.



**Mossbunker Fish**, or Menhaden, have been called the most important fish in the sea. While human beings don't eat them, they play a vital role in the complex ocean food web. These small silvery fish school in massive shoals that become the food source for a web of ocean creatures.



**Sardines** are small silvery fishes that grow very quickly to reach a length of just under 20 centimeters. Because of their small size, they group together when threatened as a natural defense mechanism. When thousands of them group together, they form a shoal and act together as a collective, constantly swimming and rearranging themselves in dazzling patterns to disorient predators. Despite their enormous difference in size, sardines have something in common with Humpback Whales: both are filter feeders. Sardines filter the water for tiny plants and animals called phytoplankton and zooplankton as the source of their nutrition. Pretty much every other creature in the sea dines on Sardines, positioning them near the bottom of the food web.



**Cape Gannets** are large seabirds that have snow-white bodies with black tails. They also have a distinctive golden crown and nape. They grow to about 90 centimeters long and weigh about 2.6 kilograms. They make their home along the seashore as they depend upon the ocean ecosystem for their survival. A gannet can travel as far as 100 kilometers over the ocean in search of food. When it sees its prey, it can dive as far as 10 meters beneath the surface. With a plummeting dive and powerful plunge, it uses its aerodynamic body to cut through the ocean at amazing speeds in search of the sardines it needs to eat in order to survive. Meanwhile, other creatures of the sea need to eat, too, and Cape Gannets can be a tasty treat, especially for Cape Fur Seals.



**Cape Fur Seals** are among the largest fur seals in the world. Fur seals are more closely related to sea lions—with their ability to walk on all fours, external ears, and a dense coat of fur on their underbelly—than they are to other seals. The Cape Fur Seal is mostly dark grey or brown in color with a lighter shade on the belly and face. Males have a mane on their necks which lightens with age over their 20 year average lifespan. An adult male can be over 2 meters long and weigh over 200 kilograms. Despite their size, they have a natural ability to hunt, diving over 200 meters below the ocean surface, holding their breath for as long as 7.5 minutes. The Cape Fur Seal's main source of nutrition comes from fish, but they will also eat seabirds like the Cape Gannet when they have the chance. Of course, sharks will eat Cape Fur Seals, especially the pups, when *they* have the chance.



**African Penguins** live in colonies on small islands along the coast. They are black and white, with individual patterns unique to each penguin. Adult males average 70 centimeters in length and 4 kilograms in weight. Their bodies are aerodynamic, helping them dive and swim very quickly in pursuit of their prey—small fish and crustaceans. That speed also helps them flee from their predators—Cape Fur Seals and sharks.



**Blacktip Sharks** are smaller than Copper Heads and Dusky Sharks but are still large and dangerous. Their skin color is dark gray-blue and their belly is white, with a thin white band along their flanks. They also have distinct black markings on the tips of their fins, although the color fades with age. Blacktips are very athletic and fast, using their speed and agility to startle their prey—which is mainly fish, although they will eat smaller sharks. And, bigger sharks will eat them!



**Copper Head Sharks** are also known as **Bronze Whalers**. They are large sharks that can grow to 3 meters in length and weigh up to 250 kilograms. The top of their body is usually a coppery bronze color, which gives them their name. Their bellies are white. They like to eat sardines and can consume 20 in one gulp! Their prey also includes other kinds of small fish, Cape Fur Seals, seabirds, turtles, squid, and even smaller sharks. Likewise, larger sharks will eat a Copper Head—until it reaches maturity. Once mature, the only predator that a Copper Head has to fear is human. This means that Copper Head Shark is an “apex predator,” occupying a dominant position in the food web.



**Dusky Sharks** are also known as **Black Whalers**. They are quite similar to the Copper Heads, growing to about the same size and occupying the same position in the food web—feeding on sardines and smaller fish and, when mature, fearing only human predators. Dusky Sharks have grayish-brown bodies and white bellies.



**Common Dolphins** are easily recognizable by their distinctive black back and a cape which forms a v-shaped saddle. They feed on small fish like Sardines and squid. They have a special ability which they use to avoid their predators—sharks and human beings. Dolphins use echolocation to navigate and locate objects in the water. The Dolphin makes a very fast clicking sound—several hundred clicks per second—to send out sound waves which bounce off of objects in its path. The Dolphin hears the “echoes” when the sound waves bounce back. The Dolphin processes the echoes into a three-dimensional image of the object, letting it know what lies ahead. This special ability helps the Common Dolphin survive in the complex ocean environment.



**Bottlenose Dolphins** are familiar to many people because of movies and television shows. It has a short rounded snout, described as bottle-shaped, and a smooth rounded head. The skin color is a series of grey tones fading into an off-white belly. Like Common Dolphins, the Bottlenose uses echolocation to find its food and also to avoid its predators. Groups of Bottlenose Dolphins will also work together to trap shoals of fish, making it easier for all of them to eat. Sometimes, a Bottlenose will use its tailfin to “whack” a fish to stun it and make it easier to eat. These behaviors have helped the Bottlenose Dolphin become a popular creature, the star of many aquatic amusement parks and aquariums.



**Humpback Whales** are magnificent creatures of the sea. Their stocky, humped, black bodies are covered with lumps called tubercles, which are actually hair follicles and are characteristic of the species. Adult females average 16 meters in length and 40,000 kilograms in weight. A Humpback can live for 50 years, if it succeeds in avoiding its predators. Once a Humpback reaches maturity, its only real predator is human. While larger sharks may attack, the adult Humpback is in only superficial danger. The shark may take a bite, but the Humpback is simply too massive. And, the shark has no reason to fear the Humpback. As filter feeders, Humpbacks use their baleen to eat only small fish, plankton, krill, and other tiny crustaceans.