



Mother humpback whale with her calf. Photo: Courtesy of Ed Lyman/NOAA

TIPS FOR WHALE-WATCHING IN HAWAI‘I

By Catherine Toth Fox, Hawaii Magazine, 11/10/2022

November is the start of whale-watching season in the Islands

Every winter, from November through May, between 8,000 and 12,000 North Pacific humpback whales—or *koholā* in ‘*ōlelo Hawai‘i*—arrive in Hawai‘i, completing a six-week voyage from Alaska to the shallow, warm waters surrounding the Islands. And who can blame them?

The first *koholā* of the 2022-2023 season was already spotted in South Maui, slightly earlier than usual. Two men aboard a private boat off Kīhei capture footage of a 30-foot humpback whale breaching about a mile from shore on Sept. 14. Usually the first sightings are in early October.

These protected marine mammals return to Hawai‘i to breed, birth and nurse calves—and if you’re here in the Islands, too, you can see these magnificent whales on boat tours or from the shoreline.

Here are some tips:

Go During Peak Season

Humpback whales make the journey to Hawai‘i from November to May, but the peak season is typically January through March. And during these months—right after the holiday travel rush—tend to have fewer visitors to the Islands, so flights and hotels may be cheaper and tours less crowded.

Maui is the Best Island for Whale-Watching

You can see humpback whales from any of the Hawaiian Islands, but Maui offers the best ways to view them. You can see whales from shore in Mā‘alaea, Kā‘anapali, Kīhei and Wailea. You’ll need binoculars. You can also book a whale-watching tour—the Pacific Whale Foundation offers PacWhale Eco-Adventures led by certified marine naturalists with profits supporting the foundation’s research, education and conservation programs—which gets you closer to the world’s fifth-largest whale species. (Regulations prohibit boats from approaching within 100 yards of a whale and you should never swim with or touch whales or any other marine mammals.)

Check the Weather Before You Go Out on a Boat

Earlier is better if you’re planning to head out on a boat tour. The mornings are calmer, afternoons are windier. It’s easier to spot whales and their spouting when the conditions on the water are *mālie* (calm, quiet). Rougher conditions may be challenging for those who are prone to seasickness, too.



A humpback whale slapping his tail. *Photo: Courtesy of Tail Slap: Ed Lyman/NOAA*

Yes, You Can See Whales from O‘ahu

If you happen to be on O‘ahu this winter, don’t fret. You can see koholā on this island, too. You can book a whale-watching tour—most of which depart from either Waikīkī or Ko ‘Olina and run between two to three hours—or you can spot them from shore. The trail to the Makapu‘u Lighthouse is a great place to see these gentle giants, especially on days when the winds are light. Even the overlook fronting Lē‘ahi (aka Diamond Head) is a popular viewing spot—without having to hike at all!

Be Prepared

Bring binoculars whether you’re planning to view from land or sea. And if you’re going on a boat tour, bring wind or rain protection—rain jacket or poncho—sunscreen and a hat that won’t fly off. You may want to consider a waterproof pouch for your phone, especially if you plan to use it to snap photos or videos. Or bring a waterproof camera like a GoPro.

Make It a Learning Moment

Seeing humpback whales IRL (in real life) is unforgettable—but it's also a privilege. Hunted to the brink of extinction, the population of humpback whales may have been reduced to 10% of its original numbers before a hunting moratorium was introduced in 1966. The koholā are now listed as an endangered species. The biggest threats include ship strikes, entanglement from fishing gear and illegal hunting.

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary was designated in 1992 and is one of the world's most important whale habitats. It's the only place in the U.S. where humpback whales mate, calve, and nurse their young. Whales also have cultural significance in Hawai'i.

Be respectful, follow the rules and enjoy the experience!

Ready to watch whales in Hawaii? To plan your resort stay or Hawaii cruise, please contact your favorite travel advisor at:



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