

# Marine protected species in the Northern Territory

Identification guide



Published by the Department of Primary Industry and Resources

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## **ENQUIRIES**

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## About this guide

The Northern Territory has one of the world's most intact marine environments and is home to an array of marine species protected under international agreements and national legislations.

Marine protected species in the Northern Territory: Identification guide has been compiled by the Department of Primary Industry and Resources, Fisheries Division (NT Fisheries).

The guide will help you identify some of the Territory's common marine protected species, ranging from sawfish to sea snakes, sea turtles to large marine mammals. Correctly identifying protected species provides valuable information about populations within Territory waters.

Please note, this guide is not an exhaustive list of marine protected species in the Territory. The guide covers the range of protected species that fishers may encounter.

Marine protected species have been identified based on their listing under the following national and international agreements:

- the Australian *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act)
- the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)
- the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.

## Reporting

Protected species inhabit areas where fishing activities take place, occasionally resulting in interactions between fishers and these species.

An interaction is considered to be any physical contact between a person, fishing gear or fishing vessel and a protected species, including captures, entanglements and collisions.

It is a legal requirement for commercial fishing operators (including fishing tour operators) to report interactions with protected species in their statutory fishing logbooks.

As long as operators are fishing in accordance with fisheries legislation, it is not an offence to unintentionally interact with a protected species. However, it is an offence not to report these interactions to NT Fisheries in accordance with logbook requirements.

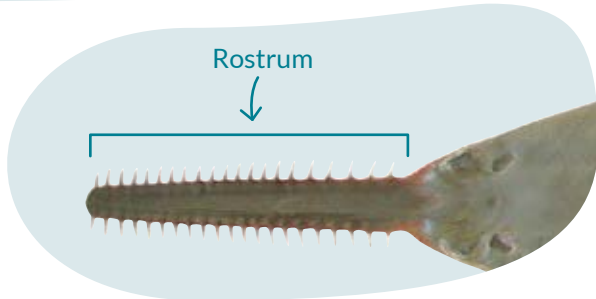
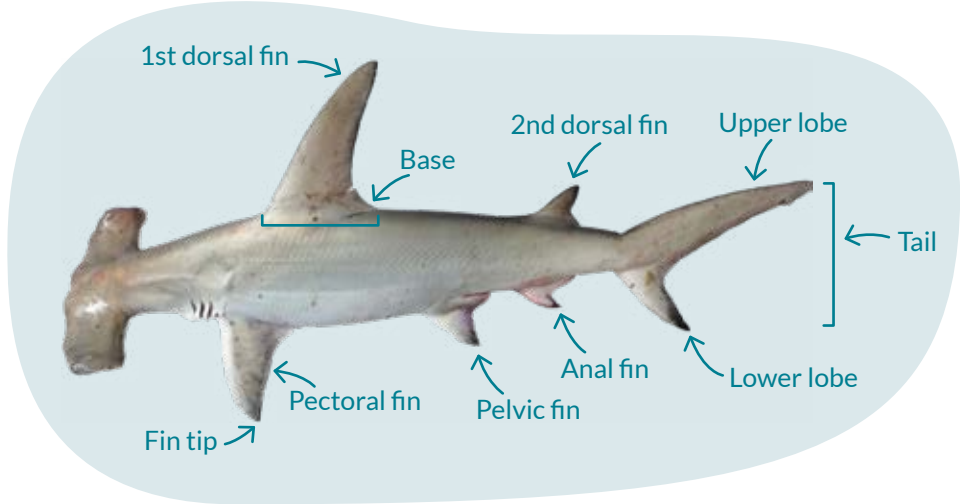
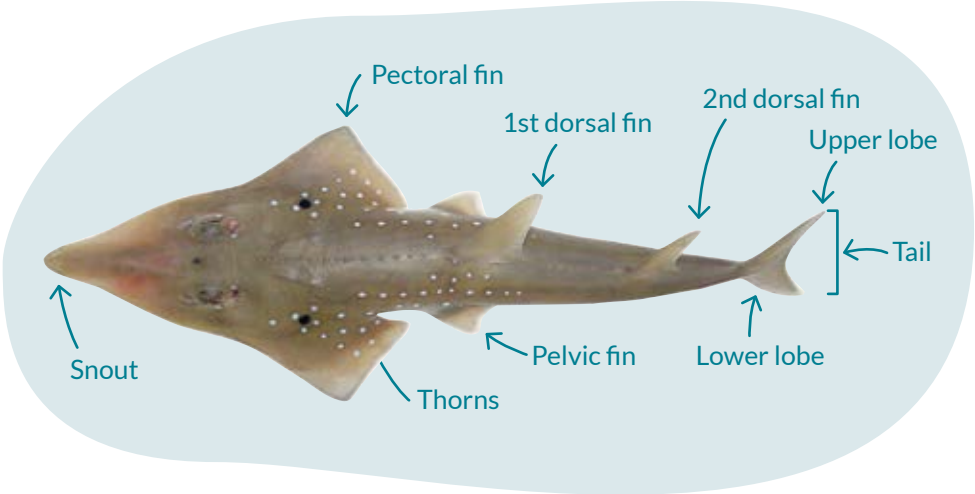
Recreational fishers are encouraged to report any interactions with marine protected species to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources through NT Marine WildWatch. The program can be used to report on interactions with marine protected species, including strandings, injuries or entanglements.

You can report interactions to NT Marine WildWatch on 1800 453 941 or at [www.wildwatch.nt.gov.au](http://www.wildwatch.nt.gov.au).

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# Anatomy



# Green Sawfish (*Pristis zijsron*)

CAAB No: 37 025001



Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

- 23-37 pairs of teeth extending to snout, spaced further apart near base
- Teeth noticeably closer to each other at the rostrum tip than at its base
- Lower lobe on tail small or non-existent
- Olive to greenish-brown on top, white underneath
- Dorsal fin starts slightly behind pelvic fin
- Rough skin
- Size: From 80cm at birth to at least 540cm when fully grown



Source: Department of  
Primary Industries and  
Regional Development,  
Western Australia

# Narrow Sawfish

*(Anoxypristis cuspidata)*

CAAB No: 37 025002



Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

Other common names:  
Knifetooth Sawfish, Pointed Sawfish

- 16-26 pairs of white teeth on slender rostrum
- Teeth beginning some distance from head
- Distinct enlarged lower lobe on tail
- Slate-grey often with blueish tinge on top, tips of fins often paler, white underneath
- Smooth skin
- Size: From 70cm at birth to at least 350cm when fully grown



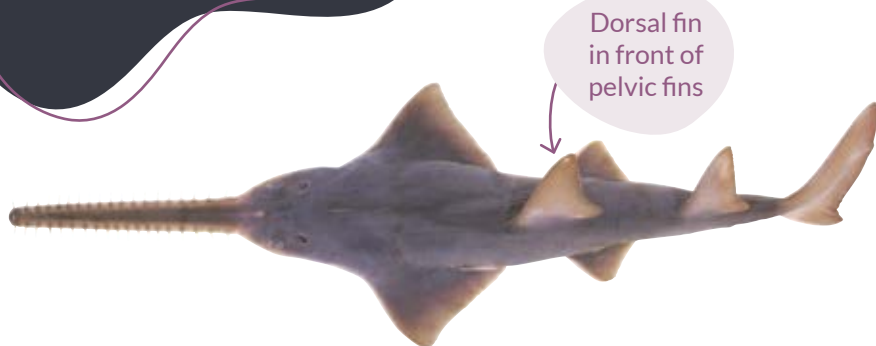
Source: Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Western Australia



# Largetooth Sawfish

## (*Pristis pristis*)

CAAB No: 37 025003

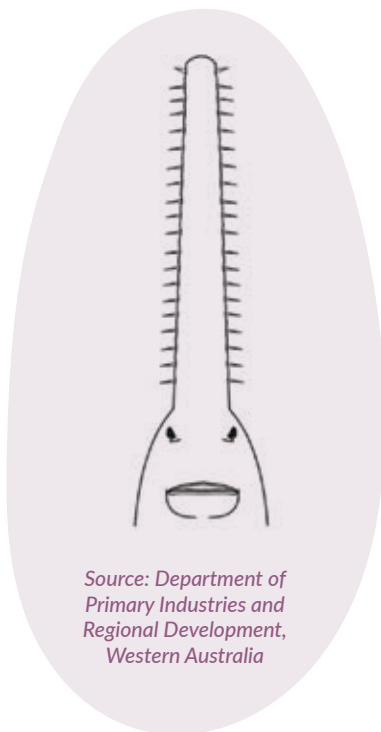


Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

Other common names:

Freshwater Sawfish, Common Sawfish

- 14-24 pairs of teeth extending to snout, teeth equally spaced and forward facing
- Dorsal fin begins well forward of smaller pelvic fins
- Distinct lower lobe of tail fin
- Yellowish to grey colour on top with distinct yellowish fins, white underneath
- Rough skin
- Size: From around 70-90cm at birth to at least 600cm when fully grown



Source: Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Western Australia

# Dwarf Sawfish

(*Pristis clavata*)

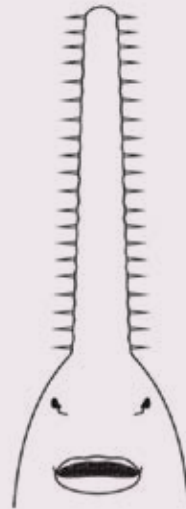
CAAB No: 37 025004



Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

Other common name:  
Broad-billed sawfish

- 18-24 pairs of teeth on rostrum
- Teeth all of similar size, uniformly separated and not forward facing
- Dorsal fin begins slightly behind or over pelvic fin origin
- Greenish-brown or greenish-grey colour on top, white underneath
- Rough skin
- Size: From 65cm at birth to at least 320cm when fully grown



Source: Department of  
Primary Industries and  
Regional Development,  
Western Australia

# Whitespotted Wedgefish (*Rhynchobatus australiae*)

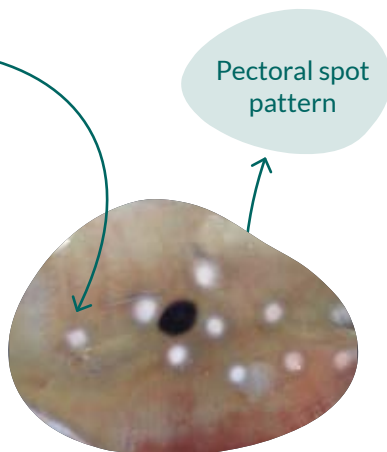
CAAB No: 37 026001



Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

Other common names: Whitespotted Guitarfish, Bottlenose Wedgefish

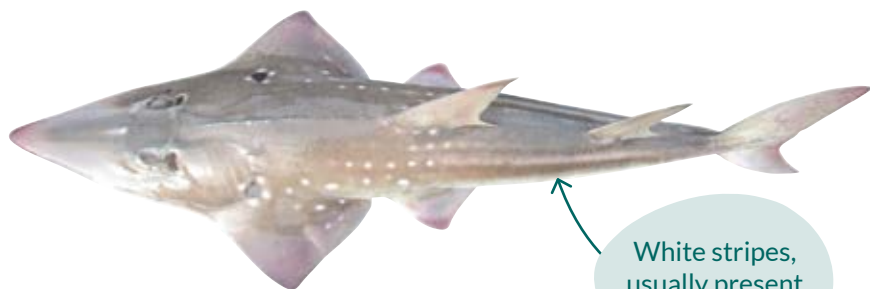
- Line of three white spots above black pectoral marking with two white spots below
- Row of white spots along sides from pectoral fins to second dorsal fin
- Small thorns on back and around eyes, absent on snout
- Distinct eyebrow marking
- Triangular, bottle-shaped snout
- Pale grey to yellowish-brown on top, white underneath
- Distinct space between pectoral and pelvic fins
- Size: From 46-50cm at birth to at least 300cm when fully grown



# Eyebrow Wedgefish

## (*Rhynchobatus palpebratus*)

CAAB No: 37 026004



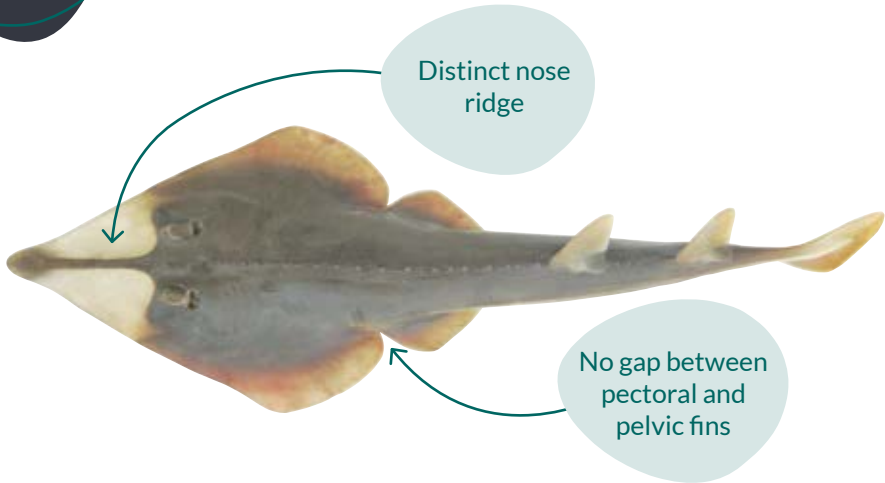
White stripes,  
usually present  
in adults

Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

- Distinct black pectoral fin marking, usually surrounded by three or four white spots.
- White horizontal stripes along the sides of the tail trunk, spots present in juveniles
- Small thorns around head, shoulders and above eyes
- Two to four rows of white spots from the side fin up to the dorsal fin base
- Dark-yellowish to grey on top, white underneath
- Dorsal fin narrowly pointed in adults
- First dorsal fin taller than second
- Size: Up to at least 260cm when fully grown

# Giant Shovelnose Ray (*Glaucostegus typus*)

CAAB No: 37 027010



Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

Other common names: Common Shovelnose Ray, Giant Guitarfish

- Broadly triangular, semi-opaque snout with a distinct nose ridge
- Snout tip narrowly rounded
- Row of irregularly shaped thorns along body midline
- Yellowish or greyish-brown on top, tips of pectoral and pelvic fins a paler yellow, white underneath
- Dorsal fin well behind pelvic fins
- Size: From 38-40cm at birth to at least 270cm when fully grown

# Scalloped Hammerhead

(*Sphyrna lewini*)

CAAB No: 37 019001



Source: Queensland Government

- First dorsal fin moderately tall, second dorsal fin small
- Scalloped shaped ridges on front edge of head
- Head bulging forward towards middle, with central indentation
- Dusky-tipped fins, usually present in juveniles
- Juveniles identified primarily by size of dorsal fin
- Olive, bronze or brownish-grey on top, pale underneath
- Size: From 45-50cm at birth to 350cm when fully grown

Scalloped shaped ridges on front edge of head



# Great Hammerhead (*Sphyrna mokarran*)

CAAB No: 37 019002



Very large dorsal fin

Source: Queensland Government

- Very large dorsal fin, relatively large second dorsal fin
- Front edge of head nearly flat, with central indentation
- Dusky-tipped fins, usually present in juveniles
- Juveniles identified primarily by size of dorsal fin
- Bronze to greyish-brown on top, white underneath
- Size: From 65cm at birth to 6m when fully grown

Front edge of head nearly flat with central indentation

Source: Queensland Government



# Winghead Shark

(*Eusphyra blochii*)

CAAB No: 37 019003



Source: Queensland Government

Other common name: Slender Hammerhead

- Wide, slender head
- Tall dorsal fin, with smaller second dorsal fin
- Grey to greyish-brown on top, pale underneath
- Size: From 45-47cm at birth to 190cm when fully grown



Slender  
head



# Grey Nurse Shark

(*Carcharias taurus*)

CAAB No: 37 008001



Source: *Carlie Bansemer*

- Protruding dagger-like teeth
- Both dorsal fins almost of equal size
- Bronze-grey on top and pale underneath
- First dorsal fin further back on body
- Reddish-brown or black spots may be present on tail and tail fin
- Size: From 100cm at birth to 320cm when fully grown

# Spear-tooth Shark

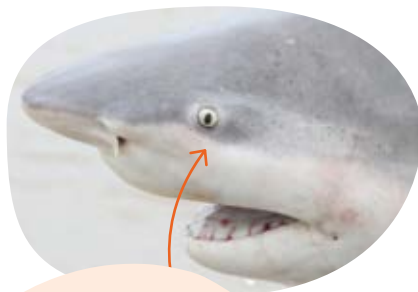
*(Glyphis glyphis)*

CAAB No: 37 018041



Source: Grant Johnson and Peter Kyne

- Grey waterline mark just below eye and short, broadly rounded snout distinguishes Spear-tooth Sharks from Northern Sharks
- Grey on top, white underneath
- Second dorsal fin two-thirds the size of the first dorsal fin
- Large second dorsal fin distinguishes Spear-tooth Sharks from Bull Sharks
- Can be mistaken for Northern River, Bull, Pigeye or Lemon shark
- Size: Up to 200-300cm when fully grown



Waterline mark just below eye

Source: Grant Johnson and Peter Kyne

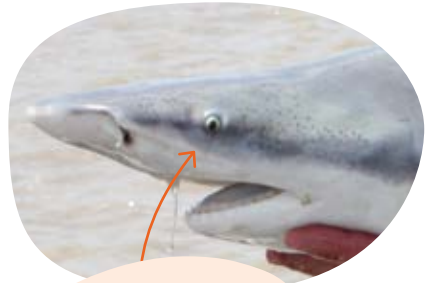
# Northern River Shark (*Glyphis garricki*)

CAAB No: 37 018042



*Source: Grant Johnson and Peter Kyne*

- Grey waterline mark more than an eye width below eye and elongated snout distinguishes Northern River Sharks from Speartooth Sharks
- Grey on top, white underneath
- Second dorsal fin two-thirds the size of first dorsal fin
- Large second dorsal fin distinguishes Northern River Sharks from Bull Sharks
- Can be mistaken for Speartooth, Bull, Pigeye or Lemon Shark
- Size: Up to 200-300cm when fully grown



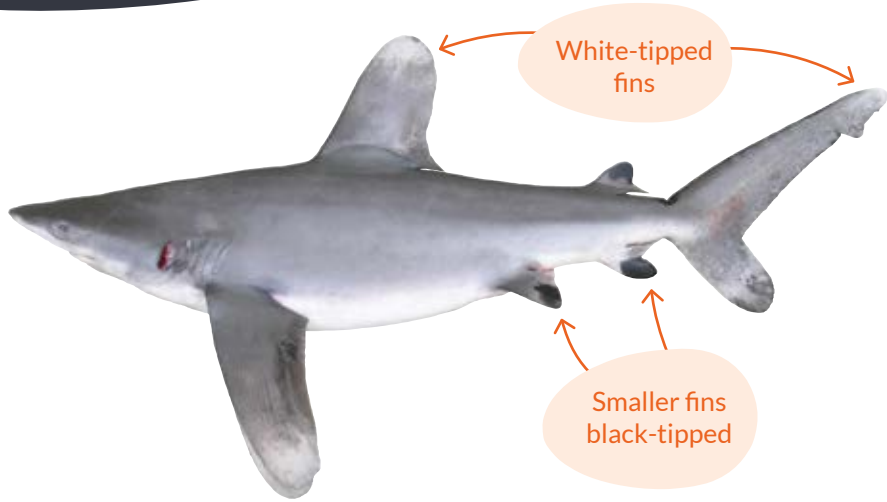
Waterline mark  
more than an eye  
width below eye

*Source: Grant Johnson  
and Peter Kyne*

# Oceanic Whitetip Shark

(*Carcharhinus longimanus*)

CAAB No: 37 018032



Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

- White-tipped fins
- Large, broadly rounded dorsal and pectoral fins
- Bronze-grey on top, pale underneath
- Black tips on pelvic, anal and second dorsal fins
- Size: From 60-65cm at birth to 200cm when fully grown

# Whale Shark (*Rhincodon typus*)

CAAB No: 37 014001



Source: *Simon J Pierce*

- Distinctive pattern of light spots and stripes over dark grey-blue body, fading to light colour underneath
- Broad, flattened head
- Blunt snout
- Small teeth
- Size: Up to 12m when fully grown

# Manta Ray

(*M. alfredi* and *M. birostris*)

CAAB No: 37 041005/37 041004



White  
shoulder  
patches

Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

- Large flat body
- Horn-shaped fins protruding from chin
- Mostly black on top, white shoulders and wing patches, white underneath
- Small dorsal fin, triangular at base of tail
- Whip-like tail
- Size: Adult wing span ranges from 5-9m

# Kuhls Devilray (*M. kuhlii*)

CAAB No: 37 041001



Wing tips curved

Source: CSIRO Australian National Fish Collection

Other common name: Pygmy Devilray

- Large wing-like fins with curved tips
- Dark grey to grey-brown on top, white underneath
- Size: Average adult wing span of 1.3 metres
- Can be mistaken for a Longhorned Pygmy Devilray (*M. eregoodoo*), which has dark blotches on underside and leading edge of wings.

## *Mobula eregoodoo*



Dark blotches on leading edge of wings  
Source: Hamid Badar Osmany

## *Mobula kuhlii*



Dark blotches absent  
Source: Hamid Badar Osmany

# Loggerhead Turtle

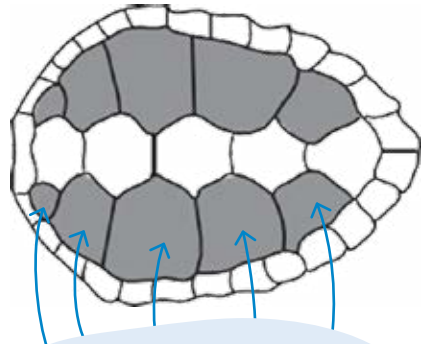
*Caretta caretta*

CAAB No: 39 020001



Source: Colin Limpus

- Large heads, especially with older turtles
- Five pairs of side scales
- Large shell scales, not overlapping
- Heart-shaped shell
- Shell dark brown to brown, sometimes with darker spots
- Size: Average adult shell length 125–150cm



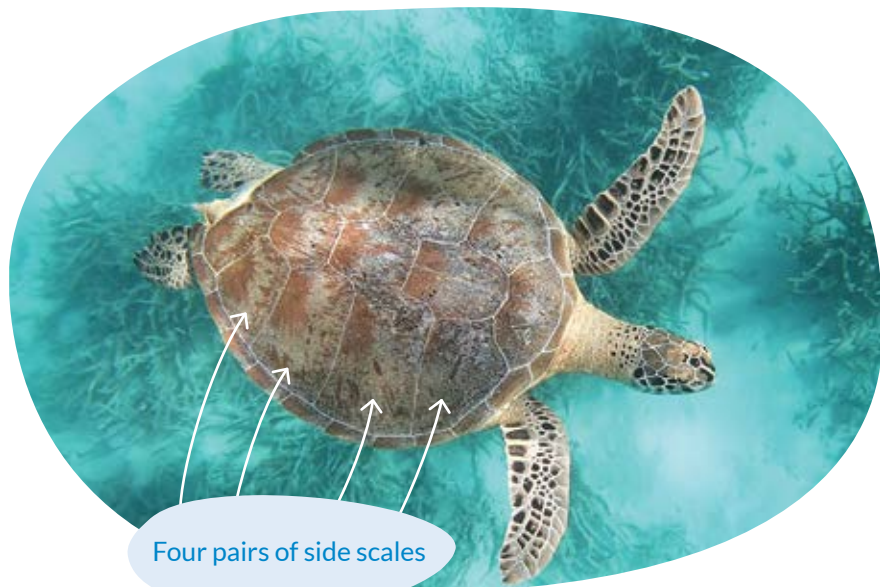
Five pairs of side scales

Source: Queensland Government



## Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)

CAAB No: 39 020002



Four pairs of side scales

Source: Ruchira Somaweera

- Rounded snout
- Four pairs of side scales
- Large shell scales, not overlapping
- Shell olive green with dark brown and black markings
- Size: Average adult shell length 140–160cm



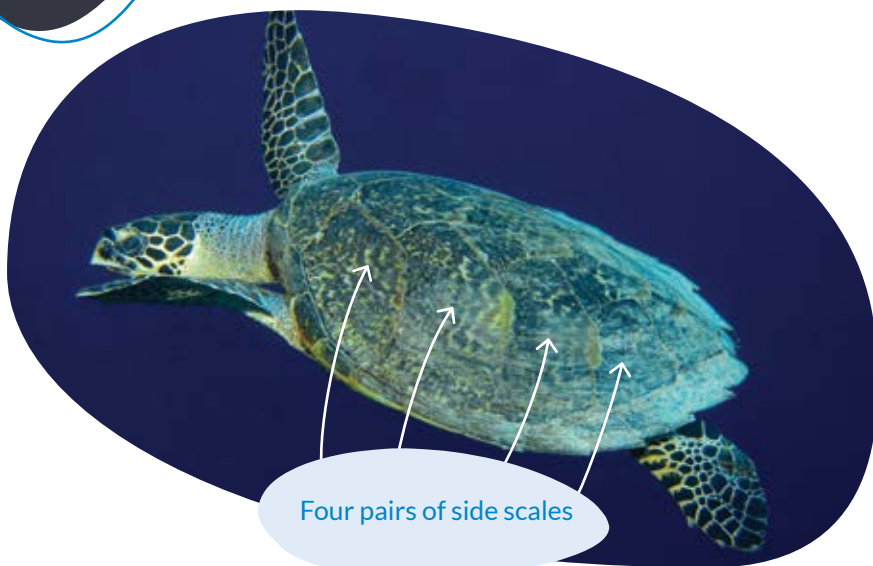
Rounded snout

Source: Tristan Simpson

# Hawksbill Turtle

(*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

CAAB No: 39 020003



Four pairs of side scales

Source: *Tristan Simpson*

- Distinct beak-like snout
- Four pairs of side scales
- Large, overlapping shell scales
- Narrow heart-shaped shell
- Shell olive green or brown with reddish-brown or black markings
- Size: Average adult shell length 90-110cm



Beak-like snout

Source: *Tristan Simpson*

# Olive-Ridley Turtle

(*Lepidochelys olivacea*)

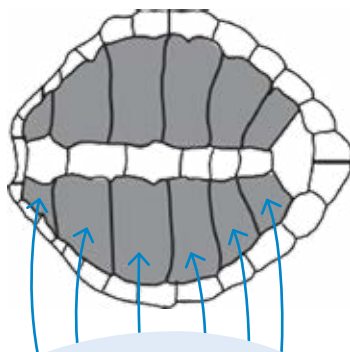
CAAB No: 39 020004



Source: Colin Limpus

Other common name: Pacific Ridley Turtle

- Rounded snout
- Six or more pairs of side scales
- Nearly round shell, can be broad and heart-shaped
- Shell olive-grey to brown, often without any markings
- Size: Average adult shell length 55-75cm



Six pairs of side scales

Source: Queensland Government

## Flatback Turtle (*Natator depressus*)

CAAB No: 39 020005



Upturned  
shell edge

Source: *Tristan Simpson*

- Rounded snout
- Four pairs of side scales
- Shell depressed with upturned edges
- Adult shell covered by thin fleshy skin
- Shell olive-grey to pale green with no pattern
- Size: Average adult shell length 75-105cm



Rounded snout

Source: *Belinda Norris*

# Leatherback Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*)

CAAB No: 39 021001



Longitudinal ridges

Source: Ian Bell

- Leathery shell with five distinctive longitudinal ridges
- Shell dark grey to black with paler markings present in some individuals
- Front flippers very large in adults with no claws
- Average adult shell length 170-290cm

Distinct ridges along shell  
Source: Ian Bell



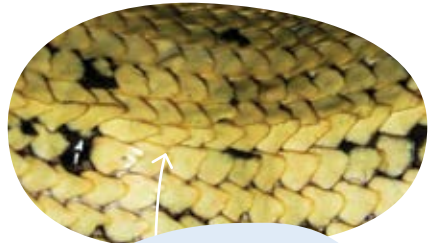
# Stoke's Sea Snake (*Hydrophis stokesii*)

CAAB No: 39 125009



Source: Ruchira Somaweera

- Large head and thick neck
- Dark distinct blotch-shaped markings on top
- Small overlapping scales on belly
- Adults less patterned, colour can vary from creamy-white to grey or almost black
- Size: Up to 120–200cm when fully grown
- Very common in Territory waters



Small overlapping  
scales on belly

Source: Ruchira Somaweera

# Spine-Bellied Sea Snake (*Hydrophis curtus*)

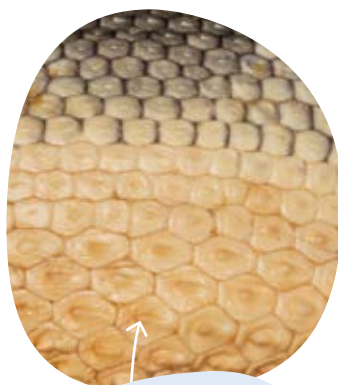
CAAB No: 39 125031



Source: *Ruchira Somaweera*

Other common name: Hardwicks Sea Snake

- Short and wide relative to body size
- Distinct enlarged hexagonal scales on sides
- Adult males in breeding season have predominant spine-like enlarged scales on belly
- Size: Up to 90-110cm when fully grown
- Very common in Territory waters



Enlarged scales  
on belly

Source: *Ruchira Somaweera*

## Elegant Sea Snake (*Hydrophis elegans*)

CAAB No: 39 125021



Source: Ruchira Somaweera

- Slender head and forebody compared to wider hindbody
- 35-55 distinct dark bands
- Bands widest on top and often broken into spots on flank
- Size: Up to 170-200cm when fully grown



## Olive Sea Snake (*Aipysurus laevis*)

CAAB No: 39 125007



Source: Ruchira Somaweera

Other common name: Golden Sea Snake

- Robust body and distinctive head
- Can be olive-coloured, often without any markings, or lighter colour with prominent darker speckled scales
- Size: Up to 120–200cm when fully grown



Lighter colour  
with prominent darker  
speckled scales

Source: Ruchira Somaweera

# Horned Sea Snake

(*Hydrophis peronii*)

CAAB No: 39 125001



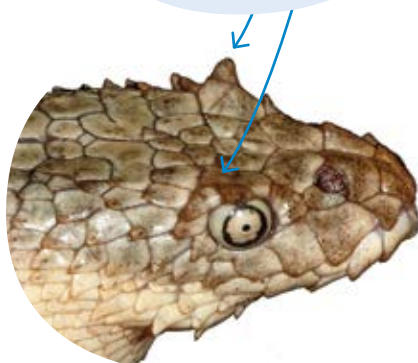
Source: Ruchira Somaweera

Other common names:  
Peron's Horned Sea Snake,  
Dragonhead

- Distinct horn-like scales above eyes
- Head small relative to body
- Size: Up to 100–120cm when fully grown

Distinct  
horn-like features

Source: Ruchira Somaweera



# Yellow-Lipped Sea Krait (*Laticauda colubrina*)

CAAB No: 39 124001



Source: *Ruchira Somaweera*

Other common names: Banded Sea Krait, Wide-faced Sea Krait

- Yellow upper lip extending to eye, head usually black
- Broad black and white bands along body
- Usually white bands darker on top and white underneath
- Smooth scales
- Amphibious snake, often seen on land and in water
- Size: Up to 80–150cm when fully grown
- Not common in Territory waters

# Humpback Dolphin

*(Sousa sahalensis)*

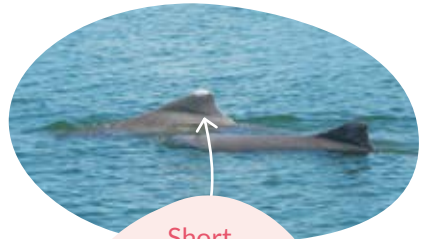
CAAB No: 41 116014



Long slender  
beak

Source: Carol Palmer

- Slightly rounded forehead
- Grey to dark grey on top from above eyes to lower belly, light-grey underneath
- Beak long and cylindrical
- Dorsal fin short and triangular with wide base
- White marking and dark flecks on head and back hump, common in adults
- Size: Up to 1–2.7m when fully grown
- Common in Territory waters

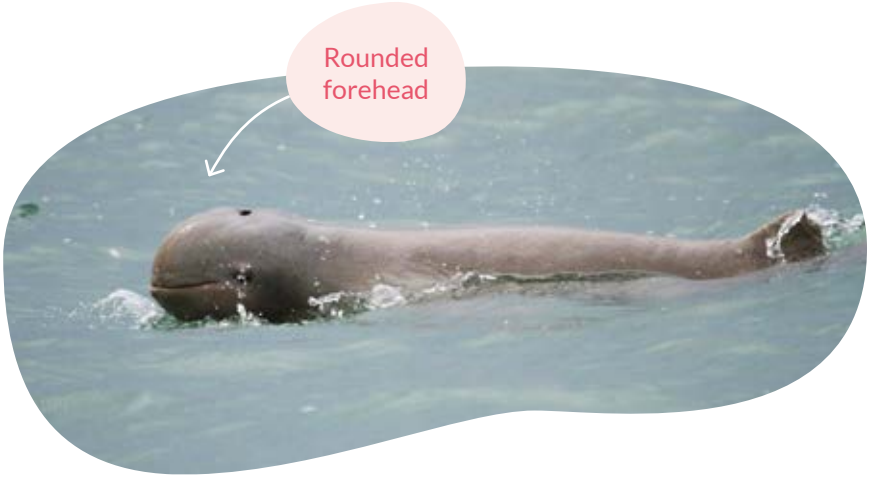


Short,  
triangular  
top fin

Source: Carol Palmer

# Australian Snubfin Dolphin (*Orcaella heinsohni*)

CAAB No: 41 116010



Source: Carol Palmer

Previously known as Irrawaddy Dolphin

- Distinctive large rounded forehead
- No beak
- Small dorsal fin with blunt, rounded tip
- Paddle-like flippers
- Body often pale grey, but may be subtly tricoloured – brownish on top, lighter grey-brown along sides, white underneath
- Size: Up to 2-2.7m when fully grown
- Common in Territory waters

# Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin

(*Tursiops aduncus*)

CAAB No: 41 116020



Source: Carol Palmer

Other common names: Spotted Bottlenose Dolphin, Coastal Bottlenose

- Beak short and thick
- Distinct dark grey-blue on top, paler grey below, with white, sometimes black speckled belly
- Differentiated from Common Bottlenose Dolphin by absence of blaze on top
- Sociable and inquisitive
- Size: Up to 2.6m when fully grown
- Common in Territory waters



No blaze on top

Source: Carol Palmer

# Bottlenose Dolphin

(*Tursiops truncatus*)

CAAB No: 41 116019



Distinct  
crease

Source: Melinda Brown

- Distinct beak with sharp crease between beak and forehead
- Body colour varies from grey to dark grey on top, light grey sides, light grey or white underneath
- Prominent hooked dorsal fin
- Size: Up to 3.5m when fully grown
- Common in Territory waters

Distinctive  
colouration  
of top and sides

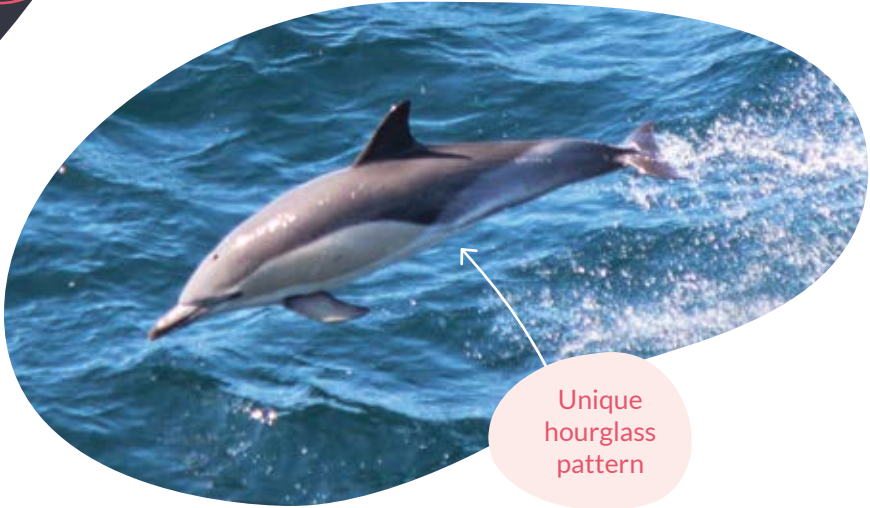
Source: Lindsey Jones



# Common Dolphin

*(Delphinus delphis)*

CAAB No: 41 116001



Unique  
hourglass  
pattern

Source: Lindsey Jones

Other common name: Short-Beaked Common Dolphin

- Unique hourglass pattern, grey on top, cream sides, white underneath
- Long beak with distinct crease between forehead and beak
- High dorsal fin
- Size: Up to 2m when fully grown
- Occasionally present in Territory waters



Distinctive  
colouration

Source: Melinda Brown



# Spotted Dolphin

(*Stenella attenuata*)

CAAB No: 41 116 015



Source: Lindsey Jones

- Long thin beak, separated from head by distinct crease
- Upper and lower jaws darkly coloured, separated by thin, white lips
- Dorsal fin narrow with hooked tip
- Dark grey on top extending from beak to mid back behind dorsal fin, light-grey underneath
- White spots may be present
- Immature individuals generally uniformly coloured
- Size: Up to 2.5m when fully grown
- Occasionally present in Territory waters

## False Killer Whale (*Pseudorca crassidens*)

CAAB No: 41 116013



Hump on  
front edge  
of side fins

Source: NOAA Fisheries

- Rounded overhanging forehead, no beak
- Dark grey to black body
- Dorsal fin crescent-shaped and located more than half way along body
- Long slender body
- Size: Up to 4-6m when fully grown
- Occasionally present in Territory waters



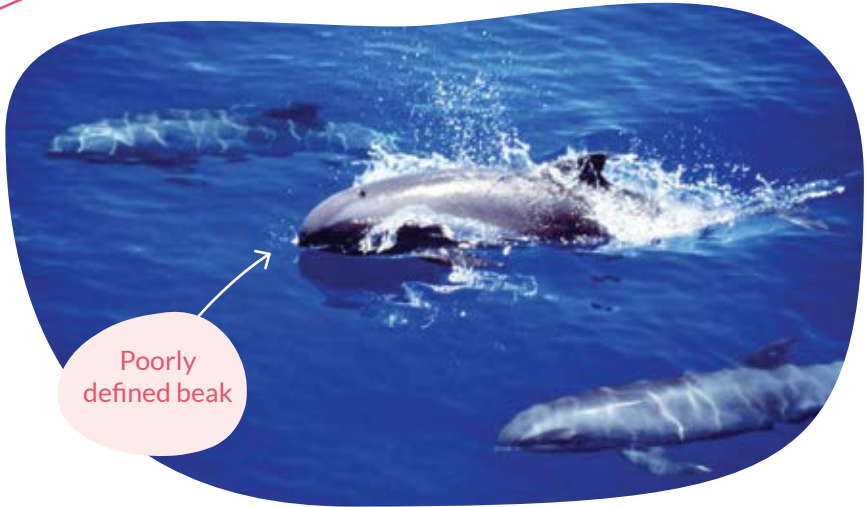
Distinct  
rounded forehead

Source: Jochen Zaeschmar

# Melon-Headed Whale

(*Peponocephala electra*)

CAAB No: 41 116012



Source: NOAA Fisheries

- Small, poorly defined beak
- Mostly dark grey all over with darker grey on top
- Lips often light grey
- Head triangular shape from above
- Size: Up to 2.7m when fully grown
- Not common in Territory waters

# Humpback Whale

*(Megaptera novaeangliae)*

CAAB No: 41 112006



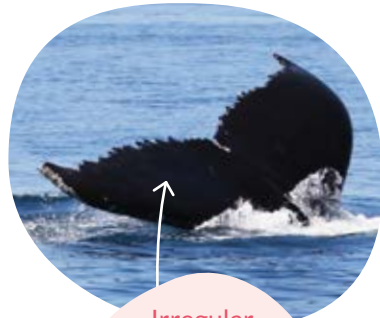
Source: Melinda Brown

- Knobby looking head and flippers
- Irregular, wavy edges on tail
- Black to dark grey on top, white underneath
- Size: Up to 15m when fully grown
- Occasionally present in Territory waters



Stumpy dorsal fin of mother and calf

Source: Carol Palmer



Irregular, wavy edges on tail

Source: Carol Palmer

# Killer Whale (*Orcinus orca*)

CAAB No: 41 116011

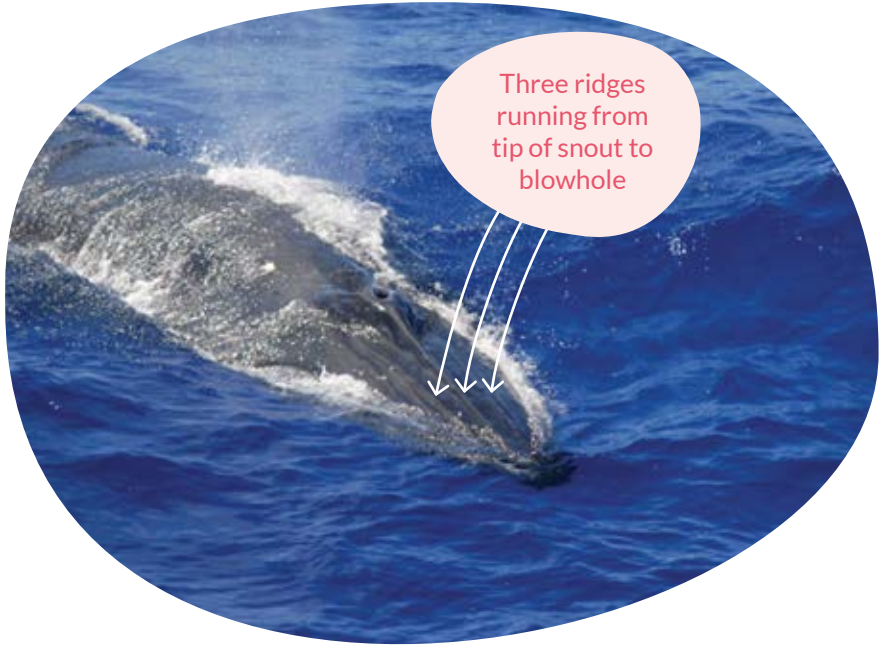


Source: Carol Palmer

- Black body with white patches behind eyes, dorsal fin and lower belly
- Very tall dorsal fin
- Paddle-shaped flippers
- Size: Up to 10m when fully grown
- Not common in Territory waters

## Bryde's Whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*)

CAAB No: 41 112003



Source: NOAA Fisheries

- Three ridges running from snout to blowhole distinguishes Bryde's Whale from Sei Whale
- Dorsal fin crescent-shaped, located three quarters down the body
- Dark grey on top and whitish-yellow underneath
- Size: Up to 12m when fully grown
- Not common in Territory waters

# Sei Whale

(*Balaenoptera borealis*)

CAAB No: 41 112002



Single ridge  
running from  
snout to  
blowhole

Source: NOAA Fisheries

- Single ridge running from snout to blowhole distinguishes Sei Whale from Bryde's Whale
- Slender, hooked dorsal fin located two-thirds down body
- Dark grey on top, sides may be light grey, pale underneath
- Slim, streamlined body
- Tail small in relation to body size
- Size: Up to 12-16m when fully grown
- Not common in Territory waters

## Dugong (*Dugong dugon*)

CAAB No: 41 206001



- Broad, rounded upper lip with bristles
- No dorsal fin
- Paddle-like flippers
- Flattened tail
- Grey-brown on top, slightly lighter grey underneath
- Size: Up to 3.3m when fully grown
- Common in Territory waters



## Seahorse (*Syngnathidae*)

CAAB No: 37 282000



Source: Millie Banner

- Elongated bony body
- Tube-like snout with no teeth
- Small side fins and single dorsal fin
- Size: From 1cm at birth to 36cm when fully grown

## Pipefish (*Syngnathidae*)

CAAB No: 37 282000



- Snake-like body
- Distinctive tube-like snout with no teeth
- Elongated body encased in bony rings
- Small pectoral fins and single dorsal fin

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**NORTHERN  
TERRITORY**  
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