

BBC

Wildlife

with Mark Carwardine

PHOTOGRAPHY MASTERCLASS

#9 How to photograph whales, dolphins and porpoises



A spy-hopping grey whale checks out tourists in San Ignacio Lagoon, Baja California, Mexico (1/2000 sec, f7.1, ISO 400, 17-40mm f.4 lens).



Getting the best angle – blue whale (1/1000 sec, f5.6, ISO 800, 24-70mm f2.8 lens).

Whales, dolphins and porpoises are fantastic animals to photograph – but they don't make it easy! For a start, they spend most of their lives underwater, often appearing at the surface for no more than a few seconds at a time when they come up to breathe.

Another challenge is working at sea. It's often wet – and not just wet, but wet with salt water. This isn't great for camera equipment, of course (it's amazing how droplets of salty water lying on your precious kit can get sucked into the tiniest gaps through capillary action). Meanwhile, if you are shooting from a boat, your platform is rolling around much of the time and, even in a gentle swell, all your photography has to be hand-held.

And, finally, unless you're driving the boat yourself, you're at the mercy of someone else to get you into position for a good angle and with the sun in the right position etc. That's harder than it sounds – unlike someone driving a safari vehicle, for instance, the skipper is at the mercy of the waves and currents (often you can't get to where you want, or you get dragged away).

But while whale and dolphin photography may be challenging, it can be immensely rewarding, too. There's a lot of potential new material out there – it hasn't all been done before. And you don't always need to see much – or any – of the subject itself to get some interesting pictures (think whale blows). Besides, I can't think of a better way of spending a day – on the sea, photographing these extraordinary animals. It's utterly addictive.

How to do it

There are three main ways to photograph whales, dolphins and porpoises: from a boat, from the air (a light aircraft or a licensed drone) or under water. They are all very different techniques, so I am going to concentrate on shooting from a boat in this factsheet.



Fin whale in perfect sea conditions (1/1000 sec, f5.6, ISO 800, 28-300mm f3.5-5.6 lens).

Equipment

Ideally, ideally, you'll need a camera with a fast motordrive and three lenses: wide angle (for when large whales, in particular, are very close to the boat – I use a 16-35mm); medium telephoto (especially for leaping dolphins – I use a 70-200mm); and a longer telephoto (not too long, or you can't hold it steady, but up to 400mm is pretty good – I use a 100-400mm). If you were to have just one lens I would go for the longer zoom, which will give you a broad range of options. Don't forget – you don't have to shoot close-ups all the time (try including dramatic skies and seas, whale blows or spouts, larger groups of dolphins etc). Having a camera with more megapixels – my go-to camera, the Canon 5DMkIV is 30.1 megapixels – gives a little wriggle room in terms of cropping, too.

Two essential pieces of equipment are to do with spray. Unless it's a

particularly calm day, and you are on a slow boat, there is likely to be at least some saltwater spray. You'll need a dry cloth in your pocket to dry spots off the lens. It's also a good idea to have some kind of waterproof cover to protect your camera and lens (you can buy these specially – try wildlifewatchingsupplies.co.uk – or use a ziploc bag with a hole cut in the bottom for the lens).

Tripods are pretty hopeless most of the time. I do occasionally use them when shooting from very stable ships in very calm water (such as in the Arctic or Antarctic) but they are impossible to use on most whale watching trips. In calm conditions, with stable boats, you might be able to use a monopod. But be careful – if you put the monopod straight onto the deck there may be so much vibration that all your images will be blurred. Try resting it on your boot, instead, to soften the movement.



Humpback whale ... with spray (1/8000 sec, f7.1, ISO 800, 70-2000mm f2.8 lens).

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Six top tips

1. STEADY YOURSELF. Sometimes, you have to hold on to the boat with one hand and shoot with the other two (if only!). Seriously, you do need to lean against something – a railing or the wheelhouse – to give you at least some stability.

2. ALWAYS BE READY. One of the great pleasures of whale watching trips is that you never know what is going to happen next. You travel along – sometimes for several hours – with very little happening. Then suddenly you stumble upon something and it all kicks off. The trick is to have your camera round your neck all the time - switched on, even - so that you're ready to start firing at a moment's notice. Even then, of course, the minute you change battery - or go inside to have a pee – is the minute the whale – or whatever it is you're photographing - suddenly does a loop-the-loop without warning. It's tiring standing on a rolling deck all day, with a ton of camera equipment round your neck, but the minute you let down your guard is the minute something dramatic happens. So always be ready.

3. THINK ABOUT WHERE TO STAND ON THE BOAT. The best position depends on the boat and what you are hoping to see, of course. Try to stand somewhere that allows you to run from one side of the boat to the other – without clambering over benches, masts, lifeboats, passengers or whatever else might be in the way. If you're likely to see dolphins, the bow is a good place to be. If you have a large whale that seems to be inquisitive – run up to the highest point you can and get some shots like mini aerials – showing more of the whale than if you were nearer water level. If the whale is fluking, or spyhopping, get down as close to sea level as you possibly can – for a more intimate and dramatic point of view. With a little experience, you do get to know the little habits of different species and can more easily predict where the best place is likely to be.



Sperm whale in choppy sea (1/2500 sec, f5.6, ISO 1600, 100-400mm f4.5-5.6 lens).



Shoot whale blows into the sun for maximum effect – killer whale (1/8000 sec, f5.6, ISO 800, 100-400mm f4.5-5.6 lens).



Think about backgrounds to give a sense of place – flipper-slapping humpback whale (1/1000 sec, f6.3, ISO 400, 17-40mm f4 lens).



'Mini aerial' from top of boat – grey whale mother and calf (1/1000 sec, f5, ISO 250, 17-40mm f4 lens).



Get down low on deck for leaping dolphins (1/5000 sec, f5.6, ISO 800, 70-200mm f2.8 lens).

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Boat reflection with bow-riding common dolphin (1/1000 sec, f4, ISO 250, 12-24mm f4 lens).



Light, landscape and fluking sperm whale (1/2500 sec, f7.1, ISO 800, 300mm f2.8 lens).



Common bottlenose dolphins with golden cliff reflection (1/1600 sec, f8, ISO 800, 200-400mm f4 lens).



Don't always shoot too tight, think about the surroundings (1/8000 sec, f7.1, ISO 800, 100-400mm f4.5-5.6 lens).



Being creative with humpbacks (1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 400, 300mm f2.8 lens).

4. THINK ABOUT THE SURROUNDINGS.

Whales and dolphins are active 24 hours a day – it's not like you have to get up at dawn to see them – though the light is usually better at the beginning and end of the day, of course. More importantly that affects, among other things, the water colour. Very often, the sea looks dull grey or dirty brown or ghastly green – and that will take the edge off your pictures. So look for reflections of cliffs – or even the boat – that add a little colour. Don't be afraid to ask the skipper if it might be possible to put you in the right position – most are very happy to help photographers (perhaps you can offer one of your best images, in return, for their publicity?). It's also quite nice to pull back sometimes to include the background – if it's a photogenic one. Getting the horizon straight when you're on a boat, of course, is a challenge. Unless it's flat calm, you're likely to be rolling around - and you can't really restrict all your shooting to the split second you think the horizon is straight. I tend to shoot slightly wider than I want the final image to be, then if necessary straighten the horizon afterwards with a crop. Finally, if the water colour and background are both awful, get in tight and show little else but the whale.

5. OBSERVE AND PREDICT. Watch for a few moments to gauge what is happening – rather than shooting non-stop without looking up. Otherwise, you could easily miss something. If there are several animals, or more, you need to keep checking in case one of them just out of frame is doing something spectacular. The more time you spend at sea, the more you can predict what might happen next. If you're leaving a group of humpback whales, for example, it's a good idea to stand at the back of the boat – quite often, one of them will breach as the boat departs.

6. PUT IN THE TIME. Like all wildlife photography, the more time you spend 'out there' the luckier you will get. I think that's one of the great pleasures of wildlife watching in general – the more you see, the more you want to see – and the more you don't see, the more you're determined to see – and it's the anticipation of what might suddenly turn up that makes it so exciting.

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Settings

Most of the time I am shooting on Aperture Priority (see my [BBC Wildlife film](#) on this for all the reasons why) with the aperture wide open. This gives me the fastest shutter speed possible, given all the changing conditions. I push the ISO up high enough to guarantee shutter speeds of at least 1/2,000 sec (more, if possible). This is enough to freeze most movement – though you'll need more like 1/4,000 sec if you are shooting leaping dolphins or breaching whales, for example.

I do occasionally switch to Shutter Priority to create blur and a feeling of movement. This works particularly well with bow-riding dolphins. My favourite shutter speed for this is 1/15 sec, but it's subjective so try anything up to around 1/50 sec. It's great fun experimenting to get a look you like. The best time to shoot slow motion is when it's really dull and you can achieve sufficiently slow shutter speeds (and you can't get fast enough shutter speeds for anything else).



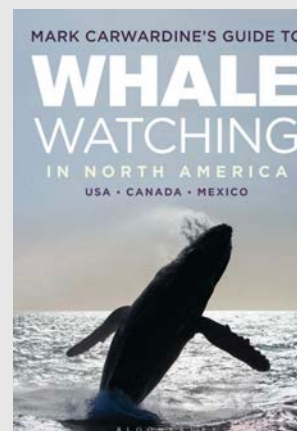
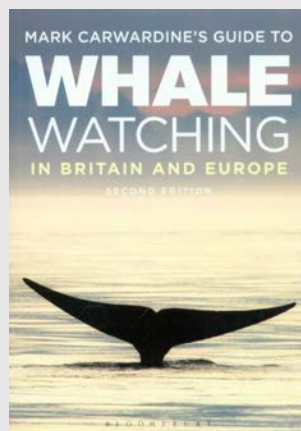
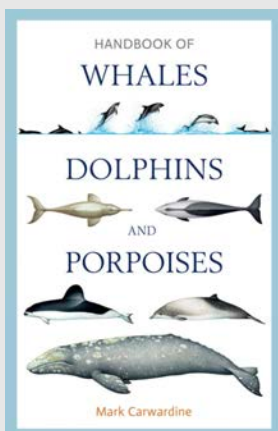
Using Shutter Priority helps to create a wonderfully blurry effect (1/15 sec, f20, ISO 200, 28-300mm f3.5-5.6 lens).



And finally ...

Consider shooting with a GoPro on a long pole. Very often, a whale watching boat will stop when there are 'friendly' or inquisitive whales nearby, and you might be able to get some underwater shots if they are close enough (put the pole vertically into the water – not at an angle, or it will appear in everyone else's shots). Another great GoPro trick is to hold the pole, with the camera on the end, out in front of bow-riding dolphins to get a completely different viewpoint.

Good luck!



Read all about it: signed copies of Mark's whale books are available to buy on our [shop](#).

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