



## Humpback Voices: Tuning in to the Songs of the Deep

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Welcome to the **Voices of QMNH** blog, where we will be sharing a wide range of content written by museum staff, volunteers, and community guests. We will be covering topics in natural history, science, travel, and anything else that sparks our interest.



Female Humpback swimming with calf. 2023. Property of Quinte Museum of Natural History.

With whales on our minds, we wanted the first voice we highlight to be the singing giants of the deep: humpback whales. Male humpback whales are known for their unique and complex songs. These songs are passed down from generation to generation, and are sometimes shared between populations.

Living their lives in the dark depths of the ocean, whales rely on sound communication to share knowledge across great distances. While humans rely on modern technology to connect with one another from around the globe, humpback whales play a unique game of underwater telephone to share information.

Humpback whale populations from different parts of the world share the same winter breeding grounds in the warm waters around the equator. Males at the same breeding ground tend to sing nearly identical tunes, which gradually evolve from one year to the next.

Humpback songs follow a fascinating language-like structure. The whales combine short sounds into longer sequences, called themes. Each song consists of several themes. Male humpbacks sometimes make small embellishments to their songs, adding an interesting new sound or cutting out an old theme.

During the long migration from breeding grounds in the winter to feeding grounds in the summer, male humpbacks from different populations might end up swimming alongside one another. As they travel, the whales may borrow themes from each other's songs. New humpback songs are being created and shared all the time.



Humpback breaching surface in Pacific Ocean. 2023. Property of Quinte Museum of Natural History.

Even though humpback whales have been the subject of extensive study, we are only just beginning to uncover the mysterious meanings behind whale songs. While we may not know exactly why whales sing, we should never stop tuning in to the captivating songs of the deep.



Exhibit photo of cast Humpback Skull. 2023. Property of Quinte Museum of Natural History.

Come visit our newest exhibit, *Diving Deep: A Tale of Whales Through Time* and marvel at these fascinating creatures for yourself.

## Resources

*Humpback Whale Songs*. Retrieved from <https://www.bcwhales.org/humpback-whale-song>

Zimmer, Carl. *Humpback Whales Pass Their Songs Across Oceans*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/30/science/humpback-whale-songs-cultural-evolution.html>