

Whales

Humpback whale / *Megaptera novaeangliae* / Zato-kujira / ザトウクジラ

In the months from January to March, the waters of Amami-Oshima are host to pods of humpback whales, which migrate here from the frigid seas of the Bering Strait to breed and raise their young. They can often be seen breaching offshore. Humpbacks are large whales that grow to 15 meters, about the size of a large bus. They can weigh up to 40 tons, and are easily recognizable due to their large pectoral fins, which can grow up to 5 meters long. Another identifying feature is the small hump in front of their dorsal fins, which gave them their English name. The origin of the whale's Japanese name is more interesting: the rounded shape of the whale's back was said to resemble the figure of a *zato*, a traditional itinerant priest or entertainer, carrying a stringed instrument on his back. Humpbacks are also known for the powerful sounds they make, and are a favorite of whale watchers all over the world.