



GREAT BARRIER REEF  
MARINE PARK AUTHORITY

# REEF BEAT

Townsville  
**Bulletin**  
THE NORTH'S OWN PAPER

## OUR GREAT BARRIER REEF

### ANIMALS ON THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

The Great Barrier Reef can be compared to a big city, with its inhabitants going about their business during the day, and others coming to life at night.

It's a complex and interdependent ecosystem where all the animals great and small are important to the ultimate survival of the Reef. Virtually all major and minor groups of living things are represented, and only tropical rainforests come close to rivaling the Reef for richness of species.

The Great Barrier Reef is home to an amazing variety of fascinating animals, which live on the Reef's many islands, on the shore and underwater.

While most people associate the Reef with the colourful corals and the brilliant fish, its other inhabitants are just as intriguing. First-time visitors are amazed by the variety of animals that live there.

Even the organisms found beneath a coral rock are astonishing, for example, colourful encrusting sponges, colonial and solitary sea squirts, delicate lace corals or bryozoans, slithering serpent stars and worms, and scores of other colourful and oddly-shaped animals.

About 359 kinds of hard coral, 4,000 molluscs, such as snails and clams, and thousands of different sponges, worms, crustaceans, and other, less familiar creatures live on the Great Barrier Reef.

It is also home to 800 echinoderms, like starfish and sea urchins, 1,500 types of fish, 215 bird varieties, of which 29 are seabirds, more than 30 marine mammals, and six marine turtle species - all listed as threatened.

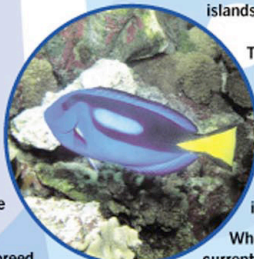
Several rare and endangered animals breed on the Reef, including humpback whales that swim from Antarctica to give birth in the warm tropical waters, and dugongs that live in a nd feed in the sheltered coastal seagrass beds.

Science has described over a million species of animals. Only about five per cent of these possess a backbone, and they are known as vertebrates. All others, constituting 95 per cent of the animal kingdom, are invertebrates. On the Great Barrier Reef, animals without backbones outnumber vertebrates by 20 to one, and new species are discovered every month.

Invertebrates are the foundation of the Great Barrier Reef, and lead an astonishingly diverse range of lifestyles. Without them, the Reef could not exist.

They come in a myriad of colours, shapes and sizes, from clams to cuttlefish and corals to crabs. Some, like the octopus, are among the most intelligent animals in the ocean. Others have no brain at all. Jellyfish drift over hundreds of kilometres driven by winds, tides and currents. Sponges, by contrast, live most of their lives anchored to just one place.

Animals with backbones - the vertebrates - include mammals, birds, reptiles and fishes. Although as we have seen, vertebrates in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park are heavily out-numbered by invertebrates, they constitute some of the largest and most spectacular animals on Earth, such as the great whales, sharks and estuarine crocodiles.



The many islands of the Reef also support a diverse range of animals and birds. Among the land mammals, the Proserpine rock wallaby is found only in the Proserpine area and on a few offshore islands in the Whitsundays. Koalas, echidnas, possums, water rats and fruit bats also live on the islands of the Great Barrier Reef.

The reptiles and amphibians are represented by seven frogs, nine snakes and 31 lizard species. Species richness decreases with increasing latitude and distance from the mainland.

The islands and cays of the Marine Park have a similar range of land bird species to the adjacent mainland, but the Park is particularly important to populations of pied imperial pigeons that migrate to the Park from Papua New Guinea and an endemic silvereye which lives in the Capricorn-Bunker group of islands.

Whether they live on land, underwater, fly through the air or drift on the ocean currents, the animals of the Great Barrier Reef are all important and depend on each other. It's up to us to ensure that the Great Barrier Reef stays great - not just for people, but for the thousands of animals that call the Reef home, and depend on it for their survival.

To learn more about what you can do to help keep it great visit [www.gbrmpa.gov.au](http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au) and [www.reefED.edu.au](http://www.reefED.edu.au)