

EYE TO EYE WITH A WHALE

Visitors to Albany have the chance to enjoy an unforgettable experience coming eyeball-to-eyeball with huge marine mammals about the size of a bus.

Southern right whales (*Balaena australis*) weighing up to 80 tonnes and reaching 18 metres long, migrate into Albany waters from late-July to mid-October.

Right whales are baleen whales, which means they have horny plates hanging from their upper jaws. They feed on swarms of plankton, found in near-surface waters, and which they sieve through the fibrous inner hairs of the baleen plates.

During summer, right whales prefer the open ocean, away from the coast, but during late winter and spring the cows come in close to shore. There, near the surf line in sheltered bays, they give birth, before returning to deeper waters as summer approaches.

For many years, whalers caught southern right whales and rendered their bodies down for oil and whale bone. In fact, they were called right whales because in the days of open-boat whaling with hand harpoons they were the "right" ones to catch. They were slow-swimming, floated when dead, and yielded large amounts of valuable products - particularly oil for lighting and lubrication.

The populations declined to dangerously low levels before whaling of southern right whales ceased in 1959. Now, after nearly 30 years, they are recovering and forming the basis of a flourishing whale-watching industry. One of the most successful is Southern Ocean Charters, operated by Les Bail, whose magnificent photographs can be seen here.

Whales often come right

into Albany's Princess Royal Harbour. Lice resembling tiny white crabs can be seen on the photograph of the whale's eye shown on this page and Les says that he is often able to locate whales in fresh water, which may be an attempt by the whales to kill the tiny parasites.

"Although southern right whales are huge, bulky creatures, they are also agile and active animals, and their acrobatic antics can keep whale watchers amazed and entranced for hours," Les said.

"It is estimated the entire world population of southern right whales is only about 3 000, compared with an original population before whaling of 100 000, so it is really a privilege to watch these whales and observe their comeback from the brink of extinction on the Albany coast."

Southern right whales: breaching (top), feeding (centre) and taking a closer look at its human observers (below). Photos - Dorothy and Les Bail



LANDSCOPE

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The threatened Wyalkatchem foxglove is being given a helping hand by scientists from CALM and Kings Park and Botanic Garden (see page 17).



This nesting pair of splendid fairy-wrens is one of the many 'Birds of the Stirling Range' (see page 36).



WA Goldfields timbers are fast becoming recognised as prime materials for producing world-class musical instruments. See 'Musical Timbers' on page 48.



A new CALM book, Dive & Snorkel Sites in Western Australia, will encourage novice divers and snorkellers to explore the rich and diverse coastline of WA. See 'Secrets of the Sea' on page 10.



The common rock-rat, photographed here in the Kimberley, has recently been recorded in the Kennedy Range National Park. See page 28 for a profile of this wonderful wilderness area.

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COVER


The brilliant purple flowers of the twining fringed lily (*Thysanotus patersonii*) entwined around the burnt stem of a slender banksia (*B. attenuata*). See 'After the Burn' on page 21.

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