

SNUBBIES

INTRODUCING SOME ROEBUCK BAY LOCALS

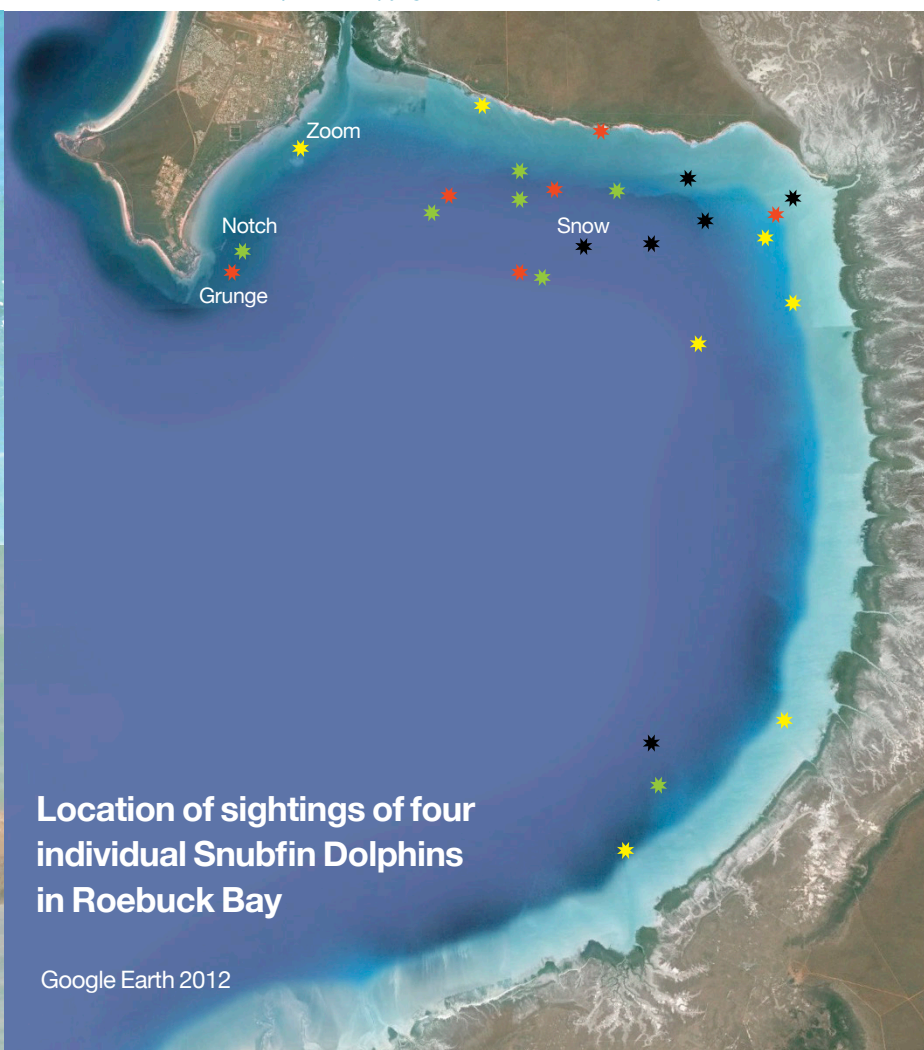
These Australian Snubfin Dolphins ooze charisma and charm with their playful antics and cheeky grins.

Snubbies, as they are affectionately called, are true Roebuck Bay locals as they live all year round in the Bay. Marine Biologist, Dr Deb Thiele from the Australian National University, has studied Roebuck's Snubfins since 2004 and has developed a rapport with these characters, hence the interesting names and photographs. Each Snubfin displays its own personality and has its own preferred feeding techniques and home range.

Marine biologists have an almost complete photo identification data base that is used to determine the size of the population. Murdoch University researchers, estimate a population of only 137 adults remain. Genetic evidence suggests almost no migration or mixing with the nearest group of Snubfins of 53 adults, found 250 km to the north at Cygnet Bay.

Roebuck Bay has the highest density and second largest known population of Snubfins left in the world, but this is still very small for a slow-breeding mammal that lives for over 30 years. These characters are under increasing pressure from the expanding township of Broome. Hopefully the introduction of the Roebuck Bay Marine Park will help to conserve this important group of rare and beautiful Dolphins.

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GRUNGE

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Grunge is really easy to spot. Most of her dorsal fin is missing, with only a small piece left, flopping on one side. Notice the scrape marks on her back, which looks as if she has been entangled in a net. Other marks may happen when Snub-fins rub against Mangrove trees or rocks to rid themselves of barnacles, or during rough play and courtship.

Grunge was first sighted in May 2007 with her calf and a male Snubfin named McNee who may be the lucky father. Since then she has been seen every year swimming with her calf and a group of mates including Nardoo, Fennel, Notch, Snow, Bezoar, Cinque, Parch, Orion, Suey and Chop. ,

In fact, Grunge is a very sociable Dolphin and also likes the company of Bottlenose Dolphins. It's not unusual to see them playing and feeding together.



JABBERWOCKY

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JABBERWOCKY is a female Snubfin with a deep injury to her back. Snubfins have amazing healing powers and wounds like this heal up quickly. She was first sighted 7 May 2007 with her family Manta, Futhorc and Baku.

These markings allow marine biologists to identify each individual dolphin just by taking photos. Hydrophones (underwater microphones) are also used to listen to the sounds Snubfins make and soon researchers should be able to tell how many dolphins live in the area just by listening to their whistles, chirps and squeaks. Snubfins use echo location to find fish and it sounds just like the pinging noises from echo sounders used on our fishing boats! Below is the Curtin University Marine Science and Technology team hard at work photographing and listening to Roebuck Bay's Dolphins in July 2014.



Dr Deb Thiele taking notes while Phd student Sarah Marley records Snubfin sounds with a hydrophone.

NOTCH

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Notch is one of the proud mums of Roebuck Bay and she has been seen with her calf over many years. She has a distinctive V-shaped piece out of the back of her dorsal fin and this makes her one of the easiest Snubfins to spot. In the bottom photo, notice the parallel slices across her back. This is possibly caused by another Snubfin giving her a love bite.

Notch was first sighted and named in 2006 by the Rushford family who were members of the community sighting program. Notch was photographed again in 2008 with a calf, Koen (named after a well-known cetacean conservationist who lives in Peru!)

Notch and Koen have been seen every year from 2006 to 2014 and are most often with a core group of family and friends, including Fennel, Rumba, Chop, Snark, Resile, McNee and Ficus.



RUMPUS

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Rumpus is perhaps the toughest Snubfin Dolphin in Roebuck Bay. He has suffered horrific injuries to his dorsal fin and tail yet continues to smile and play. While the cause of these injuries is unconfirmed, the key suspect is the large gillnets that were used in the bay since 1984 to catch Threadfin Salmon and Barramundi. Snubfins love to feed in shallow water around creek mouths, where the gillnets used to be set. All over the world dolphins and whales drown when they become entangled in gillnets. This is the main reason for the Snubfins on the east coast being dramatically reduced in numbers. Luckily for Rumpus he survived this ordeal and may never have to negotiate a gillnet again. The state government bought out the commercial fishing licenses in Roebuck Bay and removed the gillnets in November 2012.

A study in 2010 showed around 75% of Roebuck Bay's Snubfins had injuries caused by rough play, courtship, sharks, boat strike and entanglement with fishing line and nets.



SNOW

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Meet Snow. She is a bit of a loner, maybe because she has a really cool feeding technique and likes to keep her secrets. Spitfishing, it's called. This is a curious way that only a few Snubfins have learnt to catch fish and it has only been seen in Roebuck Bay. Snow is often seen at the mouth of Crab Creek on a rising tide, spitting at baitfish. The spits are really powerful, like a thick garden hose turned on full blast for 2 seconds. She will send out 2 or 3 spits at a time and completely confuses the baitfish. Often the baitfish will jump straight into her mouth or swim in panicked circles until she scoops them up.

Other Snubfins nuzzle through the mud in shallow water eating crabs and fish that are hiding on the bottom. Often their tails are waving around up in the air and when they come to the surface to breathe, their faces are covered in mud!

Snow was first seen in 2009 and she's not always alone. During neap tides somewhere between Crab Creek and Thangoo she gets together with her mates for a bit of socialising, frivolity and fun.



SNUBFIN CALVES

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The baby Snubfins of Roebuck Bay love to play and are often seen jumping, splashing and chasing the adults around. Marine biologists affectionately call them “cleanskins” as they have no identifying markings.

After a long gestation period of up to 14 months the babies are born tail first and immediately start swimming. Their mum will gently nudge them to the surface to give them their first breath as Dolphins have to remember to surface and breathe. When they are born they are around one meter long and 10-12 kg in weight and will feed off their mothers milk for the first two years of their life. This forms a strong bond between mother and calf, and they will continue to live in a family group for most of their lives.

Snubfins live for over 30 years and give birth to one calf every two to three years which means they are slow to reproduce and this puts small populations at risk of extinction.



SNUBBY PLAY

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When Snubfins play they gather in pods of up to 24 and swim tightly together, rubbing shoulders, bumping, jostling and sometimes acting like an excited mob of school kids during recess! Socialising Snubfins will cruise more calmly, touching noses and rubbing against each other. The strong connections between Snubfins is very important as they work together to round up fish and fend off sharks. The mouth of Crab Creek is a very popular spot for big groups to gather, play and feed against the mangroves at high tide.

Sometimes Bottlenose Dolphins will feed alongside Snubfins and seem to enjoy each others company. Below is a photo of a baby bottlenose happily playing with a Snubfin mum.



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