

Ocean giants

What on earth is a cetacean?

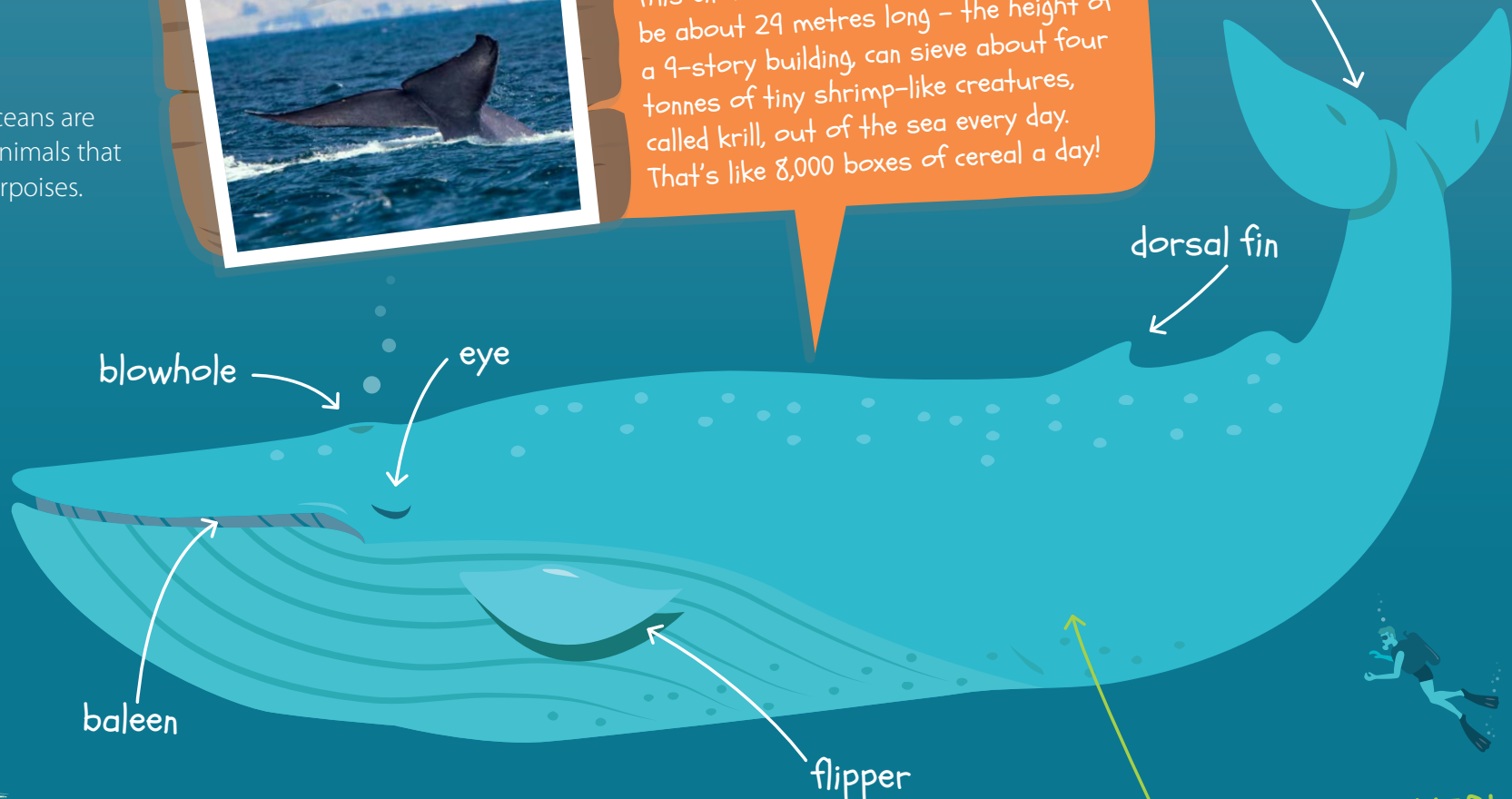
Some of the biggest animals in our oceans are cetaceans. Cetaceans are a group of animals that includes the whales, dolphins, and porpoises.



Striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*)



Blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*)
This enormous animal, which grows to be about 29 metres long – the height of a 9-story building, can sieve about four tonnes of tiny shrimp-like creatures, called krill, out of the sea every day. That's like 8,000 boxes of cereal a day!



They are not fish

These animals may look a bit like fish and spend their whole lives in the sea, but they are actually mammals, just like us. They are warm blooded, nurse their young and have lungs, so they have to come to the surface to breathe air. They breathe through an opening on the top of their head, called a blowhole. Cetaceans swim by moving their muscular tail fin up and down, unlike fish that swim by moving their tails left and right.

Teeth or no teeth?

Toothed whales, dolphins and porpoises use their peg-like teeth to catch fish and other marine animals to eat. There is another group, called the baleen whales, that don't have teeth but use special bristle-like structures in their mouths to strain food from the water. The biggest animal ever to have lived on earth, the blue whale, is a baleen whale.

Close families

Cetaceans live in social groups called pods and they have very strong social ties. Perhaps the strongest bond is between a mother and calf. Whales can live a long time. Scientists have found a blue whale that lived to be 110 years old.

The biggest animal EVER!

Cetaceans in the UK

Scientists have recorded nearly 30 species of whale, dolphin and porpoise in UK waters. Our seas are home to everything from massive humpback whales to small harbour porpoises.