

Using an Identification Key

An identification key can help you identify different types of organisms. A special key, called a **dichotomous key**, helps you identify organisms by presenting you with a series of choices. The choices describe characteristics of the organism you're identifying. Your choices eventually lead you to the identity of the species.

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Behavior

The following dichotomous key can be used to identify whale species based on their behaviors in the water. This key is based on observations experts made while watching whales along the Atlantic coast. Whale observers rarely see much of a whale's body unless it jumps above the water's surface in a behavior called breaching. But many whales show their tails, or flukes, when they are about to dive. They also produce a characteristic spray as they blow air through their blowholes. These features are used to identify different whale species.

Did You Know?

The largest animal in the world is the blue whale, which can grow up to 30 m (100 ft) in length.

Use this dichotomous key to identify the whales described on the facing page.*

1	a. Shows flukes when diving b. Raises flukes only slightly	Go to 2 Blue Whale
2	a. Head seen when surfacing b. Head not reported to be seen when surfacing	Go to 3 Go to 4
3	a. Blow bushy b. Blow not noticeable	Northern Bottlenose False Killer Whale
4	a. Breaching common b. Breaching rare	Go to 5 Longfinned Pilot
5	a. Blow bushy b. Blow at 45 degree angle	Go to 6 Sperm Whale
6	a. Dorsal fin prominent b. Dorsal fin small c. No dorsal fin	Killer Whale Humpback Whale Northern Right Whale