Ocean animals for kids: from a clownfish to a blue whale

Peabody blog · Science · updated 2026-10-30

Ocean animals for kids: 31 animals from a clownfish to the blue whale, why the ocean is a place and not a kind, and sizes from NOAA and other named sources.

Ocean animals aren't one kind of animal. They're animals that share one place, and on Peabody that's 31 of them, from a clownfish up to 9 cm long to a blue whale up to 33.5 m. Both numbers are maximums: the clownfish's comes from the US Geological Survey and the blue whale's from NOAA Fisheries. Here's how the ocean page is put together and how to read it with a child.

A place, not a kind

Peabody sorts animals two ways: by where they live and by what kind they are. The ocean is a place, so it holds every kind at once.

- Kind: Mammals · How many: 13 · Some of them: blue whale, orca, bottlenose dolphin, sea otter, manatee
- Kind: Fish · How many: 9 · Some of them: great white shark, whale shark, giant manta ray, clownfish
- Kind: Reptiles · How many: 4 · Some of them: green sea turtle, leatherback sea turtle, loggerhead sea turtle, saltwater crocodile
- Kind: No backbone · How many: 4 · Some of them: giant Pacific octopus, moon jellyfish, American lobster, blue crab
- Kind: Birds · How many: 1 · Some of them: emperor penguin

There's a full list on the ocean animals page. Some ocean animals breathe water through gills, and some, like whales, come up to breathe air. A whale looks like a fish but isn't one, while a shark really is a fish. The is a shark a fish guide has the details.

Small to big

The ocean page puts the biggest and the smallest side by side at true size, then lists everyone. Here's a ladder from small to large. Read the middle column, because each animal is measured a different way.

- Animal: Clownfish · Size: up to 9 cm (3.5 in) · What it measures: maximum length · Who says: US Geological Survey
- Animal: Lined seahorse · Size: 5.5 to 18.5 cm (2.2 to 7.3 in) · What it measures: height of an upright seahorse · Who says: NOAA Fisheries

- Animal: Blue crab · Size: up to 23 cm (9 in) · What it measures: across the shell · Who says: NOAA Fisheries
- Animal: Moon jellyfish · Size: 30 cm (about 12 in) · What it measures: width of the bell · Who says: National Park Service
- Animal: Giant Pacific octopus · Size: 1.8 to 2.4 m (5.9 to 7.9 ft) · What it measures: average total length, arms included · Who says: NOAA Fisheries
- Animal: Great white shark · Size: 6.1 m (20 ft) · What it measures: length · Who says: NOAA Fisheries
- Animal: Giant manta ray · Size: 7.9 m (26 ft) · What it measures: wingspan, the most measured · Who says: NOAA Fisheries
- Animal: Whale shark · Size: 12.2 m (40 ft) · What it measures: the most, by some estimates · Who says: NOAA National Ocean Service
- Animal: Blue whale · Size: 33.5 m (110 ft) · What it measures: maximum, Antarctic blue whales · Who says: NOAA Fisheries

The blue whale is also the heaviest on the list: 150,000 kg (about 330,000 lb), according to NOAA Fisheries. Peabody's page calls it the biggest animal that has ever lived. Meanwhile the whale shark is the biggest fish alive, and it eats some of the smallest food.

Stand a clownfish next to a great white shark in Compare Two (this pair is ready-made) and you'll see why the stage has a magnifier. The shark is more than 25 times the clownfish's length, so the clownfish is drawn at true size and also zoomed in, with a note saying how much. Blue whale next to whale shark is a good one too.

One for each kind

- Mammal. Sea otters wrap themselves in kelp so they don't drift away while they sleep. Dolphins sleep with half of their brain awake.
- Fish. The ocean sunfish is the heaviest bony fish. It looks like a swimming head and eats jellyfish.
- Reptile. The leatherback is the only sea turtle without a hard shell, and the biggest of the sea turtles. NOAA Fisheries gives it 1.5 to 1.8 m (4.9 to 5.9 ft).
- No backbone. The giant Pacific octopus has three hearts. The moon jellyfish has no brain, no heart and no bones at all.
- Bird. The emperor penguin dives deeper than any other bird, and the dad keeps the egg warm on his feet.

The fastest swimmer

Peabody's quickest swimming number is the sailfish's 113 km/h (70 mph), from NOAA's National Marine Sanctuaries. After that comes the great white shark at 56 km/h (35 mph) from NOAA Science On a Sphere, and the orca at the same 56 km/h from the US Fish and Wildlife

Service. The blue whale's is 32 km/h (20 mph), from NOAA Fisheries. Different sources measure in different ways, so treat these as a guide and not a scoreboard. The fastest animals list shows them next to the runners and fliers.

Questions grown-ups ask

Is a dolphin a fish?

No. Whales and dolphins breathe air, so they're mammals. Sharks, on the other hand, really are fish.

Why are the polar bear and the penguin on the ocean page?

Because they live on the sea ice and in the seas around it. The polar bear lives on the Arctic sea ice, and the emperor penguin lives on the sea ice and in the seas around Antarctica. They never meet: one is in the far north and the other in the far south.

Why is the saltwater crocodile there?

It lives in rivers, swamps and coasts from India to northern Australia, and it can even swim out to sea between islands, so Peabody files it under rivers and ocean.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads. If your child is still full of sea questions, the library has stories to follow them into.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/ocean-animals-for-kids