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# First record of Omura's whale, *Balaenoptera omurai*, in Sri Lankan waters



Asha de Vos

## Abstract

An unusually coloured, small baleen whale was documented off the southern coast of Sri Lanka in February 2017 during routine field surveys. Based on five distinct morphological characteristics including jaw asymmetry, presence of a prominent central rostral ridge, blaze on right side, asymmetrical chevron on left and right sides and a strongly falcate dorsal fin the individual was positively identified as an Omura's whale (*Balaenoptera omurai*). This discovery represents the first confirmed sighting of Omura's whale in Sri Lankan and therefore central Northern Indian Ocean waters.

**Keywords:** Northern Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka, Omura's whale, Sri Lanka, Distribution, *Balaenoptera omurai*

## Background

Originally misclassified as a pygmy form of Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*) in the 1970s, the Omura's whale has since been described as a distinct baleen whale species of the family Balaenopteridae (Wada et al. 2003). Sasaki et al. (2006) showed that in fact the Omura's whale represents an ancient independent lineage that diverged around 17 million years ago within the Balaenopteridae.

This species is currently confirmed from the north-eastern and South Atlantic, western Pacific and Indian Ocean. The records from the Indian Ocean are largely from the eastern Indian Ocean and more recently, with the discovery of a resident population of Omura's whales in Madagascar, the southwestern Indian Ocean and one from Iran in the northwest Indian Ocean.

This discovery represents the first confirmed documentation of Omura's whale within Sri Lankan waters and therefore the first from the central Northern Indian Ocean.

## Results

An Omura's whale was photographed on 5 February 2017 during routine blue whale photo-identification surveys. The solitary individual was documented approximately 7 km from shore in water between 55–65 m deep (Fig. 1). As the research vessel was switched off, the

animal approached the boat enabling a series of photographs highlighting a number of key morphological characteristics to be taken. These characteristics include, jaw asymmetry (Fig. 2a and b), prominent single central rostral ridge and not three as found in *B. edeni* (Fig. 2b), blaze on right side (Fig. 2c), asymmetrical chevron on both right and left sides (Fig. 2c and d) and falcate dorsal fin (Fig. 2e). These characteristics allow us to morphologically distinguish this individual from Bryde's whales that are commonly recorded in Sri Lankan waters.

The following morphologically diagnostic features enabled the identification of this individual as an Omura's whale (Fig. 2).

1. Jaw asymmetry  
As described by Cerchio et al. (2015), this individual showed evidence of asymmetrical colouration of the lower jaws, with a darkly pigmented left jaw (Fig. 2 a) and lightly pigmented right jaw (Fig. 2 b).
2. Presence of a prominent single medial ridge  
The prominent rostral ridge and absence of pronounced lateral ridges (only lightly visible) enabled differentiation from the more commonly sighted Bryde's whale with central ridge and lateral ridges (Wada et al. 2003).
3. Presence of right side blaze  
As described by Cerchio et al. (2015) white pigmentation is more extensive on the right side of the body compared to the left. This individual

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