

# Fact Sheet:

## Orca (Killer Whale), *Orcinus orca*



**O**rcas, or killer whales, belong to the order Cetacea (dolphins, porpoises, and whales) and of the suborder odontocete (toothed whales such as dolphins and porpoises). Orcas are the largest member of Family Delphinidae, making them the largest species of dolphin. Unfortunately, orcas are also very popular with the public display industry.

### Physical Description

Orcas have striking black and white coloration. Dorsally the body is black with a light area (“saddle patch”) behind the dorsal fin. They also have white eye patches. The ventral side of the body is white. They have an extremely tall dorsal fin – males’ can reach 6.5 ft (2 m) tall. Females’ are more curved and shorter at 3 ft (0.9 m) tall. Males are larger than females and can be up to 32 ft (9.8 m) long and weigh between 8-10 tons (8-10000 kg). Females can be 28 ft (8.5 m) long and can weigh up to 4 tons (4000 kg).

### Behavior

They are extremely intelligent, with a complex social structure within their groups, called pods. There are three types of orcas in the Eastern North Pacific, “transients,” “residents,” and “offshores” based on different behavior and movement patterns. Residents travel in large family pods that are matriarchal in nature, usually consisting of several females, calves, one or more males, and/or juveniles. Often, several generations stay together in a relatively small range. Transients travel in smaller pods that appear to be more fluid (i.e., unrelated individuals come and go, mothers/calves do not stay together, pods may form temporarily as a foraging pack) and have larger ranges because they follow prey abundance. The “offshore” orcas are still poorly understood.



Photo: Ken Balcomb

### Diet

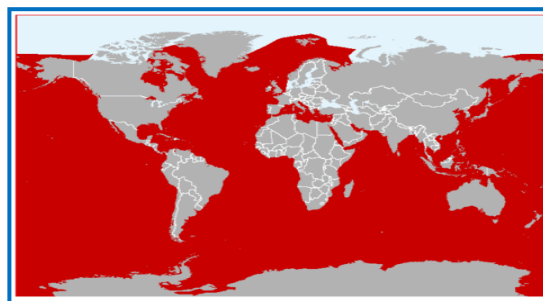
As the name implies, the killer whale is a skilled hunter and has earned the nickname the “wolf of the sea.” Their diet depends on the population and geographic area, and can include marine mammals (even large baleen whales!), squid, fish (including sharks), sea turtles, seabirds, and fish. They are known to coordinate hunting techniques to herd fish and to attack large prey.

### Reproduction

Orcas become sexually mature when they are about 10-18 yrs old. The gestation period is 13-17 months and females typically give birth every 3-5 yrs. Calf sizes vary between populations, but on average, they’re about 7-8.5 ft (2.1-2.6) long and weigh about 400 lb (181 kg).

### Distribution

They’re found in every ocean around the world, but are most abundant in cold, temperate, and coastal areas and especially in areas with high marine productivity. They’re one of the few species of whales that move freely from hemisphere to hemisphere. Orcas will travel according to food availability but don’t have set migratory patterns.



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### Threats

Pollution, including bio-accumulating contaminants like PCBs, are a serious threat to orcas. Also, habitat degradation and prey depletion (fish and marine mammals) also threaten certain populations. Orcas are also popular public display animals and some populations have been negatively impacted by the live capture industry.

### Status

The total population is estimated to be 50,000. Worldwide, Orcas are listed under the IUCN as “Data Deficient.” The southern resident subpopulation of the American Pacific Northwest was greatly affected by live capture industry and is now considered “Endangered.” There is also a population of 32 individuals around the Strait of Gibraltar that listed as “Critically Endangered” under the IUCN.

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