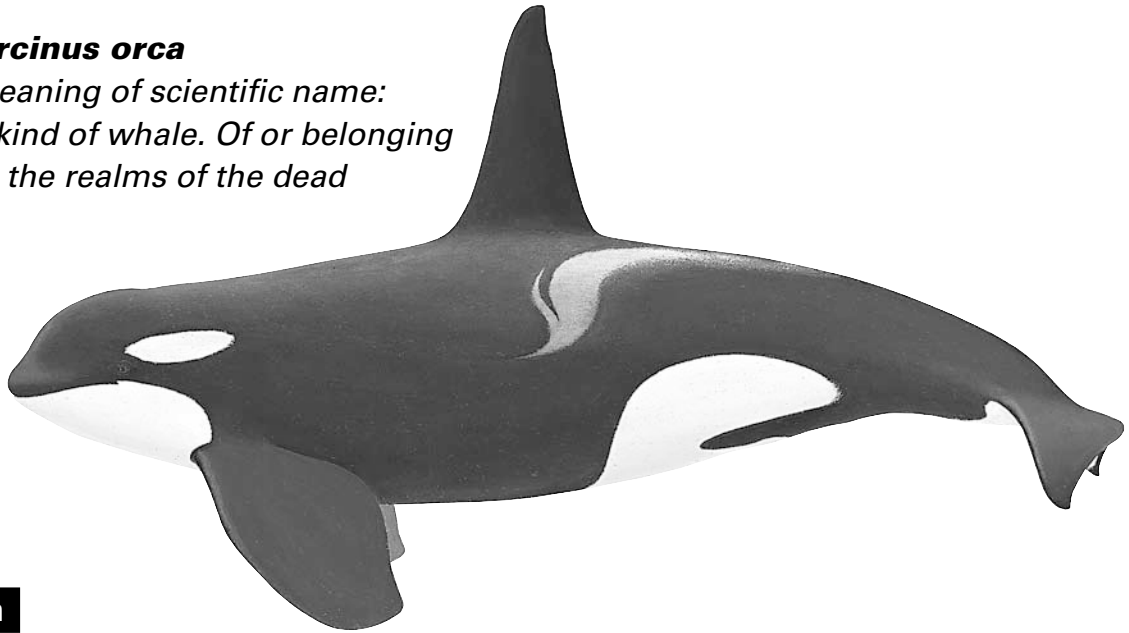


Orca or Killer Whale

Orcinus orca

*Meaning of scientific name:
a kind of whale. Of or belonging
to the realms of the dead*



Description

Orcas are the largest member of the dolphin family. Their familiar black and white coloration is actually a strategy of camouflage. From above, their dark back blends in with the darker water below them, while from below, their whiter bellies blend in with the sunlit water above. Male orcas reach 30 feet (9.5 m) in length, weigh over eight tons, and have a dorsal (back) fin up to six feet (1.8 m) tall. Females grow to 22 feet (7 m), weigh about four tons, and have a three-foot dorsal fin. Orcas have 50 teeth, which are conical-shaped and three inches long.

Range/Habitat

Orcas are found in all the oceans of the world and favor coastal temperate or cool waters. However, they also range into polar ice areas. Some orca populations remain local and travel along predictable routes. Others are transient and move over great distances.

Behavior

Orcas are very social. Most pods, or groups, consist of 5-50 individuals. Studies have shown that each pod has its own distinctive dialect or accent, and through this dialect, members of the same pod can recognize each other.

Three distinctive sub-groups of orcas have been described, residents, transients, and offshores. Residents live in pods of between 5-50 individuals consisting of two or three older females and their descendants (children, grandchildren, etc.), living together throughout their lives. This is called a matriarchal society. Residents move in more predictable areas than transients, primarily eat fish, and tend to be more vocal. Transients live in smaller pods consisting of one to seven individuals, travel longer and in unpredictable patterns, and primarily eat marine mammals. By hunting in groups, transient orcas are able to hunt animals much bigger than themselves and have been known to kill blue whales. They also eat shark, otters, sea lions, penguins, birds, and dolphins. Transients are also distinct from residents because their dorsal fins are more pointed and they are less vocal. Offshores, as the name suggests, are pelagic and as a result are rarely observed. They are known to live in large pods of over 70 and feed primarily on fish and squid.

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Orcas do not migrate in the same sense as baleen whales, but have seasonal movements, which are tied into prey movement and environmental changes.

People often wonder why orcas are also called killer whales. Mariners and whalers observed transient orcas eating other whales. Thus they were named “whale killer.” The name has since been reversed to “killer whale.” There are no confirmed records of orcas ever killing a person in the wild.

Capture of orcas for display has become controversial and more restricted. Warner Brothers’ hit film “Free Willy” prompted people from around the world to demand that Keiko (the film’s star) be moved to a better home and eventually returned to the wild. Never before has a captive orca been returned to the ocean. Keiko has many obstacles to overcome before he can survive in the wild. However, people remain optimistic about his future.

Mating and Breeding

Mating and birth take place mainly in autumn and winter. During breeding season, pods exchange members. Gestation (pregnancy) lasts over 16-17 months. At birth, orcas are about six to seven feet long and weigh almost 400 pounds (180 kg). When they are born, their “white” patches are creamy white to yellow, changing to white at about one year of age. They nurse for two years.

Status

Orcas are not endangered, with at least 180,000 individuals in Antarctic waters alone. However, a resident orca population in the Pacific Northwest has suffered a 20% decline in population over a five-year period, prompting the Canadian government to list them as threatened. Concerned scientists and conservation groups are also asking the U.S. government to list this population on the Endangered Species List. One reason for the decline may be starvation, due to a decrease in their favored prey (salmon).

It is also possible that whale watching boats interfere with their hunting. Another possible cause may be the effect of pollution such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). These chemicals were once used in many industrial processes but were banned in the United States in the 1970s when they were found to be dangerous. Despite the ban on their use in the United States, they are still used in other countries, and there are still high levels of the chemicals found in the environment. They get filtered up by bottom-dwelling organisms, which are then eaten by fish, which are then eaten by other animals, such as orcas. The chemicals then concentrate themselves in the blubber of these mammals and weaken their immune and reproductive systems. As resident orcas eat more bottom-dwelling fish instead of salmon, they accumulate more PCBs. Recently, transient orcas have been classified as the “most polluted” animal on earth with PCB levels nearly 500 times that found in humans. The United Nations is discussing a worldwide ban of these persistent pollutants.