

NATURALISTS' NOTES

Orcas

Question: When is a whale not a whale?

Answer: When it's a big dolphin.

All whales, porpoises, and dolphins are cetaceans. The Cetacea order contains several families, including the dolphin family, of which orcas (*Orcinus orca*) are the largest members. Of the 17 species of cetaceans found off the B.C. coast, orcas are most easily recognized because of their size, (males weigh 5 tonnes, females, 4) black and white colouring and tall dorsal fins. Behind the dorsal fin is a grey area called a saddle patch. The shapes of the fin and patch are unique to each orca allowing researchers to identify individual whales.

British Columbia is one of the best places in the world to see wild orcas. In prime sites, such as Johnstone Strait off northeastern Vancouver Island and Haro Strait near Victoria, enthusiastic whale-watchers observe orcas hunting, resting, playing and rubbing on pebble beaches. Prohibited by law from disturbing any marine mammal, observers follow the guidelines for closest approach, 100 metres for boats and 300 metres for airplanes.

Historically, orcas were referred to as “whale killers” by sailors who saw them attack larger whales, and from this, the name “killer whale” arose. Researchers now classify killer whales into three groups: “resident” orcas that feed exclusively on fish, “transient” orcas that eat marine mammals, usually other whales, and “offshore” orcas about which very little is known.

Resident orcas live in large family-centred pods that tend to stay in one area. Resident females live about 50 years, males, 30 years. Members of a pod, usually headed by the oldest female, often live together for several decades. There are 19 pods of resident orcas in B.C., containing about 300 animals. Each pod has its own set of unique calls, which form its dialect. Researchers have constructed family trees for B.C.'s resident orcas, identifying each whale by letter and number. Once a whale-watcher identifies a particular orca, the pod can often be identified.

Transient orcas usually travel in small groups of two to four. At least 218 transients are known to roam the coastal waters of B.C., showing up anywhere, at anytime.

Transients and residents have nothing to do with each other. DNA studies show that the two groups have not interbred for thousands of years. The two groups “speak” dialects that are so different from each other that even inexperienced listeners can tell them apart.

Some researchers blame transient orcas for the decline of ocean mammals such as Steller sea lions, sea otters, and seals. They cite the decline of large whales, the orcas' main food source, as the reason why orcas hunt these smaller marine mammals. Other scientists say there is too little data to support this theory. Animal protection groups feel that orcas are scapegoats for problems caused by people—that over fishing and pollution are the real culprits.

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