

KILLER WHALES



The **Killer Whale** (*Orcinus orca*), also referred to as the **orca Whale** or **orca**, and less commonly as the **blackfish**, is a toothed whale belonging to the oceanic dolphin family. Killer whales are found in all oceans, from the frigid Arctic and Antarctic regions to tropical seas. Killer whales as a species have a diverse diet, although individual populations often specialize in particular types of prey. Some feed exclusively on fish, while others hunt marine mammals like pinnipeds, and even large whales. Killer whales are regarded as apex predators, lacking natural predators.

Killer whales are highly social; some populations are composed of matrilineal family groups which are the most stable of any animal species. Their sophisticated hunting techniques and vocal behaviors, which are often specific to a particular group and passed across generations, have been described as manifestations of culture.

Interesting Facts:

- English-speaking scientists most often use the term "killer whale", although the term "orca" is increasingly used. Killer whale advocates point out it has a long heritage. Indeed, the genus name *Orcinus* means "of the kingdom of the dead",
- The killer whale is one of 35 species in the oceanic dolphin family, which first appeared about 11 million years ago.
- A typical killer whale distinctively bears a black back, white chest and sides, and a white patch above and behind the eye. Calves are born with a yellowish or orange tint, which fades to white. It has a heavy and robust body with a large dorsal fin up to 2 m (6.6 ft) tall. Behind the fin, it has a dark grey "saddle patch" across the back.
- The killer whale's teeth are very strong and covered in enamel. Its jaws are a powerful gripping apparatus, as the upper teeth fall into the gaps between the lower teeth when the mouth is closed. The front teeth are inclined slightly forward and outward, thus allowing the killer whale to withstand powerful jerking movements from its prey while the middle and back teeth hold it firmly in place.
- Killer whales are the largest extant members of the dolphin family.
- Males typically range from 6 to 8 metres (20 to 26 ft) long and weigh in excess of 6 tons (5.9 long tons; 6.6 short tons). Females are smaller, generally ranging from 5 to 7 m (16 to 23 ft) and weighing about 3 to 4 tons (3.0 to 3.9 long tons; 3.3 to 4.4 short tons).
- The largest male killer whale on record was 9.8 m (32 ft), weighing over 10 tons (9.8 long tons; 11 short tons), while the largest female was 8.5 m (28 ft), weighing 7.5 tons (7.4 long tons; 8.3 short tons).
- Calves at birth weigh about 180 kg (400 lb) and are about 2.4 m (7.9 ft) long.
- The killer whale's large size and strength make it among the fastest marine mammals, able to reach speeds in excess of 56 km/h (30 kn).
- An individual killer whale can often be identified from its dorsal fin and saddle patch. Variations such as nicks, scratches, and tears on the dorsal fin and the pattern of white or grey in the saddle patch are unique.
- Female killer whales mature at around age 15. They then have periods of polyestrous cycling with no cycling periods of between three and 16 months. Gestation varies from 15 to 18 months.
- The lifespans of wild females average 50 years, with a maximum of 80–90 years.
- Probably the largest population lives in Antarctic waters.