



Killer Whale - *Orcinus orca*

Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*), also known as Orcas, are one of the most deadly marine animals in the world. Despite being called a whale, the predatory species is the largest of the dolphins, growing up to eight metres long- the length of a small bus! They are extremely muscular with adult females weighing around 4 tonnes, and adult males weighing an average of 9 tonnes, making them very powerful and in most cases, unbeatable against their prey. Killer Whales can live up to 50-60 years with females living longer than males. Their brain is 5 times larger than humans, so they are extremely intelligent, inquisitive and social animals.

Killer Whales are easily recognised by their distinctive black and white colouring, with a large white patch above their eye, and white underside. They also have a grey/white colouration just behind their dorsal fin called a 'saddle patch', which is unique to each animal, similar to a fingerprint. It is believed that the mix of black and white colour camouflages the animal because other animals are not able to focus on them as they move through the water. Their large black dorsal fin sticks high out of the water and can be up to 2 metres high in adult males. Their rostrum, or beak, is blunt and inconspicuous on their stocky, robust body.

Killer Whales are apex predators, meaning they are on top of the food chain. They are able to move through the water at incredible speeds of up to 50 km per hour, meaning they are consistently able to out-swim their prey. Killer Whales often hunt in deadly pods of between 4 and 40. The juveniles are expected to hunt with the pod each day to learn specific techniques. Their diet varies greatly, but it is estimated that the average Killer Whale eats 140 kg of food a day. The type of food they eat includes fish, crustations, sea birds, and marine mammals such as whales, dolphins and seals.

Killer Whales hunt with grace and stealth, sneaking up on their prey like a cat. A pod of killer whales is able to take down even the largest species of whales, such as Humpbacks. The calves of these species are heavily preyed upon, and their mothers have been photographed in Ningaloo swimming whilst carrying their calf on their back to protect it from the attacking Killer Whales.

Killer Whales are seen in all parts of the ocean, from the poles to the equator. It is generally seen that they prefer cooler waters and are often seen in shallower coaster areas such as bays and estuaries. The species has quite an irregular pattern of migration, and one that is altered greatly by the availability of food. When the animals do migrate, they cover approximately 100 km each day.

Killer Whales are mammals, so feed their calves with milk and usually give birth one calf at a time. Their gestation period is approximately 16- 17 months, and calves stay with their mother for their entire life after birth. Despite the excellent care giving that is characteristic of the species, only half of the calves born will survive past one year old. On average one female will give birth every 5 years, but they will not reproduce at all if there are problems with their living conditions such as pollution, distressing noises, warmer waters, and lack of food.

Did you know?

Killer Whales communicate using a series of vocalisations, which are specific to their particular pod.