

Orcas

— The killer whale —

This group of orcas is on the prowl, silently slipping through the water in search of a meaty meal. These sleek, muscly sea mammals are fast, agile, and very clever.

Family life

Orcas may be fearsome hunters, but they are sociable creatures with close families, too. They live in family groups led by a mother orca. Her sons will stay with her for their entire lives, while her daughters may start their own groups when they grow up. Related families often travel and hunt together in larger groups called pods.

Did you know?

Although we call it a whale, the orca is actually the largest member of the dolphin family.



Daring hunters

Orcas are powerful predators that use teamwork to track down other ocean mammals such as sea lions and porpoises, and even much larger whales. They use cunning tricks, too, such as creating waves to wash unsuspecting seals off floating ice. It's not surprising that orcas became known as the "killer whales," but they are not dangerous to people.

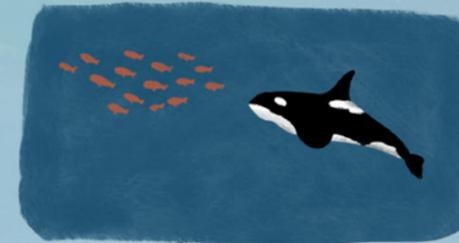
Orcas are found around the world. In a few places, populations of orcas have developed different diets. Here are two examples.

The gray saddle patch is different on every orca, just like fingerprints are with humans. Scientists can recognize a whale by looking at this marking, as well as any nicks and scars on the dorsal fin.

The dorsal fin, or back fin, of an adult male orca can grow up to 6ft (1.8m) high—that's as tall as a person.

White patches break up the dark shape of orcas' bodies. This helps them sneak up on their prey.

Wide, rounded flippers help orcas spin, roll, and turn quickly in the water.



Resident orcas swim off the Pacific coast of North America and only eat fish.



Another special population of orcas lives far from shore in the Pacific Ocean. These offshore orcas hunt sharks. The teeth of older offshore orcas are often worn away from years of biting into rough shark skin.



Length: up to 30 feet (9 meters)  Weight: up to 5.5 tons (5 tonnes)