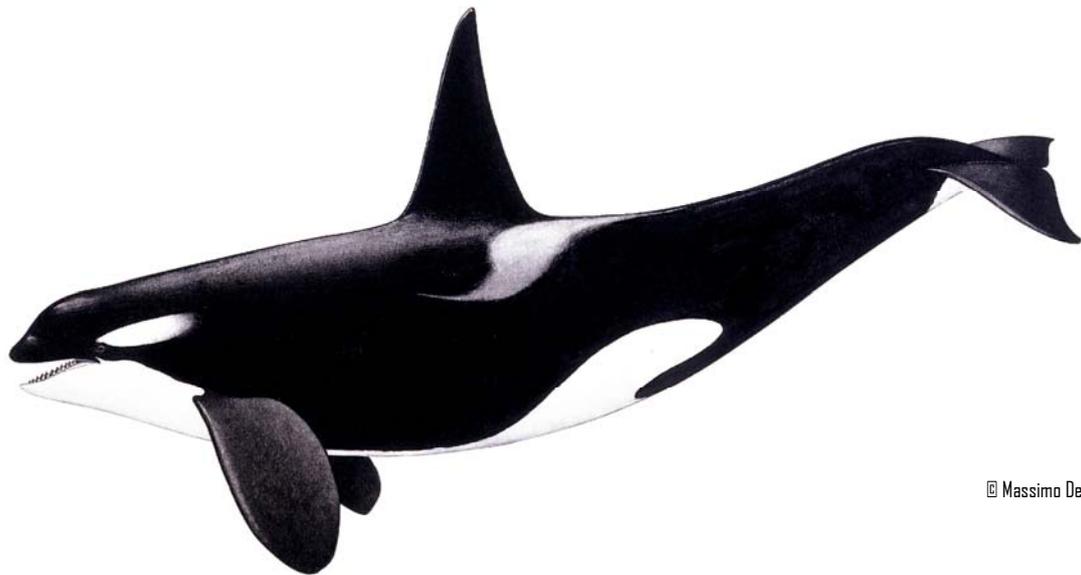


Class: Mammalia Order: Cetacea Sub-order: Odontoceti Family: Delphinidae Genus: <i>Orcinus</i>	IUCN global conservation status: Insufficient data ACCOBAMS/IUCN global conservation status: In critical danger of extinction (Mediterranean)	
	Mediterranean: Regular to occasional	Black Sea: Absent
KILLER WHALE <i>Orcinus orca</i> (Linnaeus 1758)		

English: Killer whale



© Massimo Demma/ICRAM



♂ : 8-9 m ♀ : 6-7 m

Name: ♦ Scientific: Either from the name of a god having to do with death, *Orcus*, or from Greek *orkunos* = the largest tuna.
♦ Common: Inspired to the species' feeding habits and its spectacular hunting techniques.

DESCRIPTION *The largest of all Delphinids, with a distinctive black and white colouration*

Size: Male: 8.5 m, max. 9.8 m - 5 tons, max. 8 tons.
Female: 6-7 m - 2.5-3.5 tons
Newborn: about 2 m - 150- 200 kg

Head: Rounded and bulky, with a well-marked melon and diminutive snout.
10 to 12 conical teeth, 4-8 cm long on either side of both jaws.

Body: Heavy and robust.
Colouration: characteristic, black with an oval spot behind the eye, a lighter spot (saddle) behind the dorsal fin and a white area from the lower jaw to the underside of tail, widening in the genital region. This white genital area is long and narrow in males and wide and almost rounded in females.
The shape of the saddle and the post-ocular spot is used in photo-identification.

Dorsal fin: Major sexual dimorphism: in adult males, it is triangular and may reach 2 m in height; in females and young, it is sickle-shaped and less than 80 cm in height.

Pectoral fins: Very large, wide and rounded, paddle-shaped.

Tail: Black on top, white below, with a well-marked notch.

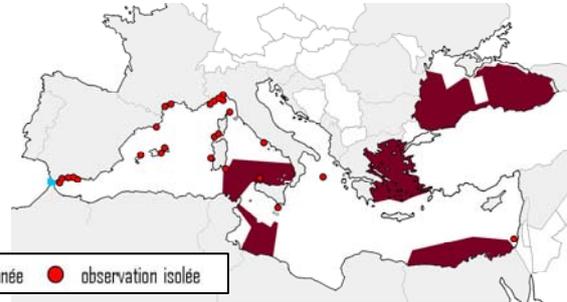
Blow: Low and bushy.

DISTRIBUTION

Cosmopolitan. However, more frequent in cold temperate and polar waters. One of mammals on the planet with one of the largest distributions: the poles to tropical waters and off-shore coastal bays.

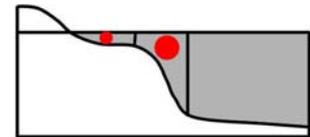
MEDITERRANEAN AND BLACK SEAS

Regularly present in the Strait of Gibraltar and the Atlantic area. Passes through the Western Mediterranean, occasional in the Eastern Mediterranean, with one uncertain observation in the eastern basin (Israel).
Absent from the Black Sea.



HABITAT AND ECOLOGY

The species occurs preferentially in cold waters and the continental shelf. Killer whales in the Strait of Gibraltar and the Atlantic area live in shallow water: 20-300 m (de Stephanis 2005, de Stephanis et al. 2005a).



BEHAVIOUR

Lives in small, familiar clans composed by 3-30 individuals, organised around a matriarch and her descendants (offspring and their offspring). The process of educating the young lasts for years.

Every population develops specialised hunting techniques based on the type of prey it hunts. Perhaps the best-known and spectacular one involves deliberate beaching to capture young pinnipeds in Patagonia.

Vocalisations are very varied. Clans exhibit different dialects depending on the geographical distance between them. Very conspicuous at the surface, with different behaviours and acrobatics (breaches, tail-slaps, spyhops, etc.).

Longevity:	40-50 years in males, 80-90 years in females.
Swimming speed:	5 kts (9 km/h), up to 30 kts (55 km/h) in bursts of speed.
Dives:	Generally 1-3 min, but may reach 30 min and 500 m.

REPRODUCTION

Sexual maturity:	Male: physiological maturity: 10 to 12 years, social maturity (access to females): 16-20 years Female: 12-16 years Menopause around 40-50 years.
Breeding season:	Autumn and winter.
Gestation:	15-17 months
Nursing:	Often 2 years or more. A female has at most 5-6 calves during her lifetime.

FOOD

Killer whales in the Strait of Gibraltar are known to feed mainly on bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) in the summer. Their diet the rest of the year is still unknown (Cañadas and de Stephanis 2010).

THREATS

Prey depletion, direct killing by fishermen who compete with killer whales for their increasingly rare prey. Habitat degradation. Toxic pollutants, noise and disturbance associated with the growing industry of whale watching are also potential threats, yet little studied.