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# Whales and Dolphins

• HARBOUR PORPOISE • WHITE-BEAKED DOLPHIN • BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN • COMMON DOLPHIN • MINKE WHALE • FIN WHALE • SPERM WHALE • SOWERBY'S BEAKED WHALE •

## of the North Sea

# Killer Whale

*Orcinus orca* (Linnaeus, 1758)

Killer Whale

Orque (French)

Schwertwal (German)



Small whale or large dolphin (4 - 9 m; calf 2.2 m)

Strikingly tall dorsal fin mid-way along the back (triangular on males)

Black with a white eye-patch, light grey saddle-patch and white marks on belly

Round head; inconspicuous beak

Swims with slow, rolling movements, sometimes has a visible blow

The Killer Whale is one of the most photographed whales in the world and many people will recognise this animal immediately. However, the circumstances at sea are usually far from ideal and identifying a Killer Whale can be more difficult. Characteristic for an adult male Killer Whale is the huge triangular dorsal fin. Young individuals and females have a more dolphin-like dorsal fin (although it is still striking). The head is round, the beak is inconspicuous and a slowly swimming Killer Whale rises so far out of the water that the white eye-patch can be seen through the water. Behind the dorsal fin a grey saddle-patch is visible, which can sometimes be whitish. The flippers are broad and rounded. The largest Killer Whales that stranded on the Dutch coast were about 6 metres long, whereas the average length is approximately 5.5 metres.

Killer Whales live in pods, with an average group size about 4 and 20 individuals. On special occasions (rich feeding areas) hundreds of Killer Whales can aggregate in a small area. During this the coherence of the family always stays intact. Killer Whales attract attention because of their noble way of swimming: a slow, rolling movement on the surface. With

adult males the point of the dorsal fin usually surfaces first and after that the head and the blowhole. When the whale dives back in, the tip of the fin is also usually the last thing visible. On larger animals a clear blow can usually be seen.

## The Killer Whale in the North Sea

The Southern North Sea is outside their natural habitat, which is situated (at our latitude) west of the British Isles and the Gulf of Biscay. Killer Whales are quite common from Spitsbergen, Iceland and Frans Josef Land, southwards to the equator, but most common in the colder, food-rich regions.

Before 1900 • The biologist Erwin Kompanje from Rotterdam wrote a thorough report about all of the adequately reported strandings of Killer Whales in our country. Prior to 1900, six Killer Whales had stranded on the Dutch coast and four had stranded in Flanders.

The first reliable finding in the Netherlands was of a pregnant female on December 4, 1783. The stuffed foetus (140 cm long) weighted as much as

56 kg and can still be seen in the museum of the Zeeuwse Society in Middelburg.

All the other known strandings date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and with the exception of findings from Engelsmanplaat (1811) and Ameland they were all found along the Dutch coast (3), in Zeeland (1) and in Flanders (94).

The Ameland case involved a Killer Whale that was captured. The animal was seen in the Wadden Sea, south of Hollum, killed and brought ashore. A stranding near Wijk aan Zee on November 30, 1841, was also of a living animal.

1900-1960 • After 1900 another 21 Killers Whales washed ashore, all of which were in the Netherlands and all but three stranded before 1960. As far as is known all the strandings took place between July and January. In only one case was the whale still alive when it stranded: the German occupying forces killed a pregnant female at Terschelling (foetus was 125 cm long) on July 8, 1943. Soldiers and the local people ate the meat, which was a welcome supplement in a period when meat was scarce. About half of these strandings took place on the Friesian Islands, and in most cases the bodies were in an advanced state of decomposition. Interesting to read is a detailed description by J.W. van Dieren in an article in *De Levende Natuur* about a Killer Whale that stranded at Terschelling in 1931, and about the author's examination of the whale's stomach contents:

*'I cut open its intestines. ... The stomach contents appeared to be interesting. We were familiar with a Killer Whale that was dissected by Eschricht, which contained 15 seals and 13 porpoises. During the dissection we already speculated about the f45,- Government bounty that they would get for so many fins. However, what we found was a bit disappointing. The stomach, which is usually described as quite a big sack divided into different compartments, appeared to be shrivelled up and contained only a bucketful of prey. In these strong acid-smelling fragments the mid-section of a ray was found along with two ribcages, the breastbone, pectoral fins and shoulder blades of two Harbour Porpoises. Apparently these fragments were from a female porpoise, because I also discovered two uteruses and two embryos, the heads of which were missing and the pectoral fins were halfway digested. However, the rest of their bodies (behind the dorsal fin) were in perfect condition.'*

## A marvellous catch

In May 1926 a Killer Whale was brought in at the Leuvehaven from Rotterdam. The animal was found floating around on the North Sea with a harpoon in its body. The newspaper of Rotterdam wrote the following:

### **A Whale was caught!**

*A brave deed and a fine story*

*Captain Langbroek told about his marvellous catch.*

*It was not a piece of cake, not at all. He was very proud; however he tried to tell the story as simple as possible. A complacent smile showed on his, by rough winds, tanned cheeks, in which the quid felt at ease.*

*- it is, so he said, an extraordinary whale species, which does not occur very often. I had hoped that, in calm water, we could have revived the whale with a few hofmansdruppels – we also let him smell ammonia water, tickled him under his chin, and put warm water bottles on his stomach, but he did not breathe anymore. Because the zoo does not have any whales, I would have liked bringing him there.*

*- You could have borrowed the tractor of the newspaper, we said.*

*- Well look at that. But returning to my beautiful animal, it is a whopper. He only eats seals; you do not have to ask what kind of stomach it has. It can kill a walrus of a hundred kilo with one bite. And after eating ten of them, he is still starving.*

*Its stupendous captain.*

*Yes and that is not all. He has forty-four teeth and molars.*

*I have counted them my self – and all of them are real ivory. You can just cut handles of a walking stick and cigar-holders out of them.*

*The backbone is also ivory. You don't have to ask what kind of money can be made out of it.*

*And the captain looked as he just had won a hundred and thousand in the lottery.*

That these Killer Whales ate Harbour Porpoises is an interesting detail. Groups of Killer Whales usually tend to specialize in some kind of prey in different areas, for example on Salmon or Herring, or they will patrol around haul out places of seals, sea lions or penguins. There are also groups that concentrate on the migrations of whales.

In the meantime there were no reports of swimming Killer Whales in our area, only reports of the strandings of living animals. This makes the visit of two fishermen from Texel, Cor Vlaming and his companion from the TX 49, to Ingvar Kristensen, the managing director of the Zoological Station in Den Helder in 1947, extra special. They came to ask about what kind of strange animals they had seen while fishing 'outside the stones' about 40km NNW of Texel. On August 4 of that year two whales had swum past, with high dorsal fins and oval-shaped white eyes. The animals somersaulted repeatedly and showed their heads, backs and sometimes their tails above the water. The fishermen's description of the animals left no doubt that they were Killer Whales.

1960-present • After 1960 three more Killer Whales were found: the first one in July 1961 on Goeree-Overflakkee, the second one on October 10, 1963, at Texel and the last one (to date) on October 18, 1963, near Noordwijk aan Zee. The bronchia of the first whale were stuffed with bird feathers, as if it had inhaled a (possibly dead) bird.

This brings us to a period of 40 years without a reliable sighting of a Killer Whale in the Southern North Sea. Actually, the Killer Whale disappeared at the same time as the Bottlenose Dolphin and the Harbour Porpoise, although the Killer Whale was already much more uncommon than the other two.

The most recent strandings in the Southern North Sea often took place in the Wadden area, a region with less constant observations than along the Dutch coast. This, plus the fact that many cadavers were in an advanced state of decomposition at the moment they stranded, suggests that most of these animals washed in from the north. Something comparable was observed with the Minke Whale.



### Where and when can Killer Whales be seen?

**The Killer Whale can be seen in the Northern North Sea, around the Orkney and Shetland Islands, but the animal is sometimes also common in the Skagerrak and along the Norwegian coast. Further south in the North Sea and along the eastern part of the English Channel sightings are extremely rare. West of the British Isles Killer Whales can be seen in every month of the year, but especially during late summer (July and August). The Killer Whale is mostly a winter guest between Shetland and Norway (November till March) and large groups are occasionally seen near fishing boats, nibbling on discarded fish and offal.**



