

Whale Watching Guidelines for Southern BC & Washington



Report Sightings, Strandings and Harassment to:
Lifeforce Whale and Dolphin Hotline
(604) 669-4673 or 649-5258
Lifeforce Standing by on VHF 16 & CB 3
 Report Guideline Violations and Strandings to:
 Department of Fisheries and Oceans (BC)
1-800-465-4336
 National Marine Fisheries Service (WA)
1-800-853-1964

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Regulatory Measures

Under the **Canadian Marine Mammal Regulations** the disturbance of whales is strictly prohibited. Summary convictions carry a fine of up to \$100,000, a prison term not exceeding 12 months, or both. Indictable convictions carry fines up to \$500,000, prison terms of up to 24 months, or both. Under the **US Marine Mammal Protection Act** it is illegal to disturb or harass marine mammals. Penalties include a civil penalty of up to \$10,000 for each violation or criminal prosecution with a fine of up to \$20,000, or imprisonment for up to one year, or both.

Diving or swimming constitutes an approach and falls under the same guidelines and regulations. All water craft and boating activities are subject to these regulatory measures.

Species Specific Guidelines

The **Whale Watching Guidelines** apply to all species such as Humpback whales, Gray whales, Minke whales, Orcas, Dall's porpoises, Harbour porpoises, sea lions, seals and sea birds. The following are species specific guidelines that must also be followed:

Dall's and Harbour porpoises behave differently. **Harbour porpoises** will avoid boat traffic and should be left alone except if you shut off your engine and watch. **Dall's porpoises** may ride the bow. If they do so, drive at a slow speed in a straight line and stay parallel to them. If not, stop and watch them "slow roll" at the surface in a feeding pattern or race about in chase play. Never try to force bow riding and drive through them.

Seals and sea lions should be approached slowly with a wide arc of 100 metres/yards. If they become agitated with "heads-up" posture and increased vocalizations, you should back off slowly. Take extreme caution to avoid scaring seals into the water and creating orphaned pups abruptly separated from their mothers. **Seal pups** who are resting on the shore are often mistaken as injured or abandoned. Older pups may be left alone for brief periods when mom is nearby fishing. If people approach too closely to **nesting seabirds** the adult may leave the nest, causing the chicks and eggs to be preyed upon, crushed or trampled. Stay at least 200 metres/yards from rookeries and refuges.

Species Commonly Seen in Southern BC & Washington*

HARBOUR/COMMON SEAL
 males 2m, females 1.7m
 newborn .98m

DALL'S PORPOISE
 males 2.36m, females 2.2m
 newborn 1m

NORTHERN (STELLER) SEA LION
 males 3.25m, females 2.73m
 newborn 1m

CALIFORNIA SEA LION
 males 2.5m, females 2m
 newborn .74m

ORCA / KILLER WHALE
 males 9m, females 7.7m
 newborn 2.4m

HARBOUR PORPOISE
 males 1.8m
 females 1.6m
 newborn .8m

PACIFIC WHITE-SIDED DOLPHIN
 males 2.25m, females 2.36m
 newborn .92m

MINKE WHALE
 males & females 9.2m
 newborn 2.8m

GRAY WHALE
 males 14m, females 15m,
 newborn 4.6m

HUMPBACK WHALE
 males 15m, females 16m,
 newborn 5m

*maximum known lengths

Illustrations courtesy of Pieter Folkens

Natural History of Species Commonly Seen

There are more than 17 species of whales, dolphins and porpoises to be seen off BC and Washington. They belong to a group called cetaceans. There are seven cetaceans and three pinniped species commonly seen. The word "whale" is used when talking about cetaceans in general.

PINNIPEDS - PHOCIDS (Seals undulates on belly dragging hind flippers. Foreflippers are covered with hair. They do not have ear flaps.)

HARBOUR SEAL - *Phoca vitulina*

Their range is near shore generally north of 35 N. Maximum weights are about 100 kg for males and 80 kg for females. Extreme cases are 200 kg and 100 kg respectively. Newborns are about 10 kg. Their life span is approx. 40 years.

PINNIPEDS - OTARIIDS (Sea lions walk on four flippers. Foreflippers are hairless and leathery. They have ear flaps.)

CALIFORNIA SEA LION - *Zalophus californianus*

Their range is near shore generally north of 35 N and well south of 40 N. Maximum weights are 300kg for males and 100 kg for females. Newborns are 6 kg. Their life span is approx. 17 years.

NORTHERN (STELLER) SEA LION - *Eumetopias jubatus*

Their range is generally well north of 35 N. Maximum weights are 1000 kg for males and 300 kg for females. Newborns are about 20 kg. Their life span is approx. 23 years.

ODONTOCETES (Toothed whales have teeth to eat mainly fish and squid. Some orcas feed on marine mammals. Odontocetes/orcas are members of the dolphin family.)

HARBOUR PORPOISE - *Phocoena phocoena*

They are often seen in shallow BC inshore waters. Maximum weight is 90 kg. Newborns are 6 - 10 kg. Their life span may be approx. 13 years.

DALL'S PORPOISE - *Phocoenoides dalli*

They are seen year-round in coastal and offshore waters along the BC coast. Maximum weight is 150 kg. Newborns are 25 kg. Their life span may be approx. 15 years.

PACIFIC WHITE-SIDED DOLPHIN - *Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*

They stay mainly offshore but large groups have been seen in Georgia, Johnstone and Queen Charlotte Straits. Maximum weight is 140 kg. Newborns are 15 kg. Their life span may be approx. 30 years.

ORCA / KILLER WHALE - *Orcinus orca*

Different races of orcas can be found from northern Vancouver Island to Haro Strait and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Maximum weight is 8200 kg for males and 5500 kg for females. Newborns are approximately 200 kg. Lifespan is at least 50 years for males and over 80 years for females.

MYSTICETES (Baleen whales have no teeth and use hundreds of long, stiff strips of baleen hanging down from their upper jaws to strain mainly small fish and krill. There are three families of baleen whales. Each family has different eating behaviours. Two are listed below and the third is Balaenidae or "bucket mouth" whales such as the Northern right whale.)

MINKE WHALE - *Balaenoptera acutorostrata (Balaenopteridae/rorquals)*

They can be seen off BC throughout the year but most often in the summer. Maximum weight is 9000 kg. Newborns are 450 kg. Their life span is approx. 50 years.

GRAY WHALE - *Eschrichtius robustus (Eschrichtiidae - a "sucker" feeder)*

They can be seen off BC between November and January heading south and in March and April heading north. Maximum weight is 34,000 kg. Newborns are 700 - 1200 kg. Their life span may be approx. 70 years.

HUMPBACK WHALE - *Megaptera novaeangliae (Rorquals - "gulpers")*

Humpbacks seen off BC spend their winters off Hawaii or Baja, Mexico. In early spring they head north to inlets off southeast Alaska and the Bering and southern Chukchi Seas. Maximum weight is 45,000 kg. Newborns are 1300 kg. Their life span may be approx. 77 years.

Note: The above information is general. Exact information about various species may vary and/or is still unknown.

Whale Watching Guidelines

Single Vessel

- **You should not approach any whales, dolphins or porpoises within 100 metres/yards.** In Marine Protected Areas, such as the Robson Bight Ecological Reserve boats **are not** allowed. Check nautical charts for the location of various protected areas.
- **Slowly approach and depart parallel from the side,** not from the front or from the rear. Do not position yourself in their path. Do not approach a line or group of resting whales. Do not separate or chase any group or individual.
- **Travel parallel and in the same direction.** Maintain a speed of two to four knots or the same speed as the slowest ones. **Do not alter your speed or change course abruptly.**
- **Keep noise levels down** - no horns, whistles, sonar, depth sounders, fish finders, shouting or racing of motors. If it is safe to do so, turn off your engine or put it in neutral. The whales might approach the vessel. When a vessel is upwind minimize engine exhaust emissions by shutting down engine(s).
- **If your vessel is unexpectedly within 100 metres/yards of the whales** you should stop and shut off engine(s) and wait for them to pass.
- **Limit your time spent to less than 30 minutes** when within 100-200 metres/yards.

DO NOT APPROACH ANY MARINE WILDLIFE WITH NEWBORNS DO NOT ATTEMPT TO TOUCH, FEED OR SWIM WITH WILDLIFE

Disruption of marine mammals' normal behaviour patterns are shown by actions such as:

- **Escape tactics** which could include a rapid change in direction or speed, prolonged diving, underwater course changes or underwater exhalations.
- **Evasive swimming patterns** which could include rapid swimming at surface.
- **Attempts by whales to protect themselves and their young** which could include tail swishing, tail fluke and pectoral slaps, breaches and other protective movements.

To report incidents of harassment, record the violator's vessel name and ID number, date, time and location. Take photographs and/or video if possible. Report it to the agencies listed on front.

More than One Vessel Aircraft

- In addition to the single vessel guidelines, **avoid any position that would result in encircling the whale(s). When parallel stay in a line on one side.**
- **Minimize the time spent and the number of vessels with any one group of whales.** Limit time to less than 30 minutes within 100 - 200 metres/yards and then move out to allow other vessels access to good viewing positions. Commercial operators should coordinate activities by maintaining contact with other operators. Charter owners should ensure that their operators are aware of all existing guidelines and how to contact all other operators.

Aircraft

- **Limit approaches to 305 metres/1000 feet above the water over the whales.** Do not hover over, circle around or "buzz" whales.
- **Landing near whales can endanger human and animal life if you are not aware of their behaviour.** You must first observe their travel patterns to be able to ensure that you will be more than 300 metres/yards from the whales for landing or take-off.

Cruiseships

- **Follow the previous rules but maintain a minimum distance of 300 metres/yards.**
- **Avoid turning or the use of bowthrusters.**

IN ADDITION, EVERYONE SHOULD BE SENSITIVE TO WHALES AND LAND BASED WHALE WATCHERS AND MAINTAIN AT LEAST A 200 METRES/YARDS SEAWARD POSITION FROM THE WHALES.

Respect Nature - Let Them Be

Habitat loss, pollution, global climate changes, overfishing, net entrapment, marine debris, whaling, aquarium captures and invasive experiments are some of the threats which continue to face marine life. Human survival is also at risk because all life on earth is dependent on healthy ecosystems. This whale card is part of Lifeforce's **Lifewatch Boater Awareness Program**. Lifeforce conducts several **Marine Life Programs** to protect people, marine wildlife and ecosystems.

For further information contact:

Lifeforce Foundation

(604) 649-5258

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