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**SPECIES FACT SHEET –**

# **False Killer Whale**

## ***(Pseudorca crassidens)***

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*Photo © Robin W. Baird*

**Measurements****Length**

Newborn: 1.60-1.90 m

Full grown: 4.5 – 6.1 m

**Weight**

Newborn: 80 kg

Full grown: 1,200-2,000 kg

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**Identification*****At Sea***

Almost entirely black with a slender body. Small and slender tapered head with a rounded snout and no beak. Dorsal fin is fairly erect, recurved at the top, and placed around the centre of the back. In mature animals, the fin appears relatively small in relation to long back (compared with similar but smaller melon-headed whale).

***On Land***

Snout projects beyond extremity of jaw. Skull has large conical teeth, but smaller and more circular than those of the killer whale. Total tooth count: 7-11 in upper jaw and 8-12 in lower jaw. Flippers have characteristic hump on leading edge.

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**Description*****Head***

It has a rounded head with an underslung jaw. The melon protrudes further over the lower jaw in males.

***Body, Fin & Markings***

All black in colour with a long slender body, there may be a blaze of grey known as the throat patch or throat chevron on the belly between the flippers. The flippers are black and narrow, about 1/10 of body length, with a distinct broad hump near the middle of the flipper, creating an elbow appearance. The dorsal fin is tall (up to 40 cm) and recurved, located around the middle of the back. The eye stripe and blowhole stripe giving a bridled appearance, typical of delphinids, are present. Males may have accessory mammary grooves, so determining sex can be a challenge. The tail flukes are relatively slender with a median notch.

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## Distribution

### ***Global Distribution***

They have a worldwide distribution. They are mainly found in deep tropical and warm temperate offshore waters, and rarely north of 50°N. In the North Atlantic, the species occurs north to Maryland (USA) in the west, and Norway and the British Isles in the east. They are rarely observed at sea due to their pelagic distribution.

### ***European Waters***

False killer whales occur only occasionally north of the Bay of Biscay, mainly as strandings around the British Isles and Ireland; a live stranding of two individuals near Ijmuiden, The Netherlands in 1935, was presumed to be part of the same mass stranding as that in Britain that year.

### ***UK & Ireland***

Most UK records are a result of large mass strandings (1927, 1934 and 1935). A handful of sightings have been recorded in the Celtic and Irish Seas, NW Ireland, NW Scotland and the North Sea. There have been five live sightings since 1976, 5-54km from land: 2 off the west coast of Scotland, 1 south of Cornwall towards the French coast, and 2 in the North Sea off NE Scotland.

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## Abundance

The species is classified as data deficient by IUCN. The abundance of false killer whale is relatively low, although it increases in lower latitudes. There are currently no population estimates within the Atlantic.

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## Habitat

False killer whales are found primarily in deep (>500 m) offshore waters; however, some populations in Hawaii, Costa Rica and Japan have been reported in shallower waters of c. 200m depth. There have been reports of migration into cooler, northern waters.

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## Diet

They feed primarily on squid (*Berryteuthis* and *Gonatopsis* in north-east Pacific, *Thysanoteuthis*, *Argonauta* in central east Atlantic) and large fish (e.g. *Seriola*, *Thunnus*, *Sarda*). False killer whales have been known to prey on dolphins and there are reports of them attacking sperm whales.

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## Behaviour

Mass strandings and observations at sea suggest that they can form large herds of c. 300 individuals or more, although groups of 5-60 are more typical. Groups can be tightly knit, of mixed age and sex. They are fast (up to 55 km/h) and manoeuvrable swimmers which may breach clear of the water. They are known to bow-ride vessels and often associate with other dolphin species. They communicate through whistles and clicks, able to distinguish between complex and simple vocalisations. Echolocation signals from wild animals suggest that prey can be detected up to 210 metres range.

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## Life History

Females are spontaneous ovulators with no obvious calving peak. The gestation period is c. 15.5 months with a lactation period of 18-24 months. Sexual maturity is reached at c. 8-12 years for females and 11-18 years for males, and the calving interval is up to 7 years. Average longevity is estimated at 30-40 years, with the oldest recorded female being 63 years and oldest male 58 years.

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## Conservation Threats

False killer whales have been actively hunted off Japan and from St Vincent, West Indies in the 1970s, for food and oil. Over 900 individuals were killed off Iki Island, Japan, between 1965 and 1980 to reduce predation of fish from longline and other hook & line fisheries. Such kills can have a substantial effect on population structure. Indirect impacts include bycatch in longline, driftnet and purse seine fisheries, which may be unsustainable in some regions. There have been some live captures, mostly in the US and Japan. Specimens have shown high levels of PCBs in their blubber and liver, which suggests that immunosuppression or impacts on reproduction is affecting some populations. The species is legally protected in European, British and Irish waters.

**IUCN status:** Data Deficient.

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