Whale Watching Guidelines for Southern BC & Washington*

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*

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

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

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

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

MINKE WHALE
males & females 9.2m newborn 2.8m

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MINKE WHALE
males & females 9.2m newborn 2.8m

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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

*maximum known lengths

Illustrations courtesy of Pieter Folkens

*maximum known lengths
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 cetacean 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.)
- **Northern (Steller) Seal - 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.
- **California Sea Lion - Zalophus californianus**
  - 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.
- **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 140 kg. Newborns are 15 kg. Their life span may be approx. 30 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. 30 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 start off coast inshore waters. Maximum weight is 34,000 kg. Newborns are 700 kg. Their life span may be approx. 17 years.

**Baleen Whales**
(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**
  - They can be seen off BC throughout the year but most often in the summer. Maximum weight is 9000 kg. Newborns are 150 kg. Their life span is approx. 30 years.
- **Gray Whale - Eschrichtius robustus**
  - 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**
  - Humpbacks are often 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.

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**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 slapping, 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.

**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:

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