

Orcas in Wellington



What are orcas?

Orcas are also known as killer whales, but are actually the largest member of the dolphin family. They get the name 'killer' whale from their consumption of other marine mammals. They are easily identified by their distinctive black and white markings and tall dorsal fins. They can grow up to 9 m in length, with male dorsal fins reaching higher than a metre. Orcas have a wide-ranging diet including fish, squid, sharks and other marine mammals. Disturbance and strike by vessels and pollution via bioaccumulation (the accumulation of toxins through the food chain) are the largest threats to these animals. Orcas can often be seen spyhopping (where they float vertically with their head out of the water to view their surroundings), breaching, and slapping their tails and flippers on the surface of the water.

While they are found all throughout the world, New Zealand is home to an estimated 150-200 individuals, which travel long distances throughout the country's coastal waters. We are beginning to understand that there are different types of orca throughout the world, and work on defining these types is currently underway. Even within New Zealand it has been proposed that there are three different types, based on observations of different food preferences.



Why do they visit Wellington Harbour?

Pods of orcas are known to venture into Wellington Harbour throughout Spring and Summer looking for a unique food source (orcas in other parts of the world aren't known to do this), but it is rare for them to stick around. They dig the muddy sea bottom for stingrays and are often seen herding them into shallow water around Oriental Parade, Frank Kitts Park and The Lagoon. Passers-by have even watched as one stingray made a frantic leap for safety onto nearby rocks, later to be assisted back into the water by a nearby observer. Orcas are also often seen exploring the northern end of the harbour and the Kapiti Coast.

Orca whales spyhopping in the Ross Sea, Antarctica.

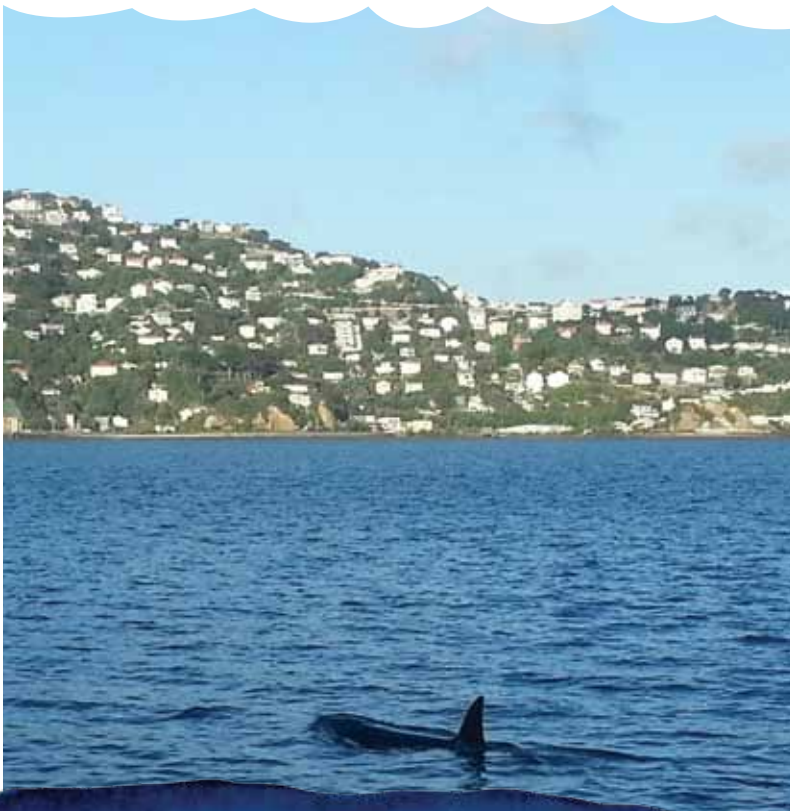


How to stay safe around orcas

Orcas are large predators. Despite the fact there are no records of deliberate attacks on humans in the wild, it is recommended that you show respect around these animals and keep a safe distance. Some general rules to follow are:

- Operate your boat slowly and quietly at 'no wake' speed.
- Manoeuvre your boat sensitively near all whales and dolphins. Do not obstruct their path, cut through a group or separate mothers from calves.
- Avoid sudden noises that could startle the animals.
- Co-operate with others so everyone can see the animals without putting them at risk.
- Maintain a distance of 50 m.

One of a small pod of orca swims near Evans Bay, Wellington, 11 January 2013. *Photo: Ewan Delany*



How you can help orcas

Keep their environment clean by carefully disposing of any rubbish appropriately—plastic waste can be particularly hazardous when discarded near waterways or beaches.

Please report sightings of orcas to the 0800 DOC HOTline (0800 362 468).

These are always of interest and help increase our knowledge of marine mammal distribution and movement around New Zealand. Useful information includes species/description, location, number of individuals, estimated sizes, what they appeared to be doing and the direction in which they were headed.

Legislation protecting marine mammals

Orcas are fully protected under the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978 – this act provides for the conservation, protection and management of marine mammals. It is an offence to harass or disturb orcas, as well as other marine mammals.

Offences carry penalties of up to 6 months imprisonment or fines up to \$250,000, and further fines of up to \$10,000 for every marine mammal in respect of which the offence is committed.

Refer to the Marine Mammals Protection Regulations 1992 for a complete list of conditions prescribing behaviour around marine mammals.

Visit: www.legislation.govt.nz.

More information at www.doc.govt.nz

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