

Guide to the identification of the most common marine mammals in the southern region of the Gulf of California

*ODONTOCETES (dolphins, sperm and beaked whales)

*Dolphins

The identification of different dolphin species is based on the patterns of stripes, spots, body coloration and, in some cases, dorsal fin shape.

-Common/striped dolphins: Common dolphins have a black stripe from the pectoral fin up to the bottom of the lower mandible; the sides have the shape of an "eight" with cream and white coloration. Striped dolphins have the same pattern, except the black stripe extends to the eye instead of under the jaw; they also have a second black stripe from the eye that passes down each side to the inferior part of the belly.



-Rough-toothed dolphins: Can be identified relatively easy. In comparison with common and striped dolphins, the head is more pointed, and it is greyish without such contrasting changes in tone.

-Spinner dolphins: One of the most stylized species, with long and thin beaks and bodies. The principal characteristic is the dorsal fin, which is triangular, large, straight, and in some adults, it can curve forward. Its coloration is grey without spots or prominent lines.

-Bottlenose dolphins: Medium sized and robust, with a short and well-defined beak. The pattern is generally dark grey on the dorsal surface and light grey on the ventral surface. They are the most common in this region.

-Risso's dolphin: Large and robust with a rounded head. The beak is poorly defined. The coloration is characteristic and goes from dark grey to near-white, with a large amount of white scars (lines) on the body.



Risso's dolphin: characteristic body and head

*Dolphins known as "Blackfish"

The term "blackfish" refers to the following odontocetes: orcas, false killer whales, melon-headed whales, short-finned pilot whales, and pygmy killer whales.

-Orcas: Highly differentiable among dolphins. Large with black and white coloration. The dorsal fin is large and can be close to 2m in adult males. On the head, they have a white spot behind each eye.

-False killer whales: Elongated and not very robust body. Oval-shaped head and short beak. The inner edges of the pectoral fins are "S-shaped." Dark grey in coloration.

-Short-finned pilot whales: Second largest in this group, next to the orca. Has a globe-shaped head and a poorly-defined mouth. Predominantly black or dark grey, with the exception of a light spot behind the dorsal fin. Characteristic dorsal fin angles backwards.



Photo: DPIPWE



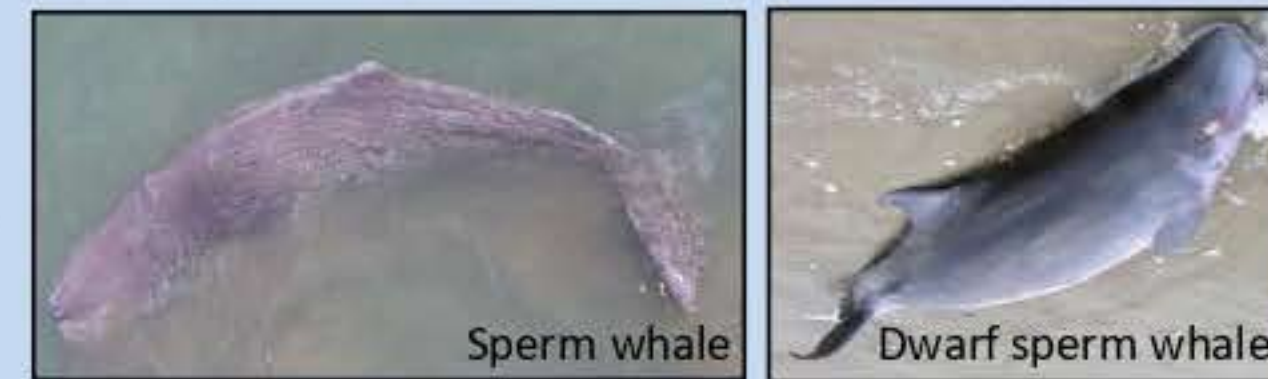
Photo: Hawaii Pacific University

Pilot whale

*Sperm whales

-Sperm whales: The largest odontocete. The body is compressed laterally and the head represents 1/4 to 1/3 of the body. The respiratory orifice is "S-shaped" and on the left anterior side. Black or dark brown in coloration with white areas around the beak and belly. The skin appears rough.

-Dwarf/Pygmy sperm whales: Small size with a flat face. The coloration is from dark grey on the dorsal surface to white on the ventral surface with dark coloration on both sides of the head like the "gills" of a shark. The dorsal fin of the dwarf sperm whale is larger than that of the pygmy sperm whale, and they have folds on the throat that are absent in the pygmy sperm whale. Both species have thin and sharp teeth.



Sperm whale

Dwarf sperm whale

*Beaked whales

These are the least known odontocetes and are rarely found stranded. They are of large size with a pronounced mouth. Usually the teeth protrude from the jaw. The coloration is generally dark brown to black and white spots, lighter sides, scars, etc., can be present. The most known species in this region include: **Baird's, Pygmy, and Cuvier's beaked whales.**



Cuvier's Beaked Whale. Photo: Alexandros Frantzis



Photo: otlibrary.com

Photo: Arbelo et al. (2012)

Blainville's beaked whale, characteristic body and head

***MYSTICETES (large whales)**

***Whales**

Present baleen instead of teeth. They are the largest marine mammals.

-Bryde's whale: Small with an elongated body that is not robust. Coloration greatly varies, but they are commonly blueish-black on the dorsal and anterior surfaces and whitish-yellow on the ventral surface. Prominent dorsal fin. Three crests present on the rostrum.

-Humpback whales: Characteristic long, and generally white, pectoral fins. More robust body compared to most other whales. Black on the dorsal surface, while the ventral surface can be black to white. The ventral surface of the tail can also be white.



-Fin whales: The second largest species of whale, next to the blue whale. Thin and elongated body with a large dorsal fin. Coloration is greyish-black on the dorsal surface, lightening towards the sides, and whitish on the ventral surface. They have a characteristic asymmetric pigmentation on the lower jaw and baleen; they present a dark coloration on the left side and a lighter or white coloration on the right side.

-Grey whales: The body is tapered and more robust compared to other whales. Poorly developed dorsal fin; has a small hump in place of a dorsal fin. Have small bumps or humps along the face and body. Variable coloration from light grey to black with whitish spots.



Photo: Mark Perry

Photo: Suffolk Free Press

Head of a fin whale; the light lip and baleen, characteristic of the species, can be observed on the right side



Grey whale

***PINNIPEDS (sea lions and seals)**

A group of carnivores conformed by sea lions and seals. In comparison with cetaceans, the land is an important component of their lives.

-California sea lion: Within the pinnipeds, this species most frequently beaches within the region. Present pinna (external ear flaps). Juvenile and adult females are light brown. Subadult and adult males are darker, larger, have a bump on the head (sagittal crest), and have thick necks.

-Guadalupe fur seals: Have a more noticeable and horizontally-oriented pinna compared to California sea lions. The fur is light greyish to dark; the mouth is pointed. The fur is more remarkable compared to the previous species. Both species can move their hind limbs forward and are capable of using them to walk.

-Northern elephant seals: Pinna are absent, the rostrum is flatter, and the posterior extremities are completely oriented caudally. Coloration is light brown without spots. Subadult and adult males are large and have a trunk characteristic of the species.

-Harbor seals: Smaller than elephant seals. However, like elephant seals, the pinna are absent, the rostrum is flatter, and the posterior extremities are completely oriented caudally. Variable coloration from light to dark brown and they usually present spots along their bodies.



California sea lion



Guadalupe fur seal



Elephant seal



Harbor seal

Bryde's whale: the characteristic rostral crests are notable



Humpback whale. Photo: Craig Connell

-Blue whale: The largest animal that has ever existed. Very small dorsal fin. Coloration is greyish with small light spots and is whitish throughout the body, with the exception of the cephalic region.



Blue whale. Photo: Matt and Claire Honeyfield



Head of a blue whale. Photo: NZ Conservation Department

