



MARINE EXCHANGE
OF PUGET SOUND



UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Puget Sound

Cetacean Guide

For Mariners



Endorsed by:



Washington Department of
FISH & WILDLIFE



CETACEANS IN THE PUGET SOUND

Within the waters of the Puget Sound, large cetaceans are stewarded by numerous organizations, collectives, and individuals, each with a unique history. Today, they coexist alongside a myriad of recreational and commercial vessels traversing the waterway.

Cetaceans encompass a diverse array of species, with whales such as gray, blue, humpback, and killer whales (though technically oceanic dolphins) being the most commonly recognized. Additionally, dolphins and porpoises are distinct members of the cetacean family.

Protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, and further safeguarded by special measures in Washington, these animals are integral to the marine ecosystem.

Given the shared goal of both vessel operators and the public to minimize impact and maintain safe distances, the challenge lies in achieving these objectives while also managing crucial transits. This guide seeks to provide strategies for navigating effectively while prioritizing the protection of both vessel and marine life.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?



Call us at the Marine Exchange of Puget Sound for 24/7 information on sightings, vessel location and current slowdowns.

206-443-3830

SEE A CETACEAN?



REPORT IT

Identify species, number of cetaceans, direction of travel, and any observed behaviors

- Be ready to provide your vessel's name and location
- Report on the WRAS² app, the Orca Network website, or call the Cetacean Desk¹ at (206) 217-6722 or designated VTS VHF Chs. 5A & 14



WATCH IT

MAINTAIN DISTANCE

- Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKW) : 400 yards (effective until January 1, 2025 then extends to 1,000 yards)
- Other Killer Whales: 200 yards
- Other cetaceans: 100 yards

REDUCE SPEED (Washington & Trans-Boundary)

- SRKW: Disengage engines within 300 yd and turn off anti-fouling systems
- All Cetaceans: Reduce speeds to under 7 kt when within 1/2 nm
- Slowdown Zone: Follow slowdown guidelines and call MAREXPS if you have questions

For more information on Cetacean regulations & guidelines visit www.bewhalewise.org.



STAY AWARE

- Be vigilant for blows, gathering of birds, and other indicators of cetacean presence
- Sign up for WRAS² to get text alerts

MORE INFORMATION

THE CETACEAN DESK¹ is a pilot program, established under the 2022 C.G. Authorization Act, embedded within the Puget Sound Vessel Traffic Service (VTS). Its primary objective is to address and mitigate the adverse effects of vessel traffic on endangered and threatened large cetacean species across key areas including Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the U.S. portion of the Salish Sea. The program coordinates with its Canadian Marine Mammal Desk counterpart and aims to leverage pre-existing data collection methods for ensuring precise and timely sighting information reaches vessel operators.

WRAS² (Whale Report Alert System/Whale Report App), managed by Ocean Wise, is an alert system that disseminates crucial information regarding whale presence to large commercial vessels via text messages and app alerts. This system collects the following data from multiple sources:

- Sightings submitted through the Whale Report App
- Acartia.io whale sightings validated by Orca Network staff (excluding Orca Sound data)
- Sightings reported to the Cetacean Desk Marine Mammal Desk

Please visit ocean.org/whales/wras/ or contact WRAS@ocean.org to sign up for WRAS. WRAS access is restricted to commercial mariners, marine mammal observers, government agencies, and Tribal and First Nation groups.

ACARTIA.IO (acartia.io/about) is a data cooperative for sharing marine animal locations within the Salish Sea. Acartia.io aggregates whale sightings from multiple reporting platforms including: Beam Reach, Conserve.io (Whale Alert App), Orcasound, Orca Network.

CETACEAN IDENTIFICATION

Below are some cetaceans that you may encounter in Washington or trans-boundary waters. All are safeguarded under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and/or the Endangered Species Act. Learn more about these animals on www.fisheries.noaa.gov/find-species.

For more information about cetacean identification and navigational strategies around them, take the “Whales in our Waters” course at echolearn.portvancouver.com.

KILLER WHALE, ORCA

Black top, white undersides & patches near the eyes
gray or white saddle patch behind the dorsal fin



HUMPBACK WHALE

Primarily black, tails up to 18 feet wide with serrated trailing edges and pointed at the tips



GRAY WHALE

Mottled gray body, bumpy ridges on dorsal side, paddle-shaped, pectoral flippers, no dorsal fin



MINKE WHALE

Small, dark body, pale chevron on back, white underside, tall sickle-shaped dorsal fin 2/3 down the back



FIN WHALE

Streamlined bodies, V-shaped heads, hooked dorsal fin about two-thirds of the way back on the body



REPORT AN ISSUE

Harassment or Disturbance of Marine Animals

- NOAA Enforcement (800) 853-1964
- WDFW Enforcement (877) 933-9847
- Be Whale Wise Violation Report Form
- Coast Guard VHF Ch.16

Injuries/Strikes, Entanglements, or Strandings

- NOAA Stranding (866) 767-6114
- NOAA Entanglement (877) 767-9425
- Dolphin & Whale 911 app
- Coast Guard VHF Ch. 16

PROTECTIVE MEASURES

Numerous organizations and entities are actively engaged in safeguarding cetaceans in the Puget Sound. In early 2024 the U.S. Coast Guard launched the Cetacean Desk¹, a pilot program which operates within the Puget Sound Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) to address vessel traffic impacts on these endangered and threatened animals.

Additionally, several organizations have developed whale reporting, tracking, and alerting apps to assist mariners and scientists in locating cetaceans in the water. Various voluntary slowdown programs have also been implemented to reduce vessel speeds, thereby minimizing underwater noise. See Quiet Sound and Enhancing Cetacean and Observation (ECHO) for more information.

It's crucial to recognize the diverse needs of different cetacean species; for instance, orcas rely on quiet underwater environments for echolocation during hunting, while larger, slower whales are more vulnerable to vessel strikes. Understanding these factors, knowing how to respond during cetacean encounters, and accessing additional information ensures compliance with regulations and contributes to the well-being of both your vessel and the marine life that shares the waters.