



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

Pilot Whales

Description

There are two species of pilot whales: long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) and short-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*). Both species are large and robust, with a dark body and bulbous head. They have a characteristic shaped dorsal fin mid-back, and as their common names imply, the two species can be distinguished primarily on the length of their pectoral fins.

Habitat and Distribution

Pilot whales are widespread and abundant from tropical to subarctic waters. Their distribution varies with current systems and prey populations.

Sounds

Pilot whales produce complex whistles, tonal sounds, and pulsed calls. Both species vocalize frequently although the calls of long-finned pilot whales are lower in frequency and have a narrower frequency range than those of short-finned pilot whales.

Feeding

Pilot whales prey primarily on squid and mackerel, although they also occasionally eat other fish as well as octopus and shrimp.

Threats

The primary threat to pilot whales is bycatch and entanglement in fishing gear, although they are also threatened by ship strikes, targeted drive fisheries, and heavy contaminant loads.

Fun Fact

Each pod of pilot whales has its own unique vocalizations which may allow members of the same pod to easily recognize and communicate with one another!



Family: Delphinidae
Population: < 1,200,000
Status: Data Deficient
Length: 13 – 24 feet
Weight: 2,900 – 5,000 lbs