



# HARBOR PORPOISE (*Phocoena phocoena*)



## DESCRIPTION

Harbor porpoises are among the smallest of all marine mammals, but are one of the most frequently seen and widely distributed of all whale, dolphin, and porpoise species. They have a small but robust body that is dark gray on the upper half and white on the bottom half, and a blunt, rounded head with grey “chinstrap.” The most distinguishable feature of harbor porpoises as they surface in a gentle, rolling motion is their short, triangular dorsal fin (dolphins have long, curved dorsal fins).

## OVERVIEW

- **Oregon Conservation Strategy Species**
- **Length:** 4.6 to 6.2 feet
- **Weight:** up to about 170 pounds, but most weigh <135 pounds
- **Lifespan:** 8-10 year average, 24 year max
- **Similar Species:** Dall’s porpoise, bottlenose dolphin
- **Key Strategy Habitats:** Nearshore

## FUN FACTS

- **Favorite Food:** Small schooling fish
- Harbor porpoises have been described as shy and elusive.
- They usually swim slowly, do not splash when surfacing for air, do not jump out of the water or approach boats to bow ride or surf in the wake.
- The name “porpoise” comes from the Latin word for pig, and harbor porpoise are sometimes called “puffing pigs” because of the sounds they make when they breathe.
- They hunt using echolocation by making various clicking and “buzzing” sounds.

## RANGE AND DISTRIBUTION

**In Oregon:** Found year-round in nearshore waters, bays, estuaries, and harbors all along the Oregon Coast.

**Everywhere Else:** Very wide range in the northern hemisphere that includes parts of the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Arctic Sea, and both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. There are different subspecies in different regions. In the Pacific Ocean, they range from Japan east to Alaska, and southward along the Pacific Coast to southern California.



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## LIFE HISTORY AND ECOLOGY

Harbor porpoises are commonly seen individually, in pairs, or in small groups of up to 8, but may occasionally aggregate in larger groups. They surface in a gentle, rolling motion about every 25 seconds during their surfacing sequences between longer dives that are usually 20 minutes or less, ignore boats, and rarely jump out of the water. They are territorial, and will patrol certain areas of their regular waters.

Harbor porpoises off the west coast of the U.S. do not migrate long distances and their movements are restricted enough that there are some genetic differences in different areas. But in other parts of the world harbor porpoises do make more extensive seasonal migrations and move south or further out to sea during the winters. Harbor porpoise off Greenland seasonally move to water over 8,000 feet deep and can dive to over 1,000 feet. But along the Oregon coast harbor porpoise are generally found in waters less than 656 feet deep and appear to be more common at shallower depths.

Females become sexually mature at 3 to 5 years old and breed annually for several years. Most breeding occurs from June to September, and pregnancies last for 10 to 11 months. Females give birth to one calf a year between May and August, and wean their calves after 7 or 8 months.

Harbor porpoises along the Oregon coast are considered to be composed of two stocks. The northern California/southern Oregon stock includes animals from Pt. Arena, California to Lincoln City, Oregon. The northern Oregon/Washington coast stock of harbor porpoise includes animals from Lincoln City, Oregon to Cape Flattery, Washington.

Predators of harbor porpoises include large sharks, orcas, and dolphins.

## DIET AND FORAGING

Harbor porpoises use echolocation to feed mainly on small schooling fish like mackerel, cod, and herring, but will also eat octopi or squid on occasion. A study off the central Oregon coast found that foraging activity near a shallow rocky reef was linked to the tidal cycle, but foraging at a deeper site with a sandy bottom was most active between sunset and sunrise and linked to the tidal cycle. The authors noted that these results are specific to the locations studied.

## HABITAT

Harbor porpoises inhabit northern temperate and subarctic coastal and offshore waters of the Northern Hemisphere. Frequently seen in bays, estuaries, fjords, and harbors. In some parts of their range harbor porpoise make extensive movements and can move well offshore to deep water for part of the year.

## CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT

**Threats:** Since they tend to stay close to shore, harbor porpoises have historically fallen victim to hunting and stranding. They are one of the most commonly found stranded cetaceans on Oregon beaches. Their biggest threat is entanglement in gill nets and other types of commercial fishing gear that can trap and drown the porpoises. Other threats include noise pollution which can cause problems with their echolocation of prey or make them avoid certain areas, pollutants entering the food web that can accumulate in these predators, and overfishing which can reduce the populations of their prey.



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