

Short-finned Pilot Whales: Always in Schools

Short-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*) are medium-sized toothed whales inhabiting oceans all over the world. They are known for their intelligence and for being one of the most social species of whale, living in close-knit groups and staying together for most of their lives. Easily confused with long-finned pilot whales, short-finned pilot whales have shorter flippers and fewer teeth.



Physical Description

Color: Short-finned pilot whales are jet black or dark gray with only a small light-gray patch on their chest.

Size: These whales can grow to 6 meters in length and 18-50 tons in weight. Males are typically much larger than females.

Head: Short-finned pilot whales have rounded, protruding heads, with males having a more pronounced forehead than females. Their mouths curve upward and give the impression that they are always smiling.

Fins: As their name implies, short-finned pilot whales have a short, low fin located on their back. They also have long, thin flippers on their sides.

Distribution

Short-finned pilot whales are found worldwide, generally in deep, off-shore, tropical and temperate waters and are thought to be fairly common in the Caribbean. They range from Virginia in the United States to northern South America and have been spotted in the West Indies in both summer and winter. Short-finned pilot whales have been reported in the waters of Mexico (Isla Mujeres, Cozumel and the Yucatan), Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Martinique, Haiti, Grenada, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad. Short-finned pilot whales are more often seen in the summer and in greater number in the northern Caribbean.



Schools of Pilot Whales off Guadeloupe

Social Structure

Pilot whales are highly social and rarely spotted alone. They usually travel and live in groups (“schools” or “pods”) of 20 to 90 individuals, although some groups may contain several hundred whales. The groups are made up of females and their offspring, and most whales stay in these groups all their lives. The groups generally travel, feed and rest together. Also because of these strong social bonds, pilot whales are more frequently found in mass strandings on land than other whale species.



Feeding and Behavior

Short-finned pilot whales prefer squid but may eat octopus and small fish when squid is unavailable.

They have only 40 to 48 teeth, far fewer than many other dolphin species. They often hunt in groups to encircle and capture their prey. While hunting, they communicate using loud sounds including echoes and clicks.

As highly social animals, short-finned pilot whales also play and rest together. They will often stick their heads straight out of the water to look around or slap the water with their tails. When resting, they position themselves side-by-side in straight lines.

Threats

Pilot whales have been historically hunted for use as meat, fertilizer and oil. Whalers in Asia have exploited the social nature of these whales by herding groups to the shore for slaughter (referred to as “drive fisheries”). One drive fishery killed more than 50,000 pilot whales in just a 10-year period.

Interesting Facts

Although they are considered whales, pilot whales are actually members of the dolphin family.

Pilot whales are known by many different names around the world. Due to their dark coloring, they are often called “blackfish”, and they are known as “bott” in Dominica and “meshouin” in St. Lucia.

Photographs courtesy of Evasion Tropicale



For more information, contact your local animal welfare organization or marine life protection and preservation society.