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Charismatic Killers

There are two whales that are in the race with bottlenose dolphins for stardom. The first is the classic sperm whale, best known for its role in *Moby Dick*. The second is the killer whale, featured in the movie 'Free Willy' and under the stage name "Shamu" at SeaWorld facilities across the nation.

At a length of 30 feet (10 m), the Killer whale is the largest member of the dolphin family. It is 2.5 times longer than a bottlenose and is about the length of our RV.

The whale is so well recognized, even the really young know part of its scientific name, *Orcinus orca*. How did this beloved creature get the name "killer?"

The killer whale is one of the fiercest predators of the oceans. Each pod has a different diet, but collectively their menu includes fish, penguins, seals, sea turtles, cephalopods, walrus and even other species of whales. They hunt alone or in pods, will swim on to a beach to catch a fleeing seal, break ice to knock off penguins or do any number of aggressive behaviors to get what they seek.

A whale raised at Marineland even taught himself how to bait gulls by spitting a dead fish that the trainer had given him at the surface of the pool and waiting down below for the bird to land on the water to get the fish.

The black top and white underside produce a coloration called counter-shading. Counter-shading enables these hunters to sneak up on prey from below or from above. The white patch that looks like an eye is actually located behind the real eye. The grey area behind the dorsal is called a saddle patch.

Killer whale dorsal fins are distinctive from other dolphins. Males have a straight, tall dorsal fin that can be 6 feet (1.8 m) in height. Females have a short, curved dorsal.

Occasionally, male dorsal fins will droop over, like dog ears. It is a myth that this only happens to captive whales. This also happens to whales in the wild, and is possibly a genetic characteristic.

Pods live in all the oceans and in both hemispheres. While most are thought to inhabit colder climates, populations do exist in temperate regions. In recent years a transient pod has been spotted several times off Padre Island, Texas.

Pods that remain in one area are referred to as resident. These pods are easier to study, hence most information is known about the behavior and diet of these animals. Pods J, K and L by Alaska have extensive studies conducted, while little is known about Texas pods. Pods consist of 2 to 55 members.

The diet of a killer whale depends greatly on if it is transient or resident. Resident pods have a primary diet of fish, not mammals.