

Editor Note: Tom Jefferson and Robin Baird contacted the Editor of *Aquatic Mammals* about a misidentification of cetacean species in the original Sahri et al. (2024) short note published in this issue. The authors immediately corrected their error and provided a revised short note, which precedes this “Errata Note.” Because there are several cetacean species that are regularly misidentified, the Editor felt it important to include accurate species details and photos with this “Errata Note.”

Errata Note: Common Cetacean Species Misidentifications

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This errata version corrects a species identification error in the original (removed by the authors and journal) publication, which incorrectly identified a group of false killer whales (*Pseudorca crassidens*) as melon-headed whales (*Peponocephala electra*). This is not the first time that a “blackfish” misidentification has occurred in print (Baird, 2010). For example, Watkins et al. (1997) reported on observations and acoustics of putative melon-headed whales, but reported sighting details (small group size and many individuals with “scratches and scars”) that are more typical of pygmy killer whales (*Feresa attenuata*). An examination of photos provided by the authors of that paper revealed that they were in fact pygmy killer whales. These misidentifications illustrate the value in having species experts confirm species identity from photographs of these species, particularly when documented in new areas or when researchers have limited prior experience with these species. All three overlap in their range(s) in tropical waters and are grossly similar in appearance (along with short-finned pilot whales [*Globicephala macrorhynchus*]), although can be discriminated based on a number of features, including body proportions (e.g., relative size of the dorsal fin in relation to overall body length), dorsal fin shape, flipper shape, and head shape (Jefferson et al., 2015). Some guidance for identifying these four species from lateral above-water photographs can be found in Yahn et al. (2019), as well as in the aerial-drone photographs presented in the images on the following page (Figure 1). Distinguishing species from aerial still images is not necessarily straightforward, however, as distortion created by the water can change the shape (e.g., making flippers with rounded tips appear pointed, or vice versa, or making a rounded head appear pointed). Body proportions, in particular the relative length of the back from the anterior insertion of the dorsal fin to the blowhole in comparison to the length of the dorsal fin base, can be used to discriminate false killer whales and short-finned pilot whales from each other and from the other two species (Figure 1), although it is important to note that body proportions can vary with age and sex (Yahn et al., 2023).

Literature Cited

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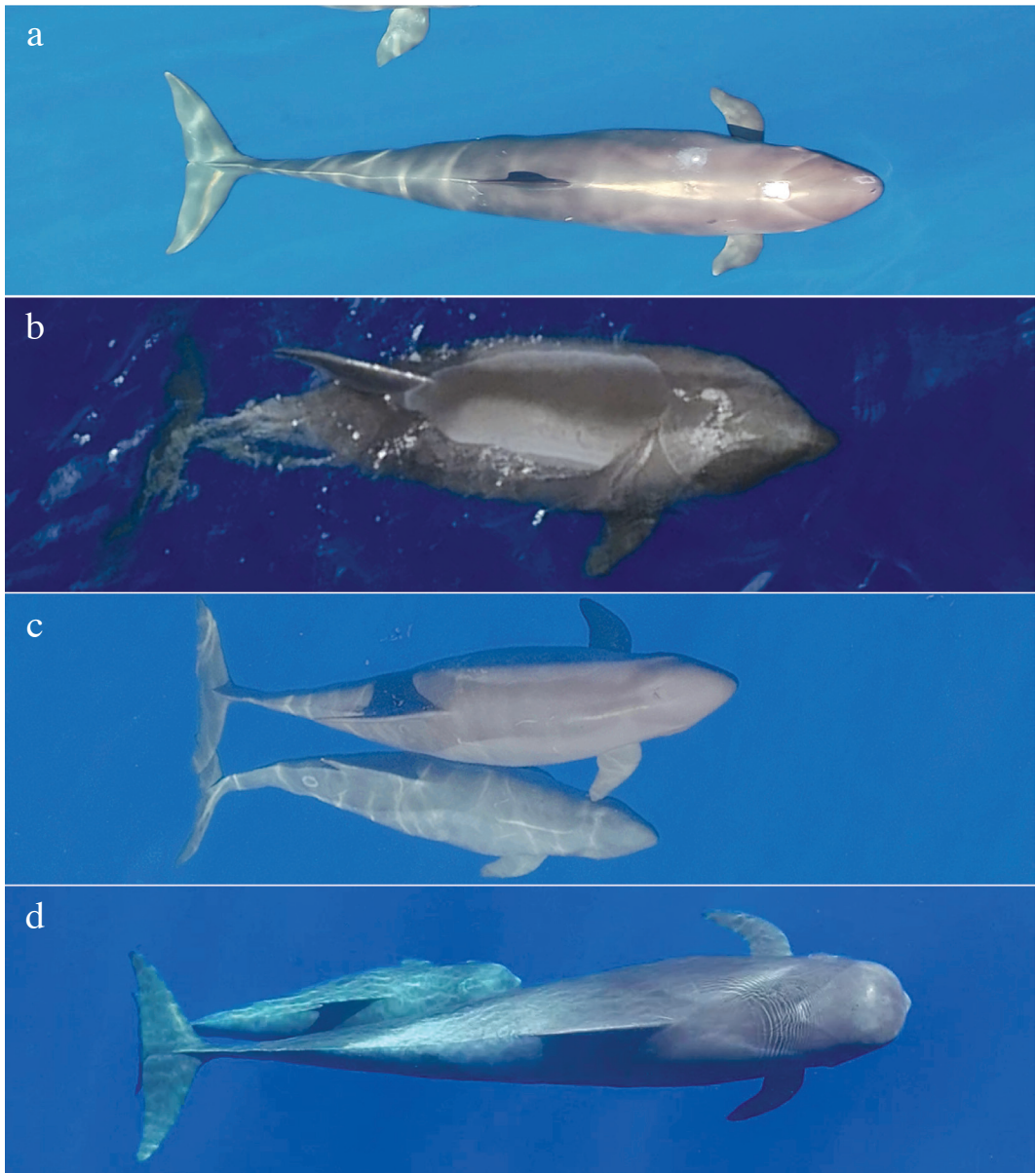


Figure 1. Aerial images taken from drone video footage of (a) false killer whales, (b) melon-headed whales, (c) pygmy killer whales, and (d) short-finned pilot whales. Even when coloration patterns are obscured, body proportions can be used to separate false killer whales and short-finned pilot whales from each other and from the other two species, with false killer whales having the largest distance (relative to length of dorsal fin base) between the blowhole and the anterior insertion of the dorsal fin, and short-finned pilot whales having the smallest distance. With good lighting conditions, distinguishing between melon-headed whales and pygmy killer whales from aerial images is relatively easy as the dark dorsal cape narrows considerably immediately in front of the dorsal fin for melon-headed whales but remains uniformly wide from dorsal to the flippers to the insertion of the dorsal fin in pygmy killer whales. The two species can normally also be distinguished by head shape when seen from above (melon-headed whales – pointed; pygmy killer whales – rounded), but head shape can appear to vary based on angle and as a result of distortion from water. We caution against using estimated lengths to discriminate among these species as juveniles of false killer whales and short-finned pilot whales overlap in size with adults of the other two species. (Photo credits: [a] False killer whale: © Pacific Whale Foundation/NMFS Permit 21321; [b] melon-headed whale: © Jim Ward; [c & d] pygmy killer whales & short-finned pilot whales: © Cascadia Research Collective/NMFS Permits 20605 and 26596)