

Pygmy Killer Whales of Hawai'i Island



HIFa005 sighted 1992-2018



HIFa006 sighted 1994-2018



HIFa009 sighted 2003-2018



HIFa249 sighted 2005-2018



HIFa253 sighted 2006-2025



HIFa395 sighted 2008-2018



HIFa398 sighted 2003-2025



HIFa538 sighted 2011-2025

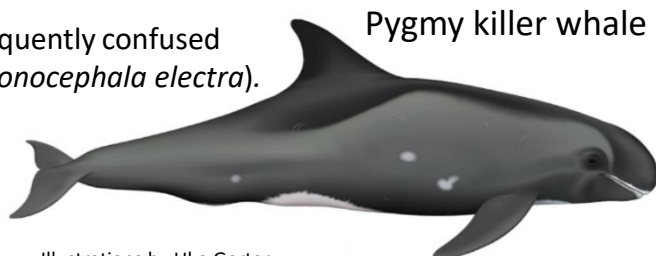
Pygmy Killer Whales of Hawai'i

Pygmy killer whales (*Feresa attenuata*) are one of the least commonly encountered dolphin species globally. Thanks to long-term research efforts, including contributions from many citizen scientists, more is known about these animals in Hawai'i than anywhere else in the world! Two small resident populations of pygmy killer whales are found in Hawai'i, one off O'ahu, Penguin Bank, and west of Lāna'i, and the other off Hawai'i Island. Groups from an open-ocean population overlap with both resident populations. Off Hawai'i Island, sightings of the resident groups have declined in recent years. Typically, 10 to 34 individuals are photographed off Hawai'i Island each year, and new individuals are still being documented.

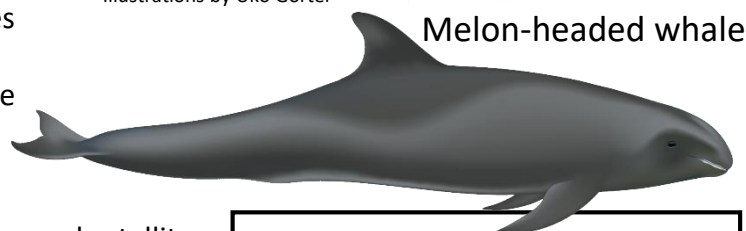
Due to their similar size and coloration, pygmy killer whales are frequently confused with other blackfish species, especially melon-headed whales (*Peponocephala electra*).

Key characteristics that identify pygmy killer whales:

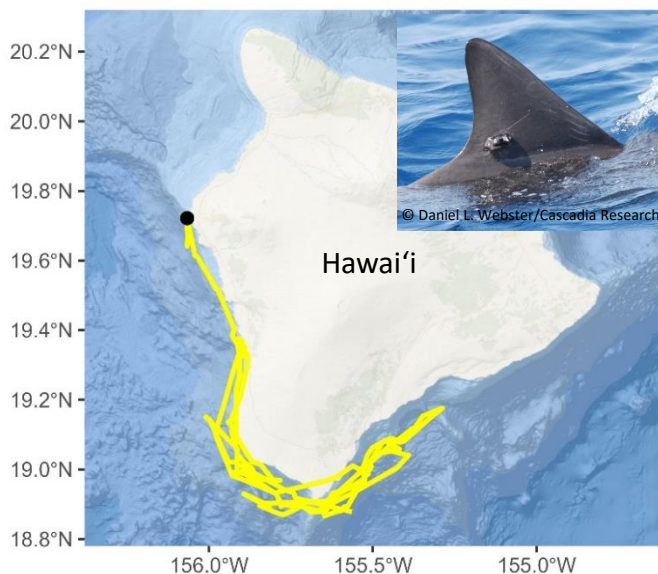
- Dark dorsal cape with well-defined edges, contrasting with the lighter sides
- Often have linear white scars from tooth rakes, and round or oval-shaped white scars from cookiecutter shark bites
- Rounded tips to the pectoral flippers
- Rounded head shape with a dark cap extending from the blowhole over the front of the head
- White pigmentation on lips/face



Illustrations by Uko Gorter



Melon-headed whale



We have used satellite tags to study where and how pygmy killer whales spend their time. On the left you can see 10 days of movements from an individual tagged off Hawai'i Island in 2008, along with an inset image of the tag attached to the individual's dorsal fin.

More photos are needed to better understand this species in Hawai'i. To contribute photos to our research, scan the QR code below, or email Hawaii@cascadiaresearch.org



Pygmy killer whales show mixed reactions to boats, often depending on what they are doing when approached. Socializing resident groups can often be approached, while resting groups and groups from the offshore population tend to avoid boats. We've found that when approaching a resting group, pygmy killer whales tend to be more curious about us when we place the boat in neutral roughly 50-100 m away, and allow the animals to decide whether or not to approach us.