

Pygmy Killer Whales of O‘ahu



HIFa347 sighted 2007-2024



HIFa372 sighted 2008-2018



HIFa373 sighted 2008-2024



HIFa419 sighted 2009-2025



HIFa452 sighted 2010-2024



HIFa462 sighted 2010-2024



HIFa587 sighted 2013-2024



HIFa670 sighted 2016-2024

Some of the distinctive resident pygmy killer whales documented off O‘ahu

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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. Small resident populations of pygmy killer whales can be found in the Hawaiian Islands, one off O‘ahu and Penguin Bank, and the other off Hawai‘i Island. Groups from an open-ocean population overlap with both resident populations. Off O‘ahu, 131 individuals have been photo-identified over the years, about half of which have been seen more than once, and new individuals are still being documented.

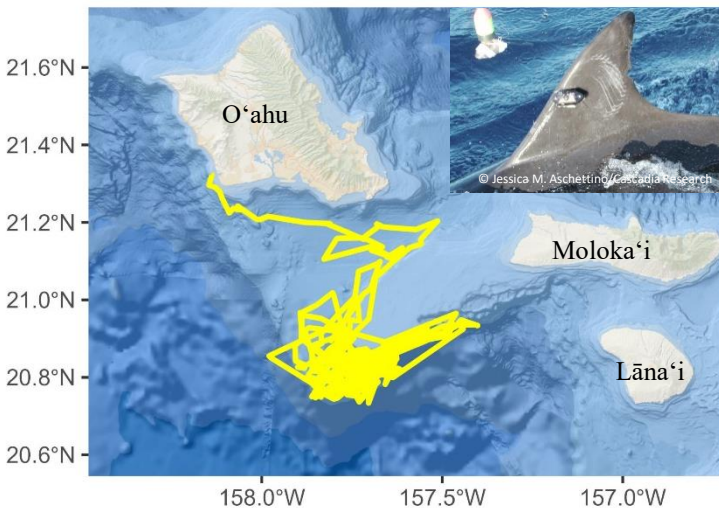
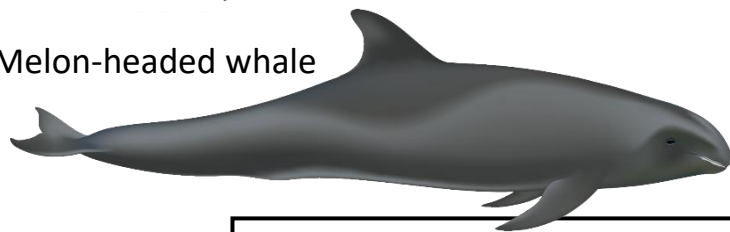
Due to their similar size and coloration, pygmy killer whales are frequently confused with other blackfish species, especially melon-headed whales (*Peponocephala electra*). Pygmy killer whales are most easily identified by the dark dorsal capes that are clearly demarcated from the lighter sides, and frequent paired white scars from tooth rakes. They also have rounded pectoral flippers and a more bulbous head shape, and older individuals often have extensive white pigmentation on their lips and face. They also often have white circular scars on their sides and underbelly, which are caused by cookie cutter shark (*Isistius spp.*) bites.

Pygmy killer whale



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 a 25-day satellite tag trackline from an individual tagged off O‘ahu in 2010, 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



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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.