

Name: _____

Wolves of the Sea

by Guy Belleranti

Which sea animal is the greatest hunter of all? Some people might say the great white shark has a reputation as the most fierce predator of the ocean. Others would argue that the giant squid is the best hunter of the sea because it can grow to be over 40 feet long! I disagree. In my opinion, the greatest hunter in the sea is the orca.



Also known as the killer whale, the orca is the largest species of dolphin. Adult males often measure well over 20 feet long and weigh 8,000 to 12,000 pounds. That's at least two times the weight of the great white shark! Some orcas are even bigger, with the record holder being 32 feet and 22,000 pounds.

Size isn't the only trait that makes this species the greatest hunter in the sea. Orcas are also highly intelligent. Their brain is the second-heaviest among marine mammals. (The sperm whale has the biggest brain of all the sea mammals.) Orcas are intelligent, curious, and playful. They even communicate with each other using their own language. Their intelligence makes hunting easier because they can outsmart their prey.

The orca lives and hunts in a family group called a pod. When the pod works together, orcas can catch and eat any marine animal including sharks, penguins, seals, sea lions walruses, porpoises, and even giant whales. Because of their cooperative hunting skills, orcas are often referred to as the "wolves of the sea".

Other traits that help their hunting ability are their keen senses. An orca has excellent eyesight, both underwater and above. If it's hunting a seal, for example, an orca could see it clearly if it's on an ice floe above water, or if it's diving under the ocean's surface. They also have great hearing, which allows them to locate prey from far away. They even have

an extra sense that humans don't have - echolocation. When it uses this extra sense, an orca sends out high-pitched clicking sounds. When it hears the sounds echo off an object the orca knows the object's location, shape, speed and size.



So what hunts the orca? Well, actually nothing other than people. Human hunters, habitat loss, pollution, and the loss of food sources are the real dangers to the orca. And although a young orca calf could occasionally be prey to a large shark, it usually has the protection of its mother and pod.

The great white shark and giant squid are certainly feared by many people, but orcas are definitely the best hunters in the oceans in my opinion. Would you be afraid of an orca if you saw one? Before you answer, you might be interested to know that there are no documented cases of a wild orca purposely attacking a human being. Even though they may be the fiercest hunter in the sea, they don't consider humans their prey.

Even More Interesting Orca Facts

- Orcas are found in all the oceans of the world, but they usually prefer cooler waters.
- Adult females can give birth to a calf every 3 to 10 years. The calf is 6 to 8 feet long and weighs around 400 pounds.
- Orcas are not fish! They are mammals because they breathe air, are warm-blooded, and give birth to live young.

About the Author

Guy Belleranti works as a docent at Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes mainly from his experiences working with animals and teaching others.

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1. What is this article mostly about?
 - a. how orcas are different from other whales
 - b. the recent discovery of wild orcas
 - c. traits that make killer whales great hunters
 - d. wolves that live in the sea

2. According to the author, what traits make orcas the best hunters in the sea?
 - a. their large fins, sharp teeth, and strong tail
 - b. their great sense of smell, streamlined bodies, and ability to jump out of the water
 - c. their intelligent, curious, and playful personalities
 - d. their large size, high intelligence, and keen senses

3. Explain why orcas are sometimes called "wolves of the sea."

4. What is echolocation and how does it work?

5. Tell whether each statement is true, false, or an opinion. Write T, F, or O on the lines.

- _____ Killer whales are a large species of fish.
- _____ The greatest hunters in the sea are orcas.
- _____ An adult orca is heavier than an adult great white shark.
- _____ An orca's brain is larger than a sperm whale's brain.
- _____ Killer whales are the most beautiful animal on Earth.

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Match each vocabulary word from the article with the correct definition.

_____ 1. reputation

a. smart; brainy

_____ 2. argue

b. ability to work together with others

_____ 3. intelligent

c. debate, make a persuasive point

_____ 4. communicate

d. young cow, camel, whale, or elephant

_____ 5. keen

e. sharp; sensitive; acute

_____ 6. documented

f. belief about something or someone

_____ 7. cooperative

g. clearly reported; proven

_____ 8. calf

h. talk to others; send messages to others

◆ **Now try this:** On a sheet of lined paper, use each vocabulary word from above in a sentence.

ANSWER KEY

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 - d. their large size, high intelligence, and keen senses**
3. Explain why orcas are sometimes called “wolves of the sea.”
They hunt cooperatively, in groups, like a pack of wolves.
4. What is echolocation and how does it work?
Echolocation is a sixth-sense that some animals have. The animals sends out a high-pitched sound. The sound echos off the object, allowing the animal to know the object's location, speed, and size.
5. Tell whether each statement is true, false, or an opinion. Write T, F, or O on the lines.
F Killer whales are a large species of fish.
O The greatest hunters in the sea are orcas.
I An adult orca is heavier than an adult great white shark.
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