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## NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

### Dall's Porpoise

*Phocoenoides dalli*



By Angelina Henshaw

Dolphins and porpoises are by far the most entertaining animals to see when you are sailing on a boat. They are typically quite social, and this is no different for the Dall's porpoise. These porpoises love to show off and swim right up to boats, riding along boat waves and making big jumps. If you take a boat ride out through the northern or western areas of the Pacific ocean, you're likely to find a Dall's porpoise nearby!

### Characteristics

The Dall's porpoise doesn't look like your typical dolphin. Most dolphins have "beaks", but the Dall's has virtually no beak but rather a blunt snout. It has a very small head and, unlike most dolphins and porpoises, it has a chunky body from head to tail. It has short pectoral flippers, a triangular dorsal fin mid-back, and a tail-stock and keel that gives it a little bit of a humped back.

Dall's porpoises are often mistake for baby orcas because of their colour and size. They are usually black with large white flanks that are extremely similar to an orca. However, Dall's porpoises do not have the same white patch above their eyes like orcas do, which is what really sets them apart. Some Dall's porpoises can be all white, and some can also be all black – these cases are very rare, but they do exist.

The typical Dall's porpoise weighs around 220 kg (485 lbs). Males are slightly larger and chunkier than females – they can grow up to almost 8 ft in length (2.43 m) while females get up to 7 ft (2.2 m). When baby Dall's porpoises (calves) are born they are about 1 m long (3.3 ft) and look identical to their parents

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(except a little lighter in colour). There are two subspecies of Dall's porpoise, *truei*-type and a *dalli*-type. *Truei*-type porpoises live in the Western Pacific Ocean near Japan, while the *Dalli*-type live closer to Canada and Alaska. As it turns out, a Dall's porpoise's colourings change depending on where they are found.

## Life Cycle

Dall's porpoises mature and are fully weaned adults when they are 7 (females) or 8 (males) years old. A lot of their mating habits remain a mystery to scientists because the Dall's porpoise is a very fast, elusive cetacean. From what can be observed, the calving period usually happens in the summer – some scientists have observed it happening in the springtime, while others have seen it happen as late as September. What is most interesting is that the calving period around US coastlines is a year-round activity.

Dall's porpoises, like all porpoises, dolphins and whales (cetaceans), give birth underwater. They will only give birth to one calf, and this happens after 10-12 months of gestation. This is followed by a 2-year period of lactation, though the calf usually only nurses for about 1 year. The calf and its mother will spend this time away from their pod, as the mother eventually weans the calf off of her milk and teaches it to hunt. The father of the calf is not a part of the parenting process.

The average lifespan for a Dall's porpoise in the wild is 20 years.

## Habitat

Dall's porpoises like to live in coast areas, but are also deep-sea swimmers. They will follow underwater canyons and deep channels into coastal areas, because that is where most of its food is. They eat all kinds of small aquatic life, including schools of fish like sardines, herring and anchovies as well as deep-sea smelt, hake and lantern fish. Their appetite is so diverse because they live all over the largest ocean in the world.

Since there are two subspecies of the Dall's porpoise, you can see them in different areas. The *Dalli*-type, as said before, is widely distributed and live in the North Pacific, Bering Sea and the Sea of Japan. The *Truei*-type has a much smaller range and is more migratory – they spend their winters in the Northeast coast of Japan and their summers in the central Okhotsk Sea.

## Behaviour

The Dall's porpoise is not at all shy! It loves to swim alongside boats and splash around before darting away. They perform what is called a "rooster tail" when they swim – they swim so quickly that their heads make a unique splash/wave that creates a hollow pocket of air. This pocket of air lets them breathe while they swim quickly under the water. This is necessary, because the Dall's porpoise is the fastest cetacean in the water – they swim up to 30 knots (which is 56 km/h or 35 mph) and do many sharp turns and zig-zag. This is another way they can be distinguished from the orca.

Dall's porpoises speak to each other in low frequency clicks and whistles, much like dolphins and other porpoises. Some scientists say that this is used for echolocation and sonar as well as verbal communication. Touch is also a way that these porpoises communicate. They typically live in groups of up to 12, but it is not uncommon to see them in groups of 25 or more. They also like to socialize with many different kinds of cetaceans – often you will see them with pacific white-sided dolphins, harbour porpoises, and even around humpback whales.

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## Threats

Dall's porpoises, according to the IUCN Red List, are of the least concern. However, this doesn't mean that they aren't facing some serious problems. While they have natural predators (orcas and sharks) their main threat by far comes from humans.

High concentrations of organochlorines (pesticides) and mercury have polluted the waters, which have a very detrimental effect on pregnant porpoises and their calves. This chemical also reduces the testosterone levels in males. These chemicals can be found in high levels in the blubber/fat stores of these porpoises.

Not only does pollution affect the Dall's porpoise, but so does the fishing industry. The Japanese fishing industry in particular uses a salmon drift-net that catches and kills a lot of Dall's porpoises, as do gillnets and trawls. The squid industry is also thought to pose a threat though there has not been any evidence to prove this. Scientists don't quite know why porpoises get caught so easily in these nets, though most suggest that it is most likely that a Dall's porpoise's sonar can't detect the nets properly.

Hunting is also popular in Japan – it is thought that around 18,000 Dall's porpoises are caught every year to sustain the whaling industry.

## What We Can Do To Help

- Urge the reassessment of the status of these two subpopulations of the Dall's porpoise. It has been 15 years since this has been done in relation to the Japanese fishing industry. It is important to urge your government to reassess this, as the Dall's porpoise is listed until Appendix II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals.
- Work to help clean up shorelines and stop pollutants from entering the water.
- Encourage your government to suggest fisheries use more easily detectable netting so fewer porpoises get caught.
- Join foundations like NWPS to learn more about these animals and help in conservation efforts!

## Interesting Facts

- The Dall's porpoise is named after W.H. Dall, an American naturalist who was the first to discover this species of porpoise.

- Dolphins have conical-shaped teeth, while the Dall's porpoise, like other porpoises, have spade-shaped teeth.

## Where & When to view the animal.

Even though the Dall's porpoise is a deep-sea swimmer, you can usually find them in coastal areas. The best place to spot them are in sounds and inlets that meet the open sea.

## Bibliography

### Web Resources:

Whales and Dolphins BC – a website that helps identify all of the whales and dolphins visible in British Columbia.

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<http://whalesanddolphinsbc.com/what-species-of-whales-and-dolphins-are-in-bc/dalls-porpoise-%E2%80%93-phocoenoides-dalli/>

NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources – an excellent fact resource that has a detailed range map.

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/cetaceans/dallsporpoise.htm>

The Dall's Porpoise – a website focusing completely on the Dall's porpoise. Thorough and factual.

<http://dallsporpoise.org/about.htm>

American Cetacean Society – provides many helpful pictures and information graphs on the Dall's porpoise.

<http://acsonline.org/fact-sheets/dalls-porpoise/>

NOAA Fisheries Alaska Fisheries Science Center – provides child-friendly facts

<http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/nmml/education/cetaceans/dalls.php>

IUCN Red List – identifies the threat levels of the Dall's porpoise as well as conservation efforts.

<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/17032/0>

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