

The Maui News

BREAKING NEWS

Man arrested in connection with 9,000-acre wildfire

Hawaii is home to false killer whales

KA MO'OLELO MOANA



The main Hawaiian Islands are home to a resident population of an estimated 150-200 endangered false killer whales. A mother and young calf are pictured above. -- Cascadia Research/ROBIN W.

BAIRD photo

Our ocean's pelagic world is as beautiful as it is dangerous, but for the false killer whale, it's a place called home.

The false killer whale (*Pseudorca crassidens*) is considered to be the most socially advanced whale species in Hawaii. Found throughout the tropics and subtropics worldwide, there are three false killer whale populations in Hawaii: pelagic (open ocean), Northwestern Hawaiian Islands insular, and the endangered Main Hawaiian Islands insular, which are genetically different from all other *Pseudorca*.

The false killer whale's common name is deceiving as it looks nothing like the true killer whale, *Orcinus orca*. It is dark grey in color, has a long, slender body, and grows up to about 14-17 feet in length. Its common name is derived from similarities between the two species' skull and teeth rather than external appearance.

False killer whales, like killer whales, are members of the family Delphinidae and are technically dolphins. Whales are divided into two groups: baleen whales (Mysticeti), such as humpbacks, and toothed whales (Odontoceti), which include beaked whales, sperm whales, dolphins and porpoises. There's a popular rule of thumb to remember: *"All dolphins are whales, but not all whales are dolphins."*

According to Cascadia Research Collective, a nonprofit research organization, false killer whales are socially advanced beings. They have a lifespan of up to 60 years, form long-lasting bonds, and have peacefully associated with other delphinids, including bottlenose and rough-toothed dolphins.

Groups range from five to 25 whales that break off into smaller groups to hunt. False killer whales cooperatively hunt for large prey, including mahimahi, ahi, ono, aku, monchong and other pelagic species. False killer whales are known to share their captured prey with each other, and on some occasions have even offered their catch to boaters and divers.

False killer whales are inquisitive and commonly exhibit positive behavior toward humans. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the human impacts on false killer whale populations. Whale hunting continues in Japan, Indonesia and the West Indies.

In offshore waters in Hawaii, accidental bycatch and interactions with long-line fishing gear, as well as entanglement with derelict fishing equipment, can lead to fatal injuries. The accumulation of toxic PCB and DDE chemicals found in false killer whales, a result of ingesting prey that has accumulated these toxins, is negatively impacting their reproductive capabilities and causing immune system problems.

The endangered main Hawaiian Islands population is estimated to be only 150-200 individuals. Conservation efforts, including a NOAA-established Take Reduction Team (2010) and Take Reduction Plan (2012), ongoing research and efforts to mitigate land-based pollution, are several strategies being implemented to protect this vulnerable species.

As we enter peak humpback whale watching season, please remember that our ocean is home to many other whale and dolphin species.

Humpback whales will eventually return to Alaska, but for the main Hawaiian Islands false killer whales that do not migrate to distant seas, Hawaii is their home year-round. They are residents of these islands, true kamaaina that warrant our admiration, respect and care.

Individual lifestyle changes and support of nonprofit organizations and government agencies are just a few ways we can increase the chances for the false killer whale to become the next success story in marine mammal conservation.

For more information about false killer whales, their status and conservation efforts, visit www.cascadiaresearch.org or fisheries.noaa.gov.

* Evan Pascual is the marketing and public relations coordinator at Maui Ocean Center. "*Ka Mo'olelo Moana*," or "*the Ocean Story*," is a monthly column submitted by Maui Ocean Center staff members. The center is

open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily in Maalaea. For more information, call 270-7000.
