

**Orcas (also known as killer whales) are marine mammals. They belong to the sub-order of toothed whales (known as odontocetes) but are also the largest member of the dolphin family.**

Orcas are incredibly popular as they are the most widely distributed of all whales and dolphins, found in every single ocean. They are very familiar with their black and white colouring but actually, depending on where they live, have very different appearances, behaviour, ways of communicating and diet!

### **What do orcas eat?**

Orcas can consume fish, seals and sea lions, dolphins and porpoises, sharks and rays, large whales, cephalopods (octopods and squids), seabirds and more. However, some orcas specialise on specific prey, and it turns out orcas are picky eaters! Once they've learned what their family eats, they aren't likely to switch diets.

### **How do orcas sleep?**

Orcas sleep in a very different way to humans. We have a breathing reflex and when we sleep, we continue to breath automatically. Orcas cannot sleep in this way, they have to remain conscious, even when they are sleeping! This is because their breathing is not automatic - they have to actively decide when to breath, and so they must be conscious even when sleeping. If like us, orcas went into a deep unconscious sleep, they would stop breathing and suffocate or drown.

To get around this, orcas only allow one half of their brains to sleep at a time; the other half stays alert enabling them to continue breathing whilst looking out for dangers in the environment. They only close one eye when they sleep; the left eye will be closed when the right half of the brain sleeps, and vice versa. Orcas swap which side is sleeping so that they can get the rest they need without ever losing consciousness. When sleeping, orcas swim very slowly and steadily, close to the surface.

### **How do orcas communicate?**

In orca populations, knowledge is passed down to younger individuals from their elders – what to eat and where to find it, how to catch it, who to avoid, vocalisations and calls unique to pods and family groups, and the distinct 'accent' of the population.

