

**Physical Description:**

Pacific white-sided dolphins, also known as 'Lags' are approximately 7-8 feet in length, and weigh up to 300 pounds. Males are larger than females. Lags have striking markings with a black back, light gray sides, a white belly, and black markings around the mouth and eyes. Their dorsal fins are tall and hooked, with a black forward edge and gray trailing edge. Lags are extremely active and will often leap, breach, and bow-ride with boats.

**Photo Identification Methods:**

Lags are individually identified by the shape and coloring of their dorsal fins. The dorsal fin becomes more curved with age.

**Natural History:**

Pacific white-sided dolphins are often found in large pods of 90 to 100 animals including both sexes and all ages. They have sometimes been observed in groups numbering in the thousands and they are often in mixed groups with other dolphins, porpoises and large whales.

**Species Subtypes:** In the northwest there are 2 separate stocks. These consist of the North Pacific stock and the California-Oregon-Washington stock.

**Reproduction:** Pacific white-sided dolphins become sexually mature at 7-10 years of age when they reach 5 to 6 feet in length. Gestation is 9 to 12 months. Females give birth every 2 to 5 years.

**Life Cycle:** Calves appear to be born mostly in the spring and summer. They are approximately 30 pounds and 2 ½ to 4 feet long at birth and they nurse for 8 to 10 months. Lifespan is 35 to 45 years.

**Range:**

The Pacific white-sided dolphin is found in temperate waters. They are possibly the widest ranging cetacean in the North Pacific. They are found from Kamchatka to the Philippines in the west, across the Aleutian chain and from Alaska to Baja California in the east.

**Diet:**

Mostly squid and small fish, including anchovy, herring, sardine, and hake. They tend to follow seasonal movements of their prey, moving closer to shore in the summer and fall and further from shore in the winter and spring. They separate into smaller groups of 10 to 20 animals when

feeding and are often seen working together to herd fish. They are capable of diving for 6 minutes when feeding.

### Status:

The Central Pacific population is estimated to be around 900,000. The California-Oregon-Washington stock has about 27,000 animals. They are currently considered 'of least concern' by the IUCN.

### Threats:

**Historical:** Strandings of Pacific white-sided dolphins appear to be rather infrequent and generally with single animals. There are records of 166 strandings in the northeastern Pacific from 1855 to 1977. A primary threat has been and continues to be fisheries bycatch. Between 1978 and 1990 approximately 49,000 to 89,000 Lags were killed in gillnets and driftnets.

**Current:** Lags continue to be incidentally caught in fishing nets. They are sometimes killed by harpooning and drive fisheries in Japan and an unknown number are captured for public display. Locally a large threat to Pacific white-sided dolphins is transient orcas.

### Fun Facts:

- The scientific name *obliquidens* means 'slanting teeth.' Lags have between 23-32 teeth.
- The common name for Lags has changed from 'striped porpoise' in 1961 to 'Pacific striped dolphin' in 1964 to 'Pacific white striped dolphin' in 1970.
- One observation of Lags described a group that was one and a half miles across. "Thirty minutes were required for it to pass at a rate of two or three knots faster than the speed of the ship" (Wilke et al. 1953).
- Lags are often seen in the company of orcas, sometimes harassing them, and seem to have no fear of their larger dolphin cousins.
- Pacific white-sided dolphins have been observed remaining with and helping other injured dolphins and porpoises. One Lag reportedly remained between a harpooned individual and a ship, repeatedly pushing the injured dolphin away from the boat. Another report describes two female Lags in captivity assisting a Dall's porpoise that had been injured during its capture, helping it remain at the surface of the water.
- Scott O'Dell (author of *Island of the Blue Dolphin*) began writing a book that was finished by his wife Elizabeth Hall upon his death. The book is entitled *Venus Among the Fishes* and its protagonist is a Pacific white-sided dolphin named Coral. Unfortunately the book did not get good reviews.

### Sources:

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Thank you to Uko Gorter for use of Pacific white-sided dolphin graphic

Photo by John Boyd