



Let's Speak ORCA

Cetaceans (whales and dolphins) have a highly sophisticated language which consists of sounds and behaviors. This guide will help you identify some of the most common whale behaviors you can observe from the shore or the water's surface, using Orcas as the example. To learn more, visit the Oceanscape Network at oceanscape.aquarium.org.

Illustrations by Michael Cole

Spyhop:

Using its powerful tail, the Orca holds itself upright so its head is above the waterline. Spyhopping is a way for these animals to see what's going on around them.

It may be used to assess the location of boats, spot potential threats or locate prey.



Tail Lob:

The Orca raises its flukes out of the water and beats them forcefully against the surface.

Scientists still aren't entirely sure why whales tail-lob. It was initially thought to be a way for them to call other whales, but since the beating sounds don't travel as well underwater as their squeaks and chirps, this now seems unlikely.

Most researchers now seem to believe tail-lobbing is probably a form of aggression, warning other animals (or even boaters) to stay away from the whale's pod.

Breach:

The Orca propels itself head-first out of the water, turns in mid-air and hits the surface making a huge splash.

Scientists believe this is a social behavior. It often takes place in the company of other whales and may be how an individual “shows off.”



Spout:

Spouting is primarily about the Orca taking fresh air and oxygen into its lungs.



As the air-breathing Orca breaks the surface of the water, it exhales.

This creates a plume of spray when the air hits the water. During spouting, the whale can also see what’s going on above the water, similar to spyhopping.



Pec Slap:

The Orca repeatedly surfaces and slaps the water with one of its pectoral fins.

Because pec slapping is most often seen during breeding season, scientists believe it has a lot to do with whale courtship rituals. For example, female whales may pec slap when surrounded by males as a way of getting their attention. Think of it as “whale flirting.”

