



FIRST ECO LODGE IN PATAGONIA ARGENTINA - WWW.ECOHOSTERIA.COM.AR
PUERTO PIRAMIDES - PENINSULA VALDES - CHUBUT - PATAGONIA ARGENTINA

PHOTOS: WWW.ALEAVA.NET

MARINE WILDLIFE OF PENINSULA VALDES



MARINE WILDLIFE

From the ocean, on land
and in the air, our fauna
share our World with us,
leaving behind harmony and
new life in an ecosystem
as fragile as the young
creatures, born in
this great maternity ward
which is the Peninsula
Valdes.



1. WILDLIFE CALENDAR

Not all the animals have the same reproductive or feeding cycle. Some need the heat of summer, others the cold, calm winter, and some are with us all year round.

What animals will you see?

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
WHALES												
SEA LIONS												
ELEPHANTS												
ORCAS												
DOLPHINS												

ATTENTION

If visiting at the beginning or end of a species season, there is a possibility that you won't see a specimen - the animals do not keep an exact timetable.

Keep this in mind especially with the orcas, which depend exclusively on good weather, with little wind and high tides.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Observe wildlife from a distance, not follow or approach the animals. Never feed wildlife, you will be damaging the health of the animals and alter their natural behaviour.

Leave what you find, rocks, plants and other natural objects in the same state and place where you found it.

REMEMBER

In wilderness areas, radios, recorders, loud musical instruments, and loud voices, are out of place.

Also, if you are quiet and careful in these areas, you will have more chance of seeing wildlife, and witnessing the unique behaviour of each species.



2.1 SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE

EUBALAENA AUSTRALIS

Between May and December, Southern Right Whales visit our shores to breed and raise their calves. Embark on an unforgettable experience by observing them in their natural habitat. Increase your knowledge by reading something about their behaviour, physiognomy and food.

LENGTH

Adult male: 14 m.

Adult female: 15 m.

Newborn: between 4 and 5 m.

WEIGHT

Adult male: 40 tons

Adult female: 45 tons

Newborn: between 2 and 3 tons.

Like other whales, the Southern Right migrates twice each year: a trophic or feeding migration, to areas rich in zooplankton, near the Antarctic Convergence; and a reproductive migration towards coastal temperate waters, which provide a calm refuge from adverse weather conditions that they can suffer in the open sea and which would be risky for newborn calves.

The Southern Right Whale, has ample space in the ocean where it spends its life. Those born in the Golfo Nuevo and San Jose not necessarily return every year to the Peninsula. They have well-

defined areas for their fall and summer migrations and can travel thousands of miles on each trip.

In fall, a time for breeding, they move northward as far as latitude 20 degrees. The furthest north where some groups can be seen is on the coast of Brazil, in South America, and between Mozambique and the island of Madagascar in Africa. They are also found in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

Through censuses conducted by the ICB (Whale Conservation Institute), it is estimated that in the winter-spring season, the whale population of Peninsula Valdés reaches over 600 individuals, the largest concentration of whales of this species in any breeding area. The calm waters of the Nuevo and San José gulfs, are very attractive to calves when learning to breathe, and are also favoured by whales at mating time.

Arriving in December, they migrate back towards the feeding area around the 55th.

parallel, where the water temperature rises in summer in the sub Antarctic region and gives way to the proliferation of krill, the main food of these whales.

Unlike the dolphins, which have a social structure of close ties, the whales do not form herds but rather solitary lives. In the mating and breeding area they can be seen in small groups, generally of less than six individuals and disperse after copulation. The mother-calf units, breaks when the calf is weaned, which usually occurs during the reproductive migration of the mother.

The whale jumps often and it also remains long periods with the tail out of the water, hitting the surface with fins and tail causing a sea foam explosion. They are very curious, often leaning vertically in a position known as “espionage” or “spy-hopping”



FEEDING

The diet consists mainly of krill. They also eat larvae of various invertebrates, fish larvae and sea-floor organisms. While for many years it was believed that breeding whales fasted, today, thanks to the observations made by the captains of whale-watching boats and by analyzing stool samples, it has been found that while in the Gulfs of the Peninsula Valdes, whales feed on zooplankton (lobster larvae, copepods and krill species present in the area) as well as sea floor organisms.

The maximum depth recorded for this species is 184 mts. Maximum apnoea recorded 50 minutes at feeding areas (in the mating area dives rarely exceed 10 minutes).

Unlike the dolphins which are toothed whales (have teeth) whales belong to the suborder of baleen whales, comprising few large species, the largest of which is the Blue Whale which can measure more than 30 meters long. The whales differ from other cetaceans in several ways, but the most obvious difference is that they have no teeth but baleens plates.

Baleen is a flexible material called keratin (the same material of our nails and hair), with the outer edge smooth, and the inner in frayed fibers like a horse's mane.

The baleen plates hang from the upper jaw and are excellent for filtering food out of seawater.

The Southern Right Whale has between 220 and 260 baleen spread on both sides of the upper jaw. The central ones can measure up to 1.80 meters long.



THE JUMP

The Southern Right Whale, like other whales, draws its body off the water in a unique and stunning show, which is commonly known as “breaching”.

We are not entirely sure of the reasons behind the jump. Some scientists say the whale jumps because it is a way of communicating with other adult whales or calves.

Others argue that another reason could be to try to see out of the water, perhaps just shapes and distances, but with eyes adapted to see salty underwater, it would be very unlikely to see the objects defined above, in the air and surface only at a glance.

There are other possible reasons that cause the jump of the whale, one of them, which is tiny, is a small, crab-like creature, the cymids, a crustacean parasite. There is evidence that there can

be large concentrations of cymids walking on the skin and callosities of the whale. Sometimes they can walk over very sensitive areas, such as the corner of the eye, and generate significant discomfort and it may be that, by breaching, the force generated by the animal falling back into the water, may dislodge some if not all of these parasites.

Other annoyances that may generate breaching are the intense bites on their backs caused by seagulls, which lately developed the habit of feeding on their skin and fat.

Whatever the reason for breaching, the sight of this amazing marine mammal propelling its body weight of more than 40 tons, 10 meters out of the water, using only the force of its tail or caudal fin, is a spectacle that is fantastic to behold.



CALLUSES

These calluses with hard and light forms have a rough base and sometimes take the form of small leaves.

They are about 5 cm in height, are formed in the foetal stage and grow with the animal, throughout his life.

They are found along the upper margin of the lower lip, jaw, dorsal surface of the face and eyes, forming a kind of eyebrow. In all specimens of right whales, the largest one is the bonnet which is on the end of the snout of the animal. These dark gray calluses have populations of cyamids, commonly known as whale-lice. The calluses sometimes host colonies of barnacles which can cause them to take on a yellow or orange colour.

While all the whales have these skin blemishes, not all are in the same place or the same way. Each whale has its own unique distribution of calluses. 40 years ago, Roger Paine decided to use this unique distribution to enable photo-identification of whales at Peninsula Valdes.



BLOWHOLE

Blowholes or the whales equivalent to our nostrils, are situated on the top and back of the head and have powerful muscles that close them and prevent water entering the lungs.

When breathing out, the animal expels two columns of moist air vapour particles, mixed with secretions from the air passages and lungs. These columns or clouds rise forming a "V" which can reach 5 meters in height.

By the shape of the blow, we can distinguish a right whale from other species, such as orcas or dolphins, which have a single blowhole.



REPRODUCTION

The southern right whale females reach sexual maturity at five or six years old.

The mating or courtship takes place with several males and a female courted is enclosed by the sides by 2, 3 or more males. Mating can last more than one day, and the female, to avoid being coupled is placed belly up, position which she can only hold for a few minutes, because of the need to breathe.

A tactic developed by males is to support the belly on the back of the female, while others keep their positions on the sides. When the female turns to breathe, males are pushed until one of them manages to copulate. Other times, as

observed from whale watching boats in Puerto Piramides, while the female is belly up, males look for the vaginal slit with their penises. The male penis is about 2 meters long and its owner has control all of the movements, in much the same way that an elephant has control of it's trunk.

If the male is able to penetrate the female by a few centimetres, it can exert a force powerful enough to turn the female to him, and to facilitate intercourse. Copulation lasts no more than 30 seconds but courtship activity can be extended for several hours and generally almost all males copulate, but only one fertilizes the female.

According to research provided by Patagonia Natural Foundation, the rate of reproduction is a calf every three years. The gestation period is 12 months, followed by a further 12 months of suckling the calf and another 12 months gestation. The whales do not have multiple births, producing only one calf with each pregnancy.

Births occur mainly between August and late October. Whale milk is oily and has a viscous consistency because it has more than 50% fat and 12% of proteins, allowing the calf grow between 2 and 3 cm daily, twice its size at the end of feeding, after a year.



Even though everything happens underwater, in whale watching trips from Puerto Piramides, the capital for the activity in Argentina, you can see how the calf receives the mother's milk. Although a mammal, unlike most other mammals, including ourselves, where the young actively suckle at the mother's teat, the female whale expresses her milk to her calf.

The mother slightly lifts her caudal fin, while the calf is submerged and is approached obliquely in the belly. Whilst the calf is feeding, usually, all that can be seen is a small fin or even just a swirl in the water.

While we do not know for sure, it is estimated that whales can live for about 60 years, although there is speculation that individuals could achieve the age of 100, although this is, as yet, unproven.



2.2 ORCA

ORCINUS ORCA





OUR ORCAS

They are the largest of the dolphin family. They are found in all the oceans of the world, but only in Peninsula Valdes will you see them hunting with the most extraordinary technique in wildlife: the intentional stranding.

LENGTH

Adult male: 9-8 m.

Adult female: 8,5 m.

Newborn: 2.4 m.

WEIGHT

Adult male: 9-10 ton.

Female adult: 7-8 ton.

Newborn: 180 kg.

The orca is a creature of the Cetacean order. This word has Greek origins (ketos) and Latin (Cetus), and in both cases means whale. And while this has led us to call orcas “whales”, it’s wrong because it is, in fact, a toothed whale, as are other dolphins, porpoises, sperm whales, etc. To avoid confusion, it is accepted that, only if the animal has baleen plates, should it be called a whale. Thus we get two orders of cetaceans: Odontoceti (orca, dolphin, etc.) and Mysticetus (whales).

They have between 10 to 13 pairs of conical teeth located in upper and lower jaws, totalling approximately 48. As with trees, the number of rings in the teeth indicates the age of the specimen.

Orcas are sexually dimorphic, which means that the two sexes differ in shape and size. These differences begin to appear at the age of 10-15 years. A distinctive feature is the dorsal fin, which in adult males can grow to about 2 meters (6 feet) and has a triangular shape. The dorsal fin of females usually reaches an average size of 1 m (3 ft), and is curved like a dolphin. Calves and young males also tend to have the fin curve, which lends itself to confusion when identifying sex.

The caudal fin may exceed 2.7 m, and is the main engine that allows

them to achieve speeds in excess of 50 miles per hour. This fin and the dorsal fin constitute not only the basis of orca’s stabilization, propulsion and direction, but also add to the touch in games, sex and method of intimidation of potential prey, with which they hit the surface of the water.

REPRODUCTION

Females can start reproducing at the early age of 11 years. Young mature females often become “nannies” to prepare them for the future responsibility of motherhood.

Throughout her life, a female can have from 4-6 young, with a gestation period of around 17 months. They stop reproducing at about age 40, although there are exceptions.



The males begin to mature at an average age of 12-14 years.

This period is marked by the rapid growth of the dorsal fin. As dorsal fin grows, begins to stretch and lose its previous curvature. This growth is called "outbreak". The growth of the dorsal fin and the body continues until about twenty years of age.

Orcas are very social animals. In some cases they live in small family groups. We have no certainties about the groups that inhabit the area of Peninsula Valdes, since no genetic studies have been conducted to confirm the field observations.



Watch orcas at Punta Norte in high tide hours. Season: mid February to mid April.



PIGMENTATION

The orcas pigmentation is normally white and black with a grey frame (behind the dorsal fin), however, in Antarctica, different coloured orcas have been found: grey and white with very pale-grey frames.

All orcas have a white post-ocular spot (just above and behind the eye).

The underside of the tail is usually white, although the genital area has less complex marks, covering the sides of the tail and flanks of the orca, differ in both sexes.

LONGEVITY

Orcas can reach the age of 80 years, but studies show that in the case of a group of orcas that inhabit the coast of Washington and British Columbia (USA and Canada respectively), female orcas live an average of 50 years.

No one knows why, but male orcas in this population live least, about 30 years, but can reach a maximum of 50 years.

“If you have the privilege of seeing this animal in its natural habitat, you will understand that he was born to be free, and not to jump through a hoop in an aquarium.”



FEEDING

Orcas often hunt penguins, dolphins, sea lions, elephant seals, sea birds, and rarely, other whales. In Punta Norte, our orcas developed the technique of intentional stranding on the beach to capture sea lions pups and elephant seals. This technique is taught from one orca to another, from six months old, and is probably the reason for observing them stranding with no intention of hunting or on solitary beaches, and always in group to avoid dangerous stranding. They can also catch sea lions, take them out to open sea and let them go.

Hundreds of filmmakers from all over the world come every year from mid-March to early April to film this unique event. Elsewhere orcas develop different hunting techniques, depending on the type of food and the possibilities offers in their environment. Remember that these animals are among the most intelligent of the ocean, and their organized hunting methods and interactivity with other species are truly amazing.

With regard to attacks on whales, there have been no cases in the waters around Peninsula Valdes. Some cases have been documented in Ushuaia and other oceanic areas, where they have been seen to approach young whales through an organized attack that combines prey exhaustion, with bites on key

points.

Still, the orcas never would cause a significant number of deaths of whales, at least not as the main predator (humans) and its “pseudo-scientific” massacres or its absurd whale meat little market. Unfortunately orcas also come into this market, like dolphins and sharks, especially in and for the nations of Norway, Japan, Denmark and Iceland.

The orcas suffer from bad press, starting with its common name that branded them as “killer whales”. It is believed that its fame of being insatiable began in 1866, when Daniel F. Eschricht found in a female’s stomach undigested remains of almost thirty porpoises and seals. The reality is that there’s no chance for one orca to eat all those animals at once, but that the remains were ingested were ingest over an indefinite period.

If you are lucky enough to see these animals in Punta Norte, you will see that it is not necessary to see an attack to marvel and feel the greatness that this mythical animal projects.

And if you ever witness one, you will realize that this animal was born to be free and not to jump through a hoop in an aquarium.

2.3 SOUTH AMERICAN SEA LION

OTARIA FLAVESCENS

One of the largest inhabitant species of the Peninsula's coast, tender yet fierce, strong yet fragile, sea lions attract the attention of all visitors of Puerto Piramides.

LENGTH

Machos: 2.80 m.

Hembras: 2.20 m.

Recién nacido: 80 a 90 cm.

WEIGHT

Males: 350 Kg.

Females: 150 Kg

Newborn: 10-15 Kg

Sea lions are pinnipeds, or sea mammals perfectly adapted to life in the aquatic environment, but can also live on land, unlike cetaceans. These species spend a period offshore feeding and a period on the coast to breed, moult their fur and rest. On the Peninsula Valdes there are colonies of two species of pinnipeds: "South American sea lion" belonging to the family of sea lions (lions) and "Southern Elephant Seal" belonging to the phocidae family (seals).



The South American sea lion has a more leonine appearance. Adult males have a robust head, with a thick mane covering the neck and chest, hence the name sea lions. It is important to recognize males and to avoid approaching them on the beaches, as they are very aggressive. Their bite is very dangerous and would need surgical drainage to prevent gangrene of the affected area. Also important, in case you find a pup alone on the beach, do not approach because they also bite. Above all, do not try to move it as it is probable that the adults will be nearby.

They feed on fish, squid and crustaceans which are caught while diving to depths of 120m. The maximum apnoeas (submersion) recorded is 8 minutes. The adult coloration varies from yellowish brown to light brown. Newborns are black until the first moult, one month later, when they take on a dark brown colour.

REPRODUCTION

Groups of males begin to occupy the breeding colonies from December. They defend their territory aggressively, while awaiting the arrival of the females a short time later.

Fights occur between males but with little physical contact, consisting mainly of threatening postures and roars. Each male gathers a harem no greater than 10 females, but usually they “steal” females from other harems, which can cause serious injury to the female, even killing her and can also cause the death of pups, caught in the middle of a fight.

Females give birth to their young

a few days after arrival and are receptive to mating receptive again a week after birth, when they mate with the dominant males in the colony.

The colony’s reproductive activities end in late February when only females remain with their young, breasting them for about 8 months.

PERIPHERAL MALES AND KIDNAPPING

Old males and the very young ones, who were defeated by the alpha male in a territorial fight, are grouped around the periphery of the colony. One of the behaviours that show is the “females kidnapping”. These males will often take a female from the colony to a nearby coast where he mates with her, although generally she would already be pregnant by the alpha male from the harem.

From time to time, when this happens, the female’s pup will follow them. The male will not

allow the mother to care for it and the pup usually starves. If a lone pair of sea-lions are seen on the beaches near Puerto Piramides and outside the breeding colony, this is almost certainly a “kidnapping”.

The Punta Piramides sea lion colony is 5km away from the lodge, where it is possible to view mpre of these fascinating animals.



The Punta Piramides sea lions colony is 5km away from the lodge.



You can see more sea lions at Punta Norte.



2.4 SOUTHERN ELEPHANT SEALS

MIROUNGA LEONINA

By remaining quiet and concealed in the countryside of the Peninsula, you can become more familiar with these large pinnipeds and feel the peace which emanates from them.

LENGTH

Males: 6.20 m.

Females: 3.70 m

Baby at birth: average 1.30 m.

WEIGHT

Males: 4 tons.

Females: 800 Kg

Baby at birth: 40 kg



The males have a proboscis or tube, which is fully developed at 8 years old and is how this species gets the name “Elephant seals”. This tube is inflated by muscle action, exhaling retained air. The elephant seal feeds on squid and fish, which it captures in a dive that can last up to 120 minutes, allowing them to dive to a depth of almost 1,500 meters. Their large eyes allow them to capture what little light is available at such a distance from the surface.

REPRODUCTION

Elephant seals remain for most of the year, feeding in deep water and the periods spent at the coast - without food - are to shed the coat and reproduce. The annual moult occurs between spring and summer, and usually lasts a few days, revealing large patches of skin that can be seen between the boulders of the colony.

Adult males begin to arrive at reproductive colonies in August and females in September. Males compete aggressively to become the dominant or alpha male of the harem and the fights involves physical contact. It is common to see on the necks of adult males, scars caused by the teeth of other males during these fights.

Harems vary in number from a few to over a hundred females. The largest harem recorded was 130 females to one male. During the breeding period, which can last about 3 months, the males continuously monitor their harem trying to prevent another male copulating with any of their females. As they are not eating, males can lose up to 12 kg per day.

A week after their arrival, the females give birth to their young which they suckle for about 25 days with high energy milk, producing a weight gain in the pup of about 5 kilos a day, while the mother, with fasting, loses about 9 kilos per day. At the time of weaning, the initial weight of the puppy will have increased by 300%.

After weaning, the pups go through a period of fasting on the coast which can vary between 30 and 90 days, after which they venture into the sea in search of getting their first solid food. This is a very critical stage for them and during this period there is a high mortality rate amongst them.

Males reach sexual maturity at 5/6 years, but only begin to mate from the age of 10, if they survive, because more than 90% of them

will die before reaching that age. The females have a reproductive life of about 15 years, reaching reproductive maturity when they are about 5 years old. It is believed that they live up to 20 years, while males seldom pass 15 years of age.



See the wildlife calendar.



2.5 DOLPHINS

DUSKY DOLPHIN

LAGENORHYNCHUS OBSCURUS

Also known as FitzRoy Dolphin, the dusky dolphin gives splashes of magic and mischief in the calm waters of the gulf. Feel the energy of man's best friend in the sea.

It's a marine mammal from the cetacean group, Odontoceti subgroup (such as orcas). It has a short, dark beak, and the dorsal fin is black with a grey crescent clearly visible in the back half. The tail is dark and has pointed ends, with a deep notch marked in the centre. The pectoral fins are long and pointed, with the curved edge and a darker colour than the surroundings. Both eyes are surrounded by a small dark spot.

The back is dark grey or bluish black, with a light grey stripe on the flanks that runs from the caudal peduncle to the centre of the body and opens on both ends where it ends, generally below the dorsal fin. The ventral side is white and extends up above the pectoral fins to end in a narrow strip between the beak and forehead.

BEHAVIOR

Dolphins are very curious and easy to approach with vessels, as the animal seems to prefer swimming in the line of the bow of the boat. It is a very acrobatic dolphin. It usually jumps very high on the surface of the water and makes a series of pirouettes as single and double somersaults, both forward and backward. It also usually jumps

backward into the water, falling headlong, it collapses on the surface followed by aftershocks, jumps repeatedly giving "headers" to the surface and is able to perform jumps with twists and turns.

It can be observed in pods that vary from 20 to 100 individuals, although, pods of nearly a thousand dusky dolphins have been recorded. It seems to be very sociable and associates with other species both for feeding and for coexistence. Examples are three cases found in Golfo Nuevo, Chubut coast, in which a bottlenose dolphin, two common dolphins and a possible hybrid, a cross between a dusky dolphin with southern right whale dolphin (*Lissodelphis peronii*), lived within a dusky dolphins herd.

It is distributed exclusively in the Southern Hemisphere and can be seen in South America, New Zealand, Kerguelen Islands and South Africa.

REPRODUCTION

Gestation lasts nine months, after which, the female gives birth to a single calf which remains in constant contact with her, swimming next to her body below the dorsal fin and only leaving that

position to breastfeed. Lactation lasts a year or more. The average length for a newborn is 80cm. The maximum age recorded was 35. Females are sexually mature from six or seven years. From there it takes about a year to have her first baby in the summer.

FEEDING

The Dusky Dolphin feeds mainly on fish (anchovies, hake, and small mackerel) and squids. When hunting, the pod will divide into several small groups. When a group locates a school of fish, it is communicated to others, who can answer the call from 8km away. Dolphins enclose the shoal and lead it to the surface swimming around and below it. Seabirds often take advantage of this concentration of fish to feed, making it easy to detect the presence of dolphins when you see a large number of seabirds in a very small area.



THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MAN

In Argentina, they are often caught in nets set for anchovies. In Patagonia there are between 100 and 200 deaths per year as a result of trawling for hake and shrimp.

In the Rest of the World: in Peru this species was exploited commercially for their meat. Even today, several thousand animals are caught each year and generally eaten as cold cuts of meat. Chile also hunts them, although to a lesser extent, mainly to use their meat as bait in fishing traps.



If you want to take part in a dolphin watching in Puerto Madryn, ask at the front desk.



COMMERSON'S DOLPHIN

CEPHALORHYNCHUS COMMERSONII

LENGTH

Adult: up to 2.70 m.
Newborn: 80 cm.

WEIGHT

Adult: 70 Kg
Newborn: 6 kg

They are considered coastal dolphins, although they have been observed more than 100 miles offshore. In the Argentine coast, they are found from San Matías Gulf to the island of Tierra del Fuego. They inhabit coasts, fjords, bays, estuaries and river mouths. Watching dolphins usually takes place in Playa Union, about 6 km from Rawson, a city that is 152 km away from Puerto Piramides.

They live in pods and you can see small groups of 2 to 10 dolphins, scattered over a large area. However, sometimes the size of the pod can reach a hundred. Commerson's dolphins are fast swimmers and active. You can easily see them on the surface and frequently jumping, often making

several jumps in a row before diving for 15 or 20 seconds.

They can be seen swimming upside down so you can see the genital spot and determine its sex. Sometimes they can be seen surfing waves, the wakes from stem to stern of boats, and even in the wake of a whale.

The maximum recorded age, determined by the growth bands on the teeth, is 20 years.

They reach sexual maturity between 7 and 8 years. At birth, the calves are between 55 and 75 cm. long and weigh 6 kg. The first calves are observed in mid-November and it is possible that the time of calving is extended throughout the summer. During this season you can see mothers with calves swimming in sync with the rest of the pack.



If you want to assist a commerson's dolphin watching in Playa Union, ask at the front desk.



INFORMATION

If you want to be aware of what is happening
right now at peninsula, visit:

eco-lodge.blogspot.com

For more information about the lodge, visit:

www.ecohosteria.com.ar



del Nómade Eco Hostería
Av. de las Ballenas s/n
Puerto Pirámides (U9121XAQ)
Chubut - Patagonia Argentina
Phone: (0280)-4495044
From abroad: (054) 280 - 4495044