

CLIPPER 2025-26 RACE



SPECIAL GUIDANCE NOTES – ORCA INTERACTIONS

SPECIAL GUIDANCE NOTES AND PROTOCOL FOR ORCA INTERACTIONS AROUND THE IBERIAN COASTS

Issue date: 28 August 2025

Issuing authority: Clipper Race Management

Navigational area: Stage 1 - Between Northern Spain and the Strait of Gibraltar, including the Bay of Cádiz.

OVERVIEW:

As well publicised, disruptive interactions between Iberian Orca populations and sailing yachts began in 2020, leading to varying degrees of damage to yachts. There are approximately 50 individuals split into four known pods that are in the Iberian area and these animals are classified as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Interactions typically last between 10 - 60 minutes but on average less than 30 minutes. Most commonly, they occur around the midday hours but can take place in daylight and now increasingly during night hours. The average size of yacht affected was 12 - 15 metres and below (but this does coincide with the likely size of vessels making these passages) and travelling at 5 - 6 knots.

Interactions include tail splashing, swimming near boats, nudging / biting rudders and turning vessels off-course. Most interactions result in no damage to yachts, some yachts incurred minor cosmetic damage to rudders and on very rare occasions catastrophic damage has occurred that has led to flooding and sinking. Scientists believe these interactions are of a playful nature with some simulation of a predator behaviour but are not aggressive, rather they are deemed as inquisitory and as part of a fear response.

Orcas follow the natural migration path of tuna and will typically be moving north in September up the Portuguese coast. Incidents at this time of year are less frequent but there is still potential for interactions from south of the Bay of Biscay to Cádiz. Further interactions could occur on departure from the Bay of Cádiz to the south and west.

IBERIAN ORCA:

Orcas are cetaceans of the dolphin family and are in fact the biggest “dolphins”. They are not whales (baleen cetaceans), or son toothed cetes (toothed cetaceans).

The Iberian Orca is a different subpopulation, very small. They are called Orcas from the Strait of Gibraltar and the Gulf of Cádiz.

Their relatives would be individuals observed sporadically in the Canary Islands and they are genetically isolated from individuals who live in Norwegian and Icelandic waters.

The size of the adults of the Iberian Orcas is between 5.0 - 6.5 metres. They are small in size, compared to other orcas worldwide, such as the Antarctic Orcas that can reach 9.0 metres in length. The juvenile specimens measure from 3.0 to 4.5 metres and the calves between 2.0 and 3.0 metres.

In orcas there is a clear sexual dimorphism, namely, there are differences between adult males and adult females. Males present a much larger dorsal fin than females, exceeding 1.5 metres in length. Calves present a cream colouration that will disappear becoming white.

Orcas in the Strait of Gibraltar are considered distinct from other northeast Atlantic sub-populations according to studies of Photo-Identification, Mitochondrial DNA, Microsatellite Genetic Markers, Stable Isotope Ratios and Contaminant Loads.

This small sub-population, with a low number of mature individuals, relies heavily on an endangered prey species – Atlantic Bluefin Tuna. Although the adult survival rates were estimated to be consistent with stable populations, poor long-term health recruitment suggest an inferred decline in the future unless conditions improve.

ORCA INTERACTIONS:

When humans and orcas are present in the same place, or in the vicinity, that moment can be defined as a sighting or an interaction.

If orcas stay their course without paying attention to their surroundings, or even getting a close to a vessel, but continuing their way, this is known as a sighting.

Interaction is considered, when the animals fix their attention on a vessel, coming to maintain a direct contact, that is, when they approach, observe and / or touch a vessel.

Therefore, interaction is the moment in which the presence of a vessel is causing a reaction from orcas, and they respond to this presence, even in different ways.

In 2020, a new behaviour, called disruptive, was observed when some juveniles started to interact mainly with sailing vessels. However, there were also some cases of interaction with fishing vessels and larger ships. It was reported that orcas touched, pushed and even turned the smaller vessels, which in some cases resulted with damage in rudders.



In total, 52 interactions were recorded between July and November 2020 between the waters of the Strait of Gibraltar and Galicia (NW Peninsula), including the coast along Portugal. Two new cases were recorded as of January 2021 on the Atlantic coast of Morocco and the Strait of Gibraltar, highlighting the persistence of this new behaviour over time, reaching 197 interactions. In 2022, there were 207 recorded interactions.

This confirms the urgent need for specific actions based on the international coordination between administrations, navigators and scientists to avoid future damage to people, orcas and boats.

RISK AREAS:

One of the low / medium risk areas (for the Clipper Race Fleet) is identified as the west coast of Spain and Portugal from the vicinity of A Coruña / Cape Finisterre in the north to Cape St Vincent in the south. To mitigate against this, the Clipper Race Fleet will be routed further offshore than normal with an ORCA Exclusion Zone as noted in the Course Instructions for Race 1.

However, the main high-risk area (for the Clipper Race Fleet) exists in the Bay of Cádiz from Cape St Vincent in the west to Puerto Sherry / Cádiz in the east. This is a total distance of approx. 150nm.

Only one of the first 100 reports related to an interaction occurring in a water depth of up to 20m and anecdotal evidence from social media sources would seem to support this statistic. A review of the comparative data suggests there may be a reduced risk of experiencing an interaction within 2nm of shore and in less than 40m water depth. This will be monitored as further reports are received.

Sailing close to shore in shallower water may add risk to a passage, especially in the event of an interaction disabling the boat. The effects of wind and swell direction and tide on a disabled yacht and proximity to maritime rescue services should be considered when planning a passage close to shore.

REPORTED INTERACTIONS:

Diagram 1 – Cruising Association - Recorded Interactions January 2020 – January 2025

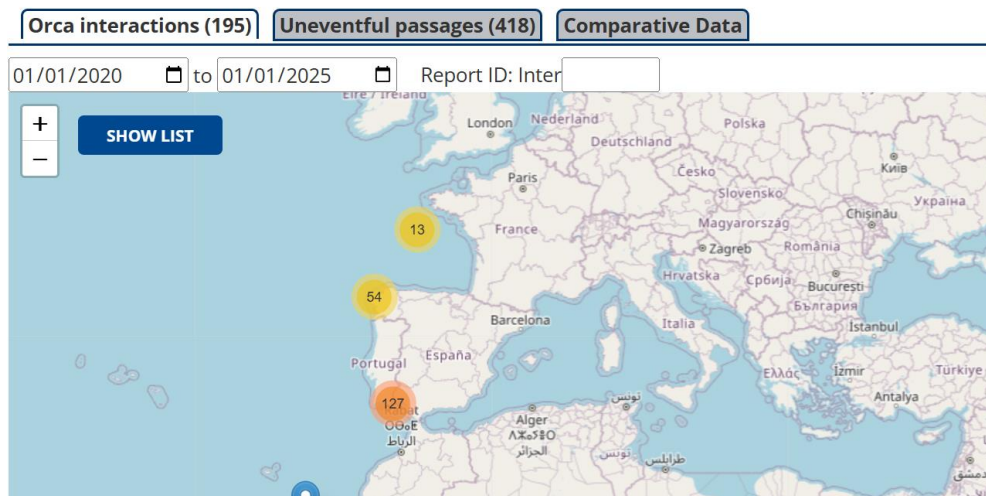
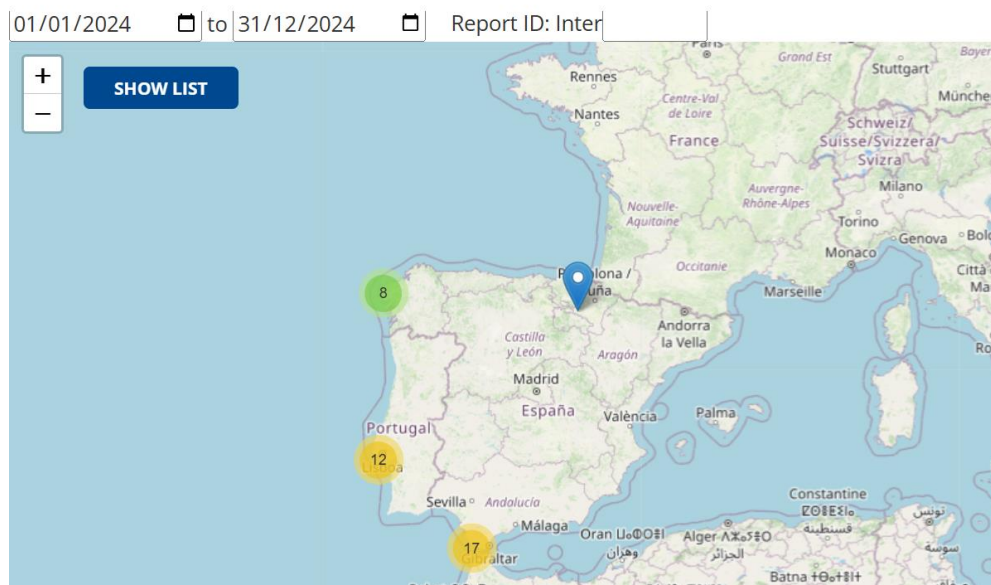
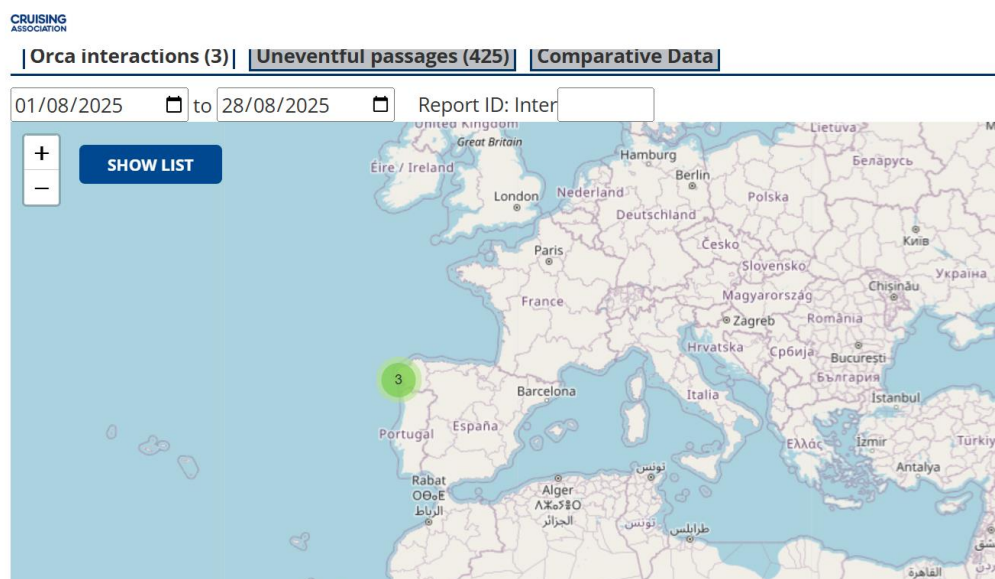


Diagram 2 – GTOA - Recorded Interactions 2024



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Diagram 3 – GTOA - Recorded Interactions August 2025



ACTIONS IN THE EVENT OF AN INTERACTION:

In the event of an interaction with orcas ALL Crew MUST follow the guidance as specified below.

All these recommendations are to be assessed by the Skipper at the time of any interaction and exact responses should be based on the situation taking into account the weather conditions, sea state, day / night hours and sail configuration.

The safety of the Crew and Vessel are of primary importance followed closely by the well-being of any orca(s) involved.

PRIMARY ACTIONS

- Monitor the situation closely.
- Slow boat (if safe to do so).
- De-power / drop headsails (& mainsail if appropriate).
- Do NOT start the engine.
- Take hands off both wheels (allow to spin freely).
- Switch off depth sounder.
- Retract Hydrogenerator(s).
- Reduce activity (and noise) on deck as much as possible.
- Move crew down below / sit within cockpit (remain quiet).
- Keep a firm hold when moving around the vessel to prevent injury.
- Stay away from side-decks / guardwires, bow and stern, and keep a low profile to minimise interest from the orcas (*see note below).
- * The Atlantic Orca Working Group-GTOA sought input from a behavioural scientist who studied orcas in captivity and advised that orcas enjoy eliciting a

response. They will hide from their keepers beneath an overhang in their aquarium, only to splash them when they peer over to look for the orcas. This is why the Safety Protocol advises to keep a low profile in order to minimise interest level.



SECONDARY ACTIONS

- Record all details as follows:
 - General status
 - GPS position / UTC time
 - Weather conditions / Sea state
 - SOG / COG
 - Sail plan
 - Duration of interaction
 - Number / type of orcas (adult / calf, etc.)
 - General orca behaviour
 - Actions taken / protocols followed
- Report to Race Management via email (or sat phone, if urgent).
- Call other Clipper vessels in the vicinity on VHF.
- Continue to monitor the situation closely.
- Take photograph or video evidence whilst keeping a low profile. Make a note of location co-ordinates and timing of the interaction along with any other relevant details including the behaviour of the orcas for future reporting.
- If interaction persists, use an airhorn blast (*see note below) inside the vessel, near the hull at waterline, towards the stern. NOTE – do not climb into the lazarette!! (*reports suggest that this is relatively successful at encouraging the orcas to move away from the vessel and not return).

ACTIONS POST- INTERACTION

- Wait for at least 10 minutes after the orcas have moved away before attempting to start sailing (to minimise interest and prevent re-interaction).
- Check for full functionality of steering wheels and rudders.
- Inspect steering system in lazarette for damage.
Inspect hull / bilges for unusual water ingress.
- Brief all crew on the situation.
- Report to Race Management via email.
- Switch on depth sounder.
- Resume racing.
- Record all subsequent actions.

PROHIBITED ACTIONS

- Reversing into orcas under engine (this is considered illegal by certain authorities).
- Deploying pingers or other noise-making devices in the water (the use of deterrent pingers is illegal without licence).
- Touching the orcas with anything.
- Preventing the orcas from moving freely.
- Using flares or any other 'weapon' against the orcas.
- Throwing anything at the orcas or into the water at all.
- Intentionally driving a vessel close to or into orcas.

REPORTING AN INTERACTION:

In the event of an interaction with orcas, the Race Management **MUST** be informed at the earliest opportunity (as stated above) via email or sat phone, if urgent.

Any vessel that is involved in an orca interaction, should inform any other vessels in the immediate vicinity (e.g. visible on AIS).

The initial report to the Race Management should be followed up with a completed Clipper Race Incident Report Form (IRF) sent to the Race Management via email.

The Race Management will manage any external reporting procedures, as required.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

What do orcas confuse the rudder with?

Orcas don't confuse the rudder with anything, they know what it is, how it moves and what effect it has when touching it. The speed of the vessel and the resistance of the rudder cause the orca to persist in action. Stopping the movement, stopping the engine and letting go of the rudder, causes them to drop their interest, ceasing the interaction, in most cases.

What kind of boats do they interact with more?

Currently, the type of boats with which they interact more, are monohull sailboats of less than 15 meters in length, with a spade rudder (also called spade), although it is probably the most common type of rudder.

Do all interactions result in damage to the vessel?

Only 50% of ships orcas interact with take any kind of damage, usually to the rudder which is where orcas are concentrated most of the time. Within the vessels that followed the protocol in 2021, 53% of vessels that did not have any damage to the vessel were due to following the security protocol.

What can we do when we have an interaction?

Try to keep the boat on course, as hitting the rudder underwater can cause the rudder wheel to suddenly spin out of control, and it has been shown that animals tend to hit the rudder harder as they feel more pressure on it and, therefore, the damage tends to be greater.

Orcas can be stimulated by human actions to interact with the boat, so please try to stay out of their sight and do not shout, try to hit them, touch them or throw things at them.

Do interactions occur at all times of the day or night?

Interactions have been recorded both during the day and at night, although more interactions are concentrated in the middle of the day.

Does speed matter?

The average speed of the boats with which they interact is around 6 knots, which also corresponds to the average speed of this type of boat (sailboats of less than 15 meters),

although an interaction has been registered in a stationary boat, and even on a ship traveling at 25 knots.



Does the colour of the hull matter?

No, all sorts of hull colours have been reported in interactions. However, the comparative data seems to suggest that black antifoul may increase the impact of an interaction and that copper antifouling may reduce that. However, there is no scientific reasoning to support this possibility and report numbers to date do not make this a statistically significant finding.

Does it matter if you are motoring or sailing?

At present there is no defined pattern nor evidence to suggest that orcas interact more or less with vessels that are either sailing or under motor, or both.

Do orcas attack humans?

There are no known direct intentional attacks on humans. In 2020, in Galicia, there were sightings on beaches among surfers without incident or interaction on their part. These orcas do not eat seals or anything that would mistake humans for food.

Was there any aggression towards the orcas?

There have been intentional or unintentional attacks on orcas mainly when there have been conflicts of interest between orcas and humans, usually when orcas have taken prey from fishing lines. Several injuries have been observed in one particular orca individual who has been interacting with sailboats, but at this time the source of these injuries is unknown.

What immediate solutions can be offered to people who experience orca interactions?

There are no solutions, this is a new situation for everyone, including orcas, which we are all dealing with for the first time. Vessels must follow the recommendations of the maritime authorities in each area and at all times. There are no infallible protocols.

Why are interactions labelled as attacks, if it is known for certain that it is not an aggressive activity?

There is no evidence of aggressive intent in orca behaviour. Orcas cannot be accused of aggression when living in their own environment, where we are the intruders.

What mitigation measures have been taken against these interactions?

During 2020, sailing vessels of less than 15 meters were prohibited in the waters of Galicia, where most of the interactions were concentrated, and this year the same was done in the waters of the Strait of Gibraltar. In Portugal, because most of the interactions were with small inflatable boats, which are the typical boats used for whale watching, especially in the Algarve, the ICNF recommended to avoid approaching orcas. Radio alerts were also given through official channels of the presence of orcas in the areas of interaction. In case of interaction, a security protocol was designed.

Sources: Atlantic Orca Working Group (GTOA), Cruising Association, Coordinator for the Study of Marine Mammals (CEMMA)

ADDITIONAL SOURCE INFORMATION:

For additional information, please see below:

Cruising Association

<https://www.theca.org.uk/orcas>

Grupo Trabajo Orca Atlantica (GTOA)

<https://www.orcaiberica.org/en>

Facebook Orca Attack Reports

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/435540734439160>

Spanish Government (MITECO) (Spanish Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico)

https://www.miteco.gob.es/en/biodiversidad/temas/biodiversidad-marina/habitats-especies-marinos/especies-marinas/bm_hayem_em_orcas.html

Institute for Nature Conservation and Forests (ICNF) (Instituto da Conservação da Natureza e das Florestas)

<https://www.icnf.pt/imprensa/prevencaodasinteracoesdeorcas>



APPS

GT Orcas – supports the identification of the most active orcas and the GTOA monthly interaction maps provide information on sightings and interactions, with maps showing areas where orcas are most active via a simple reporting platform.

Apple Store and Google Play

Orcinus – gives the opportunity to see in real time any reported sightings and interactions

Apple Store and Google Play

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