

ORCA Marine Mammal Surveyor Course FAQs

Thank you for your interest in ORCA's Marine Mammal Surveyor Course. Please see below a list of frequently asked questions. Please ensure you read through these thoroughly before contacting the ORCA Office. Many thanks for your understanding.

Are there any course prerequisites?

Yes – To take part in the Marine Mammal Surveyor Course you must have completed our '[Introduction to Whale and Dolphin Identification](#)' course first. This is a self-led, online course, hosted on our e-learning platform, which needs to be completed at least two weeks before the Marine Mammal Surveyor course. The Introduction to Whale and Dolphin Identification course is £15 and can be [booked here](#).

I am interested in marine mammals but I am not a scientist and I have no previous experience – can I still become a Marine Mammal Surveyor?

Yes – certainly! All you need is a passion for marine mammals and conservation! Our Marine Mammal Surveyor Course is aimed at a wide audience, from novices to experts. Our Marine Mammal Surveyors come from a huge range of different backgrounds. Our introductory-level course ('[Introduction to Whale and Dolphin Identification](#)', which is a prerequisite to the Marine Mammal Surveyor course) will bring you up to speed on the identification of whales, dolphins and porpoises.

How old do I need to be to survey?

You can attend and partake in ORCA's Marine Mammal Surveyor Course from 16 years of age. However, to take part in the ferry surveys, you need to be 18 years old or over. There is no maximum age limit, but you do need to have a good level of fitness to take part in our surveys, as surveys are undertaken standing up.

If I book onto the course and then have to cancel, will I receive a refund?

Please read our [Terms and Conditions](#) for all information about course transfers and cancellations.

Apart from the course, what do I need to do to get out on surveys?

Once you have completed the ORCA Marine Mammal Surveyor Course, if you would like to partake in surveys, you do need to become an [ORCA member](#). You will need to be an ORCA member both at the time of survey application and also when you undertake the survey. The only other thing you need is an ORCA Marine Mammal Surveyor Polo Shirt (£16). Details of how to obtain the polo shirt will be given at the course. The importance of wearing ORCA uniform will also be given at the course.

What is the cost implication of becoming an ORCA Marine Mammal Surveyor and doing a survey?

You will need to have completed the Introduction to Whale and Dolphin Identification course (£15), attend a Marine Mammal Surveyor Course (£120), become an ORCA member (memberships start at only £5/month) and you need to have an ORCA Marine Mammal Surveyor Polo Shirt (£16). The only other cost is getting yourself to and from the ferry port and your travel insurance. All equipment, ferry tickets and cabins (for overnight sailings) are provided for you.

One of the benefits of participating in the course is that you get the opportunity to go out to sea and collect vital data on whales and dolphins, thus taking an active role in conservation. Just by taking part in the training course and



becoming a surveyor you are supporting the charity, which receives very little Government funding, and thus enables us to conduct vital research, educate and inspire the public and ultimately inform policy and legislation to protect cetaceans.

How is the OceanWatchers course different to the Marine Mammal Surveyor course?

The [OceanWatchers course](#) is an introductory level course which is all self-study on our e-learning platform. The focus of the OceanWatchers course is a beginners level introduction on how to complete an effort-based survey for whales, dolphins and porpoises. Once the course is completed, learners get exclusive access to the full version of the OceanWatchers app, where they can undertake surveys in their own time, from land or at sea. If you wish to use our app, you will need to participate in the OceanWatchers course.

The Marine Mammal Surveyor course is a more intensive training day. It is delivered live (online via Zoom) with at least 2 ORCA staff members. The Marine Mammal Surveyor course goes a bit deeper into the science behind our surveying protocol. The data collection on our ferry surveys is more rigorous and structured, therefore thorough training is needed for individuals that wish to take part in our teams of volunteers at sea.

The Marine Mammal Surveyor course is part of a wider programme where ORCA place trained volunteers on ships, and therefore there is a great deal of logistics behind the surveys, including; liaising with our ferry and cruise partners to secure survey routes and dates, volunteer training, support and development and the time-intensive task of putting balanced survey teams together for each survey date on each route. The follow up cost to ORCA is far greater, as we then support those volunteers for years after the course by placing them on ferries and other surveys such as the Saga cruises. Therefore, the Marine Mammal Surveyor courses are more expensive.

Many of our volunteers undertake the OceanWatchers and Marine Mammal Surveyor courses, so you can always do both! We would recommend completing the OceanWatchers course first.

I have a lot of experience in marine mammals and/or scientific surveying, do I still need to do the course?

We would love for you to become an ORCA Marine Mammal Surveyor and volunteer to conduct our offshore scientific surveys and we recognise the wealth of experience that you have. However, you will still need to complete one of ORCA's Marine Mammal Surveyor training courses as our survey protocol is different to those that you would have utilised before. During the course, we also outline in detail the scientific survey protocol, recording techniques, survey logistics and equipment used. This will ensure that you get the best experience when on a survey, as well as your team and that the data is collected to the highest standard and is usable.

Do I survey alone or as part of a team?

Our Marine Mammal Surveyor Teams consist of either three or four members, depending on the ferry route and the crossing time/distance. Teams consist of an experienced Team Leader, another experienced surveyor and up to two new/less experienced surveyors – this ensures the continued training of new surveyors, an enjoyable experience for all involved and the highest level data collection. We always endeavour to put a balanced team together so that you will get the most out of your survey, and so that you enjoy yourself too!



I am completing the course with my partner, can we do surveys together?

When applying for surveys, you can specify in the comments box if you would like to survey with a partner/friend. However, we cannot guarantee this, as we do need to have a balanced team of experiences on each survey. Couples are not permitted on our cruise surveys as this is a request from the cruise company.

Am I guaranteed a place on a survey, once taking part in the course? What is the probability of a newly qualified surveyor going on a survey?

We endeavour to get all surveyors out to sea each year, but this of course is all down to availability and logistics – for example if a surveyor only applies for one survey and 100 other surveyors have also applied for that survey then this means not everyone will get on that survey. However, in the application process you can select all the dates you could do a survey on, but also specify how many surveys you are able to do in that year and this allows more flexibility when compiling the teams. If a surveyor is not fortunate enough to be allocated a survey in that season they are then prioritised for the following season. We cannot guarantee that you will get a place on a survey, but we do our utmost best to try and get everyone who has applied for a survey out.

How do I find out about surveys and apply for surveys?

Once you have attended the training course and become a member of ORCA you will be added to the Surveyor Network on our website, which is exclusively for ORCA Marine Mammal Surveyors and is where you can find all the information regarding our surveys and can apply for surveys. There is also a huge amount of resources on the Surveyor Network for you to refresh your skills and knowledge before your first survey.

All surveys are open for application in the New Year (end of January/early February), and then the teams are compiled. Teams are usually compiled on a month-by-month basis. We aim to give surveyors at least a months' notice, ideally three months' notice, if they have been given a place on a survey, but sometimes last minute places do become available.

If you wish to partake in a survey, you will need to submit an application for each survey route, where you can specify which dates you are available for, as well as how many surveys you would be able to take part in. You also need to complete our Marine Mammal Surveyor Form, which outlines your passport information and any other surveying experience you have (all of our forms are GDPR compliant). Please note that applications will only be considered if all the relevant paperwork has been filled out and sent to us.

All survey allocation logistics will be covered in detail during the course.

How often can I take part in surveys?

You can apply for as many surveys as you like – there is no minimum or maximum requirement. However, our aim is to get as many people out as possible, so it is likely that each year you will be allocated one or two surveys, depending on your availability. However, this cannot be guaranteed.



Where do the surveys take place on the ship? Are they outside or inside?

Our surveys take place on the bridge. This is where the Captain and Officers navigate the ship. It is a huge privilege to work in this area and we ask all of our volunteers to respect this highly pressurised working environment, and to maintain best behaviour at all times. Most of our surveys take place inside, however, on a couple of our survey routes we survey on the bridge wings outside. Detailed information about each individual survey route is available on the Surveyor Network and will be covered in the training course.

When do I hear if I am accepted onto the survey? And will I hear if I'm not?

You will be emailed directly if we have allocated a survey place to you. You will then need to confirm that you would like to take part in the survey before a specified date/time (this is to allow us time to find a replacement if you are no longer able to partake in a survey). Once this has been done, you will be put in contact with the rest of your team and you will be sent further information about your particular survey route and date.

As we are a very small team, we are unable to email everyone to let them know if their application was unsuccessful. However, we do put out regular news items on the Surveyor Network to inform every one of the progress with survey applications. For example, we will let everyone know via the Surveyor Network News when all survey teams have been confirmed for a particular month.

Is there a survey schedule?

Yes, ORCA liaises with the ferry companies to agree the survey dates and these span weekdays and weekends, and are from day sailings to three nights at sea, so there should be something for all.

Can I survey on my own on the ferry, if I am travelling to go to and from on holiday?

No – as our survey teams consist of three or four ORCA Marine Mammal Surveyors, and we work in partnership with our ferry companies to arrange the survey dates months in advance. You can only access the bridge of the ships on these specific dates and with your fellow team members. All of our surveys consist of a return ferry crossing.

Can I travel one way and then sail back another time?

No – as having one less survey team member would impact the rest of the team, and ultimately the data collection. We do require a full team on both legs of the survey to collect the best possible data, to help cetacean conservation. All of our surveys consist of a return ferry crossing.

How long do the surveys last?

Each of our surveys consist of one return crossing. All surveys start and finish in the UK. Due to the distance travelled between destinations our ferry surveys range from day sailings, up to sailings of three nights.

I do not live in the UK – can I undertake surveys?

Yes, you can. However, please note that all of our surveys start and finish in the UK. We cannot arrange your ferry travel to the port of survey departure.



What if I feel sea sick?

Seasickness impacts us all, but if you do suffer badly from seasickness we would recommend trialling a day sailing first to see how you get on. If you are on a survey and you start to feel unwell, please let your Team Leader know immediately so that they can arrange for you to leave the bridge and have some rest.

What equipment do I need? Do I need to buy or bring binoculars?

All equipment for the survey is provided for you by ORCA. We only use ORCA's surveying binoculars to ensure effort is consistent.

Can I take photographs?

Our primary reason for being on board is for data collection, so photography is not prioritised on surveys. We also survey from the bridge where cameras often aren't allowed due to security reasons. Your Team Leader will liaise with the crew to ask if photography is allowed and we do ask that only one camera is used per survey team. If you would like to take part in surveys primarily to take photographs, we would strongly suggest coming on one of our [Sea Safaris](#) instead! ORCA do not provide cameras on surveys.

Is food provided on board?

Generally, food is not provided on board but there are a few routes where food is provided – details are available on the Surveyor Network. You will need to arrange and pay for your own food. However, you are more than welcome to bring your own food with you, rather than purchasing this on the ferry.

What else is provided on board/in the cabins?

Towels and bedding are provided in your cabin (for overnight sailings only). Soap is provided in the bathroom, but we do recommend bringing your own toiletries.

Do you record birds?

We do not record birds in the same way as we collect data on marine mammals. However, for each survey we do create a bird list.

Do you suggest any resources if I am not confident with cetacean identification?

We recommend Princeton University Press: Europe's Sea Mammals Including the Azores, Maderia, the Canary Islands and Cape Verde by Robert Still, Hugh Harrop, Luís Dias and Tim Stenton (2019). We also have a wide variety of identification books available to purchase from the ORCA website [here](#).

What do I do at the end of the survey?

Your Team Leader deals with all of the logistics at the end of the survey, for example sending the equipment back to ORCA and getting all the data safely back to the ORCA Office.



Who owns the data?

ORCA owns all of the data collected.

Can I collect data on numerous surveys on one year for my university project?

As we try to get as many surveyors out as possible we cannot give priority to university students. However, you can fill in a data request form and, if approved, use the data collected on our surveys for your research project.

What if I am given a survey and then I have to cancel?

We request that you only confirm a survey place if you are 100% sure you can make the survey. It takes a huge amount of time, effort and resource for us to place survey teams on board, so if someone cancels this impacts the whole team and the survey going ahead. However, we do understand that unforeseen circumstances do happen, so all we request is that you let us know **AS SOON AS POSSIBLE** if you are unable to make a survey. The more notice you can give means we are more likely to find someone to take your place on the survey, meaning the survey can go ahead and that we can inform cetacean conservation.

What if the survey is cancelled?

Weather conditions and technical faults have impacted our surveys in the past. You will be informed as soon as possible if we have to cancel your survey. Once the survey has been rescheduled, the original team will get the first offer of these survey places.

Do I need a car to get to the port? Is there somewhere to park whilst I survey?

Generally, all ports that we operate from have good public transport connections, which we would encourage you to use. Most ports have car parks on site, but we are unable to arrange car parking for you or organise any other of your transport arrangements, this is your responsibility.

[Please ensure that you fully research getting to/from a ferry port before committing to a survey.](#)

Are there any routes that I cannot survey on as a new/less experienced marine mammal surveyor?

As a new/less experienced surveyor, you can partake in all surveys except for the Bay of Biscay survey route. The reason for this will be explained in the course, but it is for your benefit and the benefit of your team, as it is often a very long and busy survey route, so not the best for brand new surveyors. However, once you have one or two surveys under your belt, you can apply for this route.

Are there opportunities for progression as a Marine Mammal Surveyor/How do I become a Team Leader?

Our surveys could not run without our incredible Team Leaders. The primary role of the Team Leader is ensuring the survey team is supported, collecting the data as per the ORCA Survey Protocol, maintaining strong relationships with the crew, and upholding the reputation of ORCA. It is very rewarding and is primarily about people skills rather than surveying and identification skills. As with all our survey roles, there is no minimum or maximum number of surveys Team Leaders need to commit to, it is flexible to suit everyone's availability. We offer Team Leader training to



experienced surveyors that is tailored to each individual's needs, and this training starts with shadowing Team Leaders on surveys.

How do I go on a cruise? Can I take part in a cruise straight after the course?

ORCA places volunteer Marine Mammal Surveyor teams on selected SAGA cruises each year. These teams are made up of Team Leaders and Experienced Surveyors, as you need to be fully confident in the survey protocol and species identification to take part. Therefore, all SAGA cruise teams do need to have completed a number of ferry surveys before taking part in a cruise survey. SAGA cruises can last up to 31 nights, they are very hard work and exhausting, but extremely rewarding! The surveys are conducted out on deck with guests, and the primary reason we are on board is to deliver exceptional wildlife experiences to guests, therefore you will need to be comfortable and confident in talking about wildlife at any time and to anyone. You need to be 21 years or older to partake in any of our cruise surveys.

If you are interested in our Ocean Conservationist work, you will need to take part in our bespoke [Ocean Conservationist course](#), which offers paid opportunities all around the world with a variety of cruise line partners.

Are there further volunteering/paid opportunities with ORCA?

All of our vacancies are posted on our website [here](#). Our training courses are a great way to start getting involved with ORCA.

I have previously completed the MMS Course, but have not been out on a survey for a few years. Do you offer refresher courses?

It is important to note that we refresh our training materials every year, to reflect updates to our survey protocol and survey logistics to ensure that the vital data we are collecting is to the highest standards and so that our volunteers are having the best experiences. All updated documentation is available to view for active Marine Mammal Surveyors via the Surveyor Network.

We offer places on our Marine Mammal Surveyor courses at a reduced rate as a refresher course. We charge £50 for a refresher course, which will give you a place on an upcoming Marine Mammal Surveyor course of your choice (depending on course space availability). The timescales for a refresher course are as follows:

- If you completed the Marine Mammal Surveyor Course within 3 years and have not participated in an ORCA survey, you are eligible to apply for surveys and do not need to attend a refresher course, unless you would like to
- If you completed the Marine Mammal Surveyor Course between 3 to 5 years ago and have not participated in an ORCA survey, we would [highly recommend](#) that you attend a refresher course
- If you completed the Marine Mammal Surveyor Course 5 years ago or more and have not participated in an ORCA survey, you [must](#) attend a Marine Mammal Surveyor course as a refresher to be eligible to apply for surveys

Please contact us on info@orca.org.uk to request a refresher course. Refresher courses are only available to those who are ORCA members.

