

The False Killer Whale, *Pseudorca crassidens* (Cetacea: Delphinidae), new for Syria

by Max Kasperek

Abstract: A False Killer Whale's skull (*Pseudorca crassidens*) was found on the Syrian Mediterranean coast. This is the first record for Syria and one of the first in the eastern Mediterranean.

Kurzfassung: Der Schädel eines Kleinschwertwales (*Pseudorca crassidens*) wurde in Syrien am Mittelmeerstrand gefunden: Erstnachweis für das Land und einer der ersten für das östliche Mittelmeer.

Key words: Cetacea, whales, Syria, zoogeography, marine environment.

Introduction

Fifteen species of cetaceans, two of them belonging to the Mysticeti and 13 to the Odontoceti, have so far been found or are expected to be found in the Eastern Mediterranean (MARCHESSAUX 1980, KINZELBACH 1986). All small cetaceans are thought to be threatened in the Mediterranean Sea, and an Action Plan for their conservation has been prepared by the Contracting Parties to the Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution (Barcelona Convention) (UNEP-MAP 1992, UNEP 1994).

The False Killer Whale, *Pseudorca crassidens*, is a pelagic species. It is a cosmopolitan species of the open sea, but occurs mainly in tropical and temperate waters. It is very rare along the European and Mediterranean coasts (VAN DEN BRINK 1968). A recent record from Syria may contribute to a better understanding of the species' distribution.

Record

During a survey of the entire Syrian Mediterranean coast for marine turtle nesting (see KASPEREK 1994), I found a cetacean skull on the Mediterranean beach a few kilometres to the south of Lattakia on 22.6.1991. The skull was somewhat damaged on the underside and the teeth were absent (cf. Fig. 1–2). As no other bones of the animal were found in the vicinity, it appears that the skull was not the remains of a stranded animal but had been washed ashore. Several photographs were taken, and on the basis of these D. KOCK (Senckenbergmuseum Frankfurt) identified the skull as that of the False Killer Whale (*Pseudorca crassidens*).



Fig. 1–2. Skull of a False Killed Whale (*Pseudorca crassidens*) found on the Syrian Mediterranean coast.
Top: lateral view; Below: ventral view.

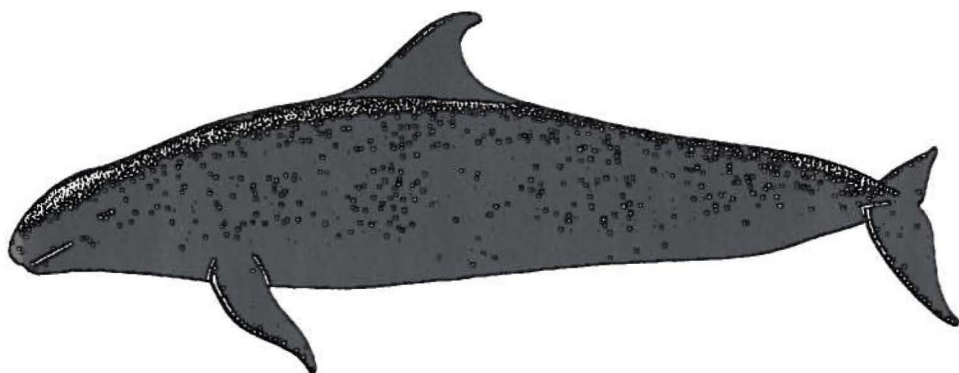


Fig. 3. False Killer Whale (*Pseudorca crassidens*). Drawing by P. MARS (in: DUGUY & DI NATALE 1994).

Discussion

The False Killer Whale is rare in the whole Mediterranean and it has not been recorded in Syria before (KUMERLOEVE 1975). For the eastern Mediterranean I found only two records: a partial skull was picked up on a beach near the mouth of River Nile in Egypt in the 1950s (MARCHESSAUX 1980) and an individual was captured near Izmir in early February 1995 (GÖREN 1995). In the western Mediterranean, it has been recorded in France, Italy and Spain (DUGUY & DI NATALE 1994, UNEP 1994). For comparison, there are only two records from the Persian (Arabian) Gulf and about half-a-dozen records from the Red Sea (WEITKOWITZ 1992).

The False Killer Whale is known to live in very large schools, often comprising several thousand animals. During strandings, many animals die simultaneously (VAN DEN BRINK 1980). As such aggregations of whales are unlikely to be overlooked and no mass strandings of this species have been reported from the Mediterranean, it can be assumed that the False Killer Whale invades the Mediterranean basin only rarely and is not overlooked.

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