



# VISITING ORCA POD STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE

Photo by NOAA Fisheries

A Southern Resident killer whale breaches off the Washington coast this February.

Whales spend part of the year on outer coast

By KATIE WILSON  
EO Media Group

PACIFIC OCEAN — The only killer whales most Long Beach (Wash.) Peninsula residents see in person are the chainsaw carvings displayed in a small square on the corner of Pacific Avenue and Fifth Street, where Long Beach's famous giant skillet also resides.

But satellite tracking now shows that orcas make an extensive hunting trip along the outer coast every year.

Orcas have probably been coming here a long time. Fishing boats sometimes report seeing them in the Columbia River plume, the nutritionally rich area where the river's outflow mixes with the ocean. Retired charter boat skipper Ron Malast recalled encountering a pod of orcas in May or June about six years ago as he was returning to Ilwaco, Wash., from a halibut fishing trip.

Some have even claimed to see them inside the Columbia estuary. In the 1930s, a young killer whale journeyed more than 100 miles up the Columbia River, delighting Portlanders for two weeks with its antics before coming to a tragic end at the hands of ex-whalers. This winter, they have been observed foraging in relatively shallow waters near the mouth of Willapa Bay.

Despite many sightings of the whales over the years and survey cruises by NOAA since the early 2000s, these particular killer whales — part of an endangered population consisting of several pods (or families) called the Southern Resident Killer Whales — remain something of a mystery. Researchers still struggle to answer seemingly basic questions about their daily habits and long-term needs.

And there are very big worries about their continued survival.

## Few babies

"What does 'sort of normal' look like?" asked Dr. Brad Hanson, a wildlife biologist with NOAA's Northwest Fisheries Science Center and chief scientist for the most recent NOAA killer whale cruise, in a phone interview March 6. His team followed the whales along the Northwest coast for three weeks beginning in February.

Researchers look to the Northern Resident Killer Whale pods that live off the coast of British Columbia, Canada, for clues, he said. Unlike the southern population, that population is clearly growing and there is a good balance of reproductive-age male and female whales.

Meanwhile, the southern whale pods "are about where they started at" when NOAA began studying them and "there's a very skewed sex class," Hanson said. Also, whales biologists don't expect to lose are dying: young, seemingly healthy, breeding-age whales.

In December 2014, a young female orca from the J Pod — one of the three pods (J, K, and L) that make up the southern resident population — was found dead near Vancouver Island. She was pregnant. Her dead calf was also female.

"That was a double whammy," Hanson said.

The pregnancy was likely a miscarriage and Hanson said initial investigations indicate the

# The sad, strange story of Ethelbert

Orca comes to a tragic end after weird interaction with humans

By KATIE WILSON  
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COLUMBIA RIVER — People told Scott White he must have seen a sea lion or a seal.

"You don't see a white-and-black seal, and they ain't 20 feet long," he told a reporter with The Daily News in Longview, Wash.

In May 2010, White had stopped for construction on Ocean Beach Highway west of Longview and was sitting on the guardrail when he said he saw killer whales surface in the Columbia River.

At the time, fish and wildlife offices received no report of orcas in the river, but said such a sighting was possible. It had happened before.

Enter Ethelbert.

She (or he) was a young killer whale, about 15 feet long, that had bumbled its way more than 100 miles up the Columbia River and landed outside of Portland in October 1931. To the amazement of the locals, who also didn't know what they were seeing at first, it proceeded to splash around in the Columbia Slough.

Eager sportsmen, guns in hand, soon lined the shore, determined to bag a whale. They shot at it until Gov. Julius L. Meier ordered them to stop. Portlanders named the whale Ethelbert and reporters wrote about "the friendly whale" that had come to "visit" the city.

By Oct. 22, Ethelbert had been in the slough for close to 10 days and the Oregon Human society decided the wounded whale needed to be put down.

As humanely as possible, they urged the state. Perhaps using dynamite.

(Finn J.D. John, an instructor at Oregon State University, writes in a November 2014 piece for The Pendleton Record that Jantzen Beach park managers, with the society's backing, also tried to get permission to catch the whale. They hoped to transfer it to a



A 1930's newspaper clipping shows gawkers gathered around Ethelbert, a juvenile orca that somehow managed to become stranded far up the Columbia River. The story ended sadly, with a pair of whalers harpooning the unfortunate creature.

saltwater tank at the park and keep it as an attraction.)

The directors of the society said the young animal needed sardines and small fish. Its throat was too small to swallow the carp, bass, salmon and trout available in fresh water, they argued. They believed it would soon starve to death. Also, the bullet hole wounds were beginning to fester.

Naturalists, meanwhile, according to an article in the Eugene Register-Guard, argued there was no reason why Ethelbert couldn't live out the rest of its life in the river.

"Today, at any rate," the reporter concluded, "he appeared as chipper as any whale that ever spouted."

The end arrived swiftly. Former whaler Ed Lessard and his son Joseph set out with harpoons. According to some reports, Ed Lessard would later claim he killed Ethelbert for scientific purposes.

"I wanted to get him and look at him," he said in an article found in a Utah newspaper. "I used to kill them, but I never saw one just like him."

So two weeks after arriving, Ethelbert

was dead. The harpooned body reportedly sank almost immediately. Before the Lessards could retrieve the carcass, though, they were arrested, charged with disturbing the public peace and morals, killing a fish with illegal tackle and fishing in the slough with illegal tackle. But the charges didn't stick. After all, no laws existed for inland whaling.

Meanwhile, other people snagged the whale carcass. According to Oregon newspapers, Ethelbert went on display and at some point, though it is not clear when, was pickled in a tank full of embalming fluid.

But Ed Lessard didn't give up.

The state of Oregon had seized the whale, so he fought the state. Eventually, following an Oregon Supreme Court ruling that decided in favor of the state, the court offered Lessard a deal: If he paid back his court costs, then, for an extra \$103, he could have Ethelbert, according to John.

Ethelbert's final resting place is unknown.

John, in his piece, says the whale was rediscovered in St. Helens, after the tank it was preserved in began to

leak, causing a terrible stench in town in August 1949. He says the whale was buried a week later.

But a 1971 Associated Press article reported that Ed Lessard carted the whale around for six to seven years, a regular traveling show. When he retired the show, he took the whale, still in its box, to property he owned on a mountain near Washougal.

The reporter claimed the whale was still there, an open secret kept by the property's various owners and later made public by a Clark County land appraiser. Still, there was no rush to turn the site into a tourist attraction.

"The whale has lain there since, losing his formaldehyde smell to the elements but resisting decomposition and erosion," the reporter wrote. "The metal box has rusted, fir trees have sprouted around it, and the road leading to the spot has been lost to brush; the whale still lies there, mouth open and eyes staring."

Ethelbert "will fade back into rumors and tales again," the reporter concluded, "which, of course, no one is really going to believe."



Photo by NOAA Fisheries

This orca was photographed near the mouth of the Columbia River on Feb. 24 by researchers from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. North Head Lighthouse and Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center can be seen in the background.

mother may have died from a related infection.

"You look back 40 years and we had fewer reproductive-age females than we do now and the population managed to grow from 74 to 80," Hanson said. Now, there are 77 whales, but of those 30 are female and few are producing calves. It is possible they are having calves, but those calves are dying before biologists ever lay eyes on them.

## L pod woes

L pod is especially worrisome. Along with K pod, L pod is the group that so far appears to spend the most time on the outer coast. According to NOAA studies, at the end of 2010, L pod had few young whales and many mature whales reaching the end of their breeding years.

Ken Balcomb, a senior research scientist at the Center for Whale Research on San Juan Island, Wash., takes it another step further. L pod is on its way to extinction, he wrote in a public comment against a proposed renewal of a permit that would allow the Navy to test sonar in whale and salmon habitat.

In written remarks submitted Feb. 28 in support of expanding the area of critical habitat for southern resident orcas, Balcomb said, "Overall, the population is now worse off than it was when it was first designated Endangered in November 2005, in spite of \$15.6 million spent on recovery efforts. L pod, read most coastal in this habitat, is well on its way to extinction with only two viable matriline remaining of ten that were pres-

ent when we began our demographic studies of this population in 1976."

Still, there is a spot of hope: Hanson and his team spotted a calf, L121, only several days old, swimming with L Pod directly off the Long Beach Peninsula Feb. 26 during the survey cruise.

## Surveys and sonar

The Navy is seeking to reauthorize five-year testing permits to continue testing and training in the Olympic National Marine Sanctuary. NOAA will need to sign off on these applications since the testing will likely result in "incidental take," or the "unintentional harm or harassment of an endangered species as long as it affects a small portion, has no more than a negligible effect, and does not have an unmitigable effect," according to NOAA spokesperson Michael Milstein.

But advocates and environmental groups say the Navy's plans could decimate marine mammal and fish populations.

At a press conference March 5, Lynne Barre, NOAA's west coast branch chief said, the agency is in the process of reviewing information about the Southern Resident Killer Whales' use of coastal habitat and considering a petition to expand critical habitat areas — including potentially 700 miles of coastline and areas where the Navy is hoping to test.

This would give the whales an extra layer of protection.

Much of the data gathered on this year's whale survey

cruise will inform that process, she said.

## Lack of data

The 2013 and 2015 cruises are the most productive to date, Hanson said. But while they gathered a wealth of information on the whales' winter habits and enjoyed many successful days of observation both years, it's not enough to see patterns emerge.

For example, he and others believe the southern population's low birthrate could be due to contaminants in the water such as PCBs. They know the whales are experiencing higher levels of contamination in their bodies than before. Part of the problem is they don't have anything to compare the current levels to. They don't know exactly what the contaminant levels looked like in prior decades.

The whales shed these contaminants at a relatively low rate, Hanson says, and a female will transfer much of them to her calf. High contaminant levels could mean a higher suscep-

tibility to disease, among other things.

Balcomb told ocean conservation group BlueVoice that he saw "pretty serious mortality" beginning in the mid-90s. He looked at video footage from the 1980s and 90s and said, "Just in a period of less than 20 years we've lost most of the adult males in the whole southern resident community" — something he attributed to high PCB levels in the whales' tissues.

"Their immune systems are depressed, much like AIDS," he told BlueVoice co-founder Hardy Jones.

But, Hanson said, transient killer whales — ones that range around the North Pacific Ocean and go after marine mammals, unlike the southern and northern residents, which eat fish — are loaded with contaminants.

"They make the southern residents look clean," he said. "And that population is growing quite well."

"I ask that question all the time: Explain why this happens," he added. "...There's no pattern to it. That's the problem."

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