

ORCAS

WASHINGTON'S FAMOUS FISHING CAPITAL



f Pacific County's five major waterfronts — the Pacific Ocean, Willapa Bay, the Columbia, Willapa and Naselle rivers — the Pacific is the most spectacularly popular.

People pour down to the seashore burbling with a sort of primeval wonder. The presence of orcas, sea lions, great white sharks, blue whales and other superstars of the animal kingdom is a large part of our fascination with the outer coast of Washington state.

We have a sudden astonishing ability to peer down from space and track an orca as he and his tribe rocket through the cold saltwater just off our shore. Aided by our satellites, we can see how swiftly an orca pod can traverse hundreds of miles of coastline, swimming up to 30 mph, relentlessly slicing through the ocean like a human family on an interstate highway vacation determined to make Reno by nightfall.

Throughout the winter and spring, Pacific County residents and visitors keep close track of amazing months-long hunts by the L pod of Southern Resident Killer Whales, sometimes joined by members of the J and K pods. All have been celebrities around Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands for decades. But only recently has tagging by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration allowed us to systematically keep up with their adventures in the open ocean, sometimes swimming well within sight of the Long Beach Peninsula and Cape Disappointment.

What drives them? Can those enormous brains discern the distant whispers of delicious fish or precisely compute the date and place of a



An orca splashes in the waters of the Columbia River with Cape Disappointment Lighthouse in the distance. Orcas from Puget Sound's famous J, K and L pods are frequent visitors to the mouth of the Columbia, where they hunt for Chinook salmon. Other orcas from the North Pacific Ocean also spend time here. — PHOTO COURTESY NOAA

salmon run's return after three years at sea? Does something like an air-traffic control screen play across an orca's cerebral cortex, plotting the vectors of currents and tides and the flavor of the sea? Do they experience ecstasy as the cold ocean massages their smooth, warm skin? Are the deep, black ocean depths as lovely to them as a clear blue sky is to us?

We can peek through and catch the slimmest glimpse of a swirling, mysterious maelstrom in which warriors undertake epic journeys. Maybe they quest after adventures as much as they pursue fish. We know they love Chinook salmon

as much as we do — perhaps more.

What must it be like to be an orca, aside from us the apex predator of the North Pacific? His brain five times larger than ours, tagged orca L84 became his species' unwitting ambassador. In a better-balanced world, orca scientists would be simultaneously monitoring the movements of an ordinary human up in the appalling expanses of the air-bathed realm.

As it is, keep your eyes open when on the beach or especially when out on a charter fishing trip for orcas, humpbacks and other denizens of the deep. These memories will last a lifetime.

WHALE WATCHING:

In recent years, an unprecedented number of blue whales were sighted grazing above the deep Guide Canyon west of Long Beach Peninsula's northern tip.

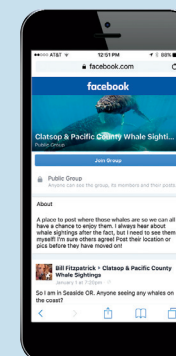
Gray whale sightings are routine in during spring and fall migrations. The Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in Cape Disappointment State Park is a nice place to look for whale spouts.

For more info, visit www.whalespoken.org



Volunteers Georgeann Silvermann and Richard Cook look out over the ocean for gray whales at the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center at Cape Disappointment State Park, Washington. Over a five-day period, Saturday to Wednesday, volunteers at the center count whales that pass by.

— PHOTO BY JOSHUA BESSEX



SOCIAL MEDIA TIP:

Columbia River whale fans post up-to-date information on the Facebook page Clatsop & Pacific County Whale Sightings. Join the group for quick personal guidance about where and when whales are being seen.

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