

# Research team studies whale features, survival

By ALLAYANA DARROW  
Mail Tribune

A new website created by researchers at Oregon State University brings the realities of life undersea to the surface, offering a chance for the public to virtually meet whales that have survived propeller injuries, fishing gear entanglements and changes in prey availability due to shifting ocean conditions.

The website, [individuwhale.com](http://individuwhale.com), covers ongoing research, information about gray whales and stressors the animals face due to human activity.

Descriptions of each whale include distinguishing features, length of time in observation, feeding habits, birth, health history and body condition. You can meet “Scarlett,” a Pacific Northwest resident since the mid-1990s, or “Buttons,” a chameleon of the sea.

These whales gained their nicknames from researchers in the Geospatial Ecology of Marine Megafauna Laboratory at the Oregon State Marine Mammal Institute. The team has cataloged nearly 200 whales in the Pacific Coast Feeding Group with unique names and identification numbers.

“We wanted to share with Oregonians, and the public in general, the stories of these whales because they are residents of Oregon like us, and they have personalities and stories to tell,” said lead researcher Leigh Torres.

The majority of gray whales in the eastern north Pacific traverse the Oregon Coast on their winter migration route to Mexico’s breeding grounds, before turning north in March to find summer feeding grounds between Alaska and Russia. The research team studies a population of gray whales that sticks around the West Coast in the summer months, known as the Pacific Coast Feeding Group.

Torres and the research team have conducted annual health exams and research on the population since 2016.

Boats and drones are used to spot whales, then researchers collect fecal samples in their wake, which can be analyzed for reproduction and stress markers.

Drone images allow for documentation of body condition and behavior.

Among the featured whales: “Sole,” first sighted in 1999, always returns to a 3.2-mile area around Newport and Depoe Bay.

“This is an incredible level of site fidelity for an animal that can migrate 20,000 (kilometers) in a year,” according to Sole’s IndividuWhale profile. “It’s amazing how reliably we found Sole in her ‘predictable patch of the ocean,’ where most of the time



Oregon State University Marine Mammal Institute

The Oregon resident gray whale ‘Scarlett’ is seen here with her calf ‘Rose’ on her back.

*‘WE WANT PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THEIR BEHAVIOR AND THESE INDIVIDUAL WHALES. WE’RE TRYING TO REACH THOSE EVERYDAY OCEAN USERS. IF EVERYONE CHANGES ONE BEHAVIOR, LIKE SLOWING DOWN WHILE BOATING NEAR THE REEFS WHERE GRAY WHALES FEED, REDUCING USE OF PLASTICS THAT POLLUTE THE OCEAN AND REMOVING RECREATIONAL CRABBING GEAR PROMPTLY SO ANIMALS DON’T GET TANGLED IN IT, THESE ARE ALL THINGS THAT CAN MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE.’*

Leigh Torres | lead researcher

we see her foraging, so she must like the prey on the menu here and be very good at catching it.”

“Roller Skate,” first identified as a calf in 2015, was spotted four years later with fishing line tangled around her fluke. In 2020, she was found diving a bit differently, having survived a “very gnarly embedded wound, and part of her fluke was effectively amputated,” said doctoral student Lisa Hildebrand.

With the website, the research team hopes to educate the public about threats facing the state’s gray whale population.

One featured whale, “Zorro,” was once a regular in the group, but has not been spotted in 2021, according to the research team.

Responding to a decline in the number of whales observed each summer in the Oregon study area, the research team investigates feeding strategies in certain habitats, and the connection between a decline in kelp density and decreased prey availability.

In Port Orford, the team collects data on kelp health, urchin density, zooplankton and gray whale foraging. Over the past six years, the team documented a “coincident

and dramatic increase in urchin density and decline in kelp health,” and decreased zooplankton prey and whale foraging.

“We want people to understand the connection between their behavior and these individual whales,” Torres said. “We’re trying to reach those everyday ocean users. If everyone changes one behavior, like slowing down while boating near the reefs where gray whales feed, reducing use of plastics that pollute the ocean and removing recreational crabbing gear promptly so animals don’t get tangled in it, these are all things that can make a huge difference.”



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