



KAKAWIN OF CLAYOQUOT SOUND

Stories & Insights of Bigg's
Killer Whales

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FOREWORD

Kakawin is the Nuučaañuł (Nuu-chah-nulth) word for Killer Whale, loosely translating to “something sticking out in the back” in reference to the dorsal fin.



INTRODUCTION

Strawberry Isle Marine Research Society (SIMRS) is a registered charity and non-profit organization based in Tofino, British Columbia on the traditional territory of the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation. Since 1991, SIMRS has been dedicated to conducting long-term research and monitoring, providing marine mammal emergency response, and educating the public about marine ecosystems in Clayoquot Sound and beyond.

The purposes of the Society are to:

- a. Conduct primary research in local marine ecosystems;
- b. Establish long-term monitoring of the unique marine life in Clayoquot Sound;
- c. Increase regional capacity for marine mammal emergency response;
- d. Promote citizen science and stewardship of marine ecosystems;
- e. Support other researchers and organizations dedicated to ocean conservation.



SIMRS was founded by local legend Rod Palm (top left) and research originally took place in the historical NorVan (bottom left), a steam-powered vessel originally launched in 1900 now hauled above the ocean's grasp on Strawberry Isle in Clayoquot Sound. This was a much grander purpose for the vessel, previously known for scraping along piers and wharves due to inexperienced captains, and long journeys courtesy of a temperamental boiler. Although SIMRS is now operated from Tofino (Načiks) based offices, the NorVan is still home to Rod and to the many whale bones he has collected over the years.



INTRODUCTION

About the Book

Since establishment, Strawberry Isle Marine Research Society has prided itself on not only collecting sound scientific data to contribute to the conservation of killer whales, but also promoting stewardship of these magnificent animals through captivating storytelling. Rod is perhaps most famous (at least locally) for his passionate storytelling capabilities, sharing his research from a first hand perspective of his encounters with Kakawin. From seasonal “Scuttlebutt” newsletter updates, to thorough year-end reports, to countless in person presentations both near and far, Rod took every opportunity to share his insights, gained through decades of experience, with the world. Since his retirement, we at SIMRS carry on his legacy of storytelling through these methods and more modern platforms such as social media and our “Scuttlebutt” blog posts on our website.

This book is meant as a collection of stories and insights that bring a sense of awe, wonder, and passion for our killer whale kin and give insight into the day-to-day lives of the killer whales in Clayoquot Sound. We hope by sharing these encounters our readers feel empowered to be better stewards for these animals and their aquatic home. After all, conservation is not possible without first connection!

In 2016, we published the “Bigg’s Killer Whales of Clayoquot Sound: A Field Guide” as a catalogue of all the individuals and gangs that had been known to visit Clayoquot Sound, and to provide some context and insight into the behaviour of these visitors. This book is not meant to be used in place of an identification catalogue for individuals and gangs, however it can be used to complement the information in such catalogues as it provides further context and meaning to the data. Please refer to our References and Resources sections (page 47) to find out where you can access Bigg’s (Transient) killer whale identification catalogues.

INTRODUCTION

Bigg's Killer Whale Monitoring

Over 30 years ago, Rod Palm (SIMRS Founder) began taking identification photos of Bigg's killer whales in Clayoquot Sound for Dr. Michael Bigg and the team at Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO). It soon became apparent to Rod that many of these whales were spending a lot more time in Clayoquot Sound than was previously suspected. This passion project inspired him to launch Strawberry Isle Marine Research Society as a way to continue a more serious monitoring effort. Kakawin (killer whales) are an ecologically and culturally significant animal in British Columbia and Bigg's killer whales are currently listed as "threatened" due to biological factors such as small population sizes and low reproductive rates, as well as anthropogenic factors including habitat degradation, pollution, and vessel-related disturbances. SIMRS believes that monitoring their population is a critical part of assessing the overall health of the local marine ecosystem.

The Bigg's Killer Whale Monitoring Project has grown and evolved over the past 30 years, into what is now a citizen-science collaboration involving passionate west-coasters. Beyond SIMRS staff, this program relies heavily on the voluntary participation of local mariners, most frequently eco-tourism operators, water taxis, waterfront residents, tugboats, fish farms and airlines. With this network, monitoring can be done continually and year-round.



As reports are from volunteers already on the water, this valuable data is collected without additional vessels impacting marine mammals. Sighting details of the whales, individual ID code (collected using photo-identification and cataloging methods), behavioral and location data collected are still shared with DFO. Our findings are also shared with a network of researchers, non-profit organizations, and our communities in an effort to support a wide breadth of conservation initiatives.

CLAYOQUOT SOUND & OUR STUDY AREA

We acknowledge and respect that our study area is within the traditional and unceded territory of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nations, including the hiškʷiiʔath / Hesquiaht, ʕaaḥuusʔath / Ahousaht, ʕaʔuukʷiʔath / Tla-o-qui-aht, Yuuʕuʔiʔath and Toquaht Nations. Members of these nations are often the first to report sightings of Kakawin and have immeasurably helped with the success of this project.



CLAYOQUOT SOUND & OUR STUDY AREA

Our primary research area extends from Quisitis Point (lat. 49° 00.00', long. 125° 40.00') at the south end of Long Beach north to Barney Rocks (lat. 49° 20.50', long. 126° 17.00'). This represents a 33 nautical mile section of the Vancouver Island coast extending as far inland as 25 miles from the open sea. Offshore monitoring is generally within two miles of the coast but has extended as far out as 34.2 miles.

Our research area encompasses the waters of Clayoquot Sound, within the unceded territories of the $\lambda a\eta u u k^{w} i \eta a \eta$ / Tla-o-qui-aht, $\zeta a a \eta u u s \eta a \eta$ / Ahousaht and $h i \zeta k^{w} i i \eta a \eta$ / Hesquiaht First Nations. This large body of water is in Nuučaanuł / Nuu-chah-nulth Territories, on the west coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. Clayoquot Sound is most frequently accessed by visitors from the coastal municipality of Tofino (Načiks) located within the Tla-o-qui-aht Tribal Parks.

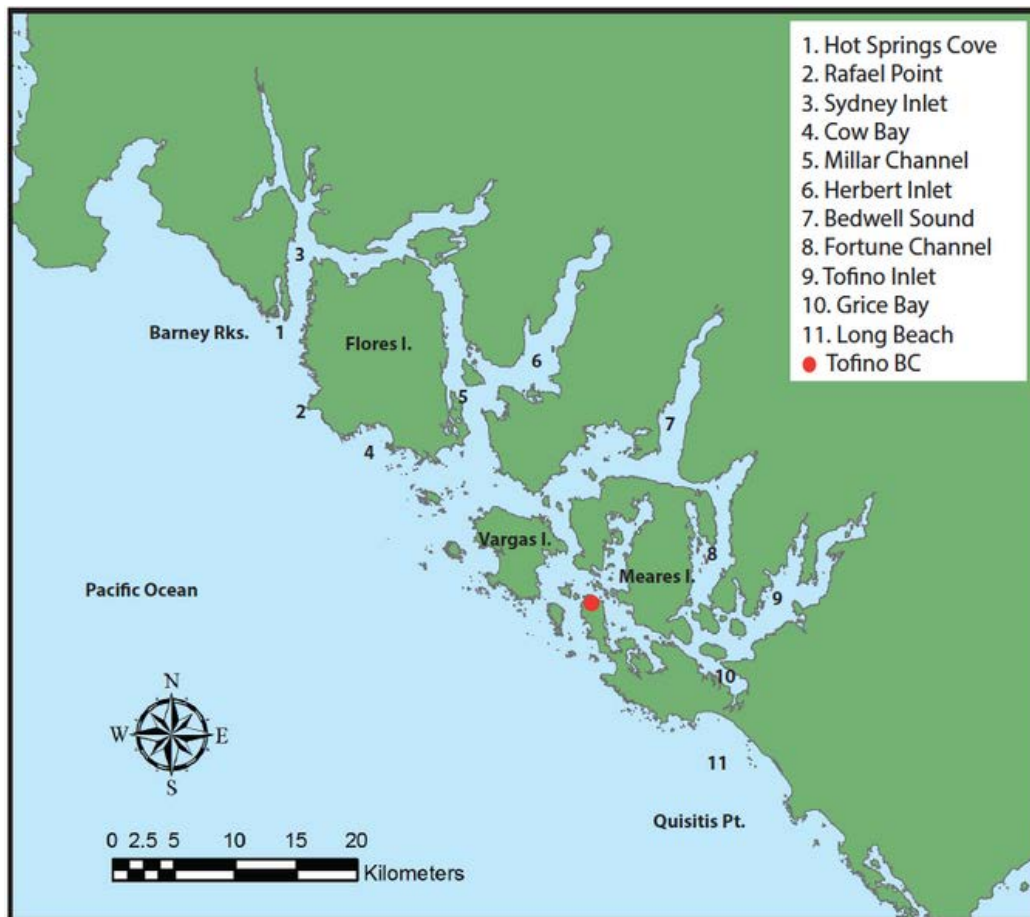


Figure 1: Map of our study area. To the north at Barney Rks and south to Quisitis Pt. Map created with ArcGIS 10.1., 2016.

KILLER WHALES OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Cultural Significance

Over thousands of years, Nuu-chah-nulth Nations have held Kakawin in high esteem. They are regarded as wolves of the sea, integral to safeguarding the balance of nature, as wolves do on land. Kakaŵin & Qwayačiik (orcas and wolves) are not to be hunted or disturbed, but given right of way and protected in Nuučaanuł / Nuu-chah-nulth Indigenous Law.

The livelihood and continued existence of Nuu-chah-nulth Nations (nuučaañuł, meaning “all along the mountains and sea”) depends on the health of all the ecosystems within their home. The Nuu-chah-nulth saying, “Hishuk-ish ts'awalk” meaning “everything is one, all life is interconnected” guides the Nations in living in harmony with the land of salmon and cedar, and the waters of the Kakaŵin (Orca whale).



ORCA DORSAL

"There are four clans in Gitxaala, my home village, also known as Kitkatla, B.C. All children are born into the clan or, tribe of the mother. I was born Eagle and it is the first of the series of four clans or tribes as they are also known at home. My father, Art Vickers, was born under the Orca totem. We grew up loving to see the dorsal fins of the Orca as they came by to visit us in the village. There are many stories and examples of the #1 predator in the oceans of the world. I continue to thrill at the sight of an Orca Dorsal as it breaks the ocean surface."

Original Artwork by
Roy Henry Vickers
May 2017

KILLER WHALES OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST



LONE BULL

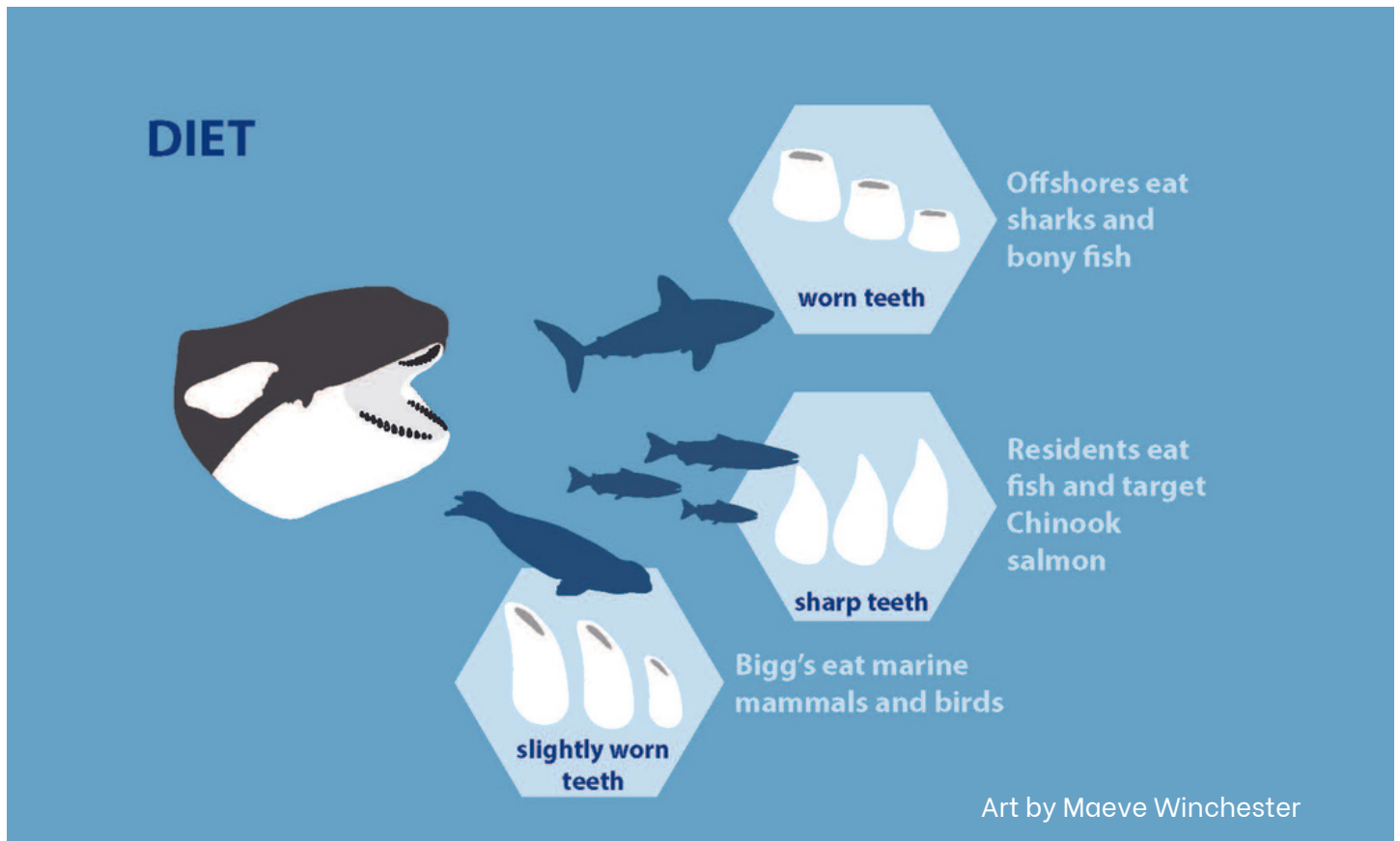
"I have a friend, Cyril Aster, who shares her photos from the area around my home village of Kitkatla (Gitxaala). Cyril shared a photo of a lone bull orca in Grenville Channel. The picture moved me to create. I'm thankful for old friends who share a love of the outdoors and the sea. The Orca is one of our clans, along with Eagle, Raven, and Wolf. My father was Orca, as was my Grandmother, Kathleen Collinson Vickers. There are many stories handed down through generations of the orca and how they have helped and taught our people. Stories of rescued people, stories of teaching people, as in my latest book, Orca Chief. All the stories teach us the laws of our people, which are based on love and respect. So many memories and stories come through this creation of Lone Bull."

Original Artwork by
Roy Henry Vickers
December 2015

KILLER WHALES OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

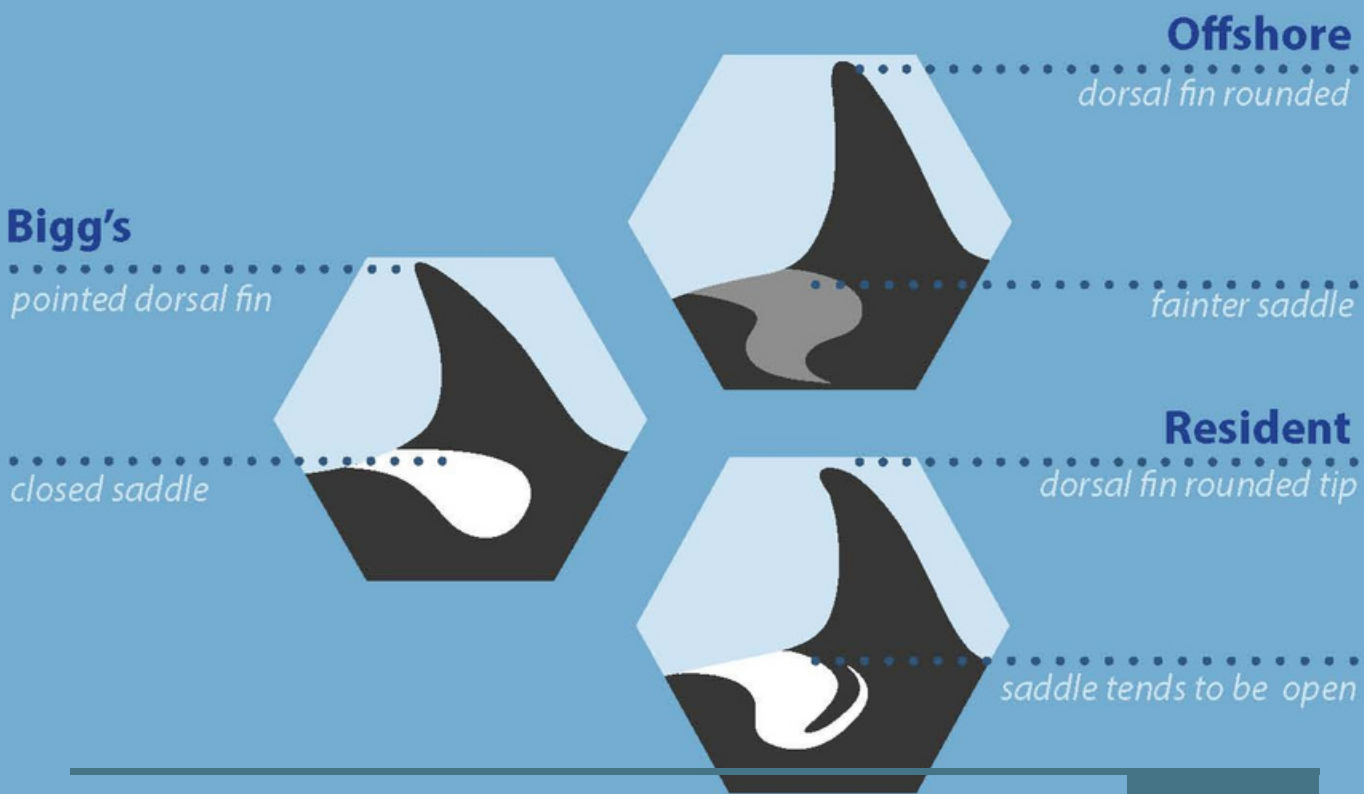
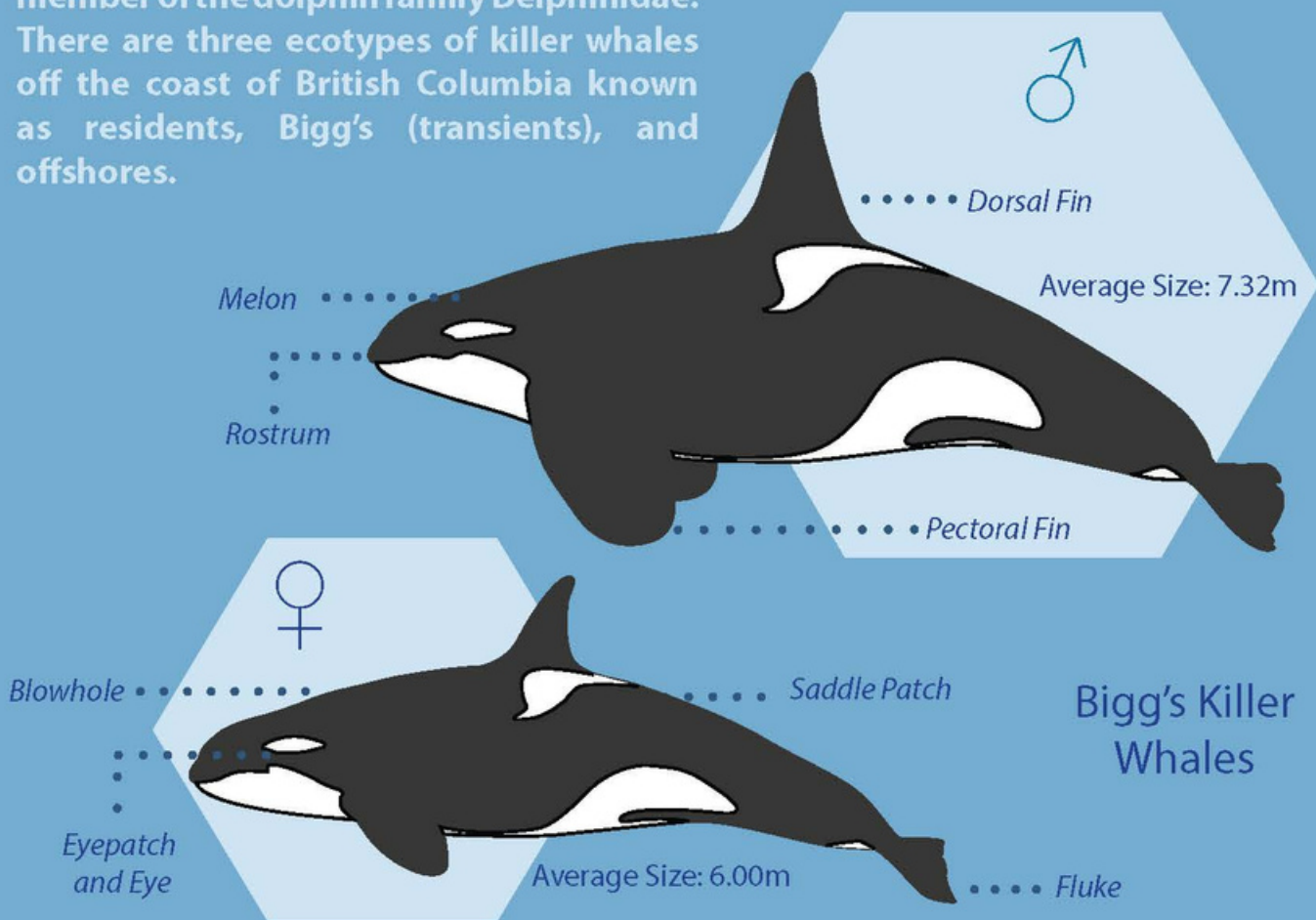
Killer Whales at a Glance

Killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) or Kakawin are considered a threatened and endangered species in British Columbia. They are a species of immeasurable regional, cultural, and ecological importance. There are three ecotypes or cultures of killer whales in British Columbia's waters: Residents, Bigg's (also known as Transient), and Offshore killer whales. In Clayoquot Sound, the mammal-eating Bigg's ecotype is most frequently seen and therefore are the focus of our monitoring efforts. Bigg's killer whales are threatened because of small population sizes, low reproductive rates, and anthropogenic changes in the marine environment such as pollution, habitat degradation, acoustic and vessel-related disturbances.



KILLER WHALES OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

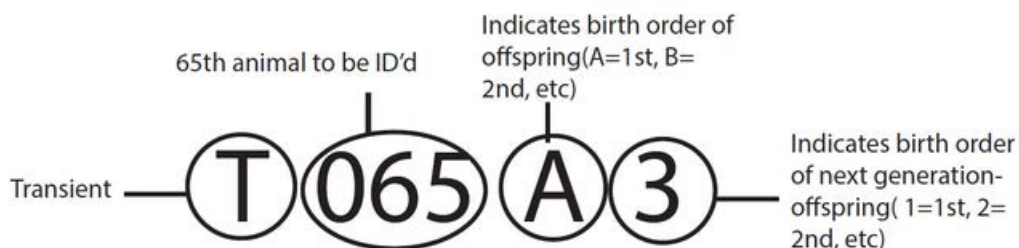
Killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) are the largest member of the dolphin family Delphinidae. There are three ecotypes of killer whales off the coast of British Columbia known as residents, Bigg's (transients), and offshores.



KILLER WHALES OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Naming of Killer Whales

Bigg's killer whales are named using an alpha-numeric code system that expresses the matriarchal relationship of the individual. All code names begin with a T for transient (a.k.a Bigg's), followed by an assigned number. Animals who were known before the system began or whose mother is unknown were given a unique number. All known offspring of an identified female share the same code as their mother, then have a letter or number assigned to indicate birth order. In subsequent generations, the indication of birth alternates between letters and numbers.



Often killer whales are also given a common name associated with their numerical name. These common names can vary depending on where the animal is spotted. For example T109 is known as "Big Momma" in Clayoquot Sound and throughout British Columbia, but as "Noyes" in South East Alaska. This is why the numerical system works best for researchers, while the common names help connect and engage people. Gangs refer to the family groups of Bigg's killer whales, similarly as Pods refer to families of Resident killer whales. Gangs are led by their matriarch, the oldest female member of their family, and usually consist of 2-6 members. Bigg's gangs are known to be more fluid in structure than Resident pods, where families often break apart when they become too large and gangs will sometimes even join other gangs for periods of time.



STORIES & INSIGHTS

Disclaimer

The stories shared through this book offer amazing glimpses into the lives of Kakawin (killer whales) of Clayoquot Sound and nearby waterways. However, it is crucial to note the context of these encounter stories. Many of the encounters shared below were instances of happenstance and “right time, right place” moments that lead to **brief and unexpected** close encounters with these whales. In no way by sharing these stories do we support the intentional close approach to killer whales, which is against the Marine Mammal Laws and Regulations of Canada. We must therefore emphasize that none of these encounter stories were in defiance of these laws and regulations surrounding killer whales in British Columbia and the individuals involved were adhering to the best practices at the time of the encounter. When suddenly approached by killer whales closer than the legal 200-400m viewing distance, the best practices are to turn your vessel engine and sonar off and patiently wait until the whales pass and distance themselves before slowly maneuvering away when safe to do so.

All the individuals who shared their stories in this book are long time mariners, many who have been trained in whale watching etiquette and are well versed in their responsibilities as boaters. When you spend as much time on the water as some of these people, you may be just as lucky to be blessed by a unique encounter such as these!

Please remember if you “**See a Blow, Go Slow!**” and respect the Marine Mammal Regulations when boating. You can learn more about these regulations at the end of this book or by visiting www.bewhalewise.org.

With that, we hope you enjoy the stories, visuals, and insights to come...



STORIES & INSIGHTS

Clayoquot Sound's Frequent Visitors

With over 30 years of monitoring killer whales in Clayoquot Sound, we have come to know the gangs that visit our waters in an intimate way. Killer whale culture is passed on from generation to generation, this includes knowledge of where to find food and at what times. What is sometimes referred to as “site fidelity” in scientific terms, essentially means some of these families have a particular interest in a geographical area such as Clayoquot Sound and have been known to visit almost every year, sometimes over decades. We call these gangs our Frequent Visitors, as they do not stay year-round but rather visit us for a few days or weeks at a time on a fairly regular basis. Tracking these families over the years we’ve come to know them extremely well, almost as our own extended family. They truly hold a special place in the hearts of locals, as nearly everyone who has spent some time on the West coast has some story to share about these animals.



Below we'll highlight a few of the most infamous gangs and individuals that frequent our study area and share some of the unique stories about them over the years.

STORIES & INSIGHTS

WAKANA & RAINNY

T011 ♀ 1963 & T011A ♂ 1978

Rainny might be considered one of the most iconic “Lone Bull’s” around. He's one of the largest Bigg's killer whales , with a dorsal fin rising to a whopping 6ft, becoming an easily recognizable visitor to our waterways. For many decades, Rainny traveled closely with his mother Wakana (T011) until he showed up one day in 2019 without her, consequently she was officially presumed dead in 2020.


STORIES & INSIGHTS

“Rainny is the iconic orca around here that everybody knows. Instantly recognizable, you can't see his dorsal fin and mistake it for anyone else.

There are a few iconic Rainny moments that will be in my heart forever. My second summer working here, on October 15th, 2018, we were on a Jamie's boat. It was a staff thing after work and there was a beautiful sunset. One of those classic Roy Henry Vickers sunsets, pink and orange and incredible. Rainny and Wakana were just cruising into the sunset. We watched them cruise out through foam reefs, or not quite that far out, but pretty close to town. Honestly, that image will probably be burned in my brain forever.”

- Alys Hoyland



 W. C. Barnes

STORIES & INSIGHTS



ORCA SUNSET

“Fishing with my Grandpa, Henry Vickers was one of my greatest learning experiences. Henry was a man of the outdoors, a trapper, a fisherman, and a hunter. One beautiful summer day we were fishing sockeye with our gill net. My job was to keep an eye on our progress while Grandpa slept. The sound came from far down the channel and sounded like gunshots so I went to wake Grandpa up. He listened for a few seconds and said they were killer whales then curled up to return to sleep. I ran up on deck and waited as the sounds got closer and then was treated to an unbelievable spectacle. There were dozens of whales and a few were jumping clear of the ocean and landing with a loud smack and that was what sounded like the gunshots in the distance. There were many incredible experiences on the sea as I grew up and that one will always be uppermost in my mind. When John Forde gave me the picture of an orca at sunset the memory of whales breaching came to mind and so I thank John for the wonderful memory and the inspiration for ORCA SUNSET.”

Original Artwork by
Roy Henry Vickers
June 2005

STORIES & INSIGHTS

"We were on the Leviathan II headed up Browning passage when the skipper called out that there were orcas up ahead. There were two of them. We slowed down to follow alongside them. With the ID catalogues on board and the trusty ol' binoculars, we were able to identify the two. It was "Wakana" (T011) and her only offspring "Rainny" (T011A).

Right away you could tell Rainny was a big boy. A very distinctive dorsal fin and for me just a great presence. We were following for a while as they just casually swam up the inlet. Then all of a sudden Rainny made a sharp turn and was heading straight for us. At this point there was no place to turn to, the inlet was getting narrow. So we shut down our engines. I happened to be in the lower cabin with some guests helping to point out the whales. I couldn't hold back my excitement that this very large animal was headed right for us. His dorsal fin popped up just a couple of meters away from the boat and he swam right under us. Right under my feet!



Of course, after this amazing experience, I looked up everything I could about Rainny. Turns out he and I share the same birth month of the same year. He quickly became my favorite being to see out on the waters. Now I don't know if we share the same birth date exactly. But I like to think Rainny came into this world on March 12th. I have been very fortunate for the last few years to have had Rainny show up in March close to my birthday. He isn't showing up to say "Happy Birthday Chris!"... but in my mind, I like to think so."

-Chris McCue

STORIES & INSIGHTS

“I remember the last time Wakana was seen alive. It was a grey, early morning on Feb 1st, 2019, and somebody texted me, “Rainny and Wakana are coming through town!”. They had been up in the islets and at that time we were living really close to First Street dock. So we got dressed super quick and ran down the dock. We caught them just as they were passing by. It was a magical moment to just watch them pass through town and out to Duffin Cove. We watched them round the corner, and Wakana was never seen again. I think that was the last time. She was on a last hurrah through Clayoquot Sound.”

-Alys Hoyland



STORIES & INSIGHTS

ScuttleButt – September 1995

“On September 2, Wakana and her son Rainny showed up at Wickaninnish Island. They were foraging their way down the coast in their usual thorough fashion, when we got a report that a lone Kawkawin bull was heading up the coast from Long Beach. This delighted us because we often see gangs traveling together, but rarely see them actually meet. We positioned ourselves between the two gangs and waited by Gowland Rocks. With our hydrophone in the water, we were hoping to pick up some communication between the animals but all was silent and there was no sign of them for several minutes past their normal surfacing time. Three explosive exhalations and there they were, the lone bull was the recently orphaned Yankee One. The two gangs were thrilled to meet each other, the water was afroth with tail slaps, rolls and spy hops, then the two big bulls, Rainny and Yankee One, simultaneously erupted out of the ocean and landed in a thunderous splash. These three whales traveled together heading back up the coast with no further thought given to hunting. The two bulls were traveling separate from Wakana and it soon becomes evident that Rainny was doing whatever he could to keep Yankee One away from his mother. He accomplishes this by getting in between the two and nudging the intruding bull in the side with his nose to steer him away. At McKay Reef they changed direction and headed back up towards Lennard Island where they turned and angled back up the coast. At Tree Island Rainny’s persistence finally seems to discourage Yankee One from hitting on his mother (whether she likes it or not). At this point the two gangs carried on their separate ways as though nothing had happened.”

- Rod Palm

STORIES & INSIGHTS

ScuttleButt – January 1995

“August, Wakana and Rainny are pillaging their way down the coast. First stop, Lennard Island to unceremonious scoop up a couple of Harbour Seals for lunch, then a snoop around the Gowland Rock seal rookery and on to Portland Point. I see an unawares bull Stellar Sea Lion right in the line of travel, oh oh. The Orcas submerge and moments later the one ton sea lion is thrown through the water by a powerful tail. They are unmerciful; the hapless animal is smacked around by one Orca after the other. For an instant, the sea lion is alone on the surface frantically swinging his head as he looks in all directions both above and below the water. Rainny bursts into the air and comes down on top of the sea lion in an explosive splash. The whale watching vessel “Chinook Key” has just arrived on the scene and skipper Earl Thomas finds himself with one battered sea lion trying to drag himself up onto the boat. It takes several minutes before the sea lion is in a position where Earl can safely throw the boat in reverse and get clear. Several more minutes of battering and they are gone, leaving one very bruised and bewildered sea lion behind.”

- Rod Palm

STORIES & INSIGHTS

There has been one family group in particular who we have had the privilege to watch grow over the years. T109 “Big Momma” and her daughter, T109A “Runaway”, have been documented in Clayoquot Sound since our research began. Until 1996, Big Momma and Runaway (b. 1990) had only visited Clayoquot Sound in the company of other gangs (family groups) of whales. In 1996 when T109B “Sem” was born, the family began visiting our waters on their own. Since that time, they have become iconic visitors of the waterways around Tofino, and a local favorite. Since our first records, Big Momma’s lineage has grown from a modest group of two, to an impressive 22 members (as of 2022) split between five gangs. Of Big Momma’s five children, four of them are females and three of which have gone on to successfully raise families of their own. In 2010, Runaway became the first of her siblings to break away from her natal pod to start a gang of her own. Her sisters Sem and Bocca have since followed in their older sister’s footsteps and broken off from Big Momma’s gang to lead their own. Finally, Fruser became the first of Big Momma’s grandchildren to break away from her natal pod and lead her own gang. Today, the Big Momma’s matriline can be seen traveling in five separate gangs led by matriarchs: T109 “Big Momma”, T109A “Runaway”, T109A2 “Fruser”, T109B “Sem” and T109C “Boca”.

BIG MOMMA'S GANG

T109	♀	≤1977
T109D	♀	2007
T109E	♂	2013
T109D1	-	2018
T109D2	-	2021

STORIES & INSIGHTS

Bigg's Killer Whales of Clayoquot Sound: A Field Guide (2016):

"Until 1996, we had only seen this very sociable female and her infant visit Clayoquot Sound with other whales. They spent a lot of time with Ted's Gang in 1991-92, Langara's in 1994 and take periodic sojourns with the Secret Agents. This wandering from gang to gang is commonly seen amongst the Bigg's, in contrast with the lifelong family bonds held by the fish-eating resident orcas that frequent the inside of Vancouver Island. In August of 1996, T109 showed up with another calf. The last time we had seen her was six days prior, so this frisky little guy was less than a week old. Young killer whales think they're hot stuff. When popping up to the surface they seem to like to lift their eye out of the water to have a peek at you; T109B even came right over to the boat just long enough to splash Kechura with a flick of its tail. It's great to see him so full of energy. Mortality in new born killer whale calves is thought to be as high as 50 percent. This is now an optimum gang size for hunting but it wasn't until June 1998 before we saw them hunting on their own.



In July of 1996 these whales were travelling up the coast with Wakana's gang and surprise, T109 had yet another calf (T109D). In August of 1994, T109s were making their way down the coast with Langara's gang. They charged into the east lagoon at Gowland Rocks and very quickly nabbed a seal and dragged it out into open water to share the spoils. This done, they dashed back in and scooped up another. Gowland is the largest harbour seal rookery in the study area so it is understandably a very important hunting site for the whales. In 2005, Big Momma became a grandmother when her eldest daughter T109A delivered a rambunctious calf."

- Rod Palm

STORIES & INSIGHTS

Sunset Birthday Guest

july heat
salt kisses fresh water
in ?uuqmin bay

sticky fingers
cling to the wet dock
daisy yellow slide

birthday girl
proudly seven
hugged in party laughter

“who hired the kakaw’in?”

breaching at the river mouth
pausing the party
breathless

© Heather Hendry, Tofino
Poet Laureate (2022-2024)
Inspired by Hanna Grimm
(Palm)



W. C. Barnes

STORIES & INSIGHTS

THE RUNAWAYS

T109A ♀ 1990

T109A3 2009

T109A4 ♂ 2012

T109A5 2014

T109A6 2018

T109A7 2021

T109A3A 2022

STORIES & INSIGHTS

“The Runaways (or T109As) are easy to recognize around here because we see them so frequently in our waters. We saw them pass right through the harbor with their new calf this year on Feb 27th, 2022, which was really cool. It always feels so special when there is a group that we recognize and they have a new calf, and they kind of parade their new calf around town. It seems like a parade anyways. Obviously it’s not, that’s totally anthropomorphizing, but it seemed like they brought their new calf by Strawberry Island and out past 1st street as if to say to the town, "Look at our new baby!". Tails slapping and celebrating. It really seems like a celebration and it is always so special when they pass through town.

It's something to be aware of too, because we are so fortunate. So blessed to have these animals in such close proximity to where we live and that gives us a sense of responsibility as well. Especially when they are passing through the Tofino harbor where it's so busy, with tons of commercial, recreational, and fishing boats. We know that these animals pass through here all the time so it's important to act responsibly and be aware of the fact that we are in their playground too, and their home.”

-Alys Hoyland



 W. C. Barnes

STORIES & INSIGHTS

“I was watching the T109As and the T069s do some hunting together in the back of Bedwell Sound in March 2019. They had recently made a kill and it looked as though there was potential prey sharing going on between the two groups which I thought was very interesting and unusual behaviour.”

- Sydney Dixon



STORIES & INSIGHTS

TED'S GANG

T041 ♀ ≤1966

T041A ♀ 1988

T041A2 2013 (Tree)

T041A3 2018

Bigg's Killer Whales of Clayoquot Sound: A Field Guide (2016):

“In June 1991, Ted Goodspeed and Rod Palm spent a day photographing the T041s off Lennard Island. In June 1992, the day of Ted’s eulogy, Rod was with them again, this time off Long Beach. Their old letter designation was “T”, so from then on we have referred to these guys as Ted’s Gang. Ted was a great lover of whales and all wild things. His film footage of gray whale bottom feeding was the first close up footage of this behaviour in Canadian waters.”



STORIES & INSIGHTS



“In 2021 I witnessed Ted's Gang, T109Cs and T123s, harassing Gray whales. The juveniles from those groups went and checked out a large Gray whale, then the Gray whale started breaching a bunch and the killer whales hightailed it away. It was a pretty funny sight to see these apex predators run off like that. They then seemed to switch gears to focus on hunting something smaller (and more attainable) like the harbour seals around Lennard Lighthouse.”

- Sydney Dixon

STORIES & INSIGHTS



T109C'S

"We watched T109C's kill a sea lion in Ukee Harbor on January 19, 2019. After they made the kill they socialized and then left the harbour and traveled tight along the coast past the lighthouse. I drove to the lighthouse and got to see them pass the shore. Jared Towers confirmed the ID of the T028s, I had never seen them before and have never seen them since."

-Sydney Dixon

STORIES & INSIGHTS

KWIISAHII
& NAŠUK

T69A3 & T69A4

"We look and there's the surge channel that goes on the other side, the open pacific side. And we are like, oh the tide is high enough that there is some water so we can swim through that surge channel. And it's flat, flat, flat. So we're like lets go see, I've never been there.

So we went over, and on the other side it's one of the biggest sea urchin barrens I have ever seen. It's just sea urchins. It looks like a big dessert. And because I love sea urchins one of the first things I did was swim down to take some sea urchins. I was having a lot of fun. I was putting them on my hands and then you know, when you swim back up and you flip your hands over they stick. So I was kind of joking like this and showing Andrew, "Oh look at this Andrew" and laughing. Andrew was like, "No, Aline Orcas, Orcas!" and I was like, "No, Sea Urchins!". Then Andrew was like "No ORCAS!", and I just remember thinking No. I realized what he was saying and I was just refusing, because this is my biggest nightmare to see orcas while swimming. So I'm just thinking No and then he's looking BEHIND me, and I'm like "No, No No". Then as I turn, I see that dorsal fin coming up at the surface of the water fully out and it's like four, five meters high and it's so huge and then it comes down, coming towards me...

STORIES & INSIGHTS

In my head I'm like, ok that's it, if I'm about to get munched on by an Orca at least I wanna see it. So I put my head in the water. I don't even know if I had my snorkel. I don't even know if I took the time to breathe before. I just know that I put my head in the water, and then I saw them. And somehow I knew there were four, and they passed right in front of me. They just swam and I was expecting it to be kind of loud and painful, because I was expecting them to eat me. I was expecting some form of impact but it was totally the opposite. It went super quiet, super calm, even if it was fast it seemed like it was slowing down and everything was holding up in time and it was just there. And then they swam away and disappeared, as fast as it happened they disappeared."

-Aline Carrier. Dive Log February 11th, 2021.

STORIES & INSIGHTS

"This is T069C. A large male born in 95. He had just killed a seal! You can see a tint of red in the mist! It's at this point, it went down & resurfaced...turns out, it was coming straight at me & was only 30 feet away! It began to slowly turn onto it's left side! This lowered that huge dorsal & allowed it to go right under my boat! I saw this 25 foot, 5 ton, beautiful creature glide slowly underneath me & than we made eye contact! It was looking straight at me! I was frozen & couldn't breath! It continued past me & went back into the centre of Rankin Cove. We shared a moment!

I pray to stumble upon moments like this! "CONTACT BETWEEN ME & THEM" I swear when these moments happen that I can feel something much more than me? Almost as if I can feel the animal on a primal level...I'm sure it's my imagination."

-W. C. Barnes



 W. C. Barnes

STORIES & INSIGHTS

KAKAWIN ON THE HUNT

"It was December 4th, 2020, and we were out microtrolling on the Ahoos Guardian for the West Coast Vancouver Island Juvenile Winter Chinook Project around Sydney Inlet, near Jenny's Beach. Kind of winding down and ending our day when someone called on the radio and said there was Kawakin nearby. So we motored over and we were watching about four of them for a while from a distance. Eventually the other boats went back into town but we decided to stick around a bit longer. That's when we started to see them tail slapping and teaching their younger one how to do a tail slap. We thought they were just doing it on the water.

Then two of them came right up next to the boat and that's when we realized it was actually a river otter that they were torturing and training with. We watched them slap the river otter down in the water, follow it and then they would come up to grab it in their mouth and drag it under for a few seconds. Then it would pop back up and they would slap it around a bit more. The otter was squeaking like crazy. They kept dragging it under, dragging it under, and it would pop back up. I remember thinking this is awesome but gruesome, but I guess they were just training. The other two orcas just hung around the shore, almost on watch. They dragged it under right near the boat and it just disappeared. I don't know if they ate it or if the river otter just gave up and drowned. I saw it being pulled under and just never saw it again...



STORIES & INSIGHTS



That's when they were like, "ok time to go check out this boat". They started circling us, doing a kind of tidal wave surging at the surface of the water with their bodies. That was definitely the most intense experience I've had in my life, it was magical. It was spiritual. It was pure elation and adrenaline. My heart was pounding and I was nervous. I just don't know how to describe it."

-Jared Dick

STORIES & INSIGHTS

“It took me a long time to figure out what I did, and then one day it just came to me. I figured it out and I thought, "of course thats why it did that!"

It was June 23rd, 2013, and we followed them into Rankin Cove, they were hunting. Kind of like when a motorcycle gang comes into town, I think that when an orca enters an area to hunt they make a lot of noise. I believe they do this to scare their prey, and the harbour seals will hide up on the rocks or in a weed bed. Once the orcas have introduced themselves to an area, they go silent. One of them, like a dog, is sent to flush out their prey, and then the chase is on. Thats exactly what happened at Rankin that day.

I was on the west side, about 30ft from the shore and I had shut off my engine. I was photographing the mealy in the centre, there was splashing and blows. I was standing up and I had my big lens on because they were at a distance. After a few minutes things started dying down and the patriarch surfaced. He started coming towards me and he sounded. When he surfaced again he was half way closer, and I thought oh shit. He surfaced again and now he was only 20ft away from me. Then he rolled onto his left side so that his dorsal fin wouldn't hit me and he slid right under my boat. The whole while, his eye was looking straight up at me and I watched him as he looked up at me. He very slowly and gently went under my boat and then he rejoined the rest of the pod.

My heart stopped. This huge animal was so close and it came to check me out! It was years later and suddenly it just came to me out of the blue. What you don't know is that my boat is a zodiac and there is no windshield. So I've got my over the ear headphones on and I play music and it downs out the engine. I not only get to listen to music but it also keeps my hat on! So when I came into Rankin I was listening to music, and I shut off my engine and took the headphones off and I dropped them on the floor. I've got a rib, so like a solid floor not a soft floor, and what I think happened was I had forgotten to turn the music off and it was transmitting through the hull into the water. The orca must have been curious, because the engine was off but it heard this music and it came over to check me out, like what the hell is that! Thats why I think it did that."

-W. C. Barnes

STORIES & INSIGHTS

BREACHING & PLAY

"I had an encounter in Rocky Pass, right next to Obstruction Island when you're going out between Millar's Channel and Dixon Bay. We were doing a clam survey, so it was the summer and it was about 10am and I saw all these splashes and splashes when we were coming back to Tofino. I thought it was just waves washing up on a rock, but then I realized that the water was flat calm and, wait, there were no waves.

I looked closer and it was a bunch of killer whales tail slapping and teaching a baby, baby how to tail slap. It was not much bigger than this table (gesturing about a meter), a really tiny, little one. They were trying to teach it how to do the tail slap. The mom would tail slap and the baby would kind of just flop out of the water awkwardly and could barely do it, but it kept trying. They would tail slap and the baby try and slap and fly sideways.

That one I just wanted to embrace the moment. It was a clear, crisp morning and me and my partner went on to the bow and made coffee with a camping stove and we just sat there, leaning up against the window of the boat drinking our coffee watching them for half an hour."

-Jared Dick

STORIES & INSIGHTS



"It was during covid and when the orcas came into the harbor it brought everyone out of there house and a smile to many. It was a nice escape from the madness we all were going through."

- Mike Dandurand.



STORIES & INSIGHTS

"It was near the end of the whale watching season, I think it was November 2019, that I had my most epic encounter with killer whales off the shores of Clayoquot Sound. It was a rare blue bird day with calm oceans (something we don't get often, especially in the fall) so I hopped on a boat with Jamie's Whaling Station for a Pelagic trip to go find some cool seabirds. It was a staff only trip, so I was in the boat with a bunch of self-identifying "whale nerds" or marine naturalists as they're professionally called. We were just enjoying the scenery of the coastal mountains and endless blue water when we got a call on the marine radio that kakawin were nearby. That put a quick end to the bird watch as we sped further out to sea to try and catch a glimpse. We were nearly 25nm offshore when we finally spotted the dorsal fins in the distance. Yahoo, we found them!...



STORIES & INSIGHTS



 Quinn Klassen

As we approached we saw it was a gang of seven Bigg's, moving pretty stealthily through the water. Suddenly, out of seemingly nowhere pops up the head of a California sea lion... uh oh. Never could I have imagined witnessing what came next. The whales disappeared beneath the surface again and then BAM! the poor sea lion got punted a few feet into the air by the large male bull. Next came a series of coordinated attacks by the larger members of the gang while the calves and their mum kept watch a little ways away. I'd never seen killer whales hunt before, but by the excitement in the boat I think even the seasoned whale watchers were amazed by the encounter. The large bull launched his hefty body fully out of the water to slam down on the sea lion time and time again and with each blow the sea lion became more bloodied and exhausted. An hour or so had passed without any of us realizing, our captain was starting to get concerned about daylight and we finally had to leave the scene. We headed back home in utter shock and awe. It was a gruesome event to say the least, but marvelous as well to witness the top predator in our oceans on the hunt!"

-Karyssa Arnett


STORIES & INSIGHTS

"So the story started in October 2019, I was with a friend and we were sailing from Flores Island to Tofino when we saw a pod of four to five killer whales. It was actually the very first pod I've ever seen because I had moved to Canada that year, just a few months before this happened. I was really curious about killer whales before moving here, so I watched tons of videos on youtube and that's where I got the idea to whistle.

We watched the killer whales from a very respectful distance and followed them for probably two to three hours, well into the dark. At some point we were around Dolley Passage and I asked the skipper if he was ok with me trying to whistle at the killer whales and he said "sure, go ahead, you can try". He was pretty skeptical but he turned off the engine and I started whistling. That's when the pod came straight to the boat, super close to us.


It was a quiet day, no wind and it was cold. I probably whistled for 3 minutes and I remember my jaws were numb and at some point I was hardly able to keep whistling. I was shaking. The killer whales started circling us, so quietly. It's always hard to interpret that kind of stuff because you don't want to humanize the animals, but it felt peaceful to me. There was no sign of anger or disturbance, because I was a little bit worried about disturbing the whales. At one point the pod stayed a little bit further away and one of the individuals came closer to me, maybe three to four meters from the boat. It was so close I could hear the exhalations and when I stopped whistling the animal stayed stationary. The blowhole was just at the surface right beneath me in the water and it started making a noise, bubbling. I'm guessing maybe it was the closest thing it could do to answer me...



 Jeremy Mathieu

STORIES & INSIGHTS



 Jeremy Mathieu

I kept that story to myself for the past 3 years because I was always a bit concerned that maybe I disturbed the whales and that's not the good way to behave around wild marine mammals. But last summer, I've was talking with a few scientists working in killer whale research and they told me that if you piss of a killer whale you'll know it.

So the first time I saw a killer whale It was special because it felt to me like they were trying to answer my whistling calls. It felt like a kind of communication. We weren't able to understand what we were saying to each other, but for sure that whale was at least curious about my whistles. From now on when I see killer whales, if I feel comfortable to whistle, I know that I'm gonna whistle the exact same song just in case it's that the same pod so they recognize me. That's going to be my call."

-Jeremy Mathieu

STORIES & INSIGHTS

“I was with Ron and we were on the “Wildside” zodiac. We were both working at Ocean Outfitters at the time. I was working in the office so I would hop on boats when ever I could for a tour. It was October 2013 and it was not the nicest day (but not terrible) and we went out for 3 full hours. We checked all the typical spots. We went close to shore where the grey whales would usually be, we went offshore and we saw groups of birds so we thought oh maybe humpbacks, but nothing. But for whatever reason, I was not giving up.

We were almost home, about two minutes away from Tofino between Wick and Stubbs Island. There was a lot of debris in the water, typical for the winter, and the driftwood was bobbing up and down. I’m looking at it thinking, it really has the shape of a killer whale fin. We’re driving by it, and Ron thinks it looks like a fin from a sea lion. You know, when they are thermoregulating? Then it moved and we stopped. There were two, and they swam right up to us. The killer whales were about a meter from our boat, and one of them, smaller of the two, spy hopped to get a better look at us. Then they disappeared. I don’t know who they were, but I’d like to think it was Big Mommas group before the Runaways separated.

That’s my best whale sighting ever. A once in a lifetime moment. It’s an example of how you never know what is going to happen, it went from 3 hours of looking everywhere for whales and possibly getting skunked to two minutes from the dock and all of a sudden there they are! We almost missed them! The fact that they chose to swim up to us, spyhop and look at us and then were like ok cool were gonna go continue and do our own thing. It felt like a such a privilege to be approached by wild animals on their own terms. They looked at us and then it was over. It was such a short moment but it was really special. “

-Celine Midavaine

STORIES & INSIGHTS


"I was riding my bike downtown, it was May 22, 2019, when a friend yelled out from his truck that a Orca pod had just gone through the harbour and more importantly was heading inside!

When they go on the inside inlets they are much easier to get shots of. On the outside after they sound, one never knows where they are going to surface but on the inside the passages are much more narrow and act like a cattle chute.

I hurried to get out in my boat! (which still took me over an hour) I had trouble finding them as no boats were tailing them by the time I arrived. I didn't know if they had gone north into Fortune Channel or continued eastward down Tofino Inlet? I searched for about 3 hours but finally found them way down Tofino inlet past Barryman point. There were four of them! I immediately recognized them as the pod I had seen two weeks earlier! Almost right off the bat I saw three total breaches! I was lucky to get them! While I was consumed with getting the shots I didn't notice that another pod of 5 had joined them. I was surrounded by them! They all seemed to be very happy! One of them came up behind me and vocalized! I've never heard an Orca speak before and was startled! I continued to hear many different vocalizations! I wondered if they were upset with me being around them but soon realized that if they were they would not be hanging around and they would be avoiding me. They jumped out of the water, slapped their tails, rolled and talked loudly to each other!"

-W. C. Barnes



 W. C. Barnes



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AUTHORS

Karyssa Arnett, Executive Director

Sophie Vanderbank, Program Coordinator & Operations Assistant

CONTRIBUTORS

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PHOTO CREDIT

Cover Photo by J  r  my Mathieu

Sydney Dixon

Wayne Barnes (Tofino Photography)

Danny O'Farrell

Mike Dandurand

Britt Pigat

Andrew McCurdy

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Rod Palm

Karyssa Arnett

Celine Midavaine

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Alberni-Clayoquot
Regional District

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IDENTIFICATION CATALOGUES

Bigg's Killer Whales of Clayoquot Sound: A Field Guide

[Photo-identification Catalogue, Population Status, and Distribution of Bigg's Killer Whales known from Coastal Waters of British Columbia, Canada](#)


SIMRS ONLINE RESOURCES


www.simrstofino.org/killer-whale-monitoring


ArcGIS StoryMap: Kakawin of Clayoquot Sound

[SIMRS Marine Naturalist Resources](#)

CONTACT US

 info@simrstofino.org

 (250) 266-9400

 www.simrstofino.org

   @SIMRS_Tofino

MORE BOATER INFORMATION BELOW!

BOATER INFORMATION

MARINE MAMMAL REGULATIONS

The Marine Mammal Regulations are set out by the Government of Canada through the Fisheries Act. The law is as follows:

No person shall approach a marine mammal to, or to attempt to:

- (a) feed it;
 - (b) swim with it or interact with it;
 - (c) move it or entice or cause it to move from the immediate vicinity in which it is found;
 - (d) separate it from members of its group or go between it and a calf;
 - (e) trap it or its group between a vessel and the shore or between a vessel and one or more other vessels;
- or
- (f) tag or mark it.

Approach Distances to Marine Mammals:

- **200 m*** for all Killer Whales in BC (see below for more details)
- **200 m** for whale, dolphin, and porpoise species with calves or in resting position
- (the whale will look like it's not moving and will be floating at or near the surface)
- **100 m** for all other whales, dolphins and porpoises
- When viewing marine mammals from the air using a drone: (1) maintain a **1,000-foot minimum altitude** within a **0.5 nautical mile (approx. 3,000ft radius)** of a marine mammal; and (2) **avoid** flight maneuvers around marine mammals (on land or in the water), as these actions may cause stress or alter animal behaviour. Know and follow all local regulations.



Keep 200 metres away from whales, dolphins or porpoises if they are resting or with their calf; and 100 metres/yards no approach zone for all other marine mammals in US & Canada.

*Mandatory **400 m** vessel approach distance for ALL killer whales in southern BC coastal waters between Campbell River and just north of Ucluelet.

It is mandatory to report any accidental contact between marine mammals and a vehicle or fishing gear to DFO (1-800-465-4336 or DFO.ORR-ONS.MPO@dfo-mpo-gc.ca).

BOATER INFORMATION

MARINE MAMMAL RESPONSE

What to do if you find an entangled whale:

- With great urgency, **report the entanglement** with location to the DFO Incident Line / VHF 16 or call **1-800-465-4336**.
- If at all possible, **remain with the whale** at a distance until trained help arrives or another boat takes over tracking, otherwise the chances of relocating the whale are greatly diminished.
- Take whatever video/photos are possible but maintain a distance that doesn't stress the whale.
- **Do NOT attempt to remove any fishing gear or rope** from the whale as it risks human and whale safety. Professional training and equipment are needed to assess the entanglement and proceed safely with the greatest chance of success. Often, much of the fishing gear in which the whale is entangled is not visible at the surface.
- Trailing gear at the surface provides the opportunity for trained responders to attach a tag to track the whale and/or to attach floatation to maintain contact with and slow down an entangled whale. Loss of this gear can significantly reduce rescuers' ability to save the whale.



Please report all marine mammals and sea turtles found entangled, stranded, distressed, or dead.

Call the toll-free marine mammal incident reporting hotline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at **1-800-465-4336**, use **VHF Channel 16 (Coast Guard)**, or email **DFO.ORR-ONS.MPO@dfo-mpo.gc.ca**. We also encourage you to report inappropriate or illegal human activity, contamination and disturbances to marine environments. To report healthy marine mammals in Clayoquot Sound please email **info@simrstofino.org**.

Marine Mammal Rescue Center
(for Pinniped rescue and response):
(604)-258-SEAL (7325)

GET INVOLVED

CITIZEN SCIENCE REPORTING

Get involved with citizen science and report your sightings by using one of the following platforms:

1. Call/text us at (250) 266-9090
2. Email us at info@simrstofino.org
3. Fill out a sightings report form on our website

When collecting data in the field, please try to include:

1. Date and time of encounter
2. Location description
3. Latitude and Longitude
4. Species
5. Number of individuals
6. Suspected gangs/individuals
7. Behaviour
8. Viewing platform
9. Vessel and company name (if applicable)
10. Photographs*

*Photos will only be shared publicly given permission and proper accreditation to the photographer.



You can further your impact as a citizen scientist by also reporting your sightings on the B.C. Cetacean Sightings Network's WhaleReport app!

Tips for photographing marine mammals:

Many marine mammals can be identified via photographs. For cetaceans, it varies by species where on the animal's body we look for identifying markings. Below are the markers we look for in order of importance/ease:

Killer Whales:

1. Saddle patch
2. Dorsal fin
3. Eye patch

Grey Whales:

1. Port/Starboard flank
2. Tail fluke (underside)
3. Evidence of past engagement or injury

Humpback Whales:

1. Tail fluke (underside)
2. Dorsal fin
3. Evidence of past entanglement or injury

To ensure you get the best images possible in a wide range of light and weather conditions, set your f-stop to 8, shutter speed $\geq 1/800$ and leave your ISO on auto.