

First come humpbacks, then orcas



A female killer whale rises from the water after feeding on a gray whale calf in the Monterey Bay.

JODI FREDIANI/CONTRIBUTED



A killer whale, known as CA20, photographed off the coast of Moss Landing, wears kelp on his fluke.

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Trio spotted feeding on gray whale calf

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MOSS LANDING—California researchers were nearing the end of a fruitless week on Monterey Bay on Friday morning when the crackle of good news came over the radio: killer whales had been spotted off Moss Landing.

Racing to the scene, the researchers found three orcas feeding on what was later determined to be the carcass of a gray whale calf. Amid what looks to be a huge whale migration, mammal-eating transient killer whales finally had made an appearance.

"It was a really exciting and exhilarating," said Diane Alps,

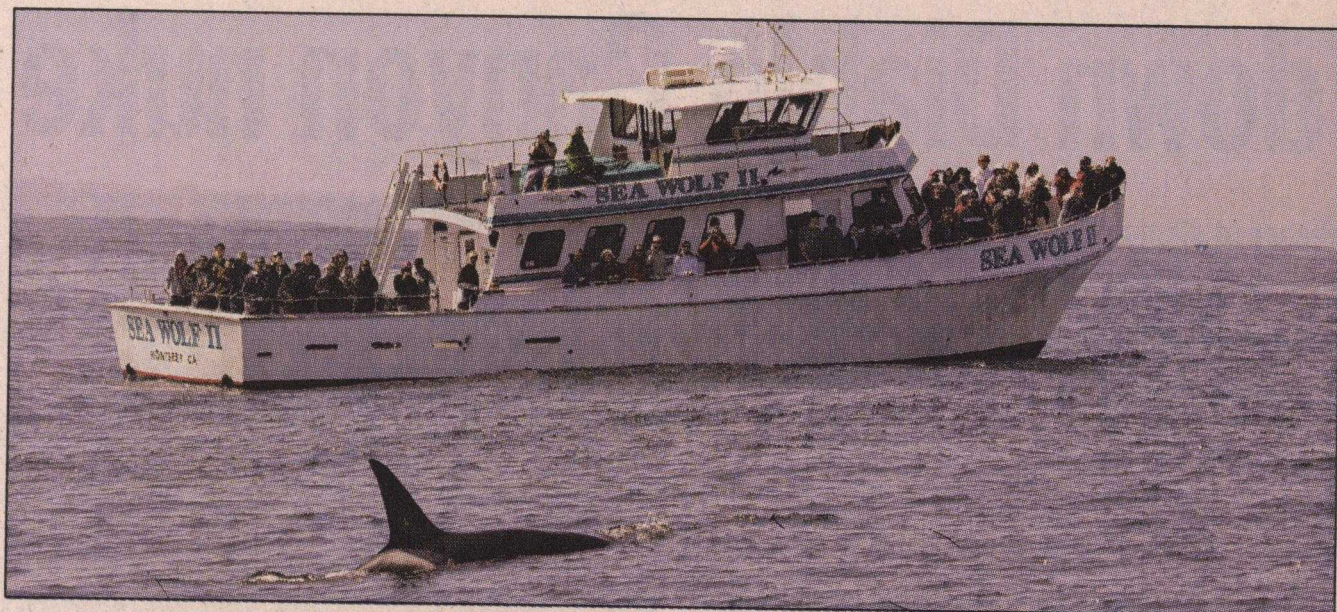
who ventured up from Southern California to help with the research. "No one wants to see the demise of these little gray whale calves [but] it is part of nature and part of the cycle of life."

Researcher Alisa Schulman-Janiger, also from the Los Angeles area, said the whales are among the estimated 120 to 150 killer whales off the coast of California. During whale migrations, they often show up in local waters.

Schulman-Janiger was here to document whales for a catalog she keeps of each whale, identified through their markings and scars. She follows

SEE ORCAS ON A3

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Passengers aboard Monterey Bay Whale Watch's Sea Wolf II watch the female killer whale, CA54.

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ORCAS

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their lifecycles by tracking sightings of them.

"We want to know who they are, the individuals, who the members of the family are, who they hang out with, where they travel—basically everything about them," Schulman-Janiger said.

Two of the whales are believed to be mother and

son, which stay together throughout life. The third is a female first spotted in 1997 but who has been seen traveling with the other two for the past several years, and Schulman-Janiger speculated she'd been separated from her family.

The male is believed to be about 50 years old, and has been spotted as far north as Alaska and as far south as Santa Barbara. He was first seen in 1987.

Though three might seem like a lot, Schulman-Janiger

said it isn't unusual to see 25 around a kill. And she has been mystified by the lack of killer whales in the bay, especially with such a vibrant gray whale migration.

"We'd expect 50 to 70 different killer whales working their way all over the place, and we haven't seen them in like a week," Schulman-Janiger said.

Professional photographer Jodi Frediani of Bonny Doon, who was with the researchers to document the trip, said "it was quite amazing, but this is

the third time in the past two weeks I've been privileged to see killer whales on the bay."

Frediani said one of the groups of orcas had just killed a harbor seal. One of the whales carried the skinned carcass on its head.

Last week, Frediani said 10 orcas, consisting of two family groups, celebrating after a kill, breaching and tail-lobbing repeatedly.

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