

TOUR PRIVATE UNIVERSITY TOWNS

northwest

TRAVEL & LIFE

Celebrate the
**NATIONAL
PARKS**
Centennial

April 2016



NWTRAVELMAG.COM

**MEET OUR
RESIDENT
ORCAS**



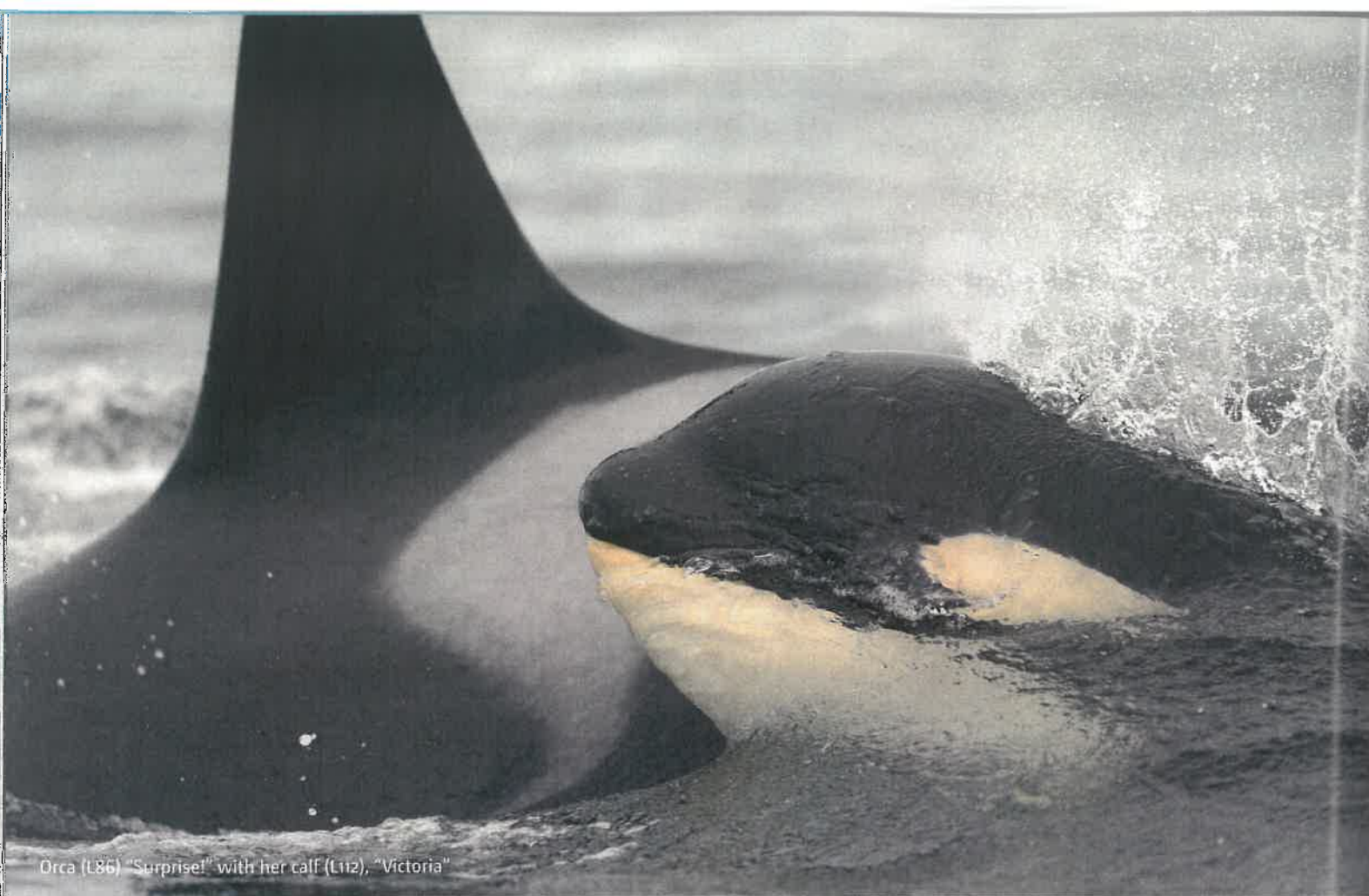
King [👑] of Whales

KENNETH C. BALCOMB, III

Center for Whale Research

by Allen Cox

Photos courtesy of Center for Whale Research



Orca (L86) "Surprise!" with her calf (L112), "Victoria"

Anyone who has ever spotted a whale in the wild knows that few wildlife sightings measure up to that experience. Whether observed from shore, from a kayak or from a double-decker whale-watching boat, a surfacing whale evokes an immediate chorus of "oohs" and "ahhs," sends cameras clicking, and has the power to turn mere spectators into avid conservationists. But the privilege of observing these giants in the wild doesn't come without people behind the scenes dedicating time and brainpower to conservation and, more specifically, to tireless whale research.

Enter marine biologist Kenneth C. Balcomb, III. He is one of the pioneers of orca identification, a crucial tool in keeping track of the orca population. He can identify each orca by sight through differences in dorsal fin shapes, sizes and marks, and variations in the white or gray patch



(the saddle patch) behind the dorsal fin. These features are as distinctive as human facial features or finger prints; no two are alike.

Balcomb has dedicated his life to the study of whales. He began his dream career as a marine biology student at U.C. Davis. He went on to study whales in the Atlantic and Pacific and completed his graduate studies under a renowned marine mammal biologist. He began his orca studies in the Pacific Northwest for the U.S. government. He then founded the non-profit

Center for Whale Research in 1985 and has since dedicated himself to orca research. Admittedly, it is Balcomb's passion.

Two populations of resident orcas make their home in Pacific Northwest waters. Northern Resident Killer Whales are in Southeast Alaska and the northern coast of B.C. Southern Resident Killer Whales live in the Salish Sea—in Washington and the protected waters between Vancouver Island and the B.C. mainland. In addition, there are two other orca populations in the North Pacific: offshore and transient.

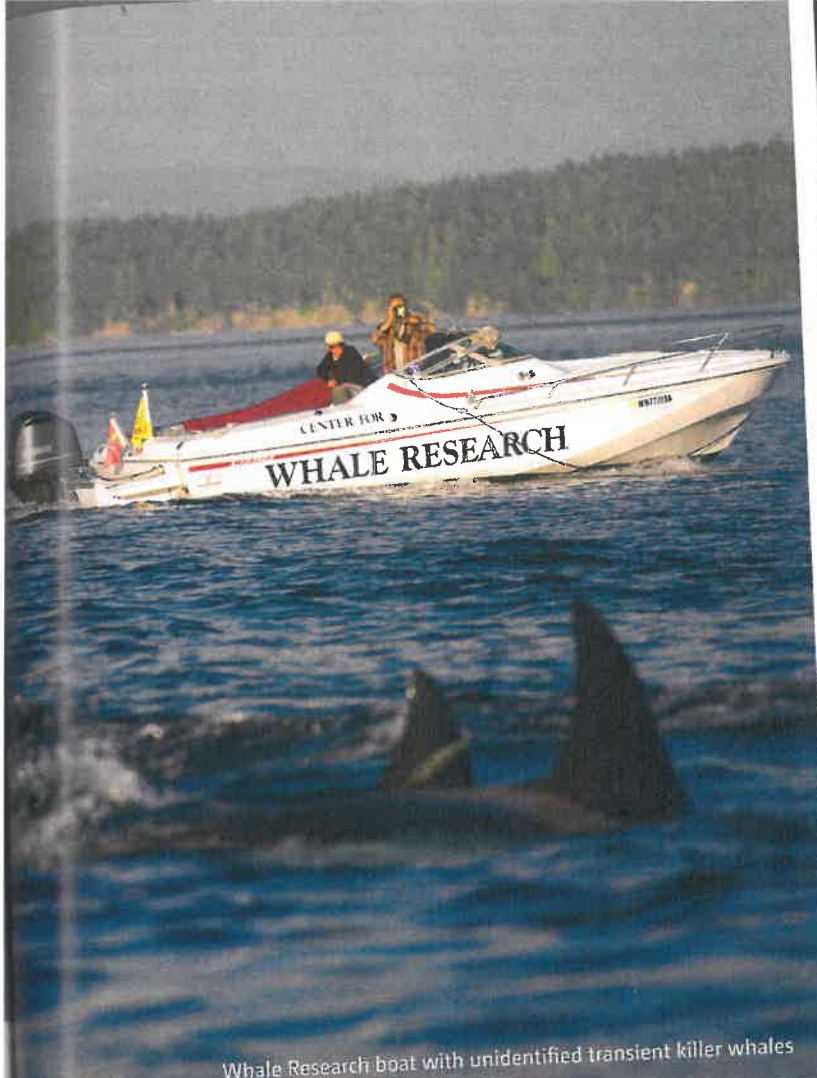
Balcomb chose San Juan Island as home base for his research, which focuses primarily on the Southern Resident Killer Whale clan. San Juan Island is ideally situated at the head of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the Salish Sea waters that stretch north and south from there. If you're a salmon, there's a good chance you'll

Orca Resources

To learn more about the Center for Whale Research and Southern Resident Killer Whales, or to give the Center your gift of support, go to whaleresearch.com.

To visit the Whale Museum in Friday Harbor, Washington, go to whalemuseum.org.

Go online at visitsanjuans.com to plan your trip to San Juan Island, home of the Center for Whale Research and the Whale Museum.



Whale Research boat with unidentified transient killer whales



(L84) "Nyssa"



L85 "Mystery"

pass the vicinity of San Juan Island on your migration to or from your river of origin. And Chinook salmon is the resident orcas' food of choice.

Finding and following orcas might seem complicated to the layperson, but follow the salmon and you find the orcas. Every whale watch boat captain knows that. And so does Balcomb's research team at the Center for Whale Research. Moreover, save the Chinook salmon in the Salish Sea, which are at only 10 percent of their historic numbers, and you save the southern resident killer whales. That's part of the message Balcomb strives to teach to the public. "We have to be aggressive in trying to educate people in order to sustain the species," Balcomb says, referring to both salmon and orcas. "Public education is key."

For the us—the public—an excellent way to learn about orcas is on a whale watching tour. "I know of no other place on the planet where you can get out of bed in your Seattle hotel room and within an hour or two be out on the water spotting orcas," says Balcomb.

The goal of the Center for Whale Research is to follow and study the Southern Resident Killer Whale population for 100 years, which would be an unprecedented study. Balcomb has completed 40 years of this study; that's only 60 to go. With a study that will outlive the Center's founder, keeping the Center alive and functioning with all orcas in the water takes vision—and funds.

"I'm working on sustaining the Center for the future," says Balcomb. This means an operating budget for salaried employees. According to Balcomb, growing funding through increased member support is key. The Center currently maintains 500-700 members. "I'm going for 20,000 or more," he says.

As proof that Balcomb's goal for the Center is critical, at the end of 2015 the Southern Resident Killer Whale population consisted of only 84 orcas, a number that's keeping the species on the endangered list. "If we are not careful, we'll be the biggest factor in the orca's extinction," Balcomb says. 🐳

(L91) "Muncher" with unidentified calf



Whale Watching Tours

Two-hundred thousand people go whale watching on the Salish Sea every year. Pacific Whale Watch Association (PWWA) members bring you to the whales. They are committed to public education, research and responsible, sustainable whale watching. They also support the Center for Whale Research. Check pacificwhalewatchassociation.org for a complete list of member tour operators. Here are a few whale watch tour companies that operate out of Washington ports and that are members of PWWA.

- >> Puget Sound Express, Port Townsend & Edmonds, seattle.pugetsoundexpress.com
- >> Victoria Clipper Vacations and Tours, Seattle, clippervacations.com
- >> San Juan Excursions, Friday Harbor, watchwhales.com
- >> Island Adventures Whale Watching, Anacortes, island-adventures.com
- >> Island Mariner Whale Watching Cruises, Bellingham, islandmariner.com
- >> San Juan Cruises, Bellingham, whales.com

Orca Fun Facts

- >> The Southern Resident Killer Whale population is an extended family made up of three separate pods named J, K and L.
- >> Since December 2014, the Southern Resident Killer Whales welcomed 10 new babies, or calves, nine of which have survived.
- >> The Center for Whale Research has named each Southern Resident Killer Whale.
- >> The oldest Southern Resident Killer Whale is a 104-year-old female named "Granny."
- >> The best season to spot Southern Resident Killer Whales in the Salish Sea is April to October; in winter, they typically travel to outer coastal waters and have been spotted as far south as Monterey, California and as far north as the Haida Gwaii, B.C.