

# Orcas in Dyes Inlet

## Timeline

*Like goodwill ambassadors, a group of 19 killer whales suddenly arrived in Dyes Inlet on Oct. 21 and created an excitement rarely seen on the Kitsap Peninsula. Over the next month, the whales captured the hearts of thousands of people, who loved to watch them but couldn't help worrying about their welfare in the confined bay.*

**Tuesday, Oct. 21:** Mike and Jerry Bode are fishing for silver salmon in Dyes Inlet when Mike looks up and sees what he thinks is a line of black boats in front of Chico Creek. The boats turn out to be a large group of killer whales. Whale experts believe that all three of Puget Sound's orca pods -- J, K and L -- visit Dyes Inlet that day, but the J and K pods leave by evening.

**Wednesday, Oct. 22:** After a story in The Sun this morning, hundreds of people begin to look out from shore to catch a glimpse of the whales. At least a dozen boats are on the water.

**Thursday, Oct. 23:** Kelley Balcomb-Bartok of the Center for Whale Research arrives from the San Juan Islands. He looks out from shore and immediately identifies L-57, a 20-year-old, 9,000-pound male. Nicknamed "Faith," the big male becomes the most identifiable whale in the close-knit group, known as the L-25 subpod. Balcomb-Bartok, son of renowned whale researcher Ken Balcomb, cautiously suggests that the whales could be stuck in the inlet due to their anxious behavior and apparent reluctance to pass the Warren Avenue Bridge.

**Friday, Oct. 24:** Ken Balcomb and two associates arrive in Dyes Inlet by boat to get a closer look at the whales. He is relieved to report that the whales are feeding normally and vocalizing with no signs of distress. Al Samuels of the National Marine Fisheries Service continues a marine patrol, urging boaters to stay at least 200 yards away and kill their motors if the animals approach.

**Saturday, Oct. 25:** At least 120 boaters come to Dyes Inlet to view the whales. That number breaks the record of 118 whale-watching boats July 18 in the San Juan Islands. For the most part, boaters are well-behaved, but a few cut in front of the whales when they make a run toward the Warren Avenue Bridge about 5 p.m.

**Sunday, Oct. 26:** High winds and high waves keep many boaters off the water, including a small boat operated by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The National Marine Fisheries Service is nowhere to be seen, and Coast Guard vessels are unavailable. Many observers, including Balcomb-Bartok, are upset when a mass of boats pursue the whales during two approaches to the Warren Avenue Bridge. Traffic along Tracyton Beach Road and Chico Way is very heavy. An injury accident occurs on Warren Avenue Bridge as the whales approach.

**Monday, Oct. 27:** In response to the heavy boat traffic on Sunday, the National Marine Fisheries Service promises to have enforcement patrols on the water every day until the whales are gone. The number of boats on the inlet drops to about 30.

**Wednesday, Oct. 29:** The whales, which have become celebrities on all the local television newscasts as well on "American Journal," are slated for a live broadcast on NBC's "Today" show. The show is to air from the Tracyton Boat Launch Friday at 4:30 and 7:30 a.m.

**Thursday, Oct. 30:** The "Today" show appearance is canceled late in the evening, as producers focus on the verdict in the murder trial of 19-year-old Louise Woodward. (The producer who wants to do the telecast is summoned to jury duty the following week. Ironically, she phones to reschedule the "Today" show broadcast on the day the whales depart.)

**Friday, Oct. 31:** Soundwatch, a whale-watching education program based in the San Juans Islands, brings its 18-foot boat to Dyes Inlet, where it will remain until the whales leave. Ultimately, the boat will be operated by a variety of volunteers from Kitsap County and elsewhere in Western Washington.

**Saturday, Nov. 1:** Nearly 200 boaters enjoy watching the whales, while spectators -- numbering in the tens of thousands -- line the shore all the way around Dyes Inlet. Entrepreneurs, some of whom set up shop the first weekend, sell "Dyes Inlet whale" T-shirts, parking spaces and other items. At least four large whale-watching boats offer tours for a price.

**Sunday, Nov. 2:** A favorable high tide, similar to the one that brought the whales into Dyes Inlet, comes and goes with no change in the whales' behavior. If the whales needed the right tide to depart, this was it, experts say. Heavy wakes in Port Washington Narrows are partially to blame for a sailboat capsizing with five people aboard.

**Monday, Nov. 1:** Jodi Smith, a scientist with the Center for Whale Research, reports that the whales are back to normal feeding patterns after heavy boat traffic on Sunday disrupted their routine. Smith has been making careful observations of the whales since they arrived.

**Thursday, Nov. 6:** State and tribal salmon managers cancel commercial fishing for chum salmon throughout southern Puget Sound. The closure, triggered by a low run of chum, was not a result of the whales in Dyes Inlet. But the pod is reducing the already low number of spawning chum in Chico Creek, where the whales continue to feed.

**Friday, Nov. 7:** An unconfirmed report of several whales swimming under Warren Avenue Bridge reduces concerns that the whales are trapped in Dyes Inlet.

**Saturday, Nov. 8:** Hundreds of boats going back and forth through Port Washington Narrows at high speed the past week heighten concerns about damage to boats, moorage facilities and private property. The Coast Guard begins broadcasting a warning about wakes over its marine radio channels. Observers report that the Coast

Guard's efforts have reduced the speed of the boats. More than 200 boats are counted in the inlet at one time.

**Sunday, Nov. 9:** About 500 boats in the inlet cause the whales to abandon normal feeding behavior and assume a tight, defensive grouping near Chico Bay. "The boats were pushing them up against the shore," says an alarmed Jodi Smith. Steve Perret, operating the Soundwatch boat, reports that boaters ignored his calls to back off. Eventually, the whales break free of the boats and swim toward Silverdale. Heavy enforcement keeps the speed of the boats down but cannot stop the slow-motion pursuit of the whales.

**Monday, Nov. 10:** Richard Severtson of the National Marine Fisheries Service pledges that the "herding behavior" observed over the weekend would not be tolerated again. John Kuntz of Olympic Outdoor Center cancels all further commercial kayak outings into Dyes Inlet scheduled for the weekends. "The whales are just getting way too stressed and traffic is way out of control there," he notes.

**Tuesday, Nov. 11:** Veterans Day turns out to be much better for the whales than anyone had predicted. About 280 boats are on the water and the weather is nice, but the whales scatter throughout the inlet and keep the boaters guessing which way they would turn.

**Wednesday, Nov. 12:** Kitsap County commissioners begin serious discussions of a no-wake zone for Port Washington Narrows and Dyes Inlet, while fog keeps most boats off the water during the morning.

**Friday, Nov. 14:** County commissioners hurry back from a meeting in Everett to pass an emergency no-wake ordinance before the weekend. Notice is posted at various boat-launch facilities, and the Kitsap County Sheriff's Office begins enforcement.

**Saturday, Nov. 15:** The whales continue to feast on chum salmon, despite an estimated 200 boats jockeying for position on Dyes Inlet.

**Sunday, Nov. 16:** The whales begin to deliberately avoid boats more than ever and are less vocal during the day, reports Balcomb-Bartok, who takes photographs of the whales in the early morning hours. Nearly 300 boats are fairly well behaved, he reports.

**Monday, Nov. 17:** Balcomb-Bartok develops his new photographs and consults with Dave Ellifrit, also with the Center for Whale Research. Ellifrit agrees that two whales -- an 11-year-old male and a 7-year-old female -- seem to be losing weight, as shown by an increasing depression behind each of their blow holes.

**Tuesday, Nov. 18:** Researchers Balcomb-Bartok and Smith call on a biologist from the National Marine Fisheries Service to examine the whales. They point out that the whales are pacing like caged animals, avoiding boats (especially kayaks) and making fewer and fewer approaches to the Warren Avenue Bridge.

**Wednesday, Nov. 19:** The whales make two approaches to the Warren Avenue Bridge, each time turning back. Balcomb-Bartok drives his boat back and forth across Port

Washington Narrows some distance away, as if to urge them on. On the third pass, all go through except for a female and her calf. An older female waits on the other side of the bridge for the two, which eventually make a dive and come up on the other side of the bridge. Balcomb-Bartok and Smith, in one boat, and Marilyn Dahlheim of the National Marine Fisheries Service, in another boat, escort the whales into Rich Passage. As night falls, the whales are spotted offshore at Southworth.

**Thursday, Nov. 20:** The whales turn north and head toward the San Juan Islands, their home base. Like other whales of the southern community, they are likely to spend the winter roaming between the middle of Vancouver Island in Canada and southern Puget Sound.