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Southern Resident Killer Whale Census and Photo-ID Catalogue 2026 Narrative Report

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for
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General Summary

The southern resident killer whale (SRKW) population increased by two individuals during the 2026 census period (July 1 2025 to July 1 2026). This was the result of 4 confirmed births, with two of these calves surviving to the census date.

Field Work Narrative

We conducted 38 encounters with southern resident killer whales during the work period, including 7 encounters that were separately funded by a grant from the Rose Foundation's Orca Fund and 3 encounters in the coastal waters southwest of Vancouver Island. We encountered southern resident killer whales in every month except December 2025 and May 2026.

In late September 2025 we confirmed new calf J64, however this calf was absent from a subsequent J pod encounter on October 23 2025 and is now considered deceased. During October and November 2025 we documented every member of the southern resident community, with no additional births recorded during this period. The bulk of these encounters were in Puget Sound, which continues to be a hotspot for southern residents during fall and winter months.

We conducted no encounters with southern residents during December 2025, however members of the public and our colleagues at NWFSC documented southern residents in Puget Sound during this month, including new calf K47. While initially observed associating with K36,

subsequent observations have indicated that this calf's mother is K43. CWR subsequently documented this calf in early January 2026.

From January to June 2026 we conducted 12 encounters with southern residents in inland waters, all with members of J and L pod. Two new calves were documented during this period. L129 was documented only once on February 16 2026, and is now presumed deceased. L130 was first documented on June 14 2026, and was still alive as of our last encounter with L pod on 9/6/2026.

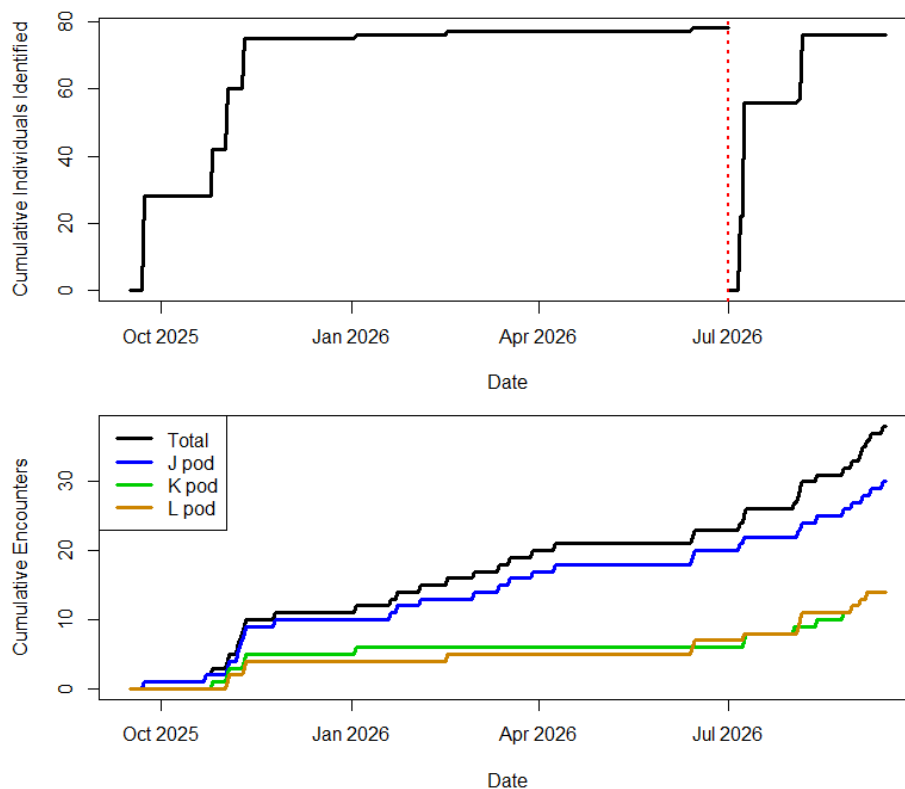


Figure 1. SRKW encounters in the 2025-2026 work period. Top: Cumulative discovery curve of individuals before and after the July 1st census date. Bottom: Overall and pod-specific cumulative encounters across work period.

We conducted coastal field work from July 5 to July 10 2026, encountering southern residents on 3 days. During this period we documented all members of J pod, K pod, and the L12 and L54 subgroups, but did not encounter any members of the greater L4 subgroup. All evidence suggests that the Swiftsure Bank area continues to be a key feeding ground for southern residents, particularly during early and mid-summer. Notably, during this field work we

encountered a group of northern resident killer whales feeding at Swiftsure Bank within 3 miles of southern residents.

We again encountered southern residents in inland waters in early August when K pod returned to Haro Strait, followed by J and L pod. The greater L4 subgroup was encountered with the L12 and L54 subgroup on 8/6/2026. Southern residents continued to consistently appear in inland waters on an approximately weekly basis during August and September, with CWR conducting 12 encounters from August 1 to September 15.

Population Census

CWR successfully documented all individuals in the southern resident population during the work period. As of July 1, 2026, the SRKW population contained 76 individuals, an increase of 2 individuals from the previous census (2.7% population growth). This is the second consecutive year of population growth. The last time this population grew for two successive censuses was 2015-2016. We note, however, that this previous period of growth was followed by four years of declines (Figure 2).

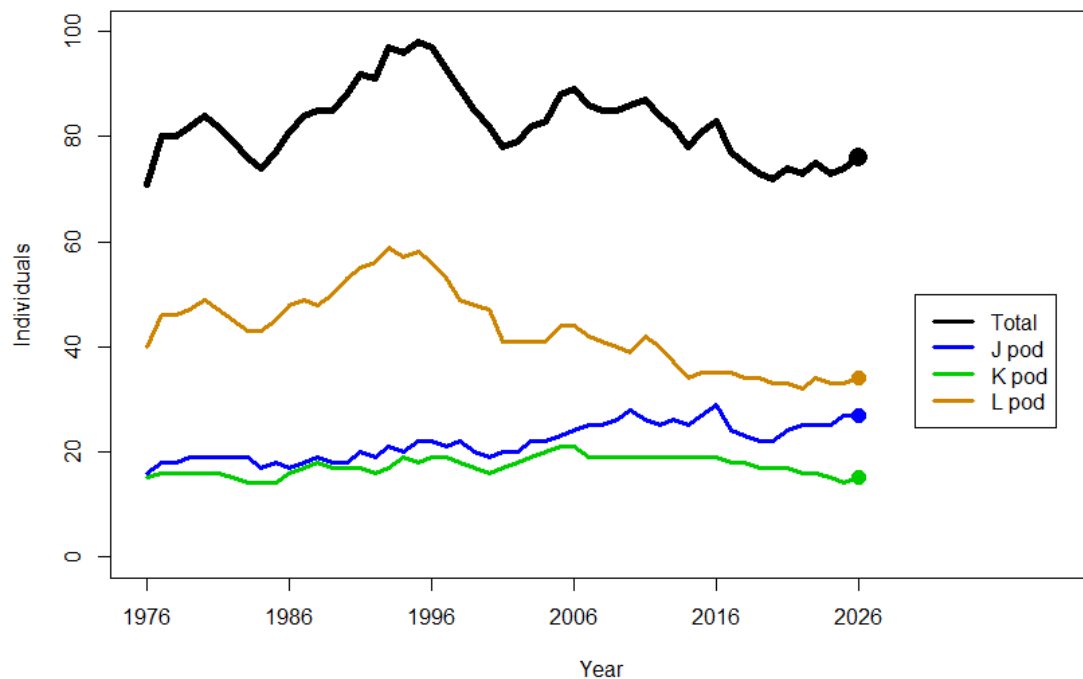


Figure 2. Southern resident killer whale population and pod sizes over study period. Lines indicate the total counts as of July 1st in each year. Points indicate results of current study period.

The SRKW population continues to have significantly different demography from other growing killer whale populations (Figure 3). The most striking difference is a lack of juveniles (< 16 years old). Juveniles made up only 28% of the SRKW population as of July 1, 2026, compared to a target of 47% based on data from the growing northern resident killer whale population¹. This difference can be ascribed to lower rates of recruitment in the southern resident population.



Figure 3. Age-sex composition of SRKW population as of July 1st, 2026, compared to published values for the northern resident population.

Pod summaries

J Pod

J pod continued to be our most encountered social group and has maintained social cohesion as a single unit in 2026 (Figure 4). J pod experienced only a single birth during the census period (J64, mother J42) however this individual survived for less than a month. With no other births or deaths during the census period, J pod maintained a size of 27 individuals as of July 1, 2026.

¹ Olesiuk, P. F., Ellis, G. M., and Ford, J. K. B. (2005) Life History and Population Dynamics of Northern Resident Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*) in British Columbia. DFO Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat Research Document 2005/045.

K Pod

K pod is the smallest of the three main social units in the population and has been a single cohesive unit since the death of K21 and the subsequent re-integration of the K16 matriline (Figure 4). The 2026 census period saw the first recorded birth in this unit since 2022 (female K47, mother K43). No deaths were recorded in K pod during the work period. K pod contained 15 individuals as of July 1, 2026. This marks the first annual increase in K pod for a July 1st census since 2005.

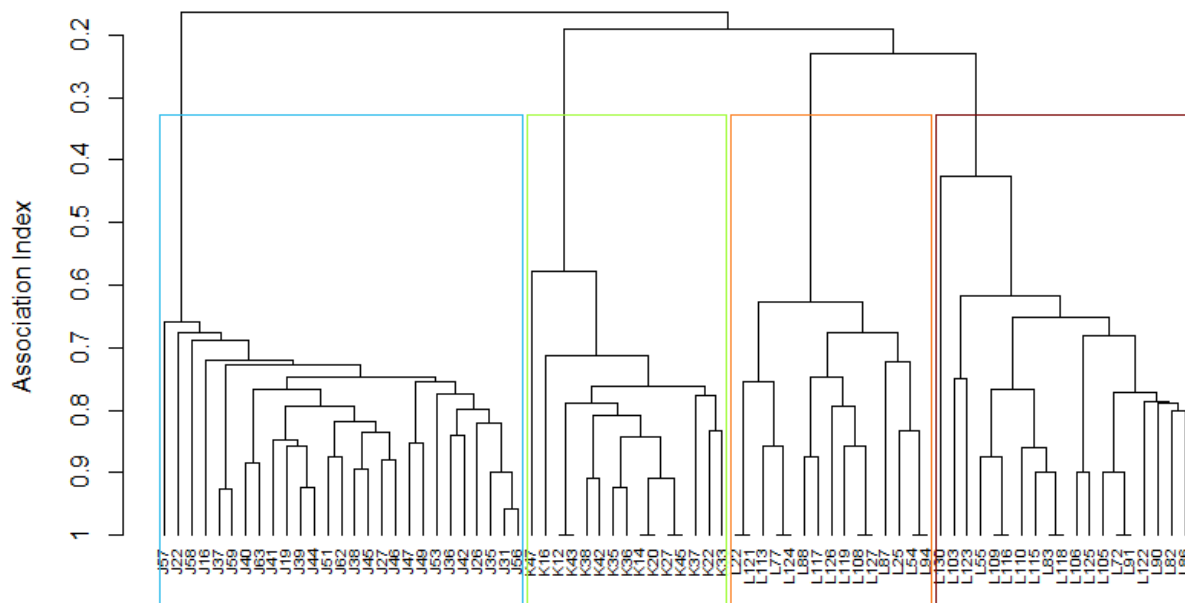


Figure 4. Social structure of the southern resident killer whale populations during 2025-2026 survey period. Dendrogram shows results of average linkage hierarchical clustering based on simple ratio indices of association, with association defined as individuals being photographed during the same encounter. Colored boxes indicate cluster assignments corresponding to maximum modularity ($Q_{\max} = 0.29$).

L Pod

L pod is the largest and least cohesive of the three primary social units in the population. During the 2025-2026 work period L pod was split into two main groups: one composed of the “greater L4s” (L4s, L47s, L72s, and L90) and a second group composed of the L12 subgroup (L22, L22, L87, and the L11s), and the L54 subgroup (L54s and L88) (Figure 4). Two new calves were born during the work period. L129 was seen on only a single encounter, with association patterns suggesting

either L55 or L103 was the calf's mother, and is now deceased. L130 (unknown sex, mother L91) was most recently seen on 6-Sep-26 and is believed to still be alive. L pod contained 34 individuals as of July 1, 2026.

Births

In total, there were four births recorded during the work period. J64 was first observed in mid-September associated with J42, and was likely less than 48 hours old when first encountered. This calf's sex was never determined. K47 was then documented in early December, and after several encounters was determined to be the calf of K43 and that this calf is female. L129 was documented in February, but the sex and maternity of this calf was never established. Finally, L130 was observed in June, with subsequent observations assigning this calf to L91, however its sex is still unknown.

Mortalities

Both deaths during the census period were newborn calves. J64 was first missing on October 23, 2025, and is presumed deceased. Similarly, L129 was only observed on a single encounter, and was missing when L pod was again encountered in June. J64's behavior and body condition were relatively normal prior to going missing, given the calf's young age, however it is worth noting that this was the first calf born to a highly inbred individual (J42). In contrast, L129 appeared very skinny when first encountered.

Notable health concerns

J45 injury

In November of 2025, CWR received images of J45 documenting a new injury near the base of his dorsal fin on the trailing edge. There were initial concerns that this may be a propeller scar and that, given the size of the injury, it may lead to infection. Referencing drone footage taken in Puget Sound, CWR researchers were able to determine that the injury was sustained on either the 9th or 10th of November, based on the injury not being present during the afternoon of the 9th and then being visible on the 10th.

Further photographs from CWR researchers on 26th of November 2025 clearly showed the presence of killer whale rake marks around the injury, allowing us to confirm that this was not due to a boat strike (Figure 5). We continued to monitor J45's healing process. As of September 2026, the wound appears to have fully healed with no apparent breaks in the skin, and J45 has

continued to behave normally (Figure 5). We have no ongoing concerns about J45's health in relation to this injury.



Figure 5. Progression of J45's dorsal fin injury. Left: Photograph taken on November 26th, 2025 showing fresh injury and rake marks. Right: Photograph taken on September 14th, 2026 showing healed injury. NMFS/NOAA research permit 27038.

L126 size and body condition

Young male L126 (born 2023, mother L119) continues to look small for his age and is in visibly poor condition from vessel-based photographs, with a clear lack of postcranial fat (Figure 6). There was potential qualitative improvement between July and August of 2026, however he is still notably skinny. His behavior also gives reason for concern. L126 appears socially isolated, regularly swimming away from any other whales, including his mother. In at least two cases, we observed him apparently having difficulty keeping up with other whales during fast travel and high-energy social behavior, with his mother periodically doubling back to re-associate with him. This is an ongoing health concern, and we will continue to monitor L126's health when possible.



Figure 6. L126 on August 8, 2026, showing a clear lack of post-cranial fat. NMFS/NOAA research permit 27038.

J35 dorsal lump

J35 was observed with a large, distinct lump approximately 1/3 of the way between her blowhole and dorsal fin on July 9th, 2026 (Figure 7). Despite this lump, she appeared to be behaving normally and keeping up with the rest of her social group, which made a spinal injury unlikely, and the relatively sudden appearance meant it was unlikely to be a tumor. We observed no wounds or other lesions around the site of the lump. Consultation with Dr. Hendrik Nollens from San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance suggested this may be the result of fluid being squeezed upward due to water pressure, with the source of the fluid being located lower on her body, however this source has yet to be determined.

Subsequent observations in August and September showed the lump shrinking significantly, and no signs of deteriorating condition or behavior. On September 14th, the lump was still visible but had almost completely receded (Figure 7). While additional observations are warranted, we currently believe J35 does not face immediate health risks from this lump.



Figure 7. J35's dorsal lump. Top: J35 on July 9th, 2026, the first day the large lump was noticed. Bottom: J35 on September 14th, 2026, with the lump significantly reduced but still visible. NMFS/NOAA research permit 27038.

Calf Behavior and Maternal Bonding

A notable pattern over recent years has been increasing difficulty in assigning new calves to mothers due to unstable calf-female associations. This has continued to be the case during the most recent census year. Both K47 and L130 associated with multiple breeding-age females from a very young age. In K47's case, initial observations suggested that K36 may be the calf's mother, only for subsequent observations to indicate it was more likely K43. K47 has continued to associate with both females, often swimming directly between them, but with a stronger association with K43. Similarly, L130 was observed in echelon position with three different females (L91, L86, and L83) during the first two observations of the calf. The determination that L91 was the calf's mother ultimately relied on observing the rates at which the calf travelled in infant position with each female and on observations of the calf nursing from L91. The causes of this apparent change in behavior of young calves warrant further investigation, as do the potential implications for maternal care and calf health and survival.