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Scuttle Butt – January 1995

By Rod Palm



Young Axle showing off

photo Adrian Dorst

TRANSIENT KILLER WHALES in CLAYOQUOT SOUND 1994 by Rod Palm

Wow! What an exciting year for Kawkawin. Killer Whales were in Clayoquot Sound on 52 days. This represents 15 transient pods containing 44 animals and 4 northern resident pods containing 28 plus animals. I should point out here that these resident visits are the most frequent we have recorded since the study began in 1991. This was likely related to the strong Spring Salmon run we had. The reason for the distinction, 'resident' - 'transient' is that these whales are actually evolving into two different species; they have not interbred in tens of thousands of years. Residents have blunter dorsal fins, more elaborate saddle patches, feed primarily on salmon and rarely wander from their specific territories except in the winter when they leave for places unknown. Transients travel in smaller pods (usually 5 or less), go wherever they please and do whatever they feel like. These guys like warm blood: seals, sea lions, dolphins, porpoise, sea birds and other whales. Last year in Alaska a pod of transients killed and ate a Moose that was swimming across a channel. We call transients the 'motorcycle gang' of the Killer Whales. On several days we were treated to three pods in

separate locations in the Sound. That sounds great but it's enough to turn your hair grey (explaining my present condition) when you're trying to find out who's who. Identification under these circumstances is becoming ever more efficient with the growing expertise between the whale watching skippers and their utilization of our Clayquot Sound Killer whale identification booklet.

There were several exciting encounters in 94', the first being performed by the Motley Crew. This pod contains the big bull U2, his mom, likely his aunt, a nine-year-old sibling (unknown sex) and his year and a half old sister Axle. In April these whales were heavily foraging for some species of fish close to the bottom on their way out of Father Charles Channel. As often happens after a good meal, the whales began an exuberant display of rolls, spy-hops, tail and fin slaps, upside down swimming and breaching. This performance carried on for over an hour. By this time they were out in front of Cox Bay. Now, who happens to be migrating up the coast minding their own business, but a mom and calf Gray Whale. The Killer Whales are with them in an instant. I must note here that although Killer Whales are known to attack and kill other whales, even their own species, our guys here on the coast have never been recorded partaking of this behavior. There has been ample opportunity; on several occasions we have watched with bated breath as Orcas swam right through or past the Gray Whales in their summer feeding grounds. We often see very nervous Greys trying to hide in the surf but our transients always passed them by without hesitation. Oh yes, on with the story. Mama Grey scooped up her baby with one pectoral fin, rolled over on her back and arched up her stomach lifting her calf right out of the water. U2 lunged up on the side of the mother, reaching with gaping jaws for the baby. He did this several times then mother rolled over and dove, still holding onto the calf with her fins. All was quiet for a few minutes then the Greys surfaced in Cox Bay and the Orcas were back on course for Cox Point. This whole incident lasted but a few minutes.

It's a cold afternoon in May. Motley Crew is traveling with Pandora, her son Kawatsi and daughter Eacott. They ran up the coast, through Tofino Harbour, up to the head of Tofino Inlet then back out and around the east side of Meares Island. Just as dusk was falling they unexpectedly all surfaced in very shallow water at Hankin Rock. One of the females pops up within a meter of the boat while both bulls surface in an explosion of water, fins, tails and erections. These guys are excited! The aggression here is unmistakable, I feel as though I'm locked into a contest of titans. It is getting dark and it's started to rain and the whales are moving so fast that I am unable to distinguish who is who. Throw the hydrophone over the side and everyone is screaming at each other, I have to turn the speaker down. The bulls are slamming away at each other with their mighty tails while rolling and thrashing in a watery battle royal. Someone is hot for the other's mother and he doesn't like it. After over half an hour of this, the whales start slowly moving away from the rock but continue to vocalize and the mood has changed to one of exuberant frolicking. It is now dark but I can still follow the whales by the great white waves that burst up as they breach. As

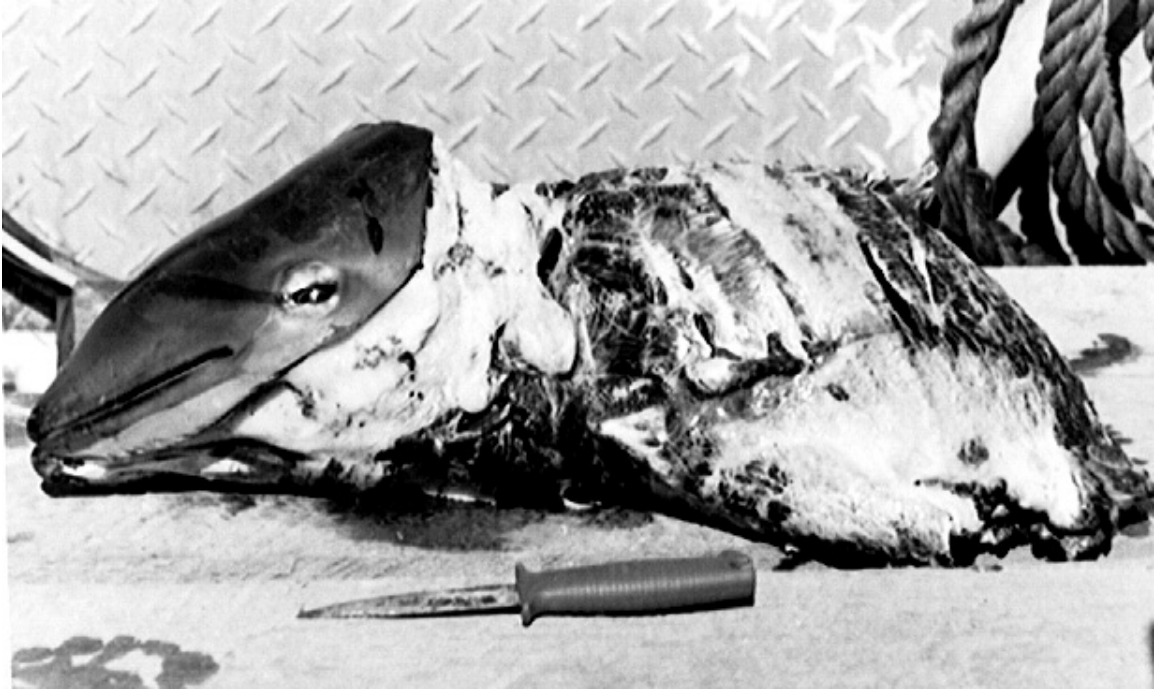
things start to settle down I realize that without rain gear I'm getting dangerously cold so it's time to leave. We will be watching these two pods very closely next year in hopes of a new calf. New births among our transients don't happen very often, there were none in 94'.

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.

September, what a month. On the first, Pachena is foraging in Tofino Inlet with her son Nitinat and two year old infant Vargas. Vargas takes an interest in a Marbled Murrelet and the race is on, the murrelet dives and surfaces about ten meters away with Vargas hot on its tail. The bird is bouncing across the surface trying to fly away but Vargas scoops it out of the air on the fourth bounce. This is the first recording anywhere of a Killer Whale getting a Marbled Murrelet.

September 9, Wakana is back with son Rainny and four other whales with quite unimpressive ID numbers. They have been hunting their way down the coast then split up at Schooner Cove. True to form, Wakana and Rainny angle offshore to check out a shallow reef off Long Beach. What now? The Orcas are in a frenzy, dashing about in very tight maneuvers. A Harbour Porpoise, they have him. Next, is not for the faint of heart. One of the Orcas gets a hold of the porpoise's tail and literally whiplashes him out of his skin. You must appreciate that for a short time, the unfortunate porpoise would remain alive. The carcass itself was not consumed. I believe the reason for this waste is that the Orcas are likely full from previous feeding and are just after the calorie rich blubber layer under the skin. Just a little chumis after a big meal.



A flayed Harbor Porpoise

photo Aija Steele

September 12 was Clayoquot Day for Killer Whales. Never have so many transient pods gotten together. My first call was from the whale watch vessel "Sun Raven", skipper Don Travis is with a half dozen Orcas and others are heading in from the west. When I arrive, yet more whales are on the scene, I see Motley Crew, Kawatsi and her family, Wakana and Rainny, Ted's and Mike's pods, Langara's pod and several whales who only go by designated numbers. It's "Party Time", whales are breaching, spy-hopping, tail slapping and performing all sorts of hijinks. The vocalizing is a mad cacophony of everyone trying to talk at the same time (John Forde of the Vancouver Aquarium says it will take him several weeks to decipher the tape). This behavior carries on for over two hours before the whales slowly start moving offshore, still cavorting. Oh look, late arrivals, Flores and her son Pender, just in time for the big race. The whales have been slowly picking up speed as move into position in a half mile long line of dorsal fins. They start moving faster and yet faster till they are slicing a long white line of churning water through the placid Ocean. The mood is intense, whales are passing each other, some are falling back and they are in the air almost as much as they are in the water. Some one viewing this scene might be alarmed to see a wild haired human charging along with the rampaging whales, hooting, hollering and gesticulating as though possessed. The race lasted for over half an hour with the whales attaining speeds of close to twenty knots. As they slowed down, the individual pods started breaking away and heading further out to sea. Flores and Pender are the last to leave, also heading offshore. There is the euphoric tingle in the air of coming down from a natural high. I follow Pender and son as they take up a relaxed pace on their offshore trek. When I loose them in the dark, a glance at the G.P.S. shows we are 17 miles offshore from Wilf Rocks. It's time to call it a day.

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