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HUMPBACKS TO THE RESCUE!

Pacific Whale Watch Association Crews Report a Group of Humpback Whales Intervening to Stop Killer Whale Attack on Steller Sea Lion



Transient or Bigg's killer whales attacks a Steller sea lion off Vancouver Island last week – before a group of four humpback whales come to the rescue. Photos: Naturalist Alethea Leddy, Port Angeles Whale Watch Co.

In a 2016 season that has included extraordinary and often unprecedented marine mammal sightings and behavior, Pacific Whale Watch Association crews can add one more first to the logs – they've now seen *heroic humpbacks*.



Last week off Sooke, BC, about 20 miles west of Victoria, several PWWA boats reported humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) intervening directly to save a Steller sea lion from attacking transient or Bigg's killer whales, rescuing the besieged pinniped from certain death.

Veteran Capt. Russ Nicks of BC Whale Tours of Victoria was one of the first on the scene.

“What we witnessed was pure aggression,” remembers Capt. Nicks. “We had four humpbacks trumpeting, rolling on their sides, flukes up in the air multiple times. The

killer whales split many times into two groups, with one that appeared to try to draw the humpbacks away from the sea lion. The other group would go in for the attack while the humpbacks were safely away – but then they'd get in the middle of it again, fighting the orcas off. It was amazing to watch.”

Naturalist Alethea Leddy of [Port Angeles Whale Watch Company](#) also had a ringside seat to *Humpback v. Orca v. Sea Lion*, along with dozens of captivated passengers.

“We got there in time to see some crazy surface activity, with humpback whales splashing in the distance along with orcas,” explains Leddy. “Then two humpbacks surfaced next to us trumpeting and the next thing we know there were four humpbacks, possibly six, all defending the sea lion. The water boiled all around as the orcas tried to separate the sea lion from the humpbacks.

“It was a wild scene,” she continues, “with the humpbacks even circling the sea lion trying to keep him safe while he frantically struggled to get his breath. The anxiety of the humpbacks was palpable and they took turns diving and slashing at the orcas.

This life-and-death drama went on and on until the four transient orcas known as the T100 family moved off in the distance. As they did, we saw the sea lion appear next to the humpbacks being guarded and escorted in the opposite direction. This was an unbelievable encounter. Hats off to our courageous humpbacks and best wishes to our little Steller sea lion, survivor for another day!”



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On board with the Port Angeles Whale Watch Company were two researchers from Cascadia Research Collective of Olympia, WA. The crew was able to identify two of the heroic humpbacks as BCX1215 Orion and MMY0009, familiar individuals to whale watchers.

In August of this year, the *Journal of Marine Mammal Science* published a report from researchers who observed humpbacks often stopping attacks from killer whales on smaller marine mammals like seals, sea lions and calves of gray whales. The *Journal* reported that humpbacks

were using the killer whale attack calls to intercept a hunt in progress, and then working in pairs to fend off orcas from their prey. These fights can last up to seven hours, according to researchers, and even one humpback wouldn't hesitate to take on 10 or more orcas, using its massive size advantage over the orcas (40-50 tons v. two-six tons) and a volley of bellows and blows and slaps of its long pectoral fins and flukes to battle the killers off. The report said that nine times out of ten these interventions involved humpbacks coming to the rescue of other species, while just one in ten involved saving a humpback calf from killer whales.

It's an altruistic behavior documented to some degree in other cetacea like dolphins, but only recently with humpbacks. And never before seen here in the Salish Sea.

"A group of humpbacks protecting a sea lion from transient killer whales? After about 2,500 whale watch trips that I have personally run I never expected to see this," said Capt. Shane Aggergaard of Port Angeles Whale Watch Company and Island Adventures Whale Watching out of Anacortes, WA. "If someone had told me about this I would've had a hard time believing it."

Why would they do this? What do the humpbacks get out of being nature's guardian angels?

"Why did Mother Teresa do what she did? We've come to learn that whales are capable of just as much saintly behavior as any mammal on this planet," explains Michael Harris, Executive Director of PWVWA, representing 38 companies operating out of 21 ports in BC and Washington. "In this case, they're foregoing opportunities to feed, rest, socialize, and they're clearly taking on great risk by battling these Bigg's whales. As humans we like to think that only we are evolved enough to do something so altruistic – when in fact seeing something like this out there makes us wonder, *how come we're not more like this?* How many stories do we hear about some person in trouble on a busy city street, and other people just passing them by? It's just another reason to love these whales. They teach us how to be better humans."

Humans have begun to help the humpbacks in the last half-century, once on the brink of extinction. Their spectacular resurgence here in the waters off Washington and BC in recent years – known as the "Humpback Comeback" – has given environmentalists, researchers and marine mammal scientists an up-close look at an extraordinary conservation success story. There are more than 21,000 humpbacks now in the eastern north Pacific, up from about 1,600 when whale hunting was banned in 1966. There are as many as 85,000 now worldwide. In the last few months, PWVWA crews have been reporting huge congregations of humpbacks in the waters between Victoria and Port Angeles, including a report Monday of group off Sooke of approximately 60 animals.

Last week, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) announced that nine of the 14 distinct populations of humpback whales have recovered enough in the last 40 years to warrant being removed from the endangered list, including the population that whale watchers have been observing and studying here in the Salish Sea.

But even delisted by NMFS, the north Pacific humpbacks aren't quite out of the woods – they still face climate change, prey depletion in some of their range, fishing gear entanglements, and other threats. But at least for now in the Salish Sea, Bigg's killer whales might think twice about tussling with them.

HOW TO HELP: You can also help the whales by learning more about the important work of Cascadia Research Collective. Go to www.cascadiaresearch.org.