

Feds spot third baby orca born recently to imperiled pods

February 26 2015, byPhuong Le



In this Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015 photo provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, (NOAA) a new baby orca swims alongside an adult whale, believed to be its mother, about 15 miles off the coast of Westport, Wash. U.S. biologists following endangered killer whales from a research vessel spotted the newborn orca off the coast of Washington state on Wednesday with other whales in the "L" pod, one of three families of southern resident killer whales that frequent inland Washington waters. This is the third baby born to the whale pods in recent months, bringing the Puget Sound's endangered population to 80, still dangerously low. (AP Photo/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Candice Emmons)

(AP)—U.S. scientists following endangered killer whales from a research vessel have spotted a baby orca off the coast of Washington state, the third birth documented this winter but still leaving the population dangerously low.

The research crew observed the calf on Wednesday with other whales in the L-pod, one of three families of southern resident killer whales that frequent inland Washington waters, said Brad Hanson, a biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries.

The baby looks great and was very active when it was seen about 15 miles west of Westport, Washington, Hanson said in a telephone interview Thursday while NOAA's research vessel, Bell Shimada, was briefly at port.

It's the third baby born to the whale pods in recent months and is an encouraging sign for the Puget Sound endangered population, though their numbers remain low at 80. The whales are struggling because of pollution, lack of food and other reasons.

The births are great news, but there also has not been a successful birth in the population for more than two years, said Ken Balcomb, senior scientist at the Center for Whale Research that keeps a census of the orcas.

"We know they've been having babies, they just haven't survived," Balcomb said. "We're getting more year-round observations, but the proof of the census is who's alive by July 1. If they're still here in July, we can celebrate. "

The population lost four whales last year, including a pregnant orca, a baby whale and two others that went missing and were presumed dead.

It's too early to say how things are going to go for this calf, Hanson said.

Wednesday's sighting was also the first time a baby orca was spotted on the outer coast. Its mother appears to be a whale known as L-94, but it's not clear yet how old the calf is, Hanson said.

"We realize the population is having a reproduction success problem, and trying to understand what animal is or isn't successful is helpful," Hanson said.

Often, a whale that gives birth in the ocean may not return to the inland waters with that baby. In the past, "if this calf didn't survive, we may not know," he said.

Until recently, scientists didn't know where the orcas swam in the winter or what they ate. But a satellite tracking project and other research are helping fill in the gaps.

Hanson and others aboard the NOAA research ship have been at sea for two weeks and have been collecting fecal samples and even catching scales from the whale's fish kills to study what it eats.

This winter, the team tagged two whales and then tracked their movements. They first tagged a member of the J-pod and monitored that group for about six weeks as the animals mostly stuck to the Salish Sea, the inland waters shared by Washington state and Canada.

Earlier this month, while on the research vessel, the crew tagged a member of L-pod. The ship followed the L-pod and another group, the K-pod, as the whales swam along the Washington coast, as far south as central Oregon.

The research will help inform decisions about whether to protect more

habitat for the animals, including in waters off the West Coast.

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