

# Orcas are attacking ships again: Here's a history of the practice

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A pod of killer whales attacked and sank a yacht over the weekend between Spain and Morocco in the Strait of Gibraltar—and it's not the first time.

The couple on the yacht said they felt sudden blows to the hull and rudder before the [boat](#) started taking on water, according to reports. They alerted authorities and a nearby oil tanker took them onboard. The yacht was unsalvageable.

Sunday's incident is the latest in a string of attacks on yachts by orcas in recent years. A lot regarding the attacks remains a mystery to experts, including the whales' motives.

Scientists suggest it could be because the orcas feel threatened, are protecting their food supply, or are simply playing around.

Here's a timeline of the encounters.

## **The early 1800s**

That's right, we're going way back. While this latest string of whale attacks began around 2020, records show whales attacking boats isn't a new concept at all—let us all recall "Moby Dick."

According to Graham Faiella, an author whose books recall early tales of the sea, ship attacks by the marine mammals date back to around 1820, when the Essex, a whaling ship—designed to catch whales—was pursued by a group of whales that struck the ship with their bodies. The ship sank, leaving 20 castaways.

The Essex's story was said to be an inspiration for Herman Melville's novel, along with another true story from 1850 about the Ann Alexander. Based out of New Bedford, Mass., the Ann Alexander sailed to the Pacific in 1851, when it was struck by a [sperm whale](#) the crew was trying to pursue.

One whale that was said to be "rushing at it [the boat] with tremendous

violence, lifted open its enormous jaws, and taking the boat in, crushed it into fragments as small as a common-sized chair," according to an account from the whalemens—the men aboard the ship tasked with catching the whales—cited by Faiella.

The culprit whale, which was nicknamed "the monster of the deep," eventually blew a hole through the Ann Alexander's hull.

## **The late 1800s and early 1900s**

Faiella said the whales attacking whalers and their ships continued into the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In 1871, a whale followed the King Oscar on its voyage between Tasmania and New South Wales. After three days of "peaceable companionship," the whale heel-turned, abruptly ramming the ship and causing a leak.

In 1901, the Kathleen ship set off on a whaling voyage from New Bedford toward the Brazilian coast. A single whale broke away from its pod to charge the ship and create a hole in the Kathleen.

The whalers found safety before the ship sank.

Finally, in 1904, a Danish merchant ship called Anna was voyaging from Iceland to New Brunswick, Canada, when a "frisky" whale appeared and played around the vessel. Suddenly—you can probably guess this part—"like a warship intent on ramming, [the whale] came straight at" the boat, according to a 1905 report from *Wide World Magazine*.

## **The late 1900s and early 2000s**

Perhaps during a dormant period, we heard a lot less about whales attacking ships and a lot more about ships striking whales.

Reports show that collisions with motorized ships were a recognized source of whale deaths, but as noted in a report from the Society for Marine Mammalogy, little had been done to compile information on the frequency of the events.

Renaud de Stephanis, a biologist involved in investigating whale attacks, told BBC News last year that in the mid-1990s, he noticed an orca pod (a family of whales that stick together) that would steal tuna from tuna boats, teaching younger whales to do the same.

He told the BBC he believes the whales attacking boats today come from the same pod that was taking back tuna as part of a predatory self-preservation tactic prompted by overfishing.

## **The 2020s**

They're baccckkkkk.

Since 2020, a small pod of orcas in the strait of Gibraltar has been ramming vessels with their heads and biting rudders.

The movement, which was nicknamed #orcauprising and inspired plenty of memes, reportedly has occurred hundreds of times. Other instances were recorded in different locations, like when an orca rammed a boat near Shetland last year.

According to research from GT Atlantic Orca, a group that tracks whale populations, there have been nearly 700 interactions of orca attacks on ships near the strait of Gibraltar since the first report in May 2020.

An advisory from the Spanish Ministry of Transport says anyone sailing through the waters from the Gulf of Cádiz and the Strait of Gibraltar should avoid areas marked as potential danger zones for orca interactions.

The greatest threats occur from May through August, which is when officials say whale pods are most commonly seen in those parts of the Atlantic.

But, as noted by CBS, the rest of the year can still be dangerous.

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