



WHALE BLITZ REPORT

AUGUST 11, 2023

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BACKGROUND

Ocean Wise's Whales Initiative

Ocean Wise is a Canadian not-for-profit dedicated to restoring and protecting our oceans. With a focus on evidence-based solutions and everyday actions, we're empowering millions of people to turn the tide on climate change, overfishing and pollution. Built on more than 60 years of conservation, our successes are proof that amazing things are possible when we work together.

The Whales Initiative is a [conservation initiative within Ocean Wise](#), established in the mid 1980's. We conduct applied research on cetacean threats and threat mitigation, population and distribution trends, acoustic behavior, population genetics and photogrammetric monitoring of the health of at-risk cetacean populations. Our main goal is to develop and implement conservation tools which deliver critical information about whale and environmental health to decision makers in real time to protect and recover whale populations.

Ocean Wise Sightings Network

The Ocean Wise Sightings Network (OWSN – formerly the B.C. Cetacean Sightings Network) is one of Canada's most enduring and successful citizen science programs. For over 20 years, the OWSN has engaged in education and outreach throughout BC to encourage coastal citizens to become marine stewards by reporting their cetacean and sea turtle sightings in support of conservation-based research.



Photo: John Jansen

The OWSN manages an extensive, historic database on cetacean and sea turtle occurrence records, which to date contains over 320,000 verified sighting reports from approximately 7,500 observers. Ocean Wise provides subsets of these data to over 10 conservation-based research projects annually. This database contains a treasure trove of pertinent ecological information, including species assemblages, distribution, behavior, group composition and individual identities (for cetaceans).



Spatially and temporally, this data covers all 203 of the current Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the Canadian Pacific Ocean, and throughout the majority of the 127 MPAs in Washington State, with dates spanning from the 1950s to present day. Data continues to be added to this database via Ocean Wise's [WhaleReport app](#), which directly informs the [WhaleReport Alert System \(WRAS\)](#) to inform large ships such as ferries, tankers, and freighters of cetacean presence and reduce the risk of ship strikes and disturbance. This amalgamation of sighting reports is an important means of identifying and protecting critical habitat, highlighting areas of high risk, reducing anthropogenic threats to at-risk species, and ultimately contributing to the designation of new MPAs. Between April 1, 2022 and 31 March, 2023 alone, the OWSN received a total of 7,833 cetacean sightings (**Figure 1**).

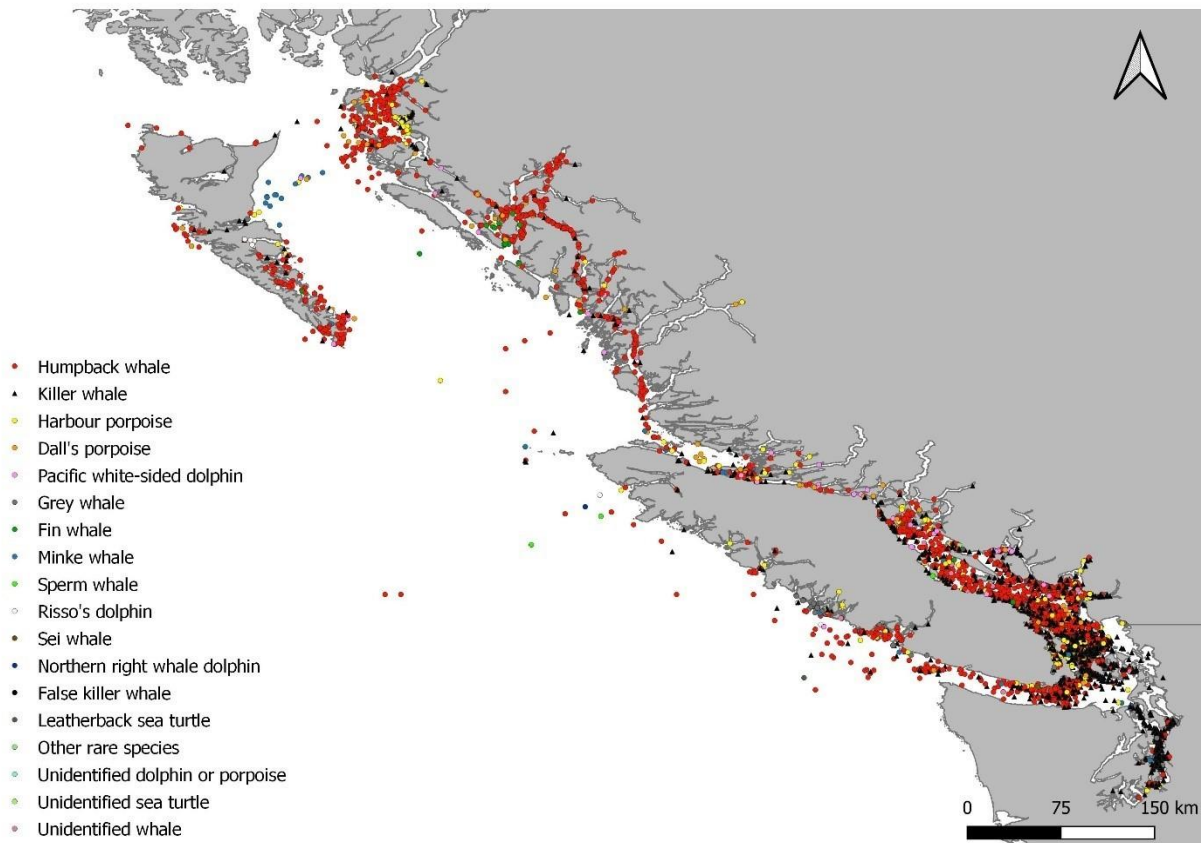


Figure 1. Map of sightings reported to the OWSN from April 2022 to March 2023. Sightings data are collected opportunistically and are not corrected for effort.





Whale spotting events are an inclusive and non-invasive way to collect important information about the whales in our waters.

BioBlitzes for Conservation

In BC, many cetacean (whale, dolphin, and porpoise) species are endangered or threatened due to human activity. Collecting information on species presence/absence, behavior and individual identifications are vital for the protection and recovery of our iconic megafauna. Often, citizen scientists are invited to get involved in collecting presence/absence data by joining a BioBlitz, an event that focuses on identifying as many species as possible in a specific area over a short period of time.

Starting in 2022, the OWSN launched a BioBlitz of its own, an annual event known as Whale Blitz. These cetacean BioBlitzes consist of a series of community events hosted by Ocean Wise staff and partners around the BC coast. Whale Blitz watches are held between July 14-17 in celebration of [World Orca Day](#) and the anniversary of Northern Resident Killer Whale [A73 'Springer'](#) being returned to her pod after rescue and rehabilitation (July 14th). Each event aims to provide coastal community members and visitors alike with an opportunity to participate in citizen science, gain species ID skills, and learn about whale conservation. In addition, hosts and participants are equipped with tips and tricks for viewing and identifying cetaceans and given information on marine mammal [Be Whale Wise](#) guidelines and regulations.

Cetacean sightings recorded during these watches will be reported in real time through the Ocean Wise WhaleReport app, thus alerting professional mariners to the presence of whales and allowing them to take actions to prevent ship strikes and disturbance.



A harbour porpoise viewed from land on Saturna Island during the 2022 Whale Blitz. Photo: Ocean Wise.



2023 WHALE BLITZ EVENTS

For the pilot year of Whale Blitz, there was a total of ten events involving nine different organizations (**Table 1**). In total, 450 members of the public were engaged with Whale Blitz watches over the 14th, 15, 16th, and 17th of July, with the exception of a watch hosted by the Ocean Wise Youth Team on a July 13th expedition to Galiano Island. There was an increase of 248 people engaged in this year's Whale Blitz events, and a larger geographic area was covered (**figure 2**).

Table 1. Information on Whale Blitz events held between July 14th and 16th across the coast, with the associated Whale Trail sign location, and number of sightings submitted to WhaleReport during the event.

Date	Time (24 hr)	Host organization	Location	Number of sightings	Number of people engaged
13-Jul-23	11:00 – 15:00	Ocean Wise (Youth Team)	Bellhouse Park, Galiano Island	0	68
14-Jul-23	15:00 – 18:00	Discovery Passage Aquarium	Discovery Passage Pier, Campbell River	0	19
14-Jul-23	13:00 – 15:00	Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea	Sidney Waterfront, Sidney	0	33
14-Jul-23	10:30 – 14:00	Cetus Research and Conservation Society	Rebecca Spit Provincial Park, Quadra Island	0	55
14-Jul-23	17:00 – 20:00	Ocean Wise	Onboard Ocean Ecoventures vessel	2	9
16-Jul-23	10:00 – 14:00	Parks Canada	Whytecliff Park, Vancouver	0	60
16-Jul-23	11:30 – 15:30	Ocean Networks Canada & Ocean Wise	Ruckle Point Provincial Park, Salt Spring Island	1	62
16-Jul-23	11:00 – 14:00	Gulf Islands National Park Reserve	Sidney Spit Day-Use area, Sidney Island	0	58
17-Jul-23	12:00 – 15:30	Cetus Research and Conservation Society, Mayne Island Conservancy, & Ocean Wise	Georgina Point, Mayne Island	0	74
17-Jul-23	15:00 – 18:00	Discovery Passage Aquarium	Discovery Passage Pier, Campbell River	0	12
TOTAL				3	450



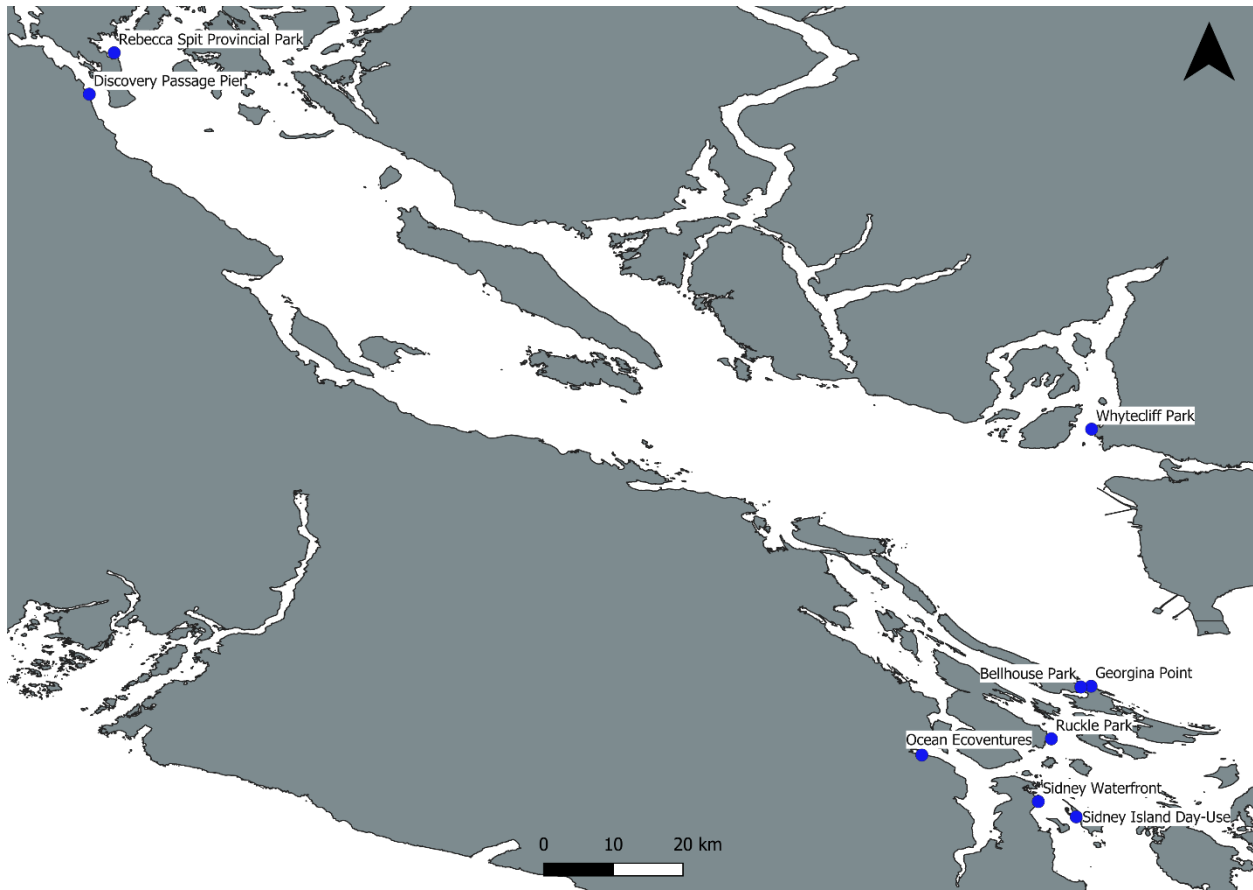


Figure 2. Locations of the 2023 Whale Blitz included Sidney Waterfront, Sidney; Discovery Passage Pier, Campbell River; Whytecliff Park, West Vancouver; Rebecca Spit Provincial Park, Quadra Island; Ruckle Provincial Park, Salt Spring Island; Georgina Point, Mayne Island; Bellhouse Park, Galiano Island; Sidney Island Day-Use Area, Sidney Island; and Cowichan Bay.



SIGHTINGS SUMMARY

Day 1: July 13, 2023

The 2023 Whale Blitz events began on the 13th this year, with the Ocean Wise Youth Team heading out on a learning expedition to Galiano Island. Whales Initiative staff accompanied the group to Bellhouse Park, where they set up their watch looking out into Active Pass. No cetaceans were spotted, however 68 people were engaged and learned about species identification and how to report their sightings to the OWSN.



Photos: Ocean Wise.

Day 2: July 14, 2023

The second day of the Whale Blitz coincided with Springer Day on the 14th of July. Four events took place throughout the day, beginning at Rebecca Spit Provincial Park on Quadra Island. This event was hosted by Cetus Research and Conservation Society and engaged with a total of 55 people. The Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea hosted a Whale Blitz on Sidney Waterfront, engaging with 33 people.



Photo: Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea



Photo: Parks Canada



Photo: Discovery Passage Aquarium

Later in the day, the Discovery Passage Aquarium held their first of two watches at the Discovery Passage Pier, engaging with 19 people. That same evening, Ocean Wise staff were given time to conduct a cetacean outreach and education session aboard an Ocean Ecoventures vessel, providing cetacean identification keys and marine mammal regulation information to a total of 9 people. They saw humpback whales Divot (BCX1057) and Raptor (BCY0458) and 10 Bigg's killer whales from the T065B and T036A matriline.



Photo: Ocean Wise

In addition to sightings from Whale Blitz, the OWSN received 80 sightings reported via the Whale Report app on July 14th. This included 27 killer whale reports, 33 humpback whale reports, 1 minke whale reports, 6 Dall's porpoise reports, 3 grey whale reports, 8 harbour porpoise reports, and 1 report of Pacific white-sided dolphins.



Anvil (BCZ0410) to the right and suspected Split Fluke (BCZ1068) to the left were captured travelling in the Strait of Georgia halfway between Vancouver Island and Savary Island on July 14th. Photo: Annette Lucas.



Photo: Annette Lucas.



Day 3: July 16, 2023

On the 16th of July, the Whale Blitz was started off by Parks Canada who hosted their watch at Whyecliff Park and engaged with 60 people. Over in the Southern Gulf Islands, staff from Ocean Networks Canada and Ocean Wise hosted a Whale Blitz at Ruckle Point Park overlooking Swanson Channel. Killer whales were seen far off in the distance near Pender Island – another onlooker with a closer observation point reported the group as 5 transient killer whales. This is a common area for killer whales to be spotted – they will often continue travelling north-east towards active pass, or head south between Pender Island and Saturna Island towards Boundary Pass. 62 people were engaged with this event, including both locals and weekend campers. The third and final Whale Blitz for the day was hosted on Sidney Island by the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. This event engaged with 58 people, adding to a total of 180 people engaged overall on day 3!

Despite having only one Whale Blitz related sighting, the OWSN received 50 reports of cetacean presence on the 16th of July. This included 4 grey whale reports, 2 harbour porpoise reports, 21 humpback reports, and 23 killer whale reports.



Photo: Tyler Ingram

Receiving reports from observers across the coast can help us understand cetacean behaviour and abundance from both a spatial and temporal perspective. The humpback whale to the left was ID'd by the Marine Education and Research Society as Eros (HW-MN0500969) on July 16th. This particular whale is known for his "mugging" behaviour, in which whales approach boats in a curious manner. Unfortunately, if proper approach distances, speeds, and actions are not taken by boaters within the vicinity of a curious whale, this can have serious consequences.

Island on the 16th! This matriline consists of the matriarch, T036A, and her offspring T036A1, T036A2, and T036A3.

The T036A Bigg's killer whale matriline were also spotted from the shoreline of Pender

Day 4: July 17th, 2023

On the fourth and final day of the Whale Blitz, Ocean Wise, Cetus Research and Conservation Society, and Mayne Island Conservancy kicked off the day with an event at Georgina Point, Mayne Island. Active Pass and the surrounding area is a hotspot for whales and ferries alike, so this was an important area to get word out about reporting cetacean observations in order to avoid the potential of ship strike and disturbance (**figure 3**). Nearby Bellhouse Park, part of the Whale Trail, provides another excellent view of the pass! The Discovery Passage Aquarium held the second of their two watches at the Discovery Passage Pier that evening. In total, the two events engaged with 86 people. Unfortunately, no whales were spotted –



OW and Cetus staff at the Georgina Point Whale Blitz. Photo: Mayne Island Conservancy



however, a group of Bigg's killer whales were spotted near Georgina Point the following day!

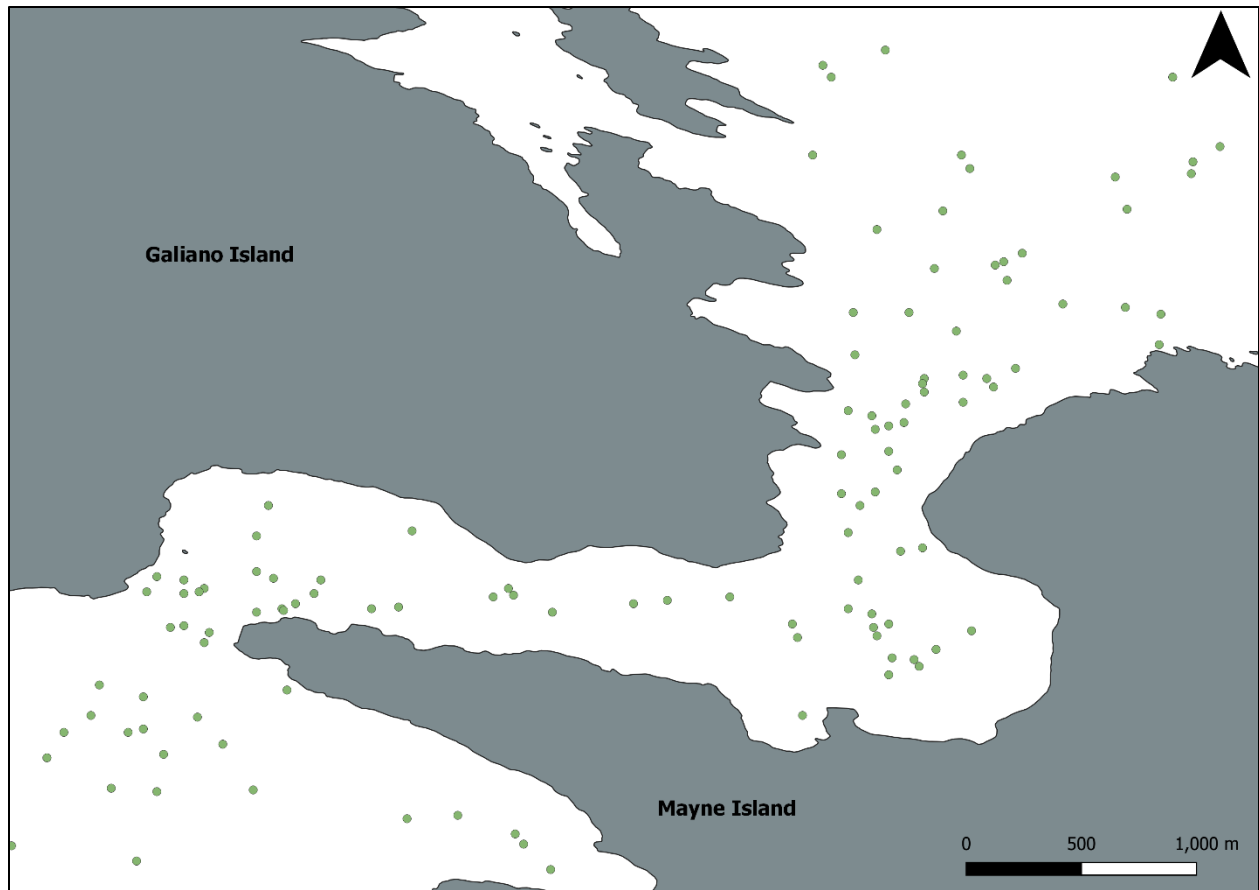


Figure 3. All cetacean sightings submitted to the OWSN from Active Pass and surrounding areas in 2022.

The OWSN received 20 sightings not associated with the Whale Blitz on July 17th, with 13 humpback whale reports, 4 killer whale reports, and single reports of a minke whale, Pacific white-sided dolphins, and a harbour porpoise.



Whale Blitz Summary Maps

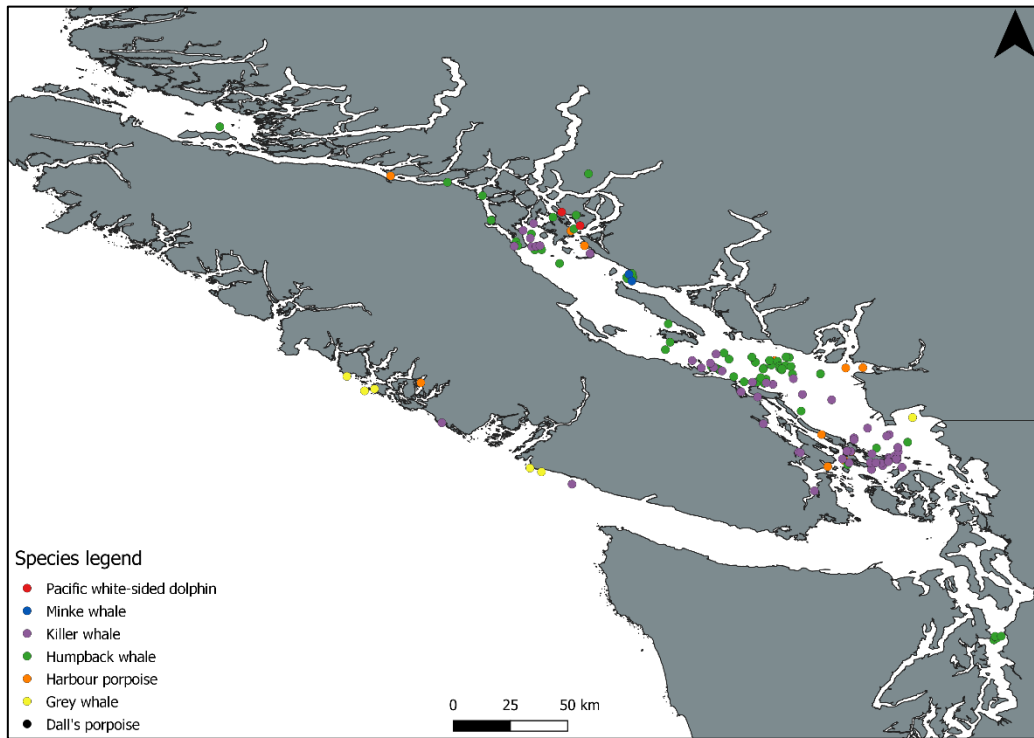


Figure 4. All sightings submitted to Whale Report during Whale Blitz watches for southern BC and northern WA. Sightings data not corrected for effort.

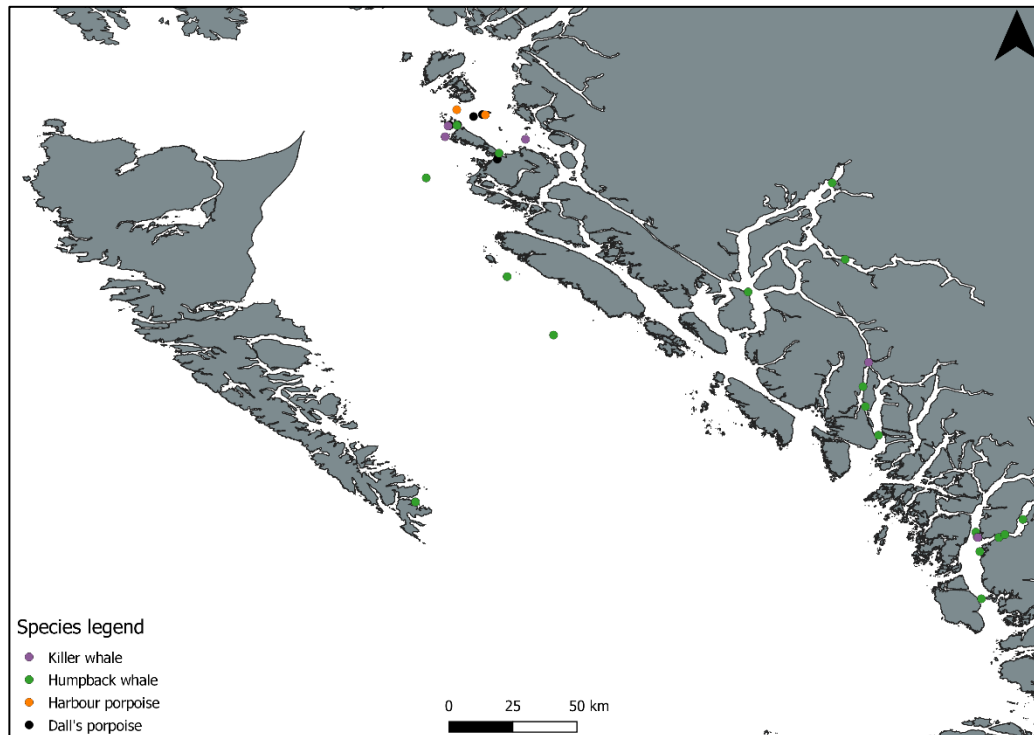


Figure 5. All sightings submitted to Whale Report during Whale Blitz watches for the north coast of BC. Sightings data not corrected for effort.



WHALE BLITZ 2024

Building on the success of our pilot Whale Blitz event, Whale Blitz 2024 is due to be hosted across roughly the same dates, to facilitate consistency and allow us to conduct comparable analyses on sightings received and public engagement.

Our aims for 2024 are to:

1. Increase the number of watches being held by hosts between the 14th-17th of July
2. Increase spatial range of Whale Blitz watches by partnering with organizations and individuals in the North Coast and elsewhere on Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, and the Lower Mainland.

We will be reaching out to 2023 Whale Blitz partners in early spring 2024 to confirm our 2024 online info session and Whale Blitz training dates (if applicable).

If you are interested in hosting a Whale Blitz event in 2024, please contact Kayla Jones at kayla.jones@ocean.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Whales Initiative would like to give a big thank you to all of our partners for hosting events throughout the Whale Blitz long weekend: Parks Canada, Gulf Islands National Park Reserve, Cetus Research and Conservation Society, Mayne Island Conservancy, Ocean Networks Canada, Discovery Passage Aquarium, Ocean Ecoventures, and the Ocean Wise Youth Team. We are so grateful for your time, for collecting valuable data on cetaceans in our waters and for helping us to raise awareness about the importance of reporting cetacean sightings throughout the coast. We would also like to acknowledge that the Whale Blitz received funding through Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Habitat Stewardship Program (2022-2025).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

WhaleReport

Anyone can download the WhaleReport app for free (Android and iOS) to report sightings of whales, dolphins and porpoises in BC and Washington State. Visit our website to learn more: <https://ocean.org/action/send-a-sighting-save-a-whale/>.

The Whale Trail

Interested in finding out the Whale Trail sign closest to you? You can find information about all of the Whale Trail sign locations in Canada and US on their website: <https://thewhaletrail.org/>.



Be Whale Wise Guidelines

Make sure you are aware of the current marine mammal regulations in Canadian and US waters by visiting the Be Whale Wise website: <https://www.bewhalewise.org/>.

DFO Reporting Hotline

To report a distressed or dead marine mammal or sea turtle in Pacific waters, please contact the DFO BC Marine Mammal Response Network (Observe, Record, Report):

- Phone: 1-800-465-4336
- Email: DFO.ORR-ONS.MPO@dfo-mpo.gc.ca
- Radio: VHF Channel 16

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Maps and photos included in this report are not for further distribution

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