

NATURE

KILLER WHALE SEASON REACHES MONTEREY BAY

Spring brings whale calves and their predators

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MONTEREY » With the arrival of spring comes the arrival of the killer whales to Monterey Bay. An attack last week on a gray whale calf by a group of 17 killer whales signified the beginning of “killer whale season” to many observers.

The killer whales (also known as orcas) found in this area patrol long stretches of coastline looking for their prey, which include seals, dolphins, and, when they can get them, gray whale calves.

Those gray whale calves are really what drives the seasonal abundance of killer whales, according to Nancy Black, a marine biologist with Monterey Bay Whale Watch. Gray whales migrate from their winter homes in Mexico back to their summer feeding grounds in Alaska, and their path along the California coast takes them right through Monterey Bay.

For adult gray whales, the deep water of Monterey Bay doesn't pose a problem. But mothers and calves need the shelter of shallower water to avoid being vulnerable to attack.

One such attack happened sometime during the night before or early morning of April 5 — a group of killer whales separated a baby gray whale from its larger, more dangerous mother, and successfully killed it. After a whale watching boat discovered the carcass of a baby gray whale surrounded by feeding killer whales that morning, they marked the beginning of this year's bloody season.

“The ones feeding were taking the tongue and stripping the blubber,” said Black, who watched the killer whales feed from her boat for hours. “Lots of birds, gulls, a big slick so you couldn't see the carcass right away.”

Blue Ocean Whale Watch owner, captain, and naturalist Kate Cummings says that she warns her passengers



PHOTOS BY VERN FISHER — MONTEREY HERALD FILE

A large male killer whale patrols the area off Cypress Point in Pebble Beach in 2005.



A pod of killer whales in Monterey Bay in 2005. Each spring the killer whales come hunting the migrating gray whales.

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