

Huge orca strands in harbour



The stranded orca thrashes its tail as it struggles to free itself from a sandbank in the Hokianga Harbour – PICTURE / Juan Copello

Spectacle delights visitor to North

“It was absolutely amazing.”

Juan Copello came to Northland in the hope of spotting orcas - but he didn't count on seeing an eight-tonne male fighting to free itself from a sandbank just metres from his boat.

"It was absolutely amazing," he said.

Mr Copello, from Argentina, was visiting Tutukaka marine expert Ingrid Visser on Thursday when she heard a pod of orcas had been spotted in the Hokianga Harbour.

They arrived just before sunset to find a group of 11 gorging themselves on stingrays in the shallows opposite Omapere. "A couple of females and juveniles were hunting rays along the sandbank, but when the male tried it he got stuck," Mr Copello said.

The orca was stranded in metre-deep water, 100m offshore, for about 15 minutes. Dr Visser said the male - known as Roundtop - was "a big boy", eight metres long and weighing in at seven to eight tonnes. "He was quite calm so he'd obviously been stranded before. He carefully tried to pivot himself around towards deeper water. When he was in the right direction, he started thrashing around and freed himself." He then "took off at top speed" to rejoin his group about 5.30pm.

The pod was heading north and should reach Shipwreck Bay tomorrow and the Bay of Islands by Thursday, Dr Visser said.

It is Mr Copello's third orca-spotting trip to Northland. In his last month-long visit, he managed just half-an-hour with the marine mammals. At home he leads wildlife tours taking in whales, elephant seals and penguins around his parents' coastal farm.

• If you see an orca, Dr Visser wants to know about it - call her on 0800 SEE ORCA (0800 733 6722).