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Rare breed of killer?

An unusual-looking orca may be a new species.



WHALE WATCHERS, sailors and coastal dwellers could be crucial in helping scientists discover more about a new type of orca that's been spotted in Australian waters. Dr Ingrid Visser, founder of New Zealand's Orca Research Trust and lead scientist studying them, has named the killer whales 'Austral orcas' and says they display physical features markedly different from all other orca species and subspecies. "They've got a very square head compared to typical orca, and much smaller eye patches," Ingrid says. "And overall they're much smaller."

Austral orcas were first noticed in 1955, when 16 were stranded on Paraparaumu Beach, north of Wellington, NZ. At the time, Dr William Dawbin, a Victoria University College zoologist, recognised differences in appearance, measured the animals and took biological samples. When Ingrid began studying orcas in 1992, she, too, remarked upon the Austral orca's striking appearance, and started collating data that built upon William's initial research.

The distinctive appearance of the Austral orca indicates they don't breed with typical orcas. "They're choosing not to, and I think that's an important thing [to look] at," Ingrid says. "We know nothing about their social structures,

New kids on the block. Austral orcas (top) have blunter heads and smaller eye patches than the killer whales (bottom) usually seen in southern waters.

feeding patterns or behaviours."

During the past two decades, Ingrid has collated records of sightings showing a distribution of Austral orca in and around the Southern Ocean. She's recorded sightings south of South America, off the coast of South Georgia, and off the Crozet Islands (a subantarctic archipelago in the Indian Ocean). In December 2008, ecotour guide Sue Werner chanced upon a pod of 40 whales in Australian waters, south of Macquarie Island. "Sue knew about my interest," Ingrid says, "so she photographed them and sent me the photos. When I saw them I absolutely freaked out."

Ingrid is reliant on public sightings to learn more about the animal's behaviour, feeding and migration patterns, so she can determine whether or not these whales are an entirely new species of orca. "I really think the Australian public are going to be the key to getting the information," she says.

If you think you've seen an unusual looking orca, you can report it at www.orcicaresearch.org.

SAMANTHA YOUNG AND JOANNA EGAN

DINKUM LINGO

WITH
FRANK POVAH



Pokin' the borak

verb: pookɪŋ · ðə · 'bɔræk

"Borak" is another home-grown word, as fair dinkum as eucalyptus oil. It comes to us from "burag", a word that the Wathawurung people of the Geelong region used to negate or deny something. Sometimes spelt "borax", it has replaced "baal", its Dharug [NSW] equivalent, undergoing some subtle changes on its journey to the 21st century.

Borak popped up in print as early as 1839, and in 1845 Melbourne's *Standard* reported that an accused man had "...merely denied the charge by using the word borak [sic]".

By the 1870s, Aussies were beginning to poke the borak at one another and its modern meaning was fixed — anyone who has ever umpired an Aussie sporting match knows only too well what it means.

In the glory days before political rallies were stage-managed 'events', politicians needed to be resilient. Getting up in front of a crowd meant copping the borak, making for some interesting exchanges.

Budgeree

noun: 'bʌʒdəri

From "bujari", a Dharug word expressing approval. By the early 1800s, Aussies were combining Dharug words and British colloquialisms. For example: "It was a budgeree feast and that's baal gammon." "Gammon", English dialect for a lie, went into Aboriginal English.

LISTEN to Frank's monthly online audio column, On the Wallaby with Frank, at www.australiangeographic.com.au.