

# Spectacular predators

While June 1 is officially the start of winter, unofficially it's also the start of the orca season north of Auckland.

Orca are present all year, but are more prevalent in winter up north, hunting in harbours and close to the coast.

So it was no surprise last Saturday for killer whale spotters to see 18 to 20 orca in the Kaipara Harbour.

Working in association with Steve Hathaway, a Warkworth resident and underwater cameraman, the orca research team headed from Tutukaka to Tinopai to try and catch up with them as they moved from Shelly Beach to the Kaipara Heads.

Pangolin Pictures, shooting an orca documentary for the Discovery Channel, tagged along. With the help of local residents on boats and observing from cliff tops, orca researcher Ingrid Visser and her crew spent three hours with the orca as they hunted on the shallow sand banks, mainly for stingrays – their favourite food.

They were spread over more than half the harbour, so researchers only had the chance to get close to a small sub-group of five. This included an adult male known as Spike, because of his 'spike-like' dorsal fin, and a young mother known as Miracle, who stranded in August 1993 at Great Exhibition Bay. Her new calf was spending a lot of time with Spike as he hunted for stingrays, Ingrid says.

"We watched them take about 10 rays while the film crew shot footage of them. Even though the light was fading fast, we knew the excitement was not over as we



**Harbour cruising:** An adult male swims alongside the Orca Research boat.

Photos: JUAN COPELLO

anticipated that they would head north once leaving the Kaipara Harbour."

Two days later the orca were well inside the Hokianga Harbour. Researchers stayed with them for four hours. Once they made it into the waves at the entrance bar the orcas began surfing and playing in the waves, the Discovery Channel film crew recording it.

"The ultimate will be for us to find the orca again and this time film them underwater," Ingrid says.

We are asking members of the public to help by calling as soon as they see the orca on 0800 SEE ORCA, 0800-733-6722.

The documentary is expected to screen later this year in the United States and then throughout the world, including New Zealand.

For information, visit [www.orcaresearch.org](http://www.orcaresearch.org).



**On film:** Pangolin Pictures cameraman Mark Gerasimenko films an adult male orca. The show is for a Discovery Channel documentary about orca from around the world.