Wild words

"IF YOU COULD AWARD THE NOBEL PRIZE TO A PLACE RATHER THAN A PERSON, WYTHAM WOODS WOULD BE A PRIME CANDIDATE."

Lord Krebs in the foreword to a book on the Oxfordshire wildlife sanctuary, which is believed to be the most studied wood in Britain.

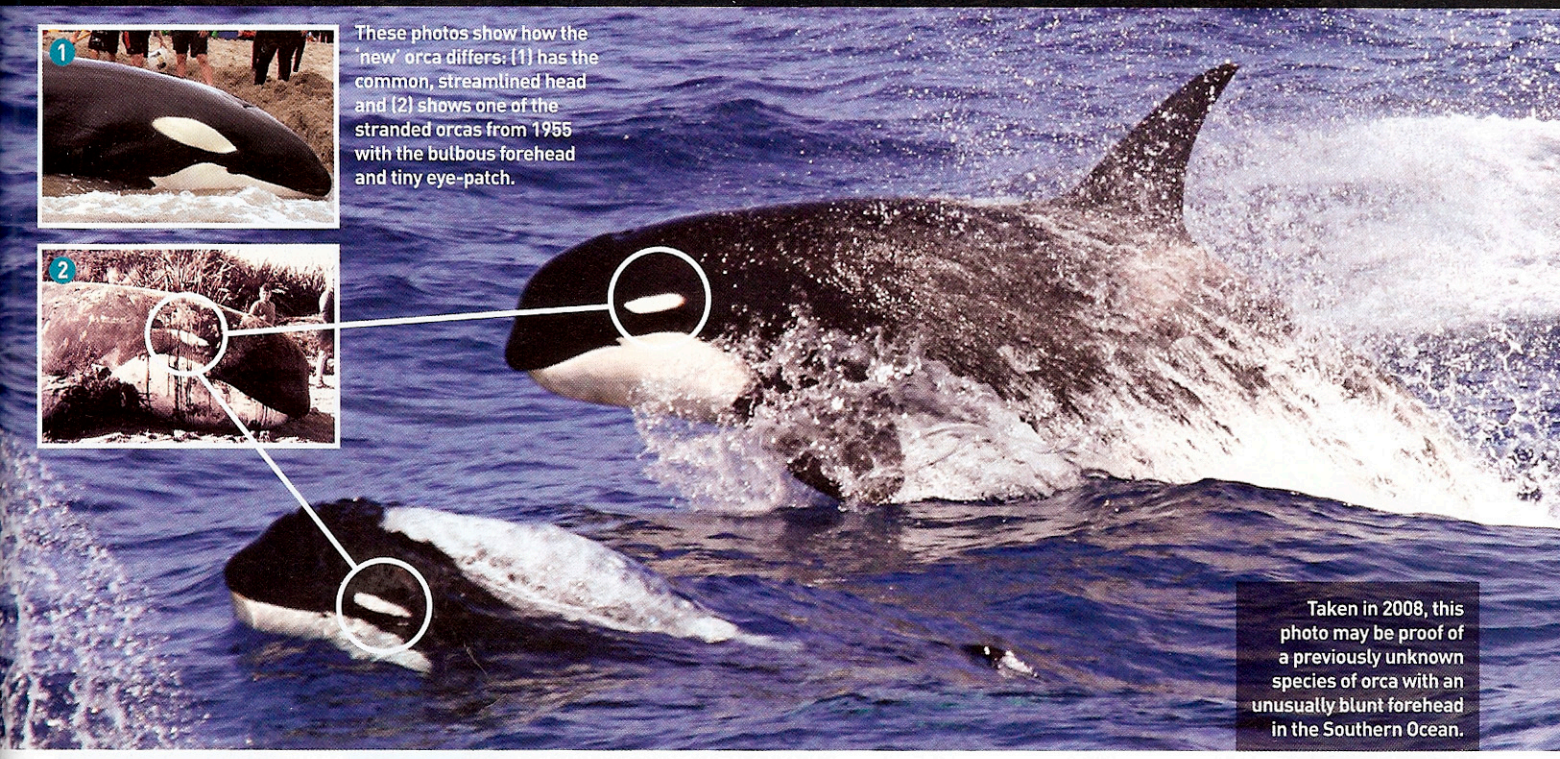
Half a grouse

400 The number of male black grouse in England – half the population of 2009 after a poor breeding season and the harsh winter, according to the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust.

Dickie Duckett/FLPA

NEWS OF THE EARTH

Everything you need to know about what's happening to wildlife around the world



These photos show how the 'new' orca differs: (1) has the common, streamlined head and (2) shows one of the stranded orcas from 1955 with the bulbous forehead and tiny eye-patch.

Taken in 2008, this photo may be proof of a previously unknown species of orca with an unusually blunt forehead in the Southern Ocean.

OUT OF THE BLUE

Grainy black-and-white images from half a century ago may have helped a New Zealand-based scientist to uncover a new species of orca. James Fair reports.

A MARINE BIOLOGIST from New Zealand believes that she may have discovered a new race or even species of orca.

Dr Ingrid Visser, who has been running the Orca Research Trust for the past 20 years, says that photos taken in 2008 of a group of porpoising killer whales show unusually blunt-headed animals with tiny white eye-patches.

Intriguingly, these orcas look remarkably similar to a group that stranded on the south-west coast of New Zealand's North Island in 1955. Photos of the stranding show orcas with extraordinary bulbous heads that are quite different to their typical, streamlined snouts.

Visser first saw these photos in books published in the 1980s. "I noticed how unusual the orcas looked," she said, "and I set off to find out more about them."

After scouring museums and archives and interviewing eyewitnesses, Visser found two skulls from the stranded animals and collected 18 other records of similar-looking orcas at sea.

But the breakthrough came when a friend photographed a pod off the Macquarie Islands in the Southern Ocean in 2008.

"The images show that the stranding wasn't just a group of extremely weird individuals who died out," Visser said. "They are proof that there is a unique form of orca around."

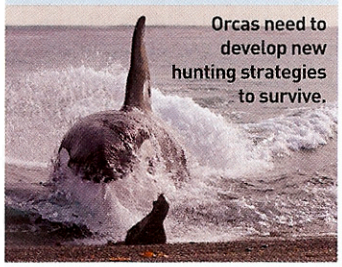
Other records suggest that this orca has a southern, circumpolar distribution, so Visser is proposing that it's called the 'Austral orca'.

Cetacean expert Erich Hoyt said that it was "open season" for speculation on how many species of killer whale there are (see box, *right*). "These days, genetics must be considered, as well as morphology – and not just external morphology," he added.

But while much of the research focuses on known orca populations, Visser claims to have discovered a whole group of animals unknown to science.

ORCA GENETICS

- DNA analysis has prompted speculation that there may be more than one species of orca.
- Phillip Morin of the US National Marine Fisheries Service has suggested that there is evidence for at least three separate species.
- Rus Hoelzel of Durham University, however, argues that the rationale for this is weak because it's based on just one genetic marker.
- Hoelzel suggests that the orca may be a species that shows a great diversity of forms and behaviour.
- This could be because it is at the top of the food-chain and needs to be able to easily develop new hunting strategies to survive.



Orcas need to develop new hunting strategies to survive.

Main: Sue Werner; beached: Ingrid Visser/orcaresearch.org; B&W: Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; hunting: Sylvain Cordier, all SpecialistStock.com