Robson Bight (Michael Bigg)
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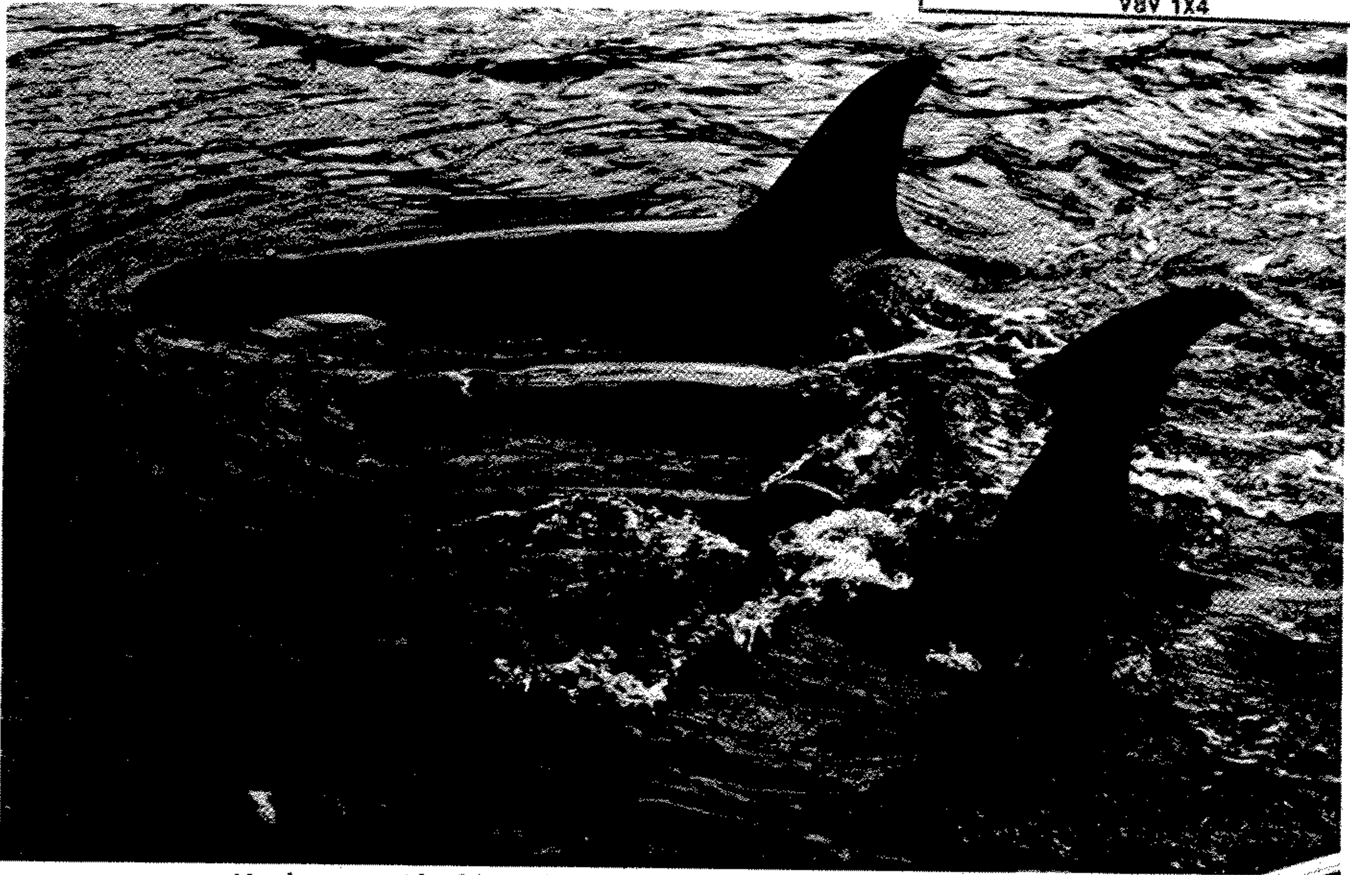

Walter Franczyk

Newborn orca (third from the top) is identified by the flopped-over dorsal fin

Whales at bay

The bay called Robson Bight is haven for over half B.C.'s orcas. But it's in danger. By Erich Hoyt

THE TALL, CURVED-BACK dorsal fins of killer whales, *Orcinus orca* – the so-called "blackfish" of B.C.'s coast — have been compared in popular literature to submarine periscopes, black lateen sails, farmers' poles, even witches' hats. But to me, watching the whales cruise in a line down the Johnstone Strait "highway", their dorsals look more like the tail fins of black '59 Cadillac limousines.

I was joking about this resemblance on August 12, 1973, during our first whale summer, when some 50 of them, the largest "fleet" we'd ever seen, entered Robson Bight, a bay on the northeast coast of Vancouver Island. They came barrelling down Johnstone Strait, weaving among the fish boats and tugs and other "freeway" traffic. They came on fast, a traffic jam of big, spouting blackfish. And if the 88-kilometre length of Johnstone Strait was their freeway, it was obvious as they turned in and slowed down that the large open bay was their exit ramp. Once into the bight's waters. they stopped to lie — still — at the surface. Home at last.

We had been five weeks in Johnstone Strait by that time, on the first of seven annual expeditions I have made with various colleagues to film and record killer whales in their natural habitat. We had anchored and set up camp on the shores of Robson Bight, a bay about three kilometres wide lying at the mouth of the Tsitika River, roughly midway between Kelsey Bay/Sayward and Port McNeill. It has been estimated that more than half British Columbia's 265 killer whales live in and around Johnstone Strait, but until that August day only small groups of two to ten individuals

had visited our anchorage. So when 50 of these sleek, shiny black and cream-white members of the dolphin family, some measuring 8 metres long, suddenly raced into Robson Bight and stopped still, we were both surprised and excited.

So too, we discovered a few days later, was marine mammologist Michael A. Bigg, who happened to be tracking them — he said it seemed the whales had been racing for hours just to reach the place. Bigg was in Johnstone Strait conducting a whale census for the federal Department of the Environment. At dawn on August 12, scouting by seaplane near Chatham Point, 23 kilometres east of Kelsey Bay, he'd picked up the group — members of several pods that had joined for the day. Changing from the plane to a boat, he had followed them as they headed west, passing fish boats and freighters, the logging camps and log booms that dot the Vancouver Island shoreline. Battling Johnstone Strait westerlies all the way, he had the engine going "almost full throttle" just to keep up. Until they reached Robson Bight and suddenly stopped.

That's when the idea first came to mind that the bight might play some special part in the whale's routine. Already, after five weeks living in the area, it seemed to us a promising place to set up filming operations. From our campsite we would have easy access to the whale's passing in the open strait and, theoretically, when they entered the bay, we could film them in the calm water. For decades the bight has been closed to commercial fishing; the traffic is light, and it is quiet. Too, the bight is especially photogenic. Snow-capped mountain peaks frame the salmon-full Tsitika River, which, until 1979, remained the last unlogged, untouched river valley on eastern Vancouver Island. We enjoyed paddling our canoe through the dense eel grass beds in the virgin estuary, landing on the grassy meadow at the delta and staring into the thick of 400 square kilometres of rain forest. The whales would not likely come for the view, though we suspected, even from the beginning, that the quiet, untouched quality of the bight had appeal even for blackfish.

After the whales arrived that August 12, we got our first of two clues about why they'd come. In scattered groups, the whales were lying motionless at the surface, taking three to four breaths over the period of a minute and a half to two minutes. Then they were diving for about four minutes before surfacing again in almost the same position, to repeat the entire procedure. Within each group of three to ten, breathing and surfacing were closely synchronized. Standing on the deck of the boat, I had my headphones tuned to a hydrophone, ready to record underwater sound — but there was nothing happening in the sound department. We were quiet ourselves, dumbfounded, until cameraman Peter Vatcher shouted: "They're sleeping!" His startling outburst made us laugh, but after a gruelling eight-hour haul up Johnstone Strait, the whales probably *were* tired.

We learned a lot about "sleeping" blackfish that first summer. Whales don't sleep like land mammals. Because whales are voluntary breathers and cannot afford unconsciousness, they take periodic "cat naps" at the surface. When they go down they must "wake" themselves about every five minutes to surface for air. Following the whales over 24-hour periods, we noticed little difference between a whale day and night. They may rest but 30 minutes in 24 hours, or, sometimes, for several hours.

On August 25 that first year, we filmed 16 whales, a group we called Stubbs' pod, resting together in the bight for four hours. In our 6-metre canoe, cameramen Peter Vatcher and Michael O'Neill tried to ease up beside them silently. We were cautious and careful toward the whales because they were sleeping. They seemed to show concern for us, too: Several times they came up underneath us, only to turn at the last minute to avoid hitting our fragile craft. Ninety per cent of our finished film that year showed these "dangerous killers" in this passive pose. And when people who saw the film asked how we got so close, we told them the truth: "We caught them sleeping." But it was the whales' choosing to sleep in Robson Bight, safe from the noise and traffic — and, perhaps more than anything, safe from those punishing Johnstone Strait whitecaps — that made it possible for us to film them. The blackfish also came to Robson Bight that summer to play. It was Michael who first advanced the theory that the bight might be a whale playground. This notion, our second clue about the bight, gained favor gradually that summer, but the first hint of it came the afternoon the 50 whales swooped into the bight. Though most of them slept for about 20 minutes after arriving, there was bound to be diverse activity in such a large group. It all began when a bull 5 metres long rolled on his back and started splashing. We were about a hundred metres away from him and, through the binoculars, saw the water washing his sun-reflecting white belly. Flapping against the water with 2-metre disc-shaped flippers — they looked like giant ping pong paddles — he was creating quite a ruckus, a contagious ruckus. Two youngsters charged over to the bull and began nudging him, rolling over him, then darting away before he could react. Slowly, all around us, the sleepers were becoming aroused. Black and white heads began poking out of the water, looking around to see what the commotion was all about. A group of cows and young males near the river-mouth began lobbing their tails, then diving deep and jumping out of the water, mustering all the grace possible for creatures weighing several tons. Photographing the event was next to

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Tsitika logging plan poses threat to Robson Bight

On November 1, 1978, the B.C. government approved in principle a plan to allow logging in the Tsitika River valley on northeastern Vancouver Island. One of the most controversial aspects of the plan was an industry proposal to create a dryland sort and log dump at Robson Bight, where logs would be graded and bundled before being shipped south to Mainland and southern Vancouver Island saw mills. Critics of the "logging port" proposal initially focused on protecting the salmon rearing habitat in the estuary. More recently, though, the debate has been expanded to include new data about the bight's "resident" blackfish. According to the Tsitika plan, the logging port was to be subject to a look at other alternatives by the logging industry. If no alternatives could be found, then further environmental impact studies would be carried out in the bight under the direction of the Tsitika Follow-up Committee. The studies and concurrent debate will continue through 1980, perhaps until 1981 or 1982, before the fate of Robson Bight is decided. For now, logging is proceeding as planned in the inland part of the valley, with the timber being shipped through an existing port at Eve River. Meanwhile, two North Island divers and whalewatchers, Jim Borrowman and Bill Harrower of the Top Island Econauts Society, are submitting an application for an ecological reserve — a whale sanctuary to protect blackfish habitat in Robson Bight.

For further comments about the killer whale debate, please turn to page 48.

KILLER WHALES

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impossible, but we were enjoying it. To the whales it seemed a grand social occasion; they'd elected to hold a wild party in Robson Bight and we were invited.

Then about 10 blackfish, the nucleus of the group we knew as Stubbs' pod, broke off from the others and headed in close to shore. We studied them in the binoculars. For the next 20 minutes, they paraded back and forth in the shallows and along the eastern rock face of Robson Bight. Part of the "playground theory" of summer 1973 was that the whales came to Robson Bight to rub themselves on rocks and smooth stones along the shore. We couldn't seem to get close enough to witness it, because the whales would scatter at the first sign of a motor boat or human being. But we'd heard stories from earlier visitors to the area.

Whale-catcher Frank Brocato, who had come to Johnstone Strait in 1965 for California's Marineland of the Pacific, was describing his attempted captures to me when, without any prompting, he suddenly dropped that the blackfish would "rub themselves inside a large horseshoe-shaped bay on Vancouver Island, about 15 miles east of Alert Bay". That had to be Robson Bight. Brocato spoke about the difficulty of approaching the whales there. Of course, he was trying to capture them. But, as we knew from our own experience, if they were rubbing they could be very elusive.

Next I talked to Alert Bay salmon fishermen who told me they'd known about the rubbing rocks for decades. One Kwakiutl fisherman, who said he'd fished with his grandfather in Johnstone Strait in the 1940s, quoted the old man as referring to the bight as the place where "you usually could find the blackfish". Then, confiding to me in a mock hushed tone, he told of the rubbing rocks, saying that his grandfather thought they had something to do with mating. He said his uncle even had a photo, taken on a Brownie camera, of two whales mating belly to belly.

The connection between rubbing and mating seemed a little fanciful. In fact, I still wasn't convinced that the whales were actually rubbing. The whales could be close without touching the rocks. A whale's skin is very soft and sensitive, and the rocks on northern Vancouver Island are mostly sharp and barnacle-encrusted.

We began our investigation of suspected rubbing rock areas in 1973 and 1974. Some places we studied at low tide, but most had to be examined by scuba divers. We found much of the coastline indeed unfit for rubbing but, in several locations, there were smooth patches of rocks, almost like velvet to touch. And, 2 kilometres east of Robson Bight, we also found a special beach with smooth rocks, sand patches and tiny smooth stones each about the size of a thumbnail. It was here we set up our cameras in late August 1975, our third season with the whales, in a determined effort to try to photograph the whales rubbing.

For six or seven days, photographers Peter Vatcher and John Oliphant and I dragged our inflatable boat up the beach and waited on the cliff above the rocks for the whales to come. Every afternoon, at least one and up to three groups of whales would appear, eight to ten per group. They moved through the bight first, often hanging around for an hour or two, so we had plenty of warning. Then they'd head for "the rubbing beach".

The first few afternoons stormy southeasters turned the water grey and murky. Several times we knew the whales were there, but we couldn't see them. Did the whales mind our presence on the cliff above? They seemed more inhibited and certainly left sooner than they had when we

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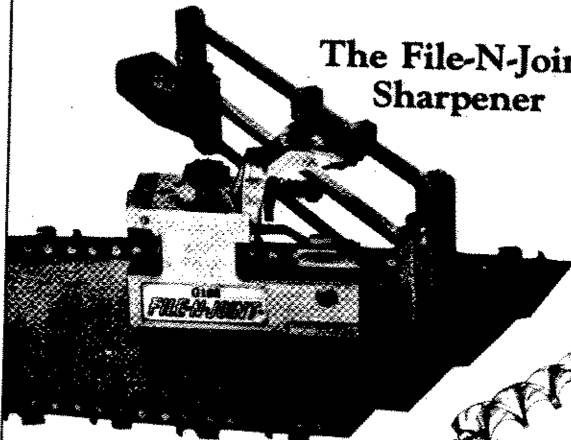

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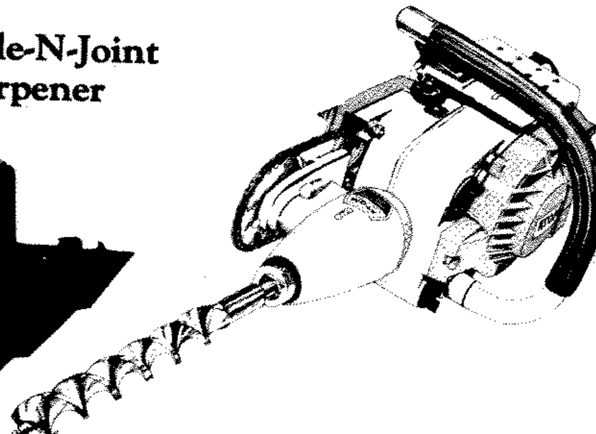

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watched them from a kilometre offshore. And with any close-up human activity on the water they left almost immediately. The canoe had been our trump card in approaching when the whales were sleeping, but the one day we tried it from the beach, even it seemed to arouse their curiosity, making them scatter and leave the area.

Our eventual close encounter at the rubbing beach came more by accident than design. For most of two weeks, we'd accompanied Stubbs' pod through Johnstone Strait. Early one evening, when the pod decided to turn in to the beach, we followed — a respectful 200 metres behind.

Our 40-horsepower engine sometimes ran on one cylinder, sometimes on none at all. Other times, both cylinders would fire momentarily, sending us flying through the water, struggling to hold on. It was this latter behavior we feared as we tried to tiptoe in behind the whales. We wanted our engine running when we were around them on our then-current theory that steady engine noise was less bothersome than revving and slowing, stopping and starting. Yet within a few minutes, as the whales surfaced at the beach, the engine stuttered and quit. Paddle in hand, helmsman Peter Vatcher tried to hold us back. The tide was taking over. We were drifting toward the white cliff rocks. Below them, and looming ahead of us, seven whales were swimming on the surface, round and round slowly in a tight counterclockwise circle. Were they lining up to rub? In the fading light, John and I push-rated our film two stops and snapped away, hoping for the best.

Still we drifted closer. Suddenly, through the unusually clear water, we saw beneath us a seven-metre bull wriggling on the bottom, rubbing his back against the rocks. We could see his moving silhouette against the sand, his massive flippers fluttering

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Robson Bight — booms or blackfish?

"The Robson Bight ecological reserve proposal is not an easy one but it is a good proposal. Because of the killer whales there, the bight appears to be a very special place . . . unique . . . and should warrant ecological reserve status. And the cost to the logging company of having to use a more costly route [to get the logs out] may in the long term be outweighed by the advantage of having this uniqueness preserved. We must consider the total "cost" which is not just logs but whales — and people coming and studying them and enjoying them, or just knowing they're there. And that's much harder to put a price on."
Bristol Foster, executive director, Ecological Reserves Unit

"We are particularly concerned that we not be driven out of Robson Bight and particularly not unnecessarily if there's any way to co-exist there, because the alternative appears to be an extremely costly one.

In the design of the dry-land sort and the booming pond near the estuary — whereby there'd be a limited area occupied by the bundled logs — we feel we have already made a major investment, if we followed that system, to minimize any impact in the water. Of course, then we have impact on dry land. But if you look at the Nanaimo River flats where it's wall-to-wall logs, the Robson Bight operation would be quite small. That might be somewhat reassuring. I realize that no disturbance is preferable where you can find an alternative. We're still studying it. And we're not ready to say what we're going to do. Hopefully within the year."
Grant Ainscough, vice-president and chief forester, MacMillan Bloedel Limited

"Based on our preliminary studies, we consider the Tsitika estuary to be a unique and sensitive environment, to say the least. But it's a complicated ecosystem and the questions that we want to answer in terms of salmonid utilization, benthic productivity, duration of that use, the relative value of that use in relation to the rest of Robson Bight and everything else are very difficult complex questions. They will take time to answer. Whether we embark on these further studies depends on whether MacMillan Bloedel decides they have no financial alternatives to Robson Bight. We do not intend to allow the industry or anyone in there until we fully know just what the impacts of any activity might be.

As for the ecological reserve idea, we wouldn't object to it. The uniqueness of that estuary, the salmonid values, offer a good rationale for the estuary itself. Are the killer whales a good enough rationale for the whole bight? They seem to be. The trouble is, though, that they're marine. If you had a blue heron rookery, it would be easy. Historically, blackfish have never been used to keep industry out of an area."
Mike Brownlee, senior project manager, habitat protection division, Fisheries and Oceans, Tsitika Planning and Follow-up Committee representative

"In our studies, recording killer whale sounds in 1978-79, on 26 out of 36 days that we spent with the whales off northern Vancouver Island they went into Robson Bight. Some days we had them from 7 a.m. till midnight and they'd go back there several times, make little excursions."
John Ford, biologist, zoology department, University of British Columbia

"Robson Bight is the centre of the home range of all the northern B.C. killer whale pods — about 150 individuals — to my knowledge, the largest concentration of killer whales in the world. North and south of this central or core area at Robson Bight, from northern Georgia Strait to at least Namu, the whales are touring — constantly travelling on their "territorial" route. But when that's done, they come back and spend a considerable amount of time here lying around, socializing, rubbing on the beaches, being very close to shore. It's the peculiarity of the biology of the killer whale that they do have this "core area". That's what makes Robson Bight unique. It's a special case, special to the B.C. coast."
Michael A.Bigg, marine mammalogist, Pacific Biological Station, Fisheries and Oceans

the water like the wings of a bird in flight.

It was Wavy, a senior bull in Stubbs' pod with a wobbly dorsal fin, a whale we had seen over several years' visits to the area. We were perhaps 3 metres away, studying him under water as he gyrated like a child at play. Yet there was something more here than child's play.

Slowly the big bull swam over to join several frolicking females and calves in shallow water about 20 metres ahead of us. The closer the tide pushed us, the wider our eyes opened. Three or four whales were rolling in the shallows of the pebbly beach, nearly half their bodies exposed. In the near-dark, we watched the dorsal fins bend as they turned over and over. We watched them thrashing, sliding against each other. Then two animals, Wavy and one of the cows, came together — belly to belly.

For a few minutes we clicked away, knowing the photos would not turn out — but too excited by our discovery to sit still. We felt privileged to share with the whales a very private moment — one that had taken us several years and hundreds of encounters to witness.

We left them to their adult fun, never mind the photos, but before we could sneak away, they were gone. We chugged back to our nearby campsite, nestled beside the Tsitika River estuary. After several seasons with whales, we were beginning to understand why the blackfish came to Robson Bight. It was a good place to rub, play and rest, a place the whales had adopted many years ago. For an essentially nomadic creature, it seemed to be the closest thing to "home". As we bid goodbye to the whales that night, it was good to know that, wherever they wandered, they would always return home again, home to Robson Bight.

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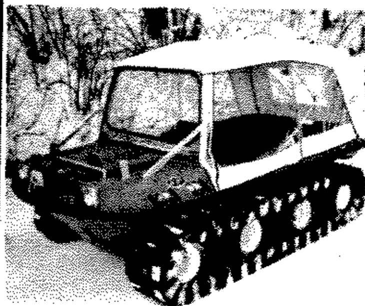

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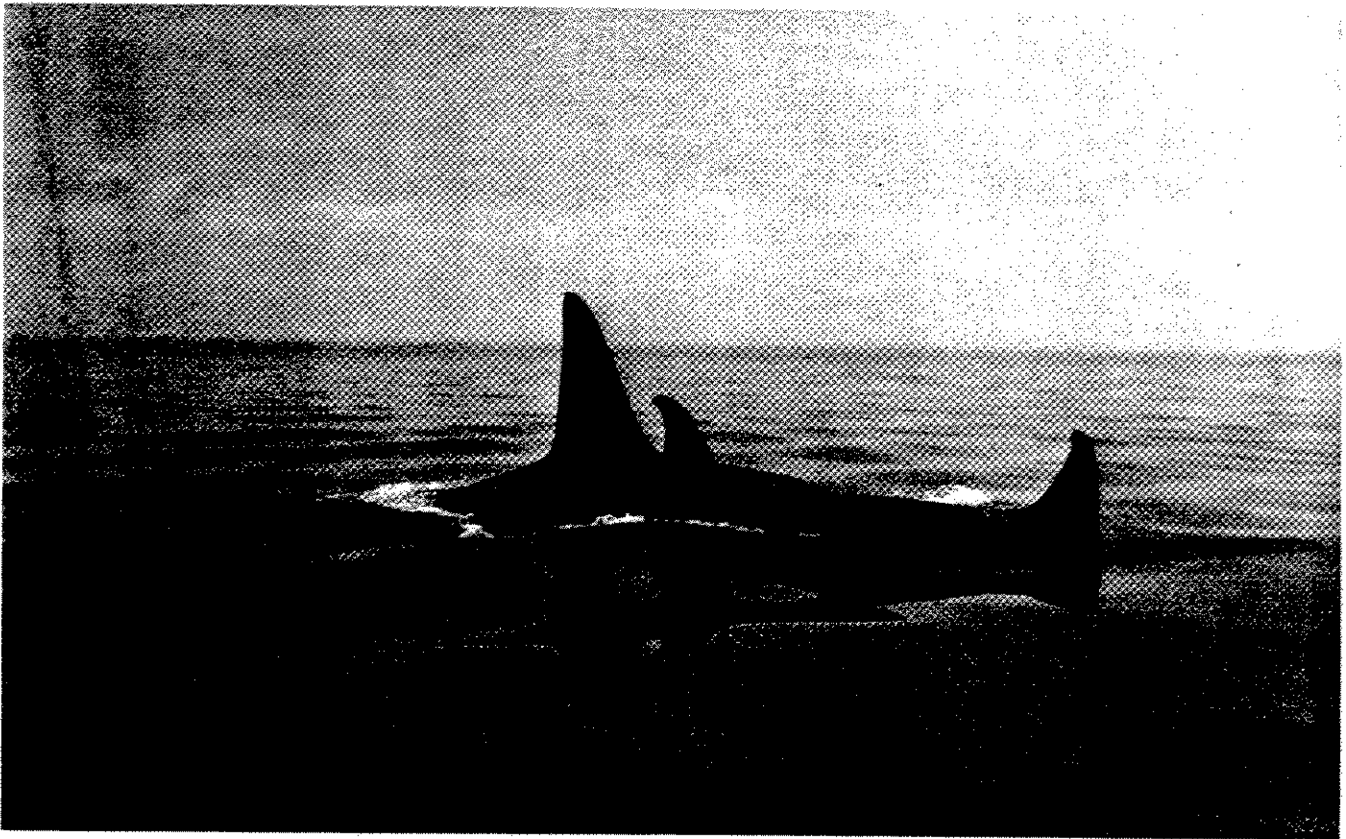
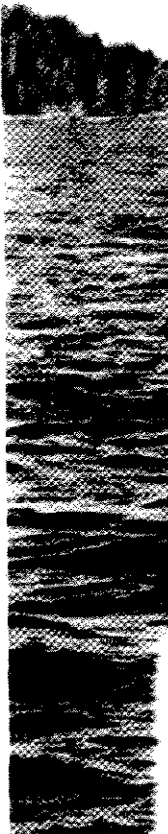


THEIR DORSAL FINS arcing from the graceful curves of their backs, three killer whales scarcely disturb the surface as they surge along Johnstone Strait, their reflections on the glassy surface blending them even more with their element, making them at one with the sea

Photography by Erich Hoyt

Portfolio



Faint spumes of water are just barely discernible hanging in the air over orcas that have just blown (top right) while lazing about in Robson Bight. Velvety smooth stones on the bottom are used for a rub by three big whales (left below). Robson Bight forms a home base for the far-ranging mammals where they rest and simply swim about (centre below) and even take the time for fun and frolic (right below)