

ORCA Times

ORCA FOUNDATION'S QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER



RESEARCH

CAPE FUR SEAL
PUPPING SEASON

CONSERVATION

KURLAND GREENING
WITH NVT

EDUCATION

SIYAKULA SCHOOL
GETS A PAINT JOB

DECEMBER 2019

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS



Danielle Conry, MSc Zoology
(Cetacean Biologist)

Experienced in cetacean field research, Danielle runs various projects on Plett's local whale and dolphin populations in collaboration with the Nelson Mandela University and the Port Elizabeth Museum.



Laura Bakker, BTech Nature Conservation
(Volunteer Coordinator and Conservationist)

With experience in Nature Conservation, Laura runs various projects on alien clearing, river health assessments, beach clean-ups and rural community education in Plettenberg Bay.



Melissa Nel, BTech Oceanography
(Field Assistant)

With a healthy dose of enthusiasm and interest in the marine environment, Melissa assists with the daily running of all fieldwork projects at the ORCA Foundation.

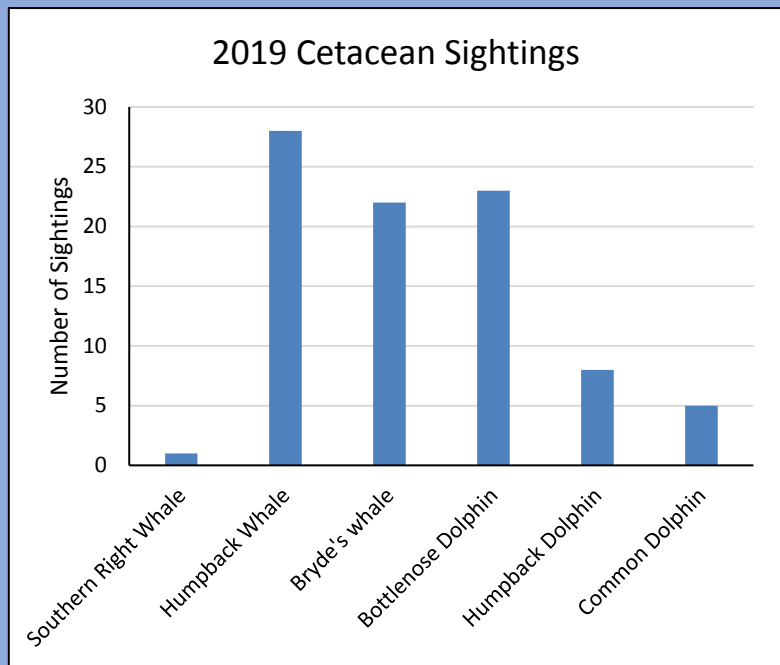
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2019 Opportunistic cetacean sightings

Over the year we conducted 527 opportunistic trips with Ocean Blue Adventures to collect data on Plettenberg Bay's marine life. During those trips we recorded a total of 87 cetacean sightings. The majority of sightings were of humpback whales, followed by bottlenose dolphins and Bryde's whales. We had few sightings of humpback dolphins and common dolphins, and only encountered Southern right whales on one occasion.

We had some great sightings over the year and look back with fondness!



We encountered cetaceans on 87 occasions over a total of 527 opportunistic trips with Ocean Blue Adventures.



Top: A humpback whale flukes offshore of Robberg Peninsula (Photo: Georg Lauscher).

Left: A group of bottlenose dolphins swim behind the breakers (Photo: Danielle Conry).

Above: A Bryde's whale surfaces before a dive (Photo: Danielle Conry).

Robberg MPA land-based observations

Between June and November field assistant Melissa Nel led ORCA volunteers on more than 145 dedicated observational sessions from cliff-top monitoring sites located along the Robberg Peninsula hiking trail. This equated to a whopping 332 hours of observations during which a total of 140 white shark sightings were made by individual volunteers. Only 12 predation attempts on Cape fur seals were recorded, and although they were all unsuccessful we know this does not mean sharks are never successful; they stick around for a reason!

Solo – the vagrant southern elephant seal that has been visiting Plett for the past few years was sighted from Robberg Peninsula again in late August and has been present at Robberg Peninsula until recently. He enjoyed chilling at his usual spot, known to us as “Secret Spot” where we found him nearly every day. Volunteers recorded many observations of Solo killing Cape fur seal pups, but were unable to confirm whether he actually consumed them. It has been quite a treat to observe this majestic animal so rarely sighted elsewhere along our coast-line.



A white shark patrols the shallows along Robberg Peninsula (Photo: Melissa Nel).



Solo, the southern elephant seal, killing a young Cape fur seal (Photo: Melissa Nel).

Volunteers continued to record the movement and group size of Cape Fur seals travelling to and from the colony, taking into consideration their group dynamics and behaviour. Sightings of other marine species such as dolphins, whales, African penguins, and commercial and recreational boat activity were also recorded. Plett's resident endangered Humpback dolphins were seen on 14 separate occasions throughout these months as well as the Bottle-nose dolphins which had a very large increase in numbers from September.

All data collected by our volunteers will be used by marine biologists and conservation managers to aid important research and monitoring efforts within the Robberg Marine Protected Area.

Alien plant clearing efforts continue



Volunteers sitting proudly on the pile of eradicated Port Jackson Willows (Photo credit: Laura Bakker).

Our efforts to remove the *Acacia Salignas* (Port Jackson Willow) continues. This evergreen shrub, a native to Australia, invades our indigenous Fynbos and coastal dunes. Originally introduced into South Africa for dune stabilization this shrub has spread and become a problem in our Eastern and Western Capes. Our method of eradication is to remove as many of the plants as possible. For the smaller individuals, we will loosen the soil around the roots with a garden fork and pull it out by hand. For the bigger

individuals, this task is a lot more difficult, given their strong tap roots. Therefore, the plant will be cut down with the use of a panga (machete) and will then be sprayed with a poison mixture. Our volunteers are doing a remarkable job at clearing the aliens and we are pleased to see how different the site is starting to look. While it can be a physically challenging task, especially in the blazing sun, our volunteers have a sense of accomplishment when they can see the difference they are making. Week after week they can see the amazing work they have done.

Volunteers assist at SANCCOB

In August our Foundation Manager received a phone call from SANCCOB asking if it would be possible for our volunteers to come and assist with general work around the rehabilitation centre. In Port Elizabeth there had been an oil spill and many of the penguins from bird island were rescued and brought to the centre. This meant that the centre had to have all attention on the penguins and thus other tasks around the centre couldn't be done, and that's where our volunteers were needed. Our volunteers assisted with draining and cleaning the swimming pools, washing and hanging up towels, scrubbing the rocks in the pens, removing rubble from behind the one pen as well as cleaning up in the holding area.



Volunteers assisting with the scrubbing of the rocks in the pen (Photo credit: Laura Bakker).

Plett's Indian Ocean humpback dolphin surveys



A humpback dolphin breaches exuberantly off Robberg beach (Photo: Danielle Conry).

Over the last year we have managed to complete 40 surveys for the Plettenberg Bay humpback dolphin project 🐬. The surveys have gone well, for the most part, with humpback dolphin sightings on 72.5% of surveys and with a total of 45 humpback dolphin groups encountered during the year.

During countless hours at sea, we have enjoyed many glimpses into the lives of these amazing and endangered marine mammals. There were many highlights, but one of the biggest was seeing a number of new calves in the beginning of the year and watching them grow as the year went by.

These surveys are run in collaboration with Nelson Mandela University and the data will be used to find out more about the humpback dolphins here in Plettenberg bay. Additionally, the data will also be used to collaborate in projects at a national scale in order to provide a cohesive picture of this endangered species along the South African coastline (www.sousaproject.org).

A big thank you to all those who helped us collect data during the surveys, to Ocean Blue Adventures for the use of their vessel and Plett Tractor Services for kindly waiving much of the launching and beaching fees for the project.



Top left: Humpback dolphin "Chris" was spotted a number of times this year (Photo: Danielle Conry).

Bottom left: One of the new calves spotted during the year (Photo: Danielle Conry).

Top: Collecting photo ID data during an encounter with a group of humpback dolphins (Photo: Melissa Nel).

Beach Clean-ups

Since July our volunteers have conducted a number of beach clean-ups along the Central and Robberg Beaches as well as the Lookout Beach rocks. Central beach has been found to be the beach where the most cigarette butts and straws are found, while the Lookout Rocks has the most fishing gear being found. During these beach clean-ups we also stumble upon some interesting finds, these include diapers, condoms, toothbrushes, shoes, batteries and even a whole slab of glass.

This quarter we have started making use of the Ocean Conservancy app "Clean Swell" whereby we immediately input all the data from the clean-ups and is directly sent to the Conservancy. The app records the number of people taking part in the clean-up, everything that is collected, the time that was spent collecting, the distance which was covered as well as the weight in pounds of the trash which was picked up.

We are reducing our use of plastic bags to collect the rubbish during our beach clean-ups. We are now using the SOS (Save our Streets/Seas/species) refuse bags produced by HMRP packaging, which are not made from plastic, but rather from plants. This, therefore, means that these bags are biodegradable and may be used in home composting.



Volunteers, Stephanie Koedinger and Caoimhe Lincoln removing a slab of glass from the beach (Photo credit: Laura Bakker).

Kurland Greening with NVT



Volunteer, Eilish Bowers helping to plant one of the trees (Photo credit: Laura Bakker).

On the 18th of July the Nature's Valley Trust hosted their annual Kurland greening event. This event took place in honour of Nelson Mandela on what is known as "Mandela Day". A day whereby South African citizens dedicate 67 minutes to helping to make a difference. We were very happy to be able to be a part of this event and assisted with the planting of a total of 40 trees in the Kurland community.

Cape fur seal pupping season!

Over November and December, seal pups born at Robberg Peninsula's Cape fur seal colony get washed off the rocks during easterly storms. Because their coats are not yet waterproof they can easily get hypothermia and drown if they are unable to get back onto the rocks at the colony. Many die and are washed up on Plettenberg Bay's beaches. Over this period we assisted pinniped researcher, Frikkie van der Vyver, with recording detailed information on this natural mortality event, including responding to live pups ashore, as part of his long term research at the Robberg seal colony. Live pups are taken through to Tenikwa Wildlife and Rehabilitation Centre where they are cared for until they can be released at Robberg Peninsula's Cape fur seal colony. Before being released they are tagged on the flippers with a unique number so that their survival at the colony can be monitored.



A Cape fur seal pup awaits transport to Tenikwa (Photo: Danielle Conry).

All marine mammal stranding response is done in collaboration with the Port Elizabeth Museum and the information collected is used for various ongoing research projects.



Left: Cetacean biologist, Danielle Conry, assists with stranded pups before they are transported to Tenikwa (Photo: Frikkie van der Vyver).

Above: Seal biologist, Frikkie van der Vyver, tags a pup at Tenikwa (Photo: Danielle Conry).

Ecobricks



Volunteer, Caoimhe Lincoln with some of the ecobricks produced by our volunteers (Photo credit: Laura Bakker).

At the beginning of 2019, we started our Ecobrick project, a method we are using to help us in reducing the amount of non-recyclable materials we are introducing into the environment. These non-recyclable materials include polystyrene trays, silver packets such as chip and chocolate wrappers, just to name a few. An ecobrick is a plastic bottle which is stuffed full of waste which is not biodegradable, a completed ecobrick can weigh up to about four kilograms. They can then be used as a brick to help with the building of structures and furniture. All the ecobricks which the ORCA Foundation produces will be donated to community projects in Plettenberg Bay who require them. Our volunteers have been hard at work with the production of the ecobricks and to date they have managed to produce seventy completed ecobricks. Our volunteers have fun partaking in this activity, some of them never

having heard of an ecobrick before. They find the concept incredible and are shocked as to how much non-biodegradable waste can fit into one two litre bottle. They have gone so far as to say that it is an idea which they would like to implement in their own households when they are back home.

Die Sterreweg

On the 13th of November 2019 our volunteers joined the “morning ring” at Die Sterreweg. Here all the kids at the centre (all ages and disabilities) come together in the morning to sing songs and dance. Some Ocean Blue Adventures staff members were also in attendance. After the morning ring our volunteers brought out something fun and creative which they had made in the days before. They had created a pinata out of paper mache, filled it with sweets and decorated. The kids at the centre all had a turn to take a swing at the pinata until it broke, releasing its goodies from inside. The volunteers all had a fun time and they were overjoyed at seeing the smiles on all of the kids' faces.



One of Die Sterreweg kids hitting the pinata (Photo credit: Laura Bakker)

Farewell to NMU's baboon project



Baboons forage intertidally on Robberg Peninsula's wildside (Photo credit: Melissa Nel).

We say a sad farewell to Nelson Mandela University's baboon scat project. We assisted PhD student Maxine Whitfield-Smit with her data collection on the number and location of baboon scats found in four different coastal sites along the Garden Route. Each site was surveyed once a month to determine the degree to which Chacma baboons forage intertidally along certain stretches of the South African coast and what factors influence their preference for certain areas of the coastline. The density of scats in each area gives us an indication of how often baboons make use

of the intertidal zone in that particular area.

After a year's worth of data, she has come to the end of her data collection phase and will now begin analysing and writing up her thesis. We wish Maxine all the best with her study and are truly grateful for the opportunity to have been involved in the project. We will miss the rugged beauty along these coastal trails, as well as the amazing fauna and flora seen during our many hikes.



Far left: Volunteers enjoy the cliff-top views after a successful baboon scat hike at Harkerville (Photo credit: Melissa Nel).

Top left: ORCA staff and volunteers gather around a baboon scat (Photo credit: Bernard Ingrisch).



Bottom left: A troop of baboons on Robberg Peninsula (Photo credit: Verena Schottl).

Siyakula Creche

The Siyakula Creche in the Qolweni township is visited by our volunteers as often as we can. At the school, our volunteers help to teach the students some basic English words, based on the school's theme for the week. We show them pictures and ask them to identify the image, once the picture has been identified correctly, we teach them how to spell the word, for example, "ladybug". The students are then asked to try and write out the word on their chalkboards



Volunteer Marloes De Rooij helping one of the students (Photo credit: Laura Bakker).

while our volunteers walk around helping them wherever they can. This task can sometimes be difficult as the children's mother tongue is isiXhosa. We teach them in English (translated by the teachers into isiXhosa) because we want them to learn some basic English words and to develop their communication skills before they

graduate from the creche and head off to the first grade, as a second language is of great importance.

During the September school holidays, our volunteers along with the 1st Plett Sea Scouts assisted with the repainting of the school. Due to the wear and tear of the weather the school required a fresh coat of paint and our volunteers were more than happy to take up the challenge.



Volunteer, Inga Matthies assisting with the painting of the school (Photo credit: Jared Harding).

Extramural activities

The **horse back safaris** have definitely been the favourite for the volunteers in their free time for this year, and you can see why! Can you imagine this? A beautiful, sunny Plett day and you're meandering on horseback through the grasslands of Plett Game Reserve. Up ahead a pair of rhinos are grazing with the Tsitsikamma Mountains towering as a backdrop. You stop, take a breath and just appreciate being here in South Africa in this time and place. Everything is suffused with a golden light; you can see a giraffe amongst the treeline in the distance and there is not a sound but those of nature. The ultimate escape.



<https://www.plettgamereserve.com/horse-safari-plett-game-reserve/>

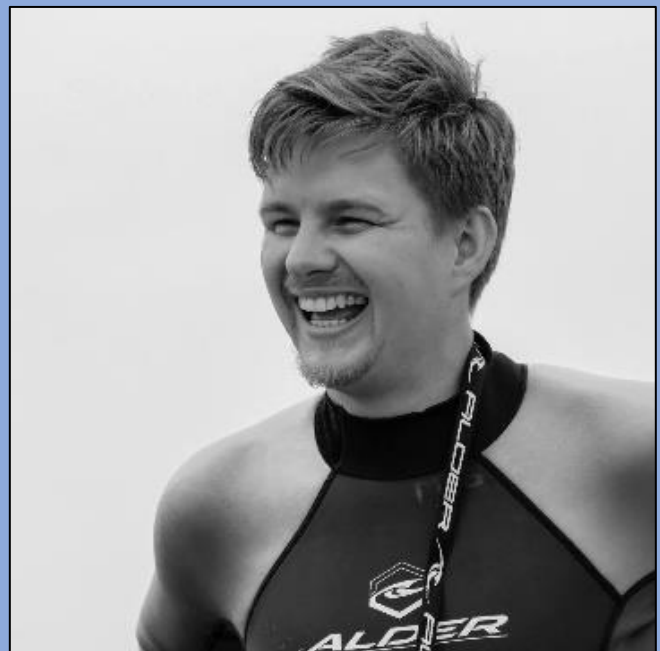
Testimonials



“From the moment I arrived everyone at Orca was very welcoming. All volunteers and staff helped to explain the roles I would be taking part in and the range of activities available. A few personal favourites would be getting involved in the Beaked whale stranding where I felt I got a lot of hands on experience. The boat trips that run for both the Humpback dolphin survey and the opportunistic boat surveys were also a personal highlight as it gave

me the opportunity to see some of the amazing wildlife that Plett has to offer! I would happily return anytime!” – **Luke**

“My favourite moments with ORCA. (To be honest: every time we had the opportunity to join the whale watching boat or to visit Robberg was special to me 😊) The adventure started on the first day, when Laura told us, that we would join the whale watching boat in the morning instead of killing alien plants. I packed my camera and we headed to the Ocean Blue station. At sea we saw a lot of birds and as we passed Robberg with its massive seal population, we found two humpbacks going wild. It was just amazing! Back at Ocean Blue the coordinator told us, that there is space left at the next ride, so we were able to go whale watching again, but this time



we headed to the other side of the bay and so I saw my very first two southern right whales. That was just overwhelming, especially when one of them breached in the distance. I was able to take a lot of great pictures that day and got an incredible welcome I never expected. The other day we had to do Robberg-Observation and I have to admit, that Robberg is my favourite place in the world right now. Sitting on a spot called “Boulders 2” for two hours was not as boring as it sounds in the first place. In fact, it was quite the opposite: enjoying the wildlife of this place, collecting data, listening to some good music and taking pictures of seals surfing in the waves was just amazing. Can’t wait to see this piece of paradise again!” – **Georg**



“I spent four weeks in the project of the Orca Foundation in South Africa. My goal was to escape every day life in Germany and see something different. It was a great time! The varied activities, the people working there and the many different volunteers have made the stay perfect. I would go back anytime.” – **Inga**

“I volunteered with Orca for a couple of weeks over the winter. I had a wonderful time and learned quite a lot. My favourite part about volunteering with Orca was that we got to go out on the sea to observe the marine life. We were lucky enough to see a Humpback whale breach a few times, which was magical :) Everyone was super nice and I really enjoyed the activities, from doing Humpback dolphin surveys to helping out in the local schools.”

- Ariane



“When I was kid my dream was to come in South Africa to protect the ocean. I did this internship to improve my knowledge about the Ocean. We learned so many things about whale, shark, dolphin and more. It is a great opportunity to help scientist to know the ocean. With this internship I did it every day! All my dream came true and people were so nice. The activities are really various. One day we can go on the boat to see whale and the next do some observation of Baboon. No matter activities we did, you always learn something. Sometimes we went on Robberg to record every animal, boat and more. Robberg observation were really interesting because we can see everything like shark, whale and dolphin in the same day. Furthermore, it's really interesting to study the behaviour of these animals. The house of volunteer is really beautiful and spend really good times here when we were not in activities. Imagine a world where you can see whale or dolphin every day, it's possible in Plett. During my week end, I did so many activities like diving or safaris. To be honest, I did my best diving here. Jared organize every activity you want to do. We just have to send him a message. Every people who work in orca foundation are helpful. Now my only objective is to come back to live my dream again. It's the biggest experience of my life!” - **Paul**



SPECIAL THANKS

From all of us here at ORCA, we would like to thank the following volunteers who contributed their time to assist with our work between July and November 2019. We appreciate your motivation and hard work to help further our projects, sometimes during physically and mentally challenging conditions. The success of our projects would not be possible without your contributions.

Ariane Wagner
Eilish Bowers
Caoimhe Lincoln
Hannah Shaw
Luke Owen
Jodie Villenave
Ting Hsin
Chelsea Bannister
Nell Colombier
Paul Abaut
Elisabeth Saar
Kendyl Murakami
Georg Lauscher
Emma Steer
Stephanie Koedinger
Mina Schneider
Julian Glover
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Mathilde Herscher
James Lee
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Ivita Sinhal
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Margo Vanden Bempt
Vivien Helf
Chatty Forster
Claire Devlin
Marloes De Rooij
Stefanie Wolter

