

BEST PRACTICES



Salmon Hats!

A mysterious orca fad—and a preview of our 2026 4-part series on Southern Resident Killer Whales.

Partying Like it's 1987?

Riddle me this: *Why did the Southern Resident Killer Whale swim around with a dead salmon on its head?*

Nobody knows! Seriously... Why would they do that?!

Local news channels first got word of this behavior in the 1980s, but it's likely killer whales (orcas) have been doing it much longer. Are they playing? Trying to impress a mate? Saving a snack for later? Could it be a sign of an abundant chum run?

It's unlikely our Southern Residents are wearing the salmon to make a fashion statement. And it's doubtful that they would waste food, as this group of killer whales is critically endangered. Killer Whales are extremely playful beings (they are dolphins after all!) and have been witnessed doing similar things over the years, for example "kelping", or swimming around dragging kelp on their dorsal fins or snout. Maybe they simply like to party?

Whatever the reason, people are definitely curious—and for good reason. This salmon-on-the-head trend has been seen in all three Southern Resident pods: J, K, and L! In 2024, the behavior resurfaced with at least two new sightings in the Salish Sea.

Knowing what we do about Tahlequah of J Pod—how she carried her deceased calf for 17 days and over 1,000 miles in 2018, and repeated a similar act of mourning in 2025—it's easy to wonder: could the salmon hat behavior be more than play? Could it be a deeper expression from a wise and grieving species? A kind of warning call, tied to the health of salmon in the Salish Sea?



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Monterey Bay Whale Watch



Credit: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mikemele/3386057041/>

No one knows for sure what the salmon hat trend really means, but it sure gives orca fans something to get excited about—and there's still so much more to discover.

Orcas are incredibly intelligent. Part of their brain—the paralimbic region—is more developed than it is in humans! With complex social lives, deep emotional capacity, and culture passed from generation to generation, killer whales continue to amaze us.

Stay tuned for our 2026 4-part series on Southern Resident Killer Whales, where we'll dive into what makes these creatures some of the most fascinating animals on Earth.

Until then, happy celebrating—July 14 is World Orca Day!.

Source: Stream Team News, Summer 2025