

Southern Resident Orcas Return to Penn Cove Capture Scene

Howard Garrett, Orca Network co-founder

November 4, 2024—33 Southern Resident L pod orcas returned to Penn Cove for the first known time since their family endured horrific trauma and loss there in 1970 and 1971.

The pod paced and porpoised, in coordinated, ritualistic movements over the exact locations that the capture operations took place. They seemed to be fully aware of what happened there more than five decades ago, where five family members drowned and 11 were hauled away, never to return. Eight orcas have been identified by Dave Ellifrit of the Center for Whale Research from photos taken during the 1970 and 1971 captures. All eight were members of L pod, apparently the pod most severely devastated by the Penn Cove captures.

Prominent in the group in November 2024 was matriarch L25 “Ocean Sun,” at the estimated age of 96. L25 is the only living Southern Resident who was present in the cove during the captures, and is believed to be the mother, or a close relation, of Tokitae, who was taken from her family in Penn Cove in 1970 and lived 53 years in a small tank in Miami until her death in August, 2023. **All the others were born after 1971. Did L25 lead her family into Penn Cove? Did she somehow tell them what happened there?**

A summary of L pod’s visit was prepared by Rachel Haight of Orca Network’s Whale Sighting Network, from multiple reports made and received by the WSN team and dozens of dedicated observers.

J pod was first seen foraging for chum salmon in Puget Sound October 19, and were seen every day there until November 2. Early on **November 1**, reports came in of **many orcas headed south in Puget Sound**. Photos taken by WSN team member Marla Smith helped confirm **all members of all 3 pods, J, K, & L, were present, a true superpod in Puget Sound!** They made their way south together, stalling off the east side of Vashon Island, just **north of Point Robinson** where many excited people had

gathered in hopes the orcas would pass by. The whales had other plans as **they flipped back northbound**, passing Alki Beach as the last light of the day faded.

The next morning, **November 2**, before dawn, **calls were heard on the Sunset Bay hydrophone, near Edmonds**. A few hours later, orcas were reported northbound in Admiralty Inlet. **J & K pods were making their way north, exiting Puget Sound**.

As Js and Ks were leaving, **L pod was seen moving north off Discovery Park**. They passed the Edmonds/Kingston ferry lanes and turned northeast up Possession Sound. **After crossing the Mukilteo/Clinton ferry lane, they hesitated, turned south, then back north to Camano Head, and the mouth of Port Susan**.

In 1970, while being blasted with underwater seal bombs, adult So. Resident orcas acting as decoys went east toward Port Susan to distract catcher boats from pursuing the mothers swimming north, fast, underwater with young calves. They knew from previous captures that their young would be taken away. The terror was surely extreme as explosives hit like sledgehammers on the whales' ears underwater.

In 2024 L pod hovered and backtracked several times over the scene of that horrific incident during the captures 54 years earlier. Then they turned to continue up Saratoga Passage, passing East Point, Whidbey Island as darkness fell.

The next morning, **November 3**, a report came in of **L pod off Strawberry Point, in Skagit Bay**. They proceeded west past Polnell Point and Crescent Harbor, aiming straight for Penn Cove, a place they had not been seen in since the devastating captures of 1970 & 1971.



L pod enters Penn Cove Nov. 3. Photo by Jill Hein.

At 11:20AM, L pod entered Penn Cove. There were “A Lot of spyhops” according to the Center for Whale Research, but **the whales were quiet on the hydrophones** as they ventured into the cove in tight groups. **They traveled more than halfway into the 4 mile deep cove, just past the Coupeville wharf, where they milled around in all directions** before turning around and heading back out. As all the whales began fanning out and heading south down Saratoga Passage researchers finally began hearing some calls. Many watchers were in awe as we saw the historic moment unfold, wondering what L pod was thinking and feeling.

They continued south in Saratoga Passage, appearing as if they were departing the area. But then, just before sunset, they **flipped back northbound just outside of Langleys**, not ready to leave just yet.

The next day, **November 4, a fierce wind roared over Whidbey from the Strait of Juan de Fuca, packing 45 mph gusts.** No research boats could venture out that day, but the wind didn't stop many brave whale watchers from heading to the beaches to track L pod's travels. The orcas were first seen heading south in Holmes Harbor before turning north at 8AM.



Jill Hein Photography

L pod enters Penn Cove Nov. 4. Photo by Jill Hein.

They continued north, and once again entered Penn Cove at 1:44PM. Hearty whale watchers were treated to stunning looks as the 33 orcas moved quickly around Long Point, surfacing high in the chop, erupting in breaches and spyhops as they porpoised their way into the cove, cutting through the frothy waves.



L pod enters Penn Cove Nov. 4. Photo by Jill Hein.

At 2:25PM the whales were still heading west past the mussel rafts, 3 miles into the cove. At 2:45, deep in the cove ***exactly where the captures occurred***, they began changing direction. At 2:50PM, they began porpoising southward near the Captain Whidbey Inn. Then **most of L Pod grouped up and swam in a line**, a stunning sight to see so many fins!



L pod enters Penn Cove Nov. 4. Photo by Jill Hein.

In seas churned by gale force winds, just after 3PM the pod drifted northeast, still in a line, **not far from the San de Fuca dock where young calves were hauled out of their home and habitat, separated from their families, never to return.** They stalled there, orcas moving slowly in all directions, but remaining in the same spot. At 3:42, they turned east toward the dock, then they angled back west, northeast of Captain Whidbey.

Shortly before 3PM, two orcas separated from the pod deep in the cove along the western shore, and began **swimming back and forth in front of the Captain**

Whidbey Inn. Photos by Sarah Geist confirmed **these two were L72 Racer & her adult son L105 Fluke.** They continued moving slowly, in place, for over 90 minutes until about 4:30PM. They seemed to be pacing, just beyond the dock at the Captain Whidbey Inn. **This was where the seine boats were parked in 1970 and 1971, with calves wrapped in nets, strapped to the hulls, calling out to their families, for hours or possibly days,** while phone calls were made to find buyers and transport trucks. Then L72 and her son rejoined the pod as family members moved toward them.

By 4:48PM, **as darkness and howling winds drove onlookers away, the whales were again trending west, even deeper into Penn Cove.** Nobody knows how long they were there that night.

This link to Rachel's video includes the whales porpoising followed by the resting line - it may help provide perspective of where they were exactly. Filmed from 500 feet east of San de Fuca dock: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/wb4vyGEaAabPFxeZ/>



L pod porpoising with the Captain Whidbey dock in the background. Photo by Rachel Haight.



The yellow line is the path of their porpoising. L72 & L105 were with the family as they porpoised, along with L25 and all the others near the San de Fuca dock. Later, about 3PM, they turned east, and made a resting line (red line). It was around that point that L72 & L105 broke away and began pacing (blue line).

Graphic by Rachel Haight.

The next morning, **November 5**, L pod was spotted just after dawn making their way south in Possession Sound. Then they flipped northbound and went back up Saratoga Passage. They continued north to just beyond Harrington Lagoon, **a mile south of Penn Cove, before turning back south**. They made their way down to the mouth of Holmes Harbor and stalled with some foraging. They then went back north up Saratoga Passage **past Harrington Lagoon, before turning south again as darkness fell**.

Jami Cantrell tells what happened there: *As the sun began to set, the pod was calmly making their way back toward Long Point, nearing the entrance to Penn Cove. Suddenly, and much to our dismay, military exercises commenced, with fighter jets performing continuous, nonstop, touch and go landings. The noise was absolutely deafening—so loud in fact that my camera visibly shook as the exercises started. It was clear that the whales were disturbed too. They immediately changed direction, began spy hopping, and tail slapping, and grouped together as they swiftly left the area. The sound was so overwhelming that, despite the whales being closer than they had been, I had to retreat to my car. I ended up with a pounding headache, and my ears were ringing. It was hard to imagine how intense and stressful it must have been, not just for the whales, but for the residents of Whidbey Island, who are subjected to these disruptions from time to time. The following day, L pod left the Sound, and I can only hope this experience didn't leave a sour note on what had otherwise been a peaceful, healing visit.*

J pod was seen November 5 in the Possession triangle at 9:45AM, spread out, foraging as usual till dark.

On November 6, Scott Veirs of Orcasound, shared that in the very early morning hours **at 01:00, AI detected L pod calls on the Port Townsend hydrophone, indicating they were making their exit out Admiralty Inlet.** In the early light of dawn November 6, J pod was again spotted foraging in Puget Sound.

To help understand what L pod was doing in Penn Cove, I asked Salish indigenous elder Rosie Cayou James. Rosie referred to a young man who had committed suicide on the roof of an Elks Lodge. Rosie's shamanistic husband Bill felt the death before the body was discovered. When the young man's remains were found Bill performed a ceremony, dancing and chanting to release the spirit of the young man who killed himself, because he died from violence and his spirit remained in that spot. Rosie believes **L pod was releasing the spirits of the whales who were brutally taken or died in Penn Cove.**

L pod seemed to still be profoundly affected by what happened over five decades ago at the capture site in Penn Cove. What they did there offers deep insight into how

these orcas live and how they remember events and lost family members. We can learn much from orcas, if we open our hearts to see and listen.

From Susan Berta, Orca Network co-founder:

Though Orca Network is science-based and relies on the latest research, we also understand that any researcher who works with whales or orcas for any length of time will find that not everything can be precisely measured, discovered or explained scientifically - and orcas' brains are far larger than ours, and have areas/functions that we have no way of understanding. And even the most fact-based scientists find themselves being changed by being around orcas - Ken Balcomb realized after decades spent with Southern Residents, that there were things that took place with these great beings that just couldn't be explained away.

We find much value in the way the Coast Salish peoples of the Northwest relate to orcas and other whales of the Salish Sea, and nature in general, and feel a similar relation to the orcas ~ a more spiritual connection. Orca culture is a lot like tribal culture, and both cultures have been subjected to and suffered similar horrors of colonialism. Our Coast Salish friends have taught us so much about what we are seeing in these black and white tribes of the sea.