



Orcas

Now Hunting Fur Seals in South Africa

Text by Silke Schimpf
Photos by Rainer Schimpf



In the wild waters of South Africa, a change of diet has occurred among a resident population of orcas. Perhaps because they are finding less of their usual prey offshore, they are now hunting fur seals. Silke and Rainer Schimpf have the story.

7 January 2025 – Today was an extraordinary day at sea. For the first time ever, a large pod of orcas (*Orcinus orca*) has been documented hunting and feeding on fur seals (*Arctocephalus pusillus*) in South African waters. On a trip organised by **Expert-Tours**, this unique observation marked the first recorded interaction of its kind in the entire region.

Our journey began in Langebaan, near Mykonos, as we headed out

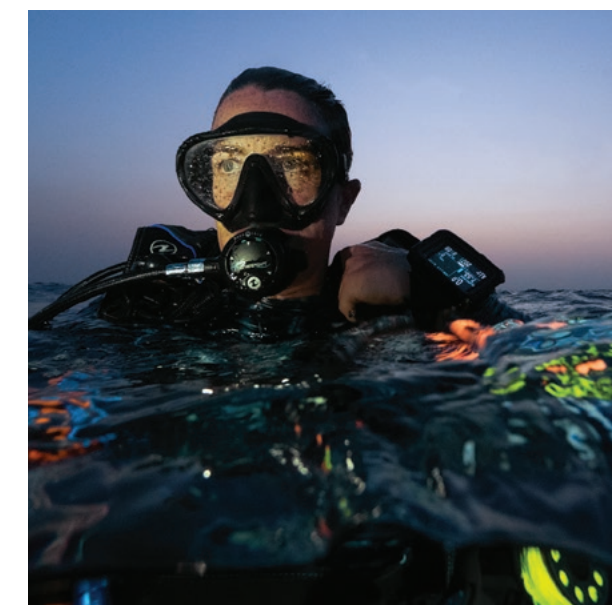
towards the open ocean. From a distance, we noticed a large group of South African fur seals, approximately 1,000 animals, swimming in an agitated circle. As we cautiously approached, the distinctive blows of orcas became visible on the horizon. We were amazed.

The orcas had encircled the fur seals, moving counter-clockwise to form a “bait ball of seal meat”, tightly compacting the animals into a dense formation. The scene took our breath away. Around 20 orcas were working in coordinated precision, gradually closing the circle while continuously surrounding the fur seals on all sides. This went on for five hours straight until the seal bait ball had a diameter of roughly 100m. Suddenly, several orcas split out of the formation and attacked from two sides at the same time.

The fur seals, clearly in a state of



A pod of around 20 orcas encircled a group of fur seals, pressing the circle into a dense “seal bait ball”. Several orcas then broke from the formation and attacked the seals from two sides at once. In a panic, the fur seals attempted to escape by leaping out of the water.



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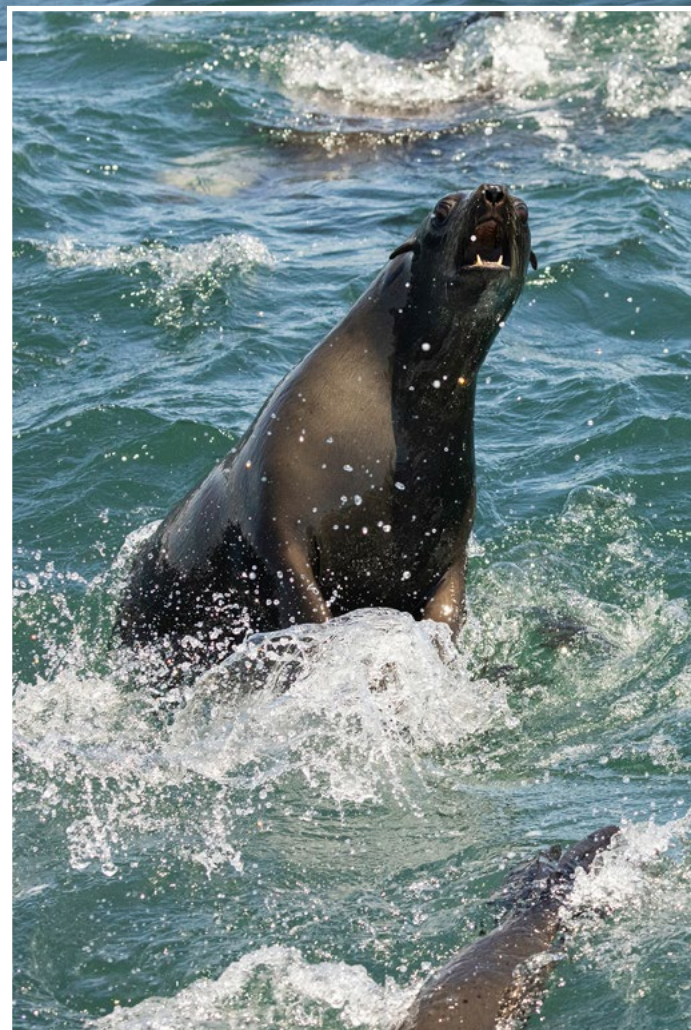
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In a coordinated strategy, the orcas launched sudden and precise attacks. After five hours of this, exhaustion soon took a toll on the fur seals, which the orcas exploited.

panic, leapt frantically out of the water, attempting to escape. But the orcas tricked them again and again. This would involve a small number of orcas pretending not to be interested and swimming past, while another group of orcas would come from the side or below and target the seals. Sometimes, the orcas would use their tails to strike and injure the fur seals, then move in and finish the hunt. In an utter panic, even the fastest fur seals in the group did not stand a chance.

Two huge males were part of this orca pod. One of them had a dorsal fin so large that it easily stood 2.5m above the surface of the Atlantic Ocean.

Exhaustion soon began to take its toll on the fur seals. Some sought refuge in the centre of the bait ball for a brief respite, which the orcas swiftly

exploited. Individual orcas would dive beneath the fur seals, launching sudden and precise attacks. As the orcas struck, panic was clearly visible in the eyes of the Cape fur seals!

From the surface, we witnessed the dramatic spectacle unfold. The usually agile fur seals were thrown into complete disarray. Oil slicks, skin fragments and pieces of flesh floated to the surface—undeniable evidence of the

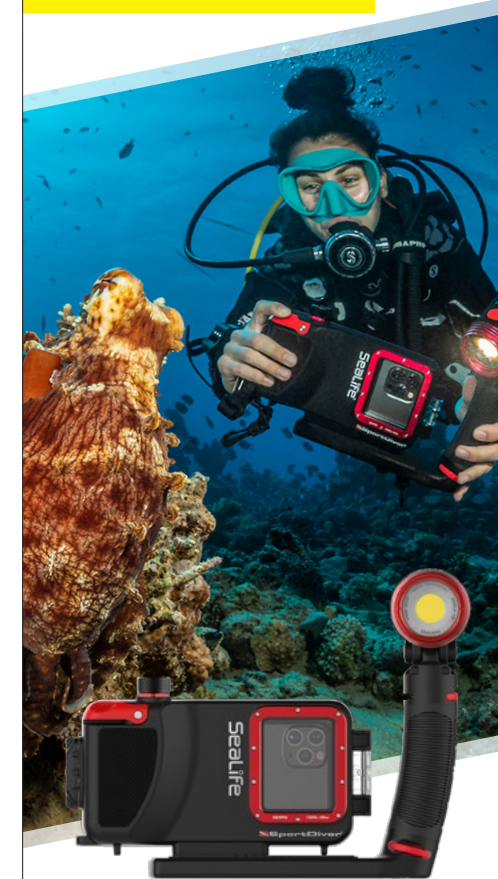
orcas' successful hunting technique. Overhead, gulls swooped down eagerly, scavenging for the remains.

Unique insights into orca behaviour

This observation provided valuable new insights into the hunting strategies of orcas in South African waters. It is well known that orcas are highly intelligent predators that operate in socially organised groups. However, the deliberate hunting of fur

Panic could be seen in the eyes of the seals.

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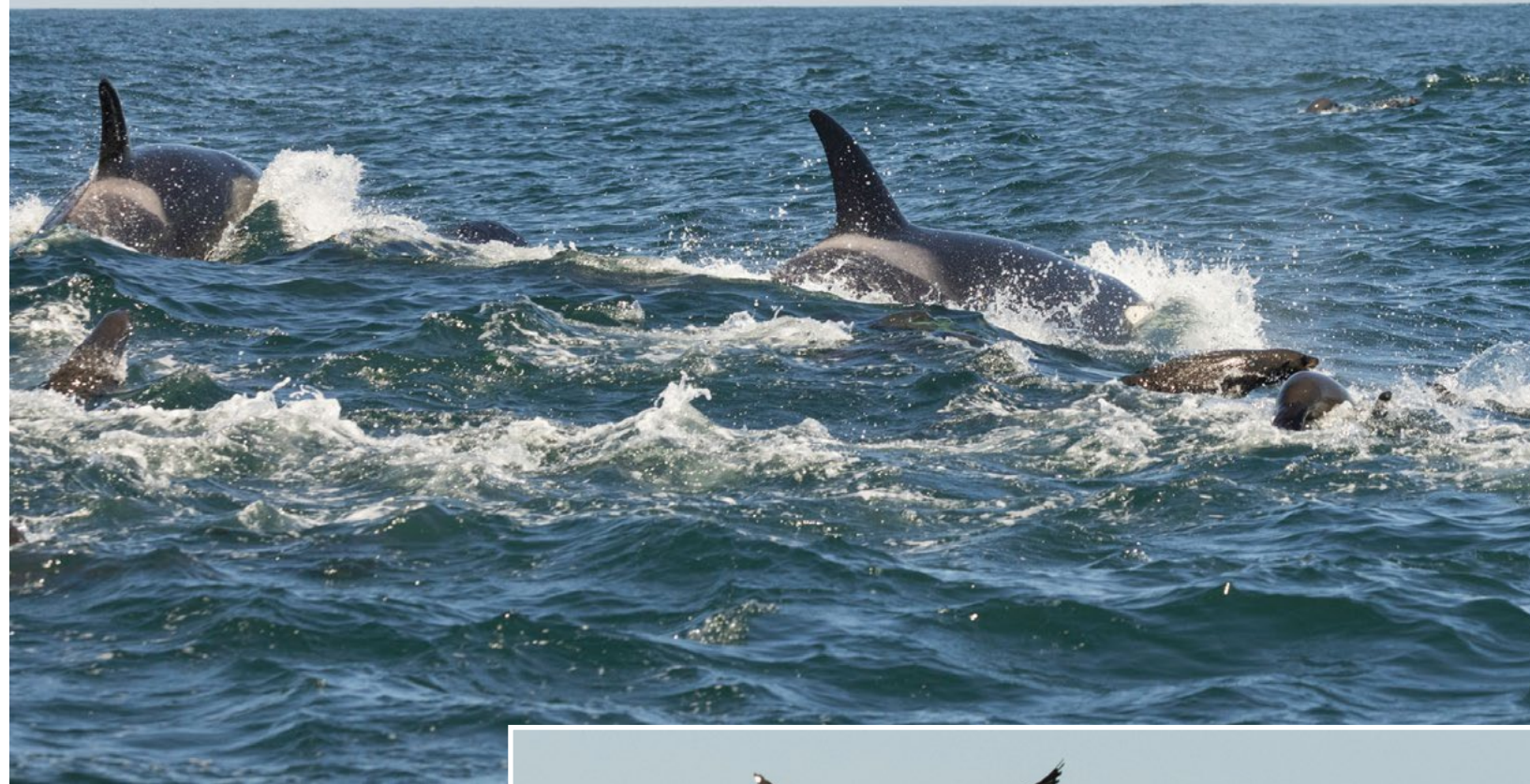
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seals in this region has never been documented before. One possible explanation for this behaviour could be a shortage of prey in the offshore areas where orcas typically hunt.

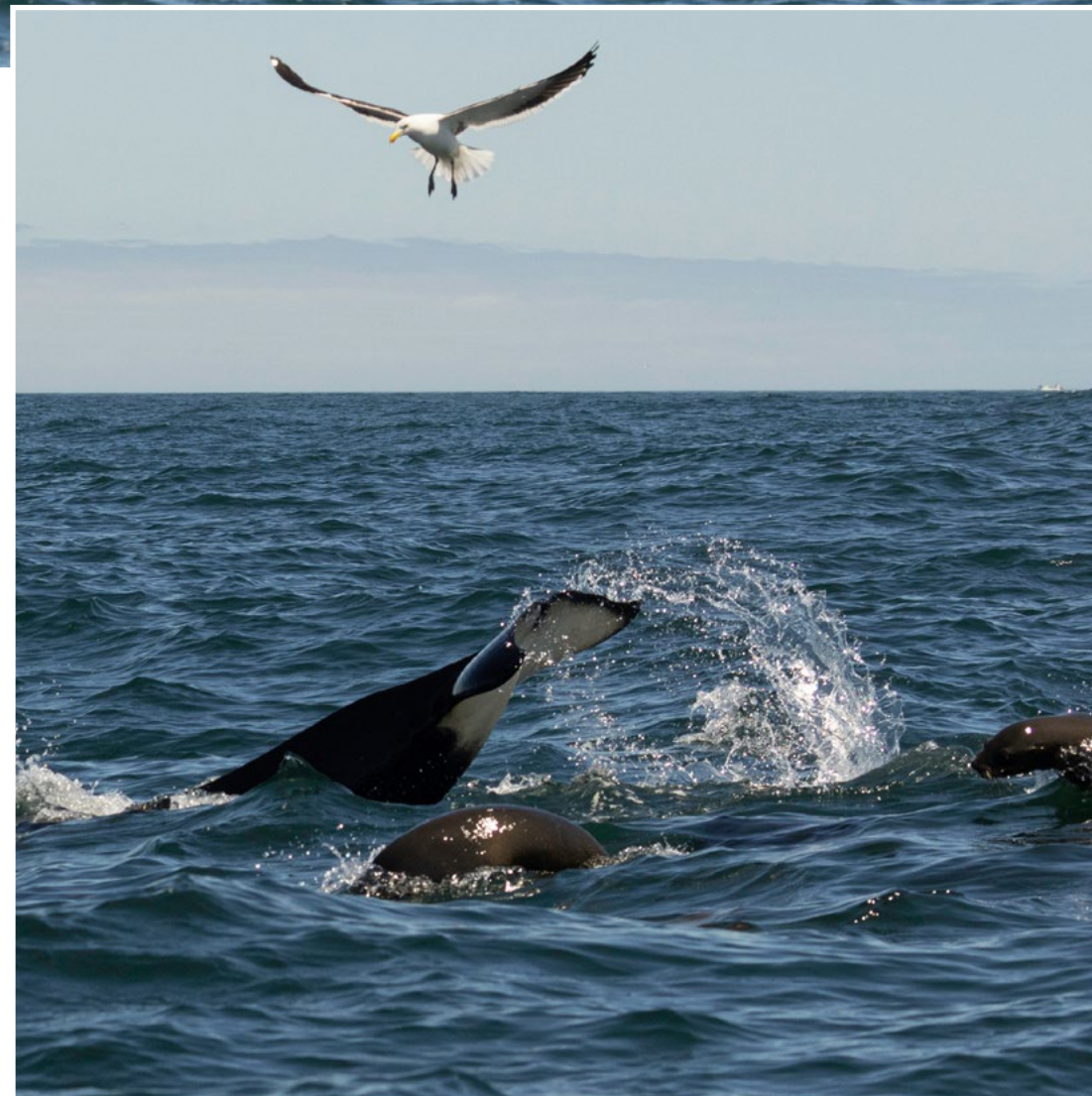
Back in 2024, we documented another unprecedented event in South Africa: Orcas hunting and killing fully grown humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). This, too, highlighted the remarkable adaptability and complex hunting strategies of these animals (see the links below).

Many of the orcas had scars and open wounds, as can be seen in the pictures. Hence, it is clear that this pod engages in more than just seal hunting. Whales, sharks and dolphins are known to be prey for orcas. If this is the case, the following point must be considered.

The question is, if fur seals have rabies and are now being eaten by orcas, will rabies



Fur seals clustered together in a frenzy as the orcas encircling them pressed the seals into a smaller and smaller area (above). Sometimes orcas used their flukes to strike and injure seals (right). Gulls looked on eagerly to scavenge on scraps left by the orcas.



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One of the two huge male orcas in the pod dwarfs a fur seal (above) trying to flee from the attack. It is thought that the orcas hunted the seals because of a lack of their usual prey.

spread to the orcas? Orcas feed on all sorts of marine life and marine mammals, including whales and dolphins. More importantly, they are known to travel across all the oceans. Could orcas contracting rabies in South African waters spell disaster for the entire global marine environment?

A similar catastrophe is described in *The Swarm* (in German: *Der Schwarm*), a science fiction novel by German author Frank Schätzing. It was first published in 2004 and quickly became a bestseller.

More on orca behaviour

See the links below for further coverage of the first-ever documentation of unique orca behaviours by Rainer Schimpf.

- First-ever observation of orcas preying on dolphins, Eastern Cape, South Africa, 2008: dailymail.co.uk
- First-ever observation of a disabled orca being assisted by other orcas, Eastern Cape, South Africa, 2013: usa.oceana.org/blog
- First-ever observation of orcas hunting

a humpback whale, West Coast, South Africa, 2024: xray-mag.com

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Expedition leaders and guides Silke and Rainer Schimpf run Expert-Tours in South Africa. For more information, please visit: expert-tours.de. Rainer has extensive expertise as a marine tourism tour operator specialising in diving adventures worldwide, with a focus on South Africa, the Azores and Mexico. He is passionate about marine mammals and large fish, particularly sharks, and he is renowned for his skills in whale watching, underwater photography and organising logistics for international film crews. He is recognised globally for his unique and adventurous experiences, including surviving a close encounter with a whale in 2019.



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