

The distinctive deeply notched tail of a southern right whale about to disappear below the surface off Campbell Island. Right whales are known for their exuberant lobtailing, where they bring the tail crashing down onto the water.



RAMARI STEWART

In the New Zealand region there has also been an apparent increase in sightings over the last decade, although the statistics have not been systematically collected.

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with the species was in Southland's Te Waewae Bay in August 1990. From a small boat the sheer size of the animals was daunting; their loud, resonant expiration of air – awe-inspiring. One 15-metre individual manoeuvred within centimetres of our aluminium runabout and poked its barnacle-clad head out of the waves to have a look at us. It is thought the callosities on the head deflect water away from the twin blowholes and form scrapers used in courtship battles. They have given rise to the nickname for the species – Barnacle Bill – given first to a friendly individual off the Napier coast by local fishermen.

During my three years in Invercargill, reports of right whales around Foveaux Strait, Stewart Island, the Catlins and Fiordland have become quite common during the winter months. In successive winters a pair of right whales have nosed into Bluff harbour, much to the delight of locals. Even Southern Air flights from Stewart Island have deviated from their

usual flight paths to treat passengers to a view of one of the world's largest and rarest mammals.

ARARE INSIGHT into the behaviour of these whales was gained by Ramari Stewart, a staff member at the Campbell Island Meteorological Base in 1983.

She observed whales in North West Bay from when they first appeared in May until they left in September.

She kept careful notes and discerned a distinct pattern of behaviour around the bay. One section of coast she named "Whale Road" because of the way whales repeatedly cruised in and out of the shallow coves, sometimes resting their bellies on the bottom. Cows first arrived

with young calves and showed little interest in bulls until mid-July when, she assumes, they came into oestrous. Loud blowing noises, breaching, fluke slapping, and rolling in the surf followed. When cows wished to avoid the attention of males they simply swam upside down, their genitalia out of the water.

As well, Ramari observed purely playful behaviour. One sub-adult male repeatedly trailed kelp from its mouth to attract an entourage of a dozen young sea lions.

Ramari estimated a population of about 30 whales at Campbell Island, suggesting a slight increase from the 1940s. Two whaling bases operated there between 1909 and 1916 and probably killed close to 100 animals.

Ramari says it is important that a photographic inventory be developed for the Campbell Island whales, similar to the ones for whales in Patagonia, South Africa and Australia. The inclusion of a Department of Conservation employee among the year-long meteorological station appointments should help with standardisation of the whale observation programme. DoC's principal conservation officer for marine mammals, Mike Donoghue, is proposing a long-term monitoring programme for the subantarctic populations and is seeking international support for a pilot study this coming winter.



RAMARI STEWART

A partially albino female right whale swims upside down to avoid the attention of males, a behaviour adopted by females in the breeding grounds who have not yet come into oestrous.