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Unusual 2025 interactions of Iberian Orcinus orca with sailing vessels: behaviour, patterns and conservation responses

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Abstract

During 2025, the Iberian killer whale (Orcinus orca) population exhibited an ongoing pattern of interactions with sailing boats, mainly along the Portuguese Atlantic coast and Strait of Gibraltar. This report provides an updated overview of incidents recorded from January to October 2025, analysing their geographic distribution, frequency, and behavioural characteristics. The study explores possible motivations, cultural transmission, and management strategies for both conservationists and mariners.

Keywords: Killer whale, Orcinus orca, incidents

1. Introduction

Since 2020, a distinct group of Iberian orcas has been engaging in repeated physical interactions with sailing boats (Culik, 2023). While early observations focused on Spain's Atlantic coast (Orca Ireland), 2025 data highlight increased activity off southern and central Portugal (float Magazin, 2025). Reports describe orcas targeting rudders, sometimes disabling or sinking small yachts (ScienceNorway, 2024). The present paper summarises the 2025 season and compares it with earlier years to identify emerging trends and conservation priorities.

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2. Methods

Incident reports were compiled through the Portuguese Maritime Authority, the Grupo de Trabalho Orca Atlântica (GTOA), and citizen submissions via verified sailing networks. Only verified cases from January to October 2025 were included (Scholl, 2024; Orca Ibérica, 2025). Each event was categorised by date, vessel length, propulsion type, and behavioural description (rubbing, ramming, or tail contact).

3. Results (January–October 2025)

A total of 187 verified orca-boat interactions were documented in 2025, slightly fewer than in 2024 (204 incidents) (Dive Magazine, 2025). Most occurred between May and September, coinciding with high tuna abundance and yacht traffic. The majority were along the Algarve coast (42%) and western Portugal near Lisbon (28%), with fewer near Galicia (15%). Rudder damage was recorded in 76% of events, while full vessel immobilisation occurred in 9 cases. Two yachts were confirmed sunk after sustained contact.

4. Behavioural Observations

Orcas continued to show coordinated behaviour, often approaching from behind and focusing on the rudder of sailing yachts (OceanCare, 2023) . Juveniles were frequently observed imitating adult movements, consistent with learning of the phenomenon (LiveScience, 2024). Drone footage collected in June 2025 indicated apparent play sequences before contact, suggesting exploratory motivation rather than aggression where the orcas are focused on rudders as intriguing objects" (Animal Welfare Institute, 2023). Acoustic recordings revealed no stress calls, supporting the interpretation of social or cultural play.

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5. Discussion

The persistence of this phenomenon into 2025 reinforces the hypothesis of learned, socially transmitted behaviour within a small Iberian sub-group (Scientific American, 2022). The data suggest three overlapping motivations: curiosity, learned play, and mechanical feedback from rudder movement resembling prey response. There is still no evidence of intentional aggression or food-seeking behaviour (Cruising Association / GTOA data). Conservation concern arises from potential negative perception of orcas by mariners and risks of retaliation.

6. Management Recommendations for 2025–2026

1. Maintain real-time alert systems for sailors through maritime safety networks.
2. Encourage use of composite rudders with reinforced structures to minimise vulnerability.
3. Expand acoustic monitoring and identification of individual orcas.
4. Promote awareness campaigns emphasising non-aggressive interpretation of these interactions.
5. Strengthen Portugal–Spain collaboration under the Iberian Orca Working Group for shared data access.

7. Conclusion

The 2025 data confirm that orca interactions with sailing vessels remain frequent but show early signs of stabilisation in number and severity. Continued research into cultural learning and environmental stressors will be crucial for balancing maritime safety and conservation of the endangered Iberian orca population.

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