

Northern Passages and Glacier Bay Cruise July 11-18, 2026 | Trip Report by Bryan Calk



Bryan Calk with Margo, Kevin, David, Sarah, Anne, Frank, Tony, Ann, Janet, Debby, Larry, and Vicky



Sat., July 11

Sitka | Totem Trail | Gray Whales

The trip began in Sitka, where everyone had the morning and early afternoon free to explore town. Some visited museums and galleries, while others checked out Sitka's restaurants, coffee shops, and waterfront. Later in the afternoon, part of the group gathered for a walk-through town toward Sitka National Historical Park and the Baranof Street trailhead, giving us an early introduction to both the natural and cultural history of Southeast Alaska.

Sitka National Historical Park protects part of the site of the 1804 Battle of Sitka, where the Kiks.ádi Tlingit resisted Russian forces before being displaced from their fortified settlement near the mouth of the Indian River. The park's coastal trail is now best known for its collection of Tlingit and Haida totem poles. The poles stood among towering Sitka Spruce and Western Hemlock, the two dominant trees in much of Southeast Alaska's coastal temperate rainforest. The spruce often grew along the brighter forest edges, while the more shade-tolerant hemlocks filled in beneath the canopy. Mosses covered fallen logs and tree trunks, and the entire forest seemed built in layers, from the dark understory to the huge conifers overhead. These wet coastal forests are exceptionally productive and can store enormous amounts of living and decaying plant material.



The trail followed the edge of the bay for much of the walk. Marbled Murrelet rested and fed offshore, and Bald Eagle seemed to be everywhere, taking full advantage of the shoreline and the activity around town. American Crow and Common Raven added their voices from the trees and buildings. Once inside the forest, Golden-crowned Kinglet and Chestnut-backed Chickadee moved through the spruce branches, while the clear, spiraling song of a Swainson's Thrush carried through the woods.

One of the biggest highlights was an adult male Harlequin Duck swimming through a mixture of Bull Kelp and Rockweed close to shore. His rich chestnut sides, white facial markings, and blue-gray body looked especially striking against the dark water and kelp. Farther along, a juvenile, Red-breasted Sapsucker gave us a good look, and both Anna's and Rufous Hummingbirds appeared during the walk. Seeing two hummingbird species this far north was a fun reminder that Sitka's comparatively mild coastal climate creates opportunities that would be unexpected across much of Alaska.

After returning to Harrigan Centennial Hall, everyone checked in for the cruise and boarded the shuttle to the ship. Once aboard, we settled into our cabins, completed the required orientation and safety drills, and headed to dinner.

Just as the meal was wrapping up, word came that a small group of Gray Whale was feeding nearby. Sitka Sound is one of the few places along this route where Gray Whale are regularly possible, since they generally favor the more open coastal waters outside the narrow channels of the Inside Passage. Everyone headed outside in time to watch several whales surfacing, breathing, and lifting their tail flukes before deeper dives.

Gray Whale have mottled bodies, no true dorsal fin, and two blowholes that can produce a heart-shaped blow when viewed from the right angle. Many migrate between northern feeding grounds and the lagoons of Baja California, one of the longest regular migrations made by any mammal, although some individuals remain along portions of the Pacific Coast throughout the year.

The whales continued feeding as the ship moved through Sitka Sound, giving us repeated looks at their backs, blows, and distinctive flukes. It was an excellent beginning to the voyage. Later in the evening, everyone

reviewed the next day's activity choices and signed up for excursions. Some gathered in the lounge for a drink, while others stayed outside to enjoy the long Alaska evening as the ship cruised toward our first anchorage.



Sun., July 12

Kalinin Bay | Wildlife from the Bow | First Excursions

The ship cruised into Kalinin Bay early in the morning, and several of us were already out on the bow before breakfast. Kalinin Bay lies on the northern side of Kruzof Island, just inside Salisbury Sound, where it provides a sheltered anchorage away from the more exposed outer coast.

Wildlife appeared almost immediately. Sea Otter floated near the surface, Humpback Whale blew and dove farther out, and Harbor Seal rested along the shoreline. Bald Eagle watched from trees and exposed rocks, while large numbers of Marbled Murrelet covered the water. Bonaparte's Gull and Black-legged Kittiwake passed through with several other gull species. A pair of Red-throated Loon gave distant views, followed by a Common Loon flying past the ship.

After breakfast, everyone rotated through activity orientations before heading out on the first skiff tours of the week. These introductory outings gave us a chance to become familiar with the small boats and with the different ways we would explore Southeast Alaska's protected bays, islands, shorelines, and tidal zones. Humpback Whale continued to surface nearby as Sea Otter and Marbled Murrelet were scattered across the bay. It was already becoming clear how productive these waters were. Even in a quiet anchorage, there was almost always something moving, diving, calling, or appearing unexpectedly at the surface.

A shore walk in the afternoon offered the first close look at the organisms living between the high and low tide lines. This group explored exposed rocks and tidal pools before continuing toward a stream surrounded by a broad green meadow. Greater Yellowleg worked along the water's edge, calling occasionally as they moved through the shallows. By late afternoon, everyone was back aboard and the ship began cruising toward a new anchorage. Happy hour gave us time to compare sightings and hear about the following day's activities. Dinner was followed by a photography presentation, and the evening ended with time to relax in the lounge or watch the changing coastline from the decks.



Mon., July 13

Sukoi Inlet | Peril Strait | Brown Bears

During the night, the ship relocated into Sukoi Inlet, a narrow, protected waterway in the complex group of channels surrounding Kruzof Island. Birding began from the bow as the ship moved deeper into the inlet. Several gull species passed overhead, Bald Eagle lined the shoreline, and Humpback Whale surfaced in the surrounding channels. Sitka Black-tailed Deer appeared near the water, moving along openings at the edge of the forest.

The biggest surprise was a small handful of Leach's Storm-Petrel. These small seabirds are usually associated with more open marine waters, so finding several inside the protected inlet was unexpected. They skimmed above the surface with a quick, erratic flight that looked a little like a nighthawk, occasionally touching down and resting on the calm water. Their dark bodies nearly disappeared whenever they settled against the reflections.

After breakfast, everyone suited up for a morning skiff tour. A Pacific Loon in transitional plumage allowed the skiff to approach closely, giving us long views of its changing head and neck pattern. Even better, the loon vocalized several times while we watched it, its calls carrying clearly over the quiet water. Another Leach's Storm-Petrel was resting on the surface and remained calm as the skiff slowly approached. Seeing one sitting so close made it possible to study its shape and small size in a way that is rarely possible when storm-petrels are flying across rough water.

Chestnut-backed Chickadee and Golden-crowned Kinglet moved through spruce trees almost directly above the shoreline. An active Bald Eagle nest was also visible along the bay, tucked into the upper portion of a large tree. Our local guide, Jessie, explained how the landscapes around us had been shaped by two major forces. Plate tectonics built and lifted the mountains, while glaciers moved through the valleys and carved them into the steep-sided fjords and channels now filled by the sea.

In the shallow portions of the inlet, the skiff passed over beds of eelgrass and clusters of mussels. Looking down through the clear water offered another view of the bay, with submerged vegetation and shellfish creating habitat beneath the surface while the rainforest crowded the shore above.

Following lunch, the ship continued through Peril Strait. Humpback Whale surfaced calmly nearby, and the ship remained in the area long enough for repeated views as the whales breathed and moved through the channel.

Another unexpected scene began when a Bald Eagle was spotted swimming across the water, using its wings in a rowing motion. It appeared to have caught a fish that was too heavy to lift. Once it reached the shoreline, other eagles quickly noticed the situation, leading to an increasingly chaotic dispute over the fish.

The wildlife watching continued as the ship passed a meadow where a lone Coastal Brown Bear grazed on vegetation. Around the next bend, another bear appeared, this time a mother accompanied by three young cubs. The family worked slowly along the boundary between the forest and the water, sometimes disappearing into the vegetation before reappearing farther down the shoreline.

After the evening edition of Cruise News and a review of the next day's schedule, everyone headed to dinner. The day ended with a presentation by one of the expedition guides about beginning birder skills as well as the birdlife of Southeast Alaska and the different species we might encounter during the remainder of the voyage.



Tue., July 14

Saook Bay

Dall's Porpoise appeared while the ship was cruising toward Saook Bay, slicing quickly through the water causing short energetic splashes. Their black-and-white pattern and fast, powerful movement separated them immediately from other local cetaceans. Marbled Murrelet were again scattered across the water, while Sitka Black-tailed Deer appeared along the shoreline. The deer often feed close to the coast, where meadows, tidal areas, and forest openings provide more low vegetation than the darker interior of the rainforest.

Saook Bay is a long, narrow inlet on the northern coast of Baranof Island. A salmon stream and broad meadow lie near its head, while steep forested slopes protect much of the bay from wind and swell. The name is derived from a Tlingit place name and was recorded on regional charts during the late 1800s.

After breakfast, the ship settled into a quiet corner of the bay for the day. The protected water made it a good place to slow down and explore. Excursion options allowed everyone to experience the bay from slightly different perspectives, whether moving along the shoreline from a skiff or kayak or spending time closer to the forest and intertidal zone.

The quieter pace also provided time to notice the smaller details of the landscape. Spruce and hemlock branches extended over the water, exposed rocks marked the changing tide, and narrow openings in the forest hinted at streams and meadows farther inland. Marbled Murrelet came and went from the bay throughout the day, while Bald Eagle remained a nearly constant presence.

The ship stayed tucked inside Saook Bay through the afternoon. It was a less dramatic day than some of the wildlife spectacles in the trip, but it gave everyone time to become more comfortable with the expedition routine and to enjoy one of the protected places that larger vessels rarely have an opportunity to enter.



Wed., July 15

Tekatz Bay | Hidden Falls Hatchery | Brown Bears

The ship entered Tekatz Bay under clear skies and continuing calm conditions. The surface of the bay was nearly flat, and the morning sunlight reached deep into the surrounding forest. Common Merganser repeatedly flew between the water and trees near the ship, possibly using a sheltered roost or tree cavity somewhere along the shoreline.

The morning skiff tour explored the tidal flats and shallow edges of the bay. A distant Coastal Brown Bear grazed along the edge of a meadow, occasionally lifting its head before returning to the vegetation.

A Varied Thrush dropped from the lower branches of a spruce onto a group of large shoreline rocks, giving unusually open views of a bird that often stays hidden in the dark forest understory. Pacific Wren called from dense vegetation, and Swainson's Thrush sang from farther back in the trees. Beyond the bay, the first truly high mountains of the trip rose above the forest, their upper slopes extending beyond the tree line and holding patches of snow. The combination of calm water, dark rainforest, exposed rock, and distant snowfields made Tekatz Bay one of the most scenic anchorages so far.

During lunch, the ship moved north into Kasnyku Bay. The afternoon skiff excursion began around a group of rocky islands near the mouth of the bay. A lone Surf Scoter floated offshore, and a group of Harlequin Duck gathered along the rocks. Harbor Seal rested on exposed ledges, watching the skiffs while remaining stretched out above the waterline. Bald Eagle became increasingly numerous as the skiff continued down the shoreline. The reason soon became obvious when we approached Hidden Falls Hatchery.

Hidden Falls is not a salmon farm, where fish would be raised in ocean pens for harvest. It is a salmon hatchery, where eggs are collected, incubated, and young salmon are released into the marine environment before returning as adults. The facility was built by the State of Alaska in 1979, and management was transferred to the Northern Southeast Regional Aquaculture Association in 1988. It has historically produced enormous runs of Chum Salmon, along with Coho and Chinook Salmon, and previous Chum returns have numbered well into the millions.

The concentration of returning salmon had attracted Coastal Brown Bear from the surrounding forest. Bears lined the shoreline and worked through the shallows, watching for fish and wading into the water whenever an opportunity appeared. The skiffs and kayaks remained quiet and kept a respectful distance, but the bears still passed exceptionally close. With no roads, buildings, or crowds surrounding us, the setting felt completely different from a developed bear-viewing area. Forested mountains rose behind the hatchery, salmon filled the water, eagles watched from the trees, and bears moved naturally through the entire scene.

After dinner, the ship continued north toward Glacier Bay. A presentation followed in the lounge, and the long evening cruise carried us toward an entirely different landscape of exposed mountains, recently deglaciated valleys, and active ice.



Thu., July 16 South Marble Island | Glacier Bay NP | Lamplugh Glacier

The ship was approaching South Marble Island when the day began, and the decks quickly filled with people carrying binoculars and cameras. South Marble Island is a rocky, isolated island in the lower portion of Glacier Bay. Its separation from the mainland protects nesting seabirds from terrestrial predators, making it one of the most active seabird colonies in the park.

Birds swirled around nearly every part of the island. Tufted Puffin were among the most conspicuous, flying back and forth on rapidly beating wings. At least one pair of Horned Puffin was also present, a less numerous species in Glacier Bay. Common Murre crowded the rock faces, while Pigeon Guillemot, Pelagic Cormorant, Glaucous-winged Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, and Black Oystercatcher moved around the shoreline.



Below the nesting birds, Steller Sea Lion covered sections of the exposed rocks. Some slept in dense piles, while others pushed through the group or raised their heads to call. South Marble Island has become a major summer haul-out for the species.

After breakfast, the ship continued deeper into Glacier Bay. At Gloomy Knob, Mountain Goat appeared on the steep rock faces, including a female accompanied by a young kid. Their white coats stood out against the dark stone whenever they crossed open areas, but they became surprisingly difficult to follow when they moved through patches of lingering snow and pale rock.

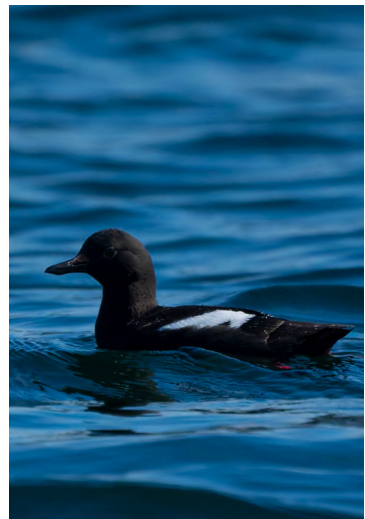
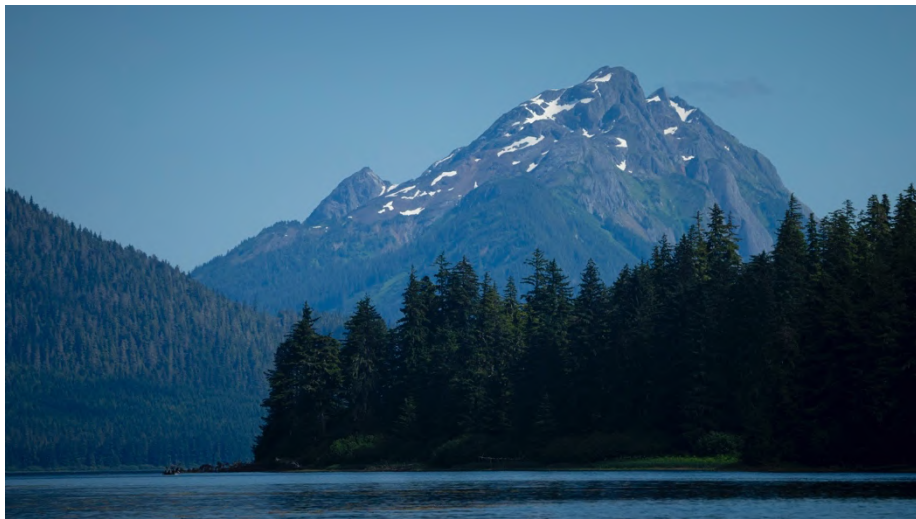
Glacier Bay is a remarkably young landscape in its current form. Around 1750, near the height of the Little Ice Age, a huge glacier filled nearly the entire bay. Since then, the ice has retreated roughly 65 miles toward the heads of the surrounding inlets, leaving behind a system of fjords, islands, bare rock, young forest, and active glaciers.

Plate tectonics continue to lift and reshape the surrounding mountains, while glaciers grind, fracture, and transport the rock. As the ship moved closer to the active glaciers, the water became increasingly opaque and turquoise. The color came from glacial flour, extremely fine particles of rock produced as moving ice grinds against the valley floor and walls. These particles remain suspended in the water and scatter light, giving glacial bays and rivers their milky blue-green appearance.

Kittlitz's Murrelet began appearing among the Marbled Murrelet. This uncommon seabird is closely associated with glacial environments and often feeds near tidewater glaciers or the outflow of glacial streams. Unlike Marbled Murrelets which nest in trees, Kittlitz's Murrelets place their single egg on sparsely vegetated slopes above the tree line, often near glaciers and snowfields. Their low reproductive rate and specialized habitat have made the species an important conservation concern, although much of its life history is still poorly understood.

Sea Otter became increasingly numerous farther inside the bay. Some floated alone, while others rested in loose groups. Tufted Puffin, Pelagic Cormorant, Surf Scoter, Common Merganser, and a Red-throated Loon added to the activity as the ship continued toward Johns Hopkins Inlet.

Johns Hopkins Glacier eventually filled the view at the head of the fjord. The glacier is formed by several tributaries descending from the Fairweather Mountains and extends roughly 16 miles from its source. Its face is approximately one mile wide and rises between about 225 and 300 feet above the water, with still more ice extending below the surface.



The glacier was named in 1893 by geologist Harry Fielding Reid for Johns Hopkins University. It remains an active tidewater glacier, meaning its terminus reaches the sea and releases ice directly into the inlet. Unlike most glaciers in the park, its terminus has generally advanced, even while the glacier has experienced thinning. An underwater moraine in front of the glacier helps shield its submerged face from warmer ocean water, reducing some of the melting and calving that would otherwise occur below the waterline.

Ice surrounded the ship as it approached. Small pieces bumped and scraped against the metal hull, producing sounds that could be heard and felt inside the vessel. The ice ranged from clear fragments to larger blue-white pieces carrying streaks of sediment, each one representing a small part of the glacier's movement through the mountains.

The ship eventually turned back toward Lamplugh Glacier, where it anchored for the afternoon's activities. Lamplugh Glacier is fed by the Brady Icefield and extends approximately 20 miles. Its face is about 0.9 miles wide and roughly 165 feet high. Although it has experienced periods of advance in the past, it is now generally thinning and retreating.

Some guests joined skiff tours through the surrounding inlets, examining the sediment-rich water, floating ice, and recently exposed landscape. Others went ashore near the glacier's terminal moraine and walked through thick glacial mud toward views of the towering ice. A small calving event sent a section of ice falling from the face, providing a close demonstration of how tidewater glaciers continue to reshape their margins.

The most strenuous option was a ridge hike overlooking the glacier. The route climbed through loose ground and dense, scrubby willows, but the elevation provided an entirely different view. From above, the folds, crevasses, debris lines, and changing colors of the ice were much easier to see. Along the trail, a family of Willow Ptarmigan appeared. The female moved with several chicks and became increasingly defensive as the group passed. Wilson's Warblers and Golden-crowned Sparrows moved through the willows during the climb.

The overlooks also made it possible to feel the cold air flowing downslope from the glacier. Dense, chilled air moves away from the ice and down surrounding valleys, creating localized winds even when the weather elsewhere is relatively calm. From the ridge, the glacier could be understood not simply as a wall of ice but as a moving part of the entire valley, affecting the ground, water, vegetation, and air around it.

Back near the landing site, several Black Oystercatcher families gathered along the rocks. Adults called loudly while keeping their young together near the shoreline, creating quite a commotion as the skiffs arrived. More Kittlitz's Murrelet appeared during the ride back to the ship, this time viewed close to water level.

Once everyone was aboard, several guests participated in a polar plunge from the kayak dock into the cold, sediment-filled water. The suspended glacial silt gave the water a surprisingly smooth, slick texture. Claims that glacial mud is especially good for the pores are probably better treated as part of the fun than as proven dermatology, but the plunge was certainly memorable and, for those brave enough to try it, immediately refreshing.

Dinner that evening featured fresh Dungeness Crab, one of the best-known foods of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska coast. Everyone settled in for the meal as the ship began cruising back down Glacier Bay. Later, an evening presentation focused on whales, their migrations, feeding ecology, and the species encountered during the voyage.



Fri., July 17

Neka Bay | Tongass Rainforest | Beach Bonfire

The ship awoke in Neka Bay, a quiet anchorage inside Port Frederick on Chichagof Island. Snow-covered mountains surrounded the upper bay, with lower ridges descending into dense coastal rainforest. Small rocky islands rose from the water, some forming narrow spires with groups of trees somehow growing from their summits.

The forest surrounding Neka Bay is part of the Tongass National Forest. Covering nearly 17 million acres, the Tongass is the largest national forest in the United States and includes much of Southeast Alaska's islands, fjords, glaciers, mountains, and coastal temperate rainforest. The weather was exceptional, with full sunshine, very little wind, and calm water. Morning and afternoon excursions offered several ways to explore the islands and shoreline. Skiffs and kayaks moved through protected passages, while shore-based groups examined the forest, beaches, and tidal areas.

Marbled Murrelet were again common on the water. These small seabirds spend most of their lives at sea but fly inland to nest, usually placing a single egg on a large, moss-covered branch in mature coastal forest. The



parents carry individual fish from the ocean to the chick, often traveling at dawn or dusk to avoid attracting predators. Once fully grown, the young murrelet leaves the branch and must reach the ocean on its very first flight. Landing short of the water can be fatal because its small legs and compact body make it extremely difficult to take off from the forest floor. The chick makes the journey alone, without an adult guiding it to the sea.

The excursions also offered time to discuss the Tlingit people and their long relationship with the forests, waters, and salmon of Southeast Alaska. Salmon connects nearly every part of this ecosystem. After returning from the ocean and spawning, their bodies release marine-derived nitrogen, phosphorus, and other nutrients into streams and surrounding soils. Bears, eagles, and other animals carry salmon away from the water, spreading those nutrients farther into the forest. In some streamside areas, a substantial portion of the nitrogen found in vegetation can be traced back to salmon.

The relationship also works in the other direction. Forests shade salmon streams, stabilize banks, and contribute fallen trees and branches that create pools and shelter for young fish. Salmon feed the forest, and the forest helps produce the next generation of salmon.

Kelp formed another important part of the day's interpretation. The floating Bull Kelp visible around the islands was attached to the seafloor by holdfasts, with long flexible stems reaching toward the surface. These fast-growing algae create underwater forests that provide structure, food, and shelter for fish and invertebrates. Pieces torn away by waves and storms also carry energy into beaches, deep water, and other nearby habitats.

The day was not entirely packed with scheduled activities. There was also time to relax with one another, play cards, talk in the lounge, watch wildlife from the decks, and enjoy the unusually warm sunshine.

A cocktail hour and bonfire were held on the beach, giving everyone a final opportunity to gather ashore. The setting could hardly have been better, with calm water, forested islands, and snow-covered mountains surrounding the bay.

Clouds began rolling in during the evening, adding new layers and textures to the mountains as moisture moved over the bay. After several days of bright sunshine, the returning clouds felt more like the Southeast Alaska everyone had expected. The ship remained surrounded by beautiful scenery as the final evening came to an end.

Sat., July 18

Juneau | Disembarkation | Independent Exploration

The final morning began in Juneau. After breakfast and farewells to the crew, everyone disembarked and collected their luggage.

The remainder of the day was open for exploring Alaska's capital independently. Some visited the downtown shops and galleries, while others stopped for coffee or enjoyed one more meal featuring local seafood before beginning their journeys home.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Bryan Calk, BC), Bald Eagle (David Oberstein, DO), Coastal Brown Bear (BC), Mountain Landscape (BC), Orcas (DO), Totem Pole (BC), Golden-crowned Kinglet (BC), Townsend's Warbler (BC), Pacific Wren (BC), Chestnut-backed Chickadee (BC), Gray Whale (BC), Gray Whale (BC), Gray Whale (BC), Scenic Landscape (BC), Waterfall (BC), Coastal Brown Bear (BC), Mountain Goat (DO), Willow Ptarmigan (BC), Pacific Loon (BC), Snowy Mountains (BC), Tour Group On An Eco-Meander (BC), Harbor Seal (BC), Pacific Lion's Mane Jelly (BC), Leach's Storm-Petrel (BC), Great Blue Heron (DO), Surf Scoter (BC), Tufted Puffin (BC), Harlequin Duck (BC), Black Oystercatcher (BC), Tour Hiking (BC), Scenic Landscape (BC), Tour Group On Boat (BC), Sea Ice (Debby Lennard, DL), Group Kayaking (BC)