



SE Alaska

Participants: Bob, Bonnie, Debra, Dianne, Emily, Lori, Michele, Ralph
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GUIDE

Woody Wheeler



Day One: Arrive to Gustavus, Alaska

Everyone arrived in the late afternoon to the cozy Gustavus Inn. We became acquainted over drinks and hors d'oeuvres of smoked salmon spread on crackers. This inn is an exceptional place with an extensive vegetable garden that provides fresh produce to accompany the locally-caught seafood served at their nightly gourmet dinners. As if this were not enough, the Inn also makes delicious homemade pies each night garnished with flower blossoms from the garden. Spectacular food complements the spectacular land, sea and ice-scapes in the Glacier Bay area. We were delighted to have this Inn as our home base.



Day 2: Glacier Bay Boat Tour

Our first full day of outings commenced with a boat tour of Glacier Bay. Prior to boarding, there was a lot to see on the short hike through temperate rain forest from the lodge to the dock. Multiple Great Blue Herons and Belted Kingfishers perched on the dock, and a group of seven River Otters swam and fished together alongside the harbor sea wall, all vying for the same fish. Barn Swallows perched on our boat as if they intended to join the tour. A large flock of Northwest Crows fluttered by – a life bird for some in our group, separate and distinct from the American Crows that reside near all of us.



Our boat launched in foggy but calm conditions. As we cruised toward the Marble Islands, a National Park Service naturalist gave a nice overview of Glacier Bay's natural history, including species that we would probably encounter. One of the interesting facts in this presentation was the maximum depth of Glacier Bay: 1,400 feet at its deepest sounding.

Soon after the ranger talk, we arrived along the shore of South Marble Island. This densely-populated bird and sea lion colony exists on a small, series of bare-rock islands – about five acres in total. Carved by

glaciers, the islands are broken up into numerous cracks and ledges of different heights, providing excellent perches and nesting platforms for birds and haul-out places for sea lions near the water.

Dozens of Steller's Sea Lions occupied the lowest portions of the islands. The air was full of their growling vocals, along with hundreds of birds chattering. The birds were roughly organized into zones from the highest to the lowest perches on the largest of the South Marble Islands. On top were the Glaucous-winged Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Moving downward, there was a band of Pelagic Cormorant nests, and then still lower, Pigeon Guillemots. In the waters surrounding the islands, Pigeon Guillemots could be found swimming with their crimson red feet, and small numbers of Marbled Murrelets and Tufted Puffins were farther out from the rocks but in close proximity to our boat.



Tufted Puffin

As we continued past this noisy, rocky wildlife refuge, the fog and clouds lifted to reveal vistas of steep forest-clad slopes and rugged snow-capped peaks. Small rafts of Pigeon Guillemots, Common Murres and Tufted Puffins passed by. Increasing numbers of Sea Otters appeared on the water, floating on their backs, often with a crab, starfish or some other sea food morsel in their grasp.



We came upon a rugged coastline near Tidal Cove. Here Debra spotted Mountain Goats on a mountainous formation called Gloomy Knob. Soon, everyone in our group joined the visual hunt. Collectively we saw a total of five Mountain goats, including at least one “kid.”

We continued watching goats and other sea life nearby, including several distant Humpback Whales spouting, surfacing and diving. The crew then determined that we needed to head back to the dock due to a mechanical problem. Since we only made it half-way up Glacier Bay, our group opted to sail again on the next day to complete the journey.

On the return trip, Woody spotted a Parasitic Jaeger harassing Black-legged Kittiwakes and a dozen Red-necked Phalaropes that some in our group were also able to see as we passed by them. The Phalaropes frequented a series of kelp beds that also attracted Sea Otters and their pups. This was a nice way in which to conclude our boat tour which would be continued the next day. We returned to Gustavus Inn under partly-blue skies and sunshine. This gave everyone an opportunity to enjoy bicycling, walking or just relaxing at the Gustavus Inn and its lovely surroundings.

Day 3: Glacier Bay Revisited

We joked that it was reminiscent of the film “Groundhog Day” as we once again arose early, had an ample, delicious breakfast at Gustavus Inn and headed for Glacier Bay. While waiting for our shuttle at the Inn, we spotted a Wilson’s Warbler and heard a Varied Thrush. We took the shuttle to our boat tour at Glacier Bay. Today’s weather was promising: overcast, calm, and no rain. Prior to departing, we saw a new species of gull feeding in the tidal mud flats: a half-dozen Mew Gulls. Soon we were once again on board a boat to cruise Glacier Bay.

As the boat sailed from the harbor, we were soon in the company of Sea Otters and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Within an hour of smooth sailing accompanied by a natural history talk by an NPS ranger, we arrived once again at South Marble Island. This time the visibility was better. Some 100 Steller Sea Lions were hauled out on low rocks, roaring away. Layers of Glaucous-winged Gulls, Pelagic Cormorants, Common Murres and Pigeon Guillemots either perched or nested on the largest of the rocky islands.



As we motored on, the skies cleared to the point where sunshine illuminated distant mountain peaks and glaciers. The area’s profound beauty was on full display.

Pausing at Gloomy Knob, a morose name for a beautiful, glacially-carved formation, we found three Mountain Goats. Some were close enough to photograph for those of us with long lenses. Continuing beyond Russell Island, we passed the farthest point that John Muir attained by canoe in the late 1800's before hitting glacial ice. Near this place, we saw the six-foot dorsal fin of an Orca plying the waters in search of marine mammals.



Soon after experiencing this spectacle, views of distant tidal glaciers opened up, including Reid and Lamplugh glaciers. Small icebergs appeared in steadily increasing numbers. Rafts of Surf Scoters mixed with a few Tufted Puffins floated by with the occasional Harbor Seal and Sea Otter. Kittiwakes were everywhere.

We reached the northern terminus of Glacier Bay, some 65 miles from the mouth of the bay, at Grand Pacific and Margerie Glaciers - - remnants of the original glaciers that carved Glacier Bay. Here we watched and listened in awe as Margerie Glacier calved massive chinks of its blue-colored ice into the salt water with a delayed crack and thunder sound. Waves from the calving rocked our boat. We lingered in this spectacular setting to watch the glaciers calve and the movement of wildlife – particularly Black-legged Kittiwakes – as they fed on sea creatures startled by the calving process. Words cannot describe the scale, the grandeur, the beauty, the sounds or the significance of a place like this. We were extremely grateful to be here.



Horned Puffin



Black-legged Kittiwake



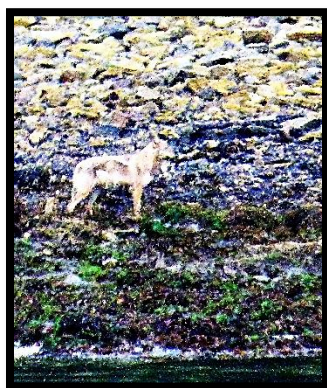
On our return trip, we made several extra forays into tidal glacier inlets. On the way into Reid Glacier Inlet, we saw four Horned Puffins in the water in a rectangular formation drifting only 50 yards away from us. This was a stunning site of a life bird for some in our group. Debra and Ralph saw a cameo appearance of two Kittletz's Murrellets, which Ralph photographed. The NPS ranger confirmed their identification.

While marveling at the expansive Reid glacier, a Brown Bear foraged through an open alluvial fan area, and another Orca surfaced simultaneously. Glacier + Brown Bear + Orca = Natural History harmonic convergence!



Day 4: Icy Strait Whale-Watching and Sea Kayaking

The rain relented this morning as we headed to the dock for our respective tours: most opted to sea kayak to Pleasant Island; the rest of us went on a half-day whale-watching excursion near Point Adolphus on Chichagof Island.



The whale trip began on a positive note when the captain and ship naturalist called out “wolf on the beach!” All of us were able to see, and some photograph from afar, this lone tawny-colored wolf foraging on the beach of Pleasant Island. Later, we found out that our sea-kayaking contingent found the tracks of this wolf while they were exploring the island on foot.

Our boat *the Taz* plowed across the seven-mile Icy Strait to Point Adolphus where we saw the spout of our first Humpback Whale. More spouting, surfacing and diving Humpbacks were soon all around us. These whales migrate over 3,000 miles from Hawaii to spend their summers here harvesting Herring, Capelin and krill off Point Adolphus where strong tidal currents mingle, attracting the fish.



1 Humpback Whale "tail-slapping." - photo by Ralph

The whales continued spouting, tail-slapping, diving slowly exposing their massive tail flukes, and one even breached only 50-yards distant, eliciting loud cries of delight from all of us. It is hard to describe the excitement of seeing a 40-50 foot-long, 25-40-ton creature that becomes briefly airborne prior to crashing into the water with an enormous splash. Incredible!

Meanwhile, hundreds of Black-legged Kittiwakes and multiple Sea Otters, Steller's Sea Lions and Harbor Porpoises joined in the feeding frenzy. Bald Eagles looked out on the action from their lofty perches on Chichigof Island Sitka Spruce trees. Black-tailed Sitka Deer calmly browsed along the beach. This point is definitely a wildlife hot spot.



While we were taking all of this in, the rest of our group enjoyed a sea kayaking expedition. My wife, Lori was among them. Here is her account of their journey:

“Six of us opted for the sea kayak trip to Pleasant Island. We donned our attractive blue raingear, spray skirts and boots and headed to the beach for a quick lesson on how to paddle. A few of us were distracted during the lesson by the five Whimbrels on the beach, the Caspian tern flying overhead and the Bald Eagle perched on the dock nearby. A further distraction was the Minke whale sighted in the distance!



The water was smooth as we launched for our one-mile crossing. Within a short time, everyone got into the rhythm of paddling and easily maneuvered through the wind in mid-channel. We approached Pleasant Island and then followed the shore for a bit. We saw three spotted sandpipers along a rocky point, and then flushed seven great blue herons who took flight. One had nesting material in its beak and we wondered why at this late time of year; perhaps for nest repair.



We landed at a sandy beach, and had a quick snack prior to walking along the beach. Here we saw fresh wolf tracks on the beach as well as shells from butter clams, mussels, whelks, limpets, a couple of jellyfish and beautifully striped rocks. We soon entered the Sitka spruce forest where lichen, mosses, mushrooms, and ferns were abundant. It was a soft, spongy place to walk. We also noted clasping twisted stalk, foam flowers still in bloom, skunk cabbage, devil's club, Bane berries and False Lily-of-the-Valley.

The guides provided bagels, cream cheese and smoked salmon for lunch – complete with tablecloth and home baked treats. A few Chestnut-backed chickadees joined us for lunch.

We documented our journey with some group pictures at our boats and headed out to sea. By this time, it had started to rain but no one seemed to mind much as we were dry in our boats and raingear. The Sea otters, Marbled Murrelets, Surf Scoters and the beauty of the Icy Straits kept our senses engaged as we paddled back. Several Steller's sea lions emerged near the Gustavus dock and growled loudly as we entered their territory.

We landed with ease and unloaded the boats. All ended the trip feeling satisfied with our kayak adventure. Ralph and Deb were clearly experienced kayakers; Bonnie and Bob decided this is a sport they will want to do more in the future."



Day 5: Whale-watching, Bartlett Cove and Icy Strait Beach

Today we re-united as a full group doing one activity together: whale-watching. On a calm, rainless morning, we set out for Pt. Adolphus, Chichigof Island. As we passed by Pleasant Island, Lori spotted a Gray Wolf foraging along the beach – a promising start to our excursion.

The crossing of Icy Strait was relatively smooth with occasional sightings of Pigeon Guillemots, Marbled Murrelets, Red-necked Phalaropes and Sea Otters. Once we made it across the strait, whale sightings began. The pattern became evident.



First there are several spoutings, then surfacing, followed by a gradual, graceful arching dive that ends with the flukes momentarily in the air. In addition, there are the occasional tail-slapping and breaching episodes. These are hard to anticipate, but when you see them, they are unforgettable.



Humpback Whale - photo by Bonnie

The culmination of our whale-watching experience occurred when one Humpback surfaced only 20 yards from our boat, then dove underneath it, eliciting loud, excited cries of WOW! and WHOA!

Meanwhile Harbor Porpoises and Sea Otters put on good shows too. The porpoises dove and resurfaced rapidly, close to our boat, often in pairs. Many Sea Otters passed by, but one in particular provided a vivid close-up example of feeding behavior. It floated 15-feet from our boat clutching a bright orange Basket Starfish it was eating –unperturbed by our presence.



While sorting through numerous Black-legged Kittiwakes, Lori spotted a Pomerine Jaeger in flight near the coastline. In the same general area, Woody found a Black-tailed Sitka Deer and Bob soon spotted another.

It was time for the journey back after seeing and sometimes hearing an impressive array of avian and marine fauna. The close encounters with whales, otters and birds were spectacular. After another smooth crossing, we thanked the crew of the TAZ and shuttled to the Gustavus Inn just as they were pouring us fresh hot bowls of tomato-based salmon chowder with focaccia bread and garden salad. What a stupendous lunch after being out in the elements in Icy Strait! In the afternoon, some opted to walk to the dock and beach area where they found Whimbrels, Fox Sparrows, Least Sandpiper, Northwest Crows and several Bald Eagles.

Others went to Bartlett Cove for a ranger-led walk through the temperate rainforest. Here we learned about the effects of glaciation on the Tlingit Tribe, which was forced to abandon their village, and on those who came later. We also learned about various trees, plants, mosses and lichens, and how they have adapted to the relatively new ice-free landscape. Plant succession here started with lichens and moss, then progressed to shrubs and low-lying plants, and finally to a Sitka Spruce/Western Hemlock climax forest.

We returned to Gustavus Inn to read and relax before compiling our species list over drinks and gourmet hors d'oeuvres followed by yet another outstanding meal of fresh seafood and vegetables. This lifestyle could become addicting!



Day 6: Return to Juneau and Points North and South



On our final day in Gustavus, some of our group braved the rain to hike the Nagoonberry Trail on the 4,00-acre Nature Conservancy preserve. It passes through three distinct habitat types: mixed woodland, browsed (by moose) willow, and mature meadow. It was perhaps our best hike from a botanical standpoint. Among the many plants we saw were: Wild Strawberry, the fruit of which Bob and Bonnie found delicious; Bunchberry; White Bog Orchid; Unalaska Yellow Paintbrush; Yellow Rattle; Northern Grass of Parnassus; and abundant Fireweed in bloom.



In addition to the botanical splendor, Bonnie spotted a Pacific-slope Flycatcher; and Debra, a Sharp-shinned Hawk. We all heard a Red Squirrel scolding us repeatedly from a Sitka Spruce. There were bear signs but no bears present which was probably a blessing in disguise.



Following our walk, we had one last sumptuous lunch at Gustavus Inn featuring homemade soup and bread with garden-fresh salad. We will surely miss the fresh, gourmet meals and homey atmosphere of the Inn. Fog cancelled our original flight but in the evening, some of our group were able to get on a flight to Juneau. The rest of us boarded flights the following morning. Some continued touring independently in Haines and Skagway while others returned home.

This vast landscape is a place none of us will soon forget. It is a marvelous testimony to the value of National Parks, Public Lands and to those who protected them for our benefit.



Photo by Lori

~Report and photos compiled by Woody Wheeler~