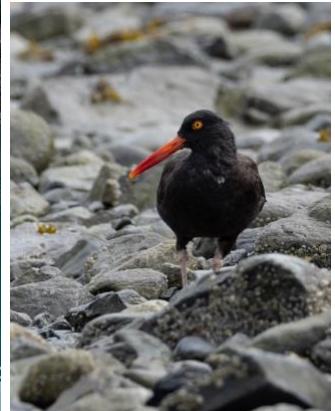


# Southeast Alaska Cruise | Trip Report

## July 2-9, 2022 | by Peg Abbott



With Naturalist Journeys' guide & founder, Peg Abbott, and participants Alan, Ann, Carol, Carolyn, Don, Doni, Dori, Frank, Gordon, Janell, Jim, Julie, Ken, Ron, Sally, Sandra, Sarah, and Steve.



### Early Arrivals

Quite a few of the group came in early to explore Sitka. There is much to see here, from the local raptor rehabilitation center to the waterfront, as well as the National Historic Park. Several of us booked with Captain Neil of A Whale Song Expeditions to go out to see the seabird colonies on the cliffs of Saint Lazaria National Wildlife Refuge. We had calm seas, whales, and lots of Tufted Puffins and Rhinoceros Auklet, and Harlequin Ducks, fun! We got some nice walking in, saw native crafts and artifacts, dined at some great local restaurants, the Beak and Ludvig Bistro for dinners, and the local taco stand for lunch. Well worth a couple of extra days.



## Sat., July 2 Sitka, Alaska

All aboard! We met at the Centennial Hall on the waterfront in Sitka for a briefing, then took a short bus ride over to the cruise ship dock to board. It was high tide so the gang plank was quite even, and in short order were settling into our lovely cabins. Beautiful wood trim and well-thought-out storage drawers and closets made for a very cozy feel. They had a gorgeous tray of fruits and cheeses and the bar open for our greeting. We met about safety protocols and practiced the life drill, and then cast off for our adventures. It was a stellar Alaska summer night, gorgeous light on Sitka in the rear-view mirror as we chugged along creating a wake behind. The dinner was a choice of a ribeye steak, fresh salmon, or a vegetarian dish with a nice fresh salad, polenta and vegetables. And few could refuse the flourless chocolate cake for dessert.

## Sun., July 3 The Magoun Islands State Marine Reserve

We woke to dense fog cloaking the edges of the boat and precluding any views. Within it we could hear chirping calls of one Bald Eagle to another and the flute-like notes of Hermit Thrush. Within an hour or so it started to lift and the shoreline came into view. Leaving Sitka, we had threaded through a narrow channel, mooring for the night near Beehive Rock. We navigated a narrow passageway into the wider Haymarket Channel just ahead of breakfast. Three white crosses on a rock told a story we'd not get to read; along the shore we saw the upturned ruins of an abandoned boat. Marbled Murrelets came into view, lone individuals with probable mates up on their mossy tree-limb nests of the spruce forests that grew robustly here. Janelle described them as "flying potatoes," an apt description of their chunky appearance with fast-beating wings.

Breakfast was lovely, a vegetable frittata with choice of meats and toast, served with fresh greens. Yoghurt and berries and fresh coffees or cappuccino created together a nice way to start the day! Wilson gave an overview of how to prepare for activities of kayaking, skiff-boat riding or walking and then out we went, all happy on what was now a sun-bright day to start our exploring. The skiff-boat made a circuit between the islands, entering a central lagoon, the Magoun Lagoon. Our naturalist was Bobby who kept a running dialog going, graced with humor and a deep knowledge of the area. We followed the shorelines at a negative 0.6 tide, observing the ecological phenomena of horizontal banding. Today more than normal was exposed and we were amazed at



three kinds of sea stars: Leather, Marbled and Purple-ochre, orange sea cucumbers and various types of anemones. Nimble Bobby climbed ashore and collected specimens he then carefully returned, but it was great fun to see the body parts of these strange creatures that move about by the pressure of water moving through to their tube feet. We could see the little tube feet waving and we felt them, surprisingly heavy, thick and dense. Peg picked up on various bird calls, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Hermit Thrush, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Dark-eyed Junco, the latter being the most common of the bunch and one we could actually see. We saw mature and immature Bald Eagles at close range, a lot of American (Northwestern) Crow, and in the far distance, a female Red-breasted Merganser with young. They hopped up on her back as she crossed deep water, and one clung on all the way up the shore, so she was walking around with junior on her back—pretty sweet. A big surprise, probably lured in by the red on our jackets, was a Rufous Hummingbird that buzzed us several times, perhaps imagining us to be a giant patch of flowers.

Julie and Sarah embarked with the other half of the group to explore the shoreline up close during low tide. Bright, and other-worldly invertebrates clung to underwater boulders—sea stars of all different colors and sizes and the group got to hold a spiny cucumber. We also learned about the different kinds of kelp around us, giant kelp and bull kelp, which our expedition guide, Wilson, blew like a conch. A lone Bald Eagle perched above us at the top of a tree, watching our group as we explored. Not missed today were dessert after both lunch and dinner—a rhythm we would come to appreciate.

## **Mon., July 4      Emmons Island | Peril Strait | Chatman Strait | Basket Bay & the Grotto**

We anchored close to an intriguing island where Peg spied Black Oystercatchers, a flock of Surfbird and we watched several Bald Eagles sparring. We suspected they had some kind of carcass (Alan had glimpsed a bear near here the night before from the ship) as adults were careening down on juveniles that did not want to go away. We were able to go to shore not far from this island and had fun beachcombing. We ate popcorn kelp and beach asparagus and listened to a Pacific-slope Flycatcher and Red Crossbill really too high up to see. It was fun to walk through spruce and hemlock forests, red alder thickets and take in all the life. Others kayaked or did a charger hike covering more terrain.



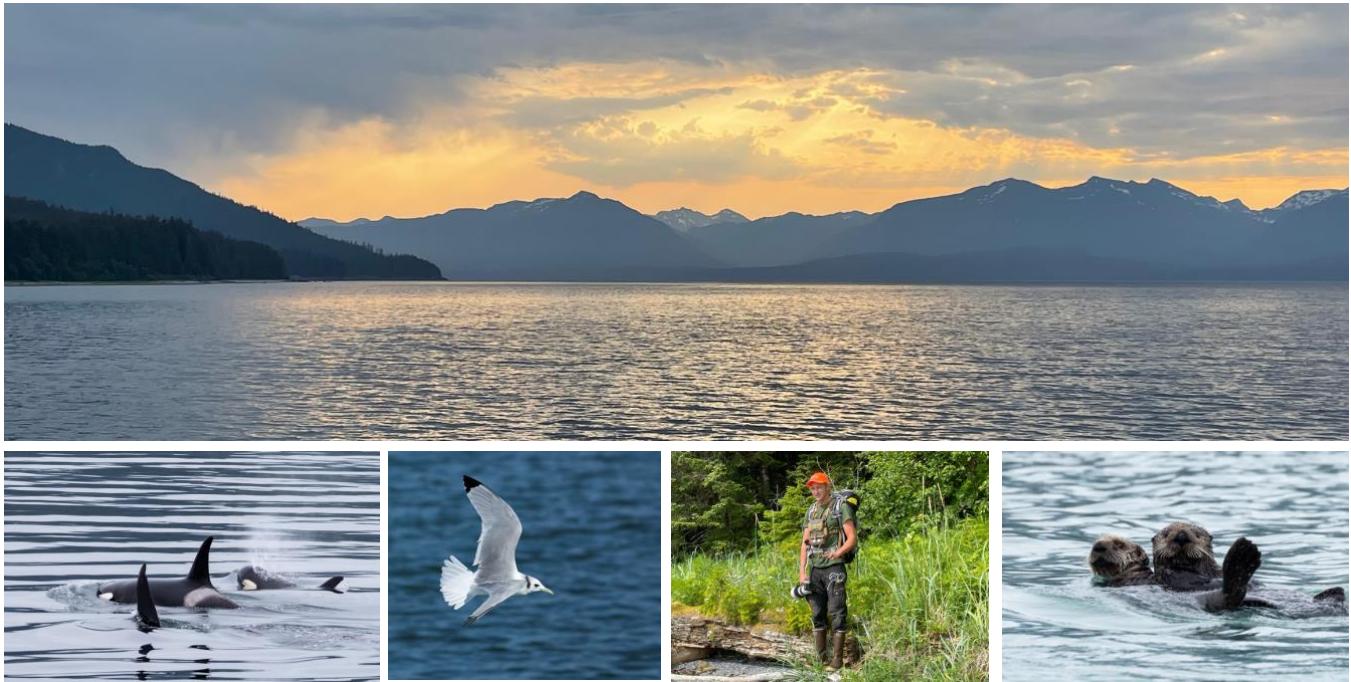
The bushwackers of the group had their first taste of off-roading, picking up some wild blueberries, learning how to ID a massive Coastal Brown Bear track, hiking through spongy peat, and taking a look at sundew, a carnivorous plant. We whacked less than a mile, but we were all tuckered out by the end.

Back aboard ship, we encountered a Humpback Whale, solo, that was putting on a show. It breached over and over again, loudly slapping the water with its full body. It would roll, lift both flippers up to the sky, then flip over, disappear and come lunging out of the water. WOW! We left the whale to play on its own, and the galley staff was relieved we would come to lunch. This included Halibut tacos that melted in our mouths, spoiled we would be! We entered Peril Strait, a narrow area of some pretty wicked currents difficult to navigate but certainly impressive to see. Peril led us to Chatham and near the junction there was a lot of gull activity. Ken and Peg watched as a Parasitic Jaeger, some distance away, tossed and turned and blew the group up again and again, stealing fish no doubt.

Afternoon cookies had red, white and blue stripes in honor of the holiday, other than that nod we did not break the serenity and mood of an Alaskan escape or seek out any ceremony. Oh except ... Dungeness CRAB NIGHT. What fun it was to see everyone with their pliers working away, a first for many. Lots of slurping could be heard. For those not enamored, tender duck breast was a fine alternate. All this followed by Tres Leches cake.

## Tues., July 5 Iyoukeen Bay | Icy Strait Cruise for Whales | Lemesurier Island

We woke up at a picturesque mooring close enough to shore we could hear the morning chorus of Hermit Thrushes. Wilson spied a Sitka Deer on the beach. In the water were sizeable rafts of White-winged Scoters, a number of Marbled Murrelets and two Common Loons. After a breakfast of baked French toast with caramelized bananas, we needed to move and soon sorted into two levels of hiking and a skiff ride. The hikes enjoyed some time in this most picturesque spot, walking at first a long crescent beach of totally polished stones. It had a margin of alder thickets and then opened up to a surprisingly inviting and open old-growth forest. We found one huge tree that took four people to touch arms around it, most were at least 250-300 years



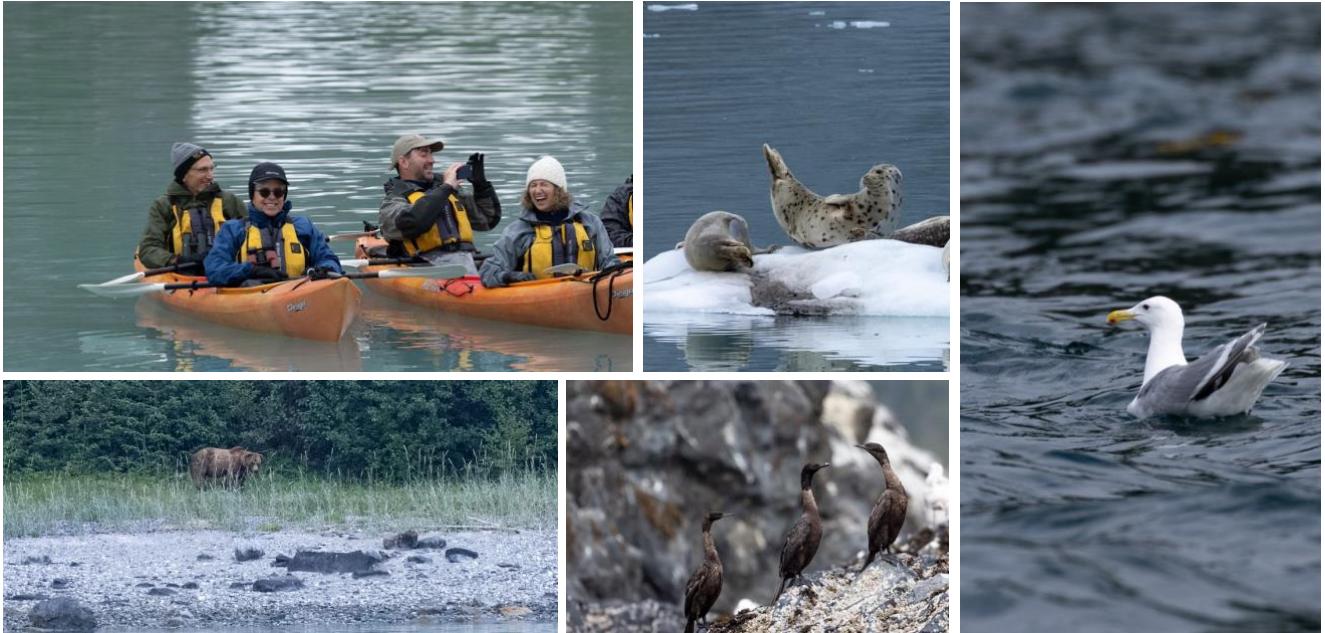
old and this one quite a bit older. Varied Thrushes sang and we got super looks at a Pacific Wren. We found flowers like the tiny Shy Maiden (a wintergreen) and several orchids and someone spied the bones of a Sitka Deer. It looked fairly peaceful as if it had laid down for its last rest and just stayed, the backbone in tact from the skull to the pelvic girdle so no critters had disturbed it before the moss moved in to place a soft coat over the bones. We found fairy cup mushrooms and various lichens, an elfin realm indeed.

The bushwackers again took on steep trails today, first walking along the bear highway, a well-worn patch about 30 feet from the treeline. Varied Thrush called overhead, and we even had the chance to see our first massive banana slug. Lunch had a Greek theme with hummus and salad with chicken and feta. It fortified us for an afternoon of cruising through Icy Straits. Near a narrow point called Cape Adolphus we saw several whales in the distance, one quite close to a small tour boat and we let them enjoy the moment. We found another group and watched them surface, breathe, and sound. In some years there can be huge numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes in this stretch. We saw them in small number along with Glaucous-winged Gulls.

We anchored in the lee of a large island of Icy Strait, a quiet spot where we enjoyed the long daylight stretching the night out almost as long as one liked. Strange to go to bed in daylight! Dinner tonight was a tenderloin steak, a stuffed portobello or halibut – tough choices!

## **Wed., July 6      Dundas Bay | Inian Islands**

We were excited today to have permits to enter a back portion of Glacier Bay National Park, a place so remote that few visit. We got empowered by a healthy breakfast of overnight oatmeal with berries and nuts and were raring to go. But before the outing one of the most magical moments of the trip ensued – a pod of Orcas, at least nine, probably more like 12. Adult males and females and some quite young. They were moving toward an arm of the bay, but hanging near an island. We could watch them rise and breathe, arch their spines and glide back into the water. Little ones sometimes almost overrode their attending adults. Bobby talked about the matriarch society of Orca culture as we watched. We had spied them at a distance, moved closer and with luck they turned parallel to us. But lo and behold they turned at one point right to the boat, rising near the bow and playing a bit



in the energy of waves, curious. With amazing speed they carried on, out of sight as quick as they came into it. About twenty minutes of pure magic. Our photographers were over the top excited as the background was as iconic as it gets, green forests framing the sea, distant mountains and fog. We split up into a walking group ashore, a kayak group that did a rigorous paddle, and the skiffers that opted to glide about in search of birds and wildlife. The walkers had a challenge with some wet kelp to cross, but they found several shorebirds, Semi-palmated Plovers nesting here were a first for the trip. The skiff riders saw big flocks of Mallards and both Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, many Bonaparte's and Glaucous-winged Gulls, Sea Otters with big babies and Harbor Porpoise. The kayakers went all the way back to the river and up the river a bit, logging in over five miles of paddling this day. Dundas is a large bay and different from other areas we'd explored and we enjoyed it. Lunch was inspired from Hawaii where this ship spends part of the year, either a salmon or tofu poke everyone seemed to enjoy. Desert was an odd texture but great flavor – a purple colored rice flour cake topped by mango.

After lunch we anchored in a small cove close to an open water gap to what we dubbed Bird Rock of the Inian Island group. An islet in a narrow gap with swirling current, it attracts Steller Sea Lions and Sea Otter, Pelagic Cormorants and runs of salmon. In small skiffs it's a hold on to your hat experience with wild waters but good looks at so many animals its hard to choose at any one moment. We circled the island several times, and Peg spied more Surfbirds. The Pelagic Cormorants were a mix of brown first year birds and some really iridescent flashy adults ready to breed. The auditory was as good as the visual if not more so, few of us will forget the wind, the water and the breathtaking scenery all to a symphony or roaring Steller Sea Lions. What a day!

From one adventure to the next, we moved on to position ourselves up into the protected waters of Glacier Bay National Park. A brilliant plan to be the first to wake up next to glaciers. In the meantime the quiet waters allowed calm service for dinner and we feasted on Black Cod caught locally, roasted rack of lamb or beet steaks. All that food required a stretch so out on deck we went to discover... A Brown Bear! A big lone individual walking along the shoreline at Tidal Bay, far enough away to be oblivious to us but close enough to observe and photograph. A perfect way to end this day, we got a good amount of time to view.



## Thurs., July 7    Glacier Bay National Park

We woke up this morning to ice, big bergie bits from the tidewater glaciers floating by outside our cabin doors. We knew that by 7 am we'd be parked in front of John Hopkins Glacier, so several of us were up early like kids on Christmas. It was cold, so getting out on deck took some layering and prep, once bundled up there was beauty all around. Ken snapped some great pictures of Harbor Seals, hauled out on the ice, many sporting pretty brindled coat patterns. Their huge eyes make them so appealing and we enjoyed seeing them use the bergie bits like couches, often piling several onto one flat floating ice cushion. Up the middle of several occupied bergie bits came a Sea Otter, paddling with its back feet and making better time than our boat. The clunk of ice on our hull brought most everyone out of bed ahead of the breakfast call. We posed for photos with the glacier behind and heard one thunderous resonant roar as some ice came crashing down. It was mesmerizing, colors of chocolate and gray and white, clean blue ice and dirty almost black ice, and lots of bare, ice-scraped in the several thousand-foot peaks that surrounded us.

After all of our group got a grand view and some memorable photos, we cruised down the fjord towards Lamplugh Glacier, another tidewater glacier that at this time ends on a moraine so is more stable for our walks and skiff rides and exploring. All of us commented on what a great plan it had been to come up this early, as we had the whole wintery world of ice to ourselves. Not long after we mentioned that a huge 5000 passenger Carnival Cruise boat came into view, its bright colors so out of harmony with the scene. It did not stay long, enough for views and on it went, while we had the full morning here to play.

The “chargers” took off first, wanting a hike that would give them some elevation and a birds-eye view of the glacier below. Next fanned out the kayakers, their colorful boats looking so small up against the 300 foot wall of blue ice. Peg had asked for our walk to be both a skiff ride and walk and thus the skiff and stroll was born – perfect for those of us keen to see Kittlitz Murrelet, a specialty of this glacial realm. This tiny but tough seabird stages here among the bergie bits, waiting to start its nesting cycle. They choose rocky burrows near the tops of



U-shaped glacial valleys, often on either side of a cascading stream or waterfall. Park researchers have been studying them and we wondered if two sturdy tents on one of the shores in line of view with such a setting might be them. Several were still coming out of winter plumage and were very pale on the water. We got super views, eye-level with them on our skiff. We also watched and listened to Pigeon Guillemots, which were busy along the cliff faces of the shoreline. They would perch and sing their high-pitched zingy songs, putting their bright red feet on display. There was a Common Loon calling and a lot of Glaucous-winged Gull activity around the freshwater stream running off the glacier. Chunks of ice were plentiful and we were able to walk around this “ice garden” with ease. Later the “chargers” did the same, a special place for sure.

Once back on the ship it was time for a weekly tradition for the *Safari Explorer* – the Polar Plunge. Into the jade green cold water jumped Steve, and four of our group, Ron, Julie, Sarah, and Alan. It took real drive to dive into those cold waters and all were happy to clutch their towel as they climbed up the ladder victorious. Alan even added a few strokes of swimming – nice! Lunch was good on this colder day – chili (meat or vegetarian) with fixings and homemade cornbread. Dessert was a chocolate truffle cake which was quite scrumptious.

The afternoon was designed to cruise back down the length of the main fjord of Glacier Bay National Park, stopping at wildlife hotspots. The first was Gloomy Knob where we saw four Mountain Goats, two singles and then a duo – all lying down and not easy to find. We used the scope to zoom in – a bit of a feat on a moving boat but helpful. Martha yelled, “puffin” and all eyes turned toward the bow. Indeed, five or six of these snazzy alcids were zipping low over the water. We caught views in flight and then were lucky enough to have one sit on the water and pose. Several Sea Otter floated by, and once past the knob three huge Humpback Whales came into view, feeding and diving, showing off their distinctive tail patterns. Peg snapped some photos of the tail flukes to send in to the website “Happy Whale” in an effort to help tack a few of these gentle giants.



**Fri., July 8**

## **George's Island | Icy Straits at Sea | Chatham Strait**

We left anchor before breakfast, having taken shelter again in the lee of Leminer Island. Good anchorages are not easy to find in these deep fjords and that was a good one. We made our way west, watching as flocks of Black-legged Kittiwakes gathered above small groups of Steller's Sea Lions and the occasional Sea Otter riding about, paddling with its feet while on its back, flipping over from time to time with grace and ease. Glaucous-winged Gulls were present, and along the island edges, our regular sightings of Bald Eagle continued. Marbled Murrelets and Pigeon Guillemots popped up like corks in quieter places. We passed the Inian Islands and continued on, turning south to anchor across from the small fishing hamlet of Elfin Cove in the lee of George's Island.

The island has a historic site, an artillery site from WWII, pointed west to protect the mainland from entry from Japanese ships or submarines. Quite a few of our group opted for a forest walk that would take them to that site, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile each way. They found quite a few birds, including Chestnut-backed Chickadees and a mixed flock of warblers: Orange-crowned, Wilson's, Townsend's and Yellow-rumped – a jackpot! They also got good looks at Fox Sparrow and heard Hermit Thrush and Pacific Wren. The skiff went out beyond the island, out to a rock islet covered with Steller Sea Lions, not unlike the Inian Islands' Bird Rock. They cavorted and carried on with loud roaring, while in front of them wrapped in kelp beds were quite a few Sea Otter. Tufted Puffin were there, along with a few Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemots, and Marbled Murrelets. All were catching fish as there seemed to be a rich stream of them around the islet. Coming back toward George's Island they got super views of a dramatic sea arch, and of the Brady Glacier pouring out of a wide valley in the distance. A Belted Kingfisher was a trip first working the shoreline. The kayakers had quite a day to paddle, relatively nice calm seas and great coves and inlets to explore. Our day at the edge of the world was just wonderful! Lunch was a ramen noodle dish with beef or tofu and various vegetables, very good and creative too.

The afternoon was spent in travel, we were at the westernmost edge of the continent and had a good way to go to get back to Juneau. It was misty and cool so not many hung out on deck, but peered instead through the big windows of the lounge and dining room with cups of hot chocolate or coffee or tea in hand, taking perhaps a second Orca cookie (dipped in chocolate so a pattern of black and white). Occasionally Peg or Wilson or Bobby would call out "dolphins" or "whales" and out we'd go, bundled up to brave the elements. A pod of Dall



Porpoise came to ride the bow waves, their strength just remarkable as they'd barrel through the waves to shoot out and come back for another run, for all the world like salmon swimming upstream, all muscle, seeming to delight in a test of strength. It was sporting to hang over the bow trying to film their sleek and fast-moving forms. Not long after this action we got a radio call from a friendly fishing boat that had spied Orca about 5 miles away, on our route. We chugged along and readied to view them. The first seen was a big male, by himself cutting through the water with his dorsal fin visible much of the time. We then spied several others but really spread out, over a half-mile perhaps between them. We turned to watch what seemed like a mother and calf, joined then by a few others. It was a very different feel than the tight knit pod we'd watched at the other end of Icy Strait, but still fascinating. Sandra expressed wonder at just how scientists study them, even find them to study in such a vast realm.

We wandered in and out of our cabins, not wanting to miss anything but mindful that we had better pack up a bit. Most of us had thoroughly stretched out in our cozy cabins, filling the drawers and shelves and closets. Somehow it had to go back into suitcases and we knew morning might bring more wildlife sightings – best to get ahead of the game this afternoon. Soon it was time for cocktails and today, ceviche. The final dinner was Bouillabaisse made with all kinds of seafood in a delicious broth and as always, a meat and vegetarian dish to choose from as well. Dessert was a lemon tart – yum! Mist closed in on us this evening, a different Alaska mood than we'd experienced before with a chill to it. Our guides expressed relief as the region needed rain, two weeks of sunshine a rarity and it was time now for some liquid sunshine. Not a one of us felt bad we'd missed it on our watch but it was good to sense the change. A few lingered in the bar conversing, sharing favorite moments, and then to a last good night of rest in our comfortable beds, tucked in.



**Sat., July 9**

## Lynn Canal into Juneau

We were underway by 5:30 this morning, unaware of our Captain's Sean's special anticipation of return – a new baby very shortly on the way! We were told this by owner Dan Blanchard who came on board to meet us once docked with obvious happiness for this news and Sean's good timing. Juneau is the capitol of Alaska but feels like a small town and UnCruise is right in the middle of it with an office between the waterfront and the historic downtown. We could not yet get into our rooms at various hotels but it was easy to store luggage and set out for some exploring. The waterfront is interesting in both directions, one with a boardwalk trail to a remarkable sculpture of a breaching Humpback Whale and the other to the cruise ship docks, busy today as three of these behemoths were in the harbor. We waited for passengers to disperse to various field trips and shopping before going over to give Patsy Ann a pat, the sculpture of Juneau's dog greeter that for many years met each ship, sensing their arrival despite being deRonald af, in the years before modern communication her heading to the dock was the herald that a ship was coming in. She's a lovely statue and invites longing pats even now. Time passed quickly with shopping, eating, walking to get a bit of exercise. Several went up to the Perseverance Trail above town that leads up a lovely canyon, strewn with wildflowers. A few took the tram for a bird's eye view. Several of us rendezvoused at Deckhand Dave's for wonderful fish tacos outside on a deck. Weather was changing, some rain moving in by nightfall but it held off for our wandering.

Some of the group flew out this evening, taking overnight flights back home. Others stayed for one last fresh fish dinner, oh that halibut and salmon .... It was time for our flock to disperse but what a great group and what a great time! Dori just kept smiling and saying, I have never seen scenery on a scale so grand. Until the next adventure!

*Photo Credits: Scenic (Ronald Gangnon - RG), Pelagic Cormorant (Peg Abbott - PA), Humpback Whale (PA), Birding by skiff (PA), Tufted Puffin (PA), Black Oystercatcher (PA), Peg-Julie-Sarah (Ken Copenhagen - KC), Sitka (NJ Stock), Harlequin Duck (NJ Stock), Marbled Murrelet (NJ Stock), Getting the shot! (KC), Examining Sea Stars (PA), Safari Explorer (PA), Red-breasted Merganser (PA), Bald Eagle (PA), Forest Walk (PA), Humpback Whale (PA), Tidepooling (PA), Mink (PA), Common Loon (PA), June & Sarah (PA), Sunset (PA), Orcas (PA), Black-legged Kittiwake (PA), Wilson Expedition Leader (PA), Otters (PA), Happy Kayakers (PA), Harbor Seals (PA), Glaucous-winged Gull (PA), Brow Bear (PA), Juvenile Pelagic Cormorants (PA), Minke Whale (PA), Surfbirds (PA), Tufted Puffin (PA), Good times! (KC), Marbled Murrelet (PA), Hike (KC), Sea Lions (KC), George Island Sea Arch (PA), Chestnut-backed Chickadee (NJ Stock), Yellow-rumped Warbler (NJ Stock), Carolina Wren (NJ Stock), Belted Kingfisher (NJ Stock), George Island Scenic (PA), Sarah (PA), Dori & Ron (PA), Humpback Statue (KC), Group (Sarah Doherty)*