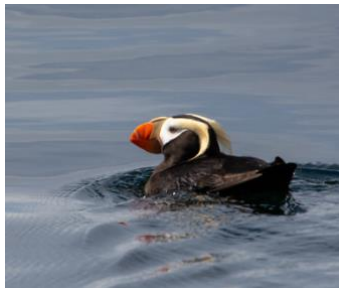


Southeast Alaska Cruise | July 8 - 15, 2023

Trip Report | by Peg Abbott



With guide Peg Abbott and participants Mona, Gary, Shannon, Alberto, Cathie, Wilfried, Deanna and Amy



Always a yearly favorite, in 2023 our fabulous annual Naturalist Journeys Alaska Cruise was at the last moment interrupted by the news our beautiful small ship would not make it to Juneau in time for our voyage, waiting on parts to complete a repair that was long overdue. She was due to be there a week ahead of our group, but instead came the last day of our replacement voyage. This unseen and highly unusual turn of events was most unfortunate, but part of the global issue at present with the supply chain for parts. The Coast Guard is very strict on inspections, good for our safety but rough on our intended adventure. Peg scurried to find all possible solutions upon hearing the news and was able to find same date passage for most of our group, though we'd be split on two different ships and we did some wild short Alaska Air flights to move people around. As many in the group had plans before and after the cruise, news was received with relief that we could make the best of our plans. This report gives highlights from our splendid time in the wilds of Southeast Alaska but does not follow a regular day to day format as we were on different ships with differing itineraries.



SITKA

Almost everyone in our group had planned on time at leisure in the historic small city of Sitka and this proved fortuitous for us to reschedule cruising when we had to. It also gave us a chance to meet up, enjoying meals at Sitka's wonderful restaurants, so many of which feature fresh seafood and fruits and vegetables of the region. We also enjoyed day-cruises around the Sitka Harbor, rich in wildlife, and as sea conditions permitted, an island at the edge of the Gulf of Alaska, where steep cliffs allow seabirds to breed and we found high numbers of Tufted Puffins, an Ancient Murrelet in lovely breeding plumage, Rhinoceros Auklet and many Glaucous-winged Gulls. The trip is through fairly calm inland passage waters until one reaches the island, where open ocean waters swirl in, creating ideal current for mixing waters that spark an abundance of productivity of the ocean food chain. We had sunny days, ideal for walking about the town to shop, for climbing up to a viewpoint of the harbor where historical signs depict early life and the transfer from Russian to American rule. People enjoyed seeing the Russian Orthodox church still active today and the local art galleries that featured so much local work — carvings, paintings, jewelry, textiles and more. Those long Alaskan winters seem to inspire creativity! We snapped photos of harbor views with wild rose and fireweed in the foreground one after another — the setting of Sitka is lovely. Ravens are particularly common here, and noisy, evidenced by the local radio stations call letters KCAW. We had a chance as a group to walk through the National Historic Park ahead of the voyage, with its marvelous array of tall totem poles so intricately painted and carved. With a lot of conifers trees, it was also a good spot to see Western (Pacific-slope) Flycatcher and Chestnut-backed Chickadee.

EMARBARKATION – THE ADVENTURE BEGINS!

There is something magical about getting on a ship, casting off your cares for a week and being immediately treated as you are someone very special. We meet up at a convention center in town where we can store bags to go off to explore until the meet-up time, when we receive a briefing and typically bus to the dock where we begin. Smiling faces welcome us, and someone snaps a photo — great to have on board by the dining room so we can learn names of both passengers and crew. There are lovely snacks and drinks and conversation is lively from the start — all are here to immerse themselves in the wilds of Alaska while enjoying some delightful



creature comforts. We hear from various staff about their roles and expertise, everyone quite keen to see the chef, the captain, the expedition leader that would chart their day to day for the next week. As lines are gathered and the ship moves off, there is a great sense of anticipation. Being birders, many of us are out on the deck, hoping for chances to see loons, Harlequin Ducks, Bald Eagles (quite common here) and a variety of gulls. Soon there are sounds of winds caressing the decks and water under us, a very slight motion but thanks to the protection of Alaska's Inside Passage, nothing that leads to sea-sickness, a big plus of a Southeast Alaska cruise!

NIGHT LIGHTS, SUNSETS & STARS

The summer light of Alaska is intoxicating; it stays light up to midnight, though the sun sets by 10:00 PM, there is a long lingering glow that savored from the deck is deeply satisfying. Looking through tones of orange and pink reflected from clouds onto the surface of the sea, the blow of a Humpback Whale (also quite common!) carries the joy of a burst of fireworks, surprising and strong, then gone. Mountains are often in view, some soft and rounded, covered by forests, others ragged and capped by snow. Late light brings alpenglow to the flanks of these landscape frames. Sunsets are a grand time to be out on deck, as if on demand, Dahl's Porpoise raced around the ship the final night. We had a third quarter moon that rose later each night, so also got a fine show of stars in the deeply dark skies of this remote area.

LANDINGS

Our Southeast Alaska cruises are different each year, as our expedition leader chooses a mooring for us, often we find that at night and wake to search the shoreline for Sitka Deer, Grizzly or Black Bears, scoters and sea ducks. Sometimes we move again during breakfast to get further into a secretive place under safe navigation, sometimes we have arrived where we want to be and already hear Black Oystercatchers calling from tiny islands or Steller's Sea Lions barking from their haul outs. Either way we hear the plan for the day, make our choices to hike, to kayak, or to simply admire from the deck. It's great fun to mix it up and each group differs in what the top choices will be. On the outer coast we hiked to a historic gun-mount from the watch to the west during the war. We walked to peat bogs, meadows, ridges — never on trails. The sense of wildness and wilderness abounds,



and we meet the challenge of downed logs, thick brush, and sometimes elevations — particularly on walks labeled "bushwhacks." For those that simply like to get off and wander, coastal ambles keep us close to the shoreline, finding tidepool creatures a delight.

KAYAKS!

We love the opportunities with UnCruise as they stretch us more, rather than paddling about in view of the ship on kayaks, they have guides that take you on several hours of guided paddles if you wish – an amazing sense of exploring. Some days there are easy kayak options for those new to it or wanting just the joy of quiet time to paddle. The naturalists and crew seem to have a way to help anyone into boats that wants to go, and as groups disperse the color of the boats against the jade green sea is stunningly beautiful. The work to raise and lower the boats, prepare the life-jackets and paddles is all done with ease, making the endeavor for us all too easy. Animals are curious about the boats, particularly when paddlers are quiet, and you can great views of coastal species, even elusive Mink! Both double and single kayaks are available. Gliding through the water one wants to smile and sing.

WHALES!

The chance to spend day after day with the great beasts of the sea is the primary wildlife draw of the cruise. Learning more about their anatomy and ecology, and sensing firsthand this feeding leg of their very long migration adds so much to the experience. We could sense places in the ocean that were richer than others, signaled by the sudden abundance of whales. At the edge of Icy Bay near the Inian Islands, we had over thirty in view at one time! We saw two big groups, and their spouts came fast and furiously. These were super active whales that were intent on feeding. We quickly hopped in the zodiacs to go closer and though we positioned at a respectful distance and stayed quiet, at times the whales would surround us, seeing their enormous proportions at close range was astonishing! At close range you hear so many sounds, air pushed through the blow hole, contact calls, and in one area, we had a very loud "croaker", a sound not unlike a fog horn only emitted by a few. We heard slaps of flukes pounding the water, often in rapid succession, and sounds of our own group gasping at



the sudden breach — vertical whale leaps that often clear the water then slap down with a great show of water spray. Many of us spend countless hours up on deck, watching, counting, just enjoying a sense of whale activity and distribution.

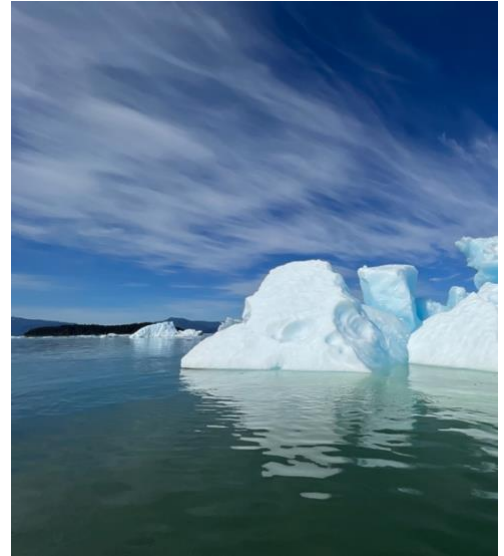
BIRDS

This is not a journey for a big bird list, but the birds we see are special and we have time to learn them from repeated sightings. Summer brings several species to nest, both on land and along the sea. I think Tufted Puffins won the vote for the favorite bird, Horned Puffin probably a close second. The battle between a Peregrine and a Bald Eagle took top prize for bird behavior. Fortunate to see where two Parasitic Jaegers outside of Glacier Bay, a Sooty Shearwater at sea as we approached Chatham Strait, thousands of scoters, mostly Surf and White-winged, rafting up post breeding, going into their season of molt. We found a few other gull species among the numerous Glaucous-winged, delicate Short-billed (Mew) Gulls, Herring Gull and near Petersburg, Bonaparte's Gulls.

Marbled Murrelets were numerous, perhaps as our cruise dates overlapped peak time of fledging. We found Kittlitz Murrelets when close to the ice up in Glacier Bay. Black Oystercatcher was the most prevalent shorebird, vocal and often territorial on rocky islets. Mobs of American Crow (Northwestern variety) worked the shorelines, and beautiful Harlequin Ducks were present in good number, mostly bright males that left females behind to tend nests and gathered up to feed in the safety of a group ahead of their time of molt. Bald Eagles were literally everywhere — a favorite sighting happened in Sitka as we waited to board the ship, we watched two harassing a Steller's Sea Lion to give up its fish, diving over and over at it while chirping that crisp bell like sound they give, so iconic to Southeast Alaska.

MEALS

Thankfully they do not weigh us in and then out, for it is inevitable one will put on a few pounds from the luscious meals served on a Southeast Alaska cruise. Fresh seafood, beach asparagus, blueberries and blackberries, local greens and sauces made with kelp were just a few of the local foods featured in each day's selections. There was typically a fish, a meat, and a vegetarian entrée, then all kinds of sides and of course, very decadent desserts. Presentation was a big part of each meal; it was just a delight to have your plate delivered



after ordering at the start of the meal. Sometimes they were almost too pretty to eat. We had a birthday among our group and it was wonderful fun to have the crew sign and deliver a surprise cake – fun! Three meals a day seemed to turn into four, as afternoon tea had sweet and savory options. And as drinks were included, a lovely glass of wine or a cold brew was just right to set off the meal. Often a plate of steaming hot cookies would appear just as we disembarked, or if a colder day, a jug of hot totties, with our without alcohol of your choice. More than once one of our groups would sigh, “this is the life”. And best of all the dining area had big windows, so the wildlife viewing did not stop for meals. Our dining was interrupted more than once with sightings of deer, bears, whales or eagles. For an Orca sighting, less common, we all piled out on deck whatever we were doing!

LECTURES & MAPS

Life aboard the ship brings a lot of learning opportunities, as the ship crew and naturalists are out each week in these wilds and they have both training and personal experience to share. They make it fun and entertaining, but over the course of a week you can learn a lot. Lectures are often given in evenings, or mid-day as we traverse from one activity site to another. They may be on photography, whale behavior, seabirds, historic exploration, topics are many and varied. This year we had a whale expert come onboard to describe a decade plus of research in the area, quite fascinating. The bridge was open for visitation and Cathie was our map keeper, checking each night for the routing and where we’d moor ahead of the next day’s adventures. The maze of channels and islands and how it all fits together is most intriguing.

A DAY IN GLACIER BAY

Many of the species we observed, both birds and mammals, were recorded on a single day, the day we cruised the length of Glacier Bay, a treasured national park and the gem of this region. It’s hard to describe just how fast and furiously species appear, and as they are acclimated to the ships offshore, you get amazing views. This day starts at Bartlett Cove and with UnCruise that often happens the night before so the ship can position far up into the park by night to have a leisurely full day return. A loop trail from the Visitor Center this year gave us a good chance to see Hermit Thrush feeding a young one, singing Orange-crowned Warblers, Townsend Warbler and Golden-crowned Kinglet and high in the canopy, a flock of White-winged Crossbills. Coming out of Bartlett Cove into the main fjord, we found hundreds of Marbled Murrelets, their numbers were astonishing! These were adults with fledged young, perhaps rafted up for safety in numbers; indeed two Parasitic Jaeger seemed to be



flying a close circuit around them and Bald Eagles watched from conifer perches on shore. White-winged and Surf Scoters were also in the raft, perhaps drawn in by good feeding or perhaps again for safety in number. We cruised through stunning scenery, watching the shoreline, and indeed saw three Grizzly Bears that day. Near Marble Island, a seabird nesting site, we had our best show of birds, including both Tufted and Horned Puffins, both Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorants, Black Oystercatchers, Glaucous-winged Gulls and more. Steller's Sea Lions were piled on the outer rocks, bellowing and jockeying for best positions, in and out of the water — a great show. Further up by Gloomy Knob we had wonderful sightings of Mountain Goats with kids, maneuvering on impossibly steep slopes to nibble greenery. There were many Pigeon Guillemots breeding on cliffs there, and we had quite a commotion when a passing Bald Eagle, intent on hunting them, was wildly interrupted and driven off by an angry, focused, territorial Peregrine Falcon. Our photographers got some awesome shots of the two battling it out in flight, including the Bald Eagle in flight going belly up to protect itself with outstretched talons. Wow! After Gloomy Knob we got into the ice, a long way from where it was when John Muir first described the area and his observations on plant succession. But ice anywhere is grand, and we marveled at the bergy bits banging against our hull. In sight of the front of a massive tidewater glacier, we saw Harbor Seals hauled up with pups among the bits, taking refuge from Orca. This is also where we found several Kittlitz Murrelets, a desired sighting in the bird realm of Southeast Alaska. They nest among high scree slopes in cirque basins; several groups were four, likely parents and two slightly lighter plumaged fledglings. The ship parks as close to the ice as considered safe and we just sat marveling, taking in the beauty, deep blue colors, sounds, and sense of wilderness. Many snapped selfies or group shots with the glacier in the background. We cruised back watching for seabirds, whale spouts near the entrance to Icy Bay, feeling so thankful for the foresight and protection of our national parks.

ICE SCULPTURE GARDENS

Outside of Tracy Arm, a deep fjord with glaciers, we ventured out in zodiacs to cruise around huge chunks of ice let go by LeConte Glacier. A Great Blue Heron perched on one and the first boat out spied a River Otter hauled out as well. It was great fun to zip in and out of truck sized blocks of ice, one more beautiful than the other, with



vivid colors. Some of the boats pulled up on shore where ice had landed, others zipped around to take it all in. It was a playful and wonderful morning!

JUNEAU

For one of our groups the starting city of the cruise, and the other the end, Juneau is nestled against thousand foot-plus mountains along the sea. Flying in and out is exhilarating, watching the water and mountains collide and somehow finding a runway. The waterfront is lively with shops, music, food vendors, a sculpture of Patsy Ann, a famous street dog that greeted ships in Juneau's early days ahead of good communication. She was deaf, but somehow sensed the ships before humans could, whatever she was doing she'd get up and run to the docks. Juneau has a tram going up to the high country, Gary and Mona went up and saw a Black Bear among the many blooming flowers — wow! Along the coastal path there was a Belted Kingfisher working the dock posts, and a marvelous statue of a breaching whale, complete with a water fountain mimicking whale spray. Juneau has several good restaurants and tempting shops — a fitting start or end to a voyage.

Photo Credits: Our Ship! (Catherine Sandell - CS), Scenic (Peg Abbott - PA), Sea Lions (Alberto Diez - AD), Tufted Puffin, Group walk (Amy Greene - AG), New friends! (AG), Gary & Mona (AG), Coastline (AD), Fluke & Back of Humpback Whale (Wilfried Mueller-Crispin - WMC), Fireweed (AG), Group exploring the narrows (AG), Tree Carving (AG), Forest floor (AG), Splashing Humpback Whale (WMC), Kayaking fun (AG), Sea Otters (CS), Dinner (CS), Breakfast (AG), Bird Island (CS), Map Room (AG), Dinner (PA), Alaskan chair (AG) & (CS), River Otter on the ice (CS), Tracy Arm Scenic (CS), Amy & Peg (AG), Ship Deck (CS), Look at that view! (AG)