

Southeast Alaska—May 2015

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Lighthouse, Eagles, Totem Poles—Ketchikan

We have high hopes of spotting bald eagles as we set sail from Ketchikan, Alaska, with Captain Rob Holston on a boat owned by Lighthouse, Totem and Eagle Excursions. This place is known for permanent eagle's nests, and the weather is perfect for sighting. Captain Rob tells us to look for white golf balls in the trees. Those balls will be the heads of mature eagles.



Hopeful passengers are ready with binoculars and zoom lenses. We search the horizon, trees, and cliffs. We are not disappointed. What appears to be a huge loosely woven basket attached to a tree comes into view. Then we spot the golf ball and know that we have a bald eagle in our sights. The magnificent birds live in the trees and along the cliffs. Their regal manner leaves no doubt as to who owns the bay.

Pairs of eagles perching in trees carefully watch the humans who have invaded their territory, their vigil interrupted by swift dives into the bay for food for their families.

Eagles mate for life, and males and females share parenting duties. The Alaskan waters offer plentiful food. Salmon is the favorite dish of bald eagles.

Also spotted in the bay is Totem Bight Park, replete with Tlingit totem poles and a clan house standing vigil and bearing witness to thousands of years of rich culture that has existed here.

The Guardhouse Lighthouse looms on an island where it provided a beacon of safety for travelers from 1901 to 1942. Humans and eagles share the bounty offered by the sea. The latecomers on the excursion boat pay homage to ancient life.

Whales and Sea Lions—Juneau

The quest from Juneau is for sea mammals—humpback whales, Steller's sea lions, and orcas. The first streets in this city, which started as a mining town in 1880, were stairways up the steep cliffs that fall to the sea. Juneau is the only state capital that does not have a road going in or out of town. Locals like to say that there are three ways to enter Juneau—airplane, boat, or birth canal.

It's a warm spring day with yellow wildflowers lining the road as the bus carries us to meet the catamaran which will carry hopeful naturalists to likely waters off the port of Juneau. No

promises of sightings today, but hope and good spirits are as apparent as binoculars and zoom lenses. Deep blue sky meets the sea as we glide by the rocky shore.

Our guide tells us that humpbacks are sometimes hard to spot because they use echo location (sonar) and know we are there well before we can see them. They will show themselves only if they wish to be seen. These whales, transient animals just arriving from their winter in Hawaii, come to Alaska for krill, plankton, and small fish which abound in these waters. Each humpback has a distinctive tail called a fluke. Locals look for regulars who come back year after year. Among the favorites are Spot and his mother, and entire books have been written about them.

A black form the size of our tour bus rises slowly to the surface of the bay and then another and another. A pod of humpbacks has chosen to make itself visible to the invaders. Known as the gentle giants of the sea, they are hungry after their 3000-mile swim from Hawaii.

The shipboard naturalists eagerly look for a deep dive which will reveal the fluke as a gentle giant dives in search of food. We are not disappointed. A fluke briefly meets the sky and disappears into the sea. We will not see that one again soon. Dives can last as long as half an hour, but are usually about ten minutes.



Our humpback companions swim alongside the catamaran and keep us company. Steller's sea lions bask on a buoy as we pass, disdainfully ignoring the invaders. Reluctantly we head for shore leaving the gentle giants to their food frenzy.

Our guide tells us to have cameras ready, as there is something "kind of fun" up ahead on the left near the beach. Even more rare than the humpbacks are sightings of orcas. A mother and young calf—just a few days old according to our guide—are frolicking in the water, rising to the surface and going under in an undulating rhythm. More orcas appear. Their black and white markings set them apart. Also known as killer whales, they eat sea mammals and large fish.

We invaders aboard the catamaran are beyond ecstatic. Cries of delight are followed by a hush. It is a sacred moment of union between land and sea creatures.



Photos by Pam Skelton