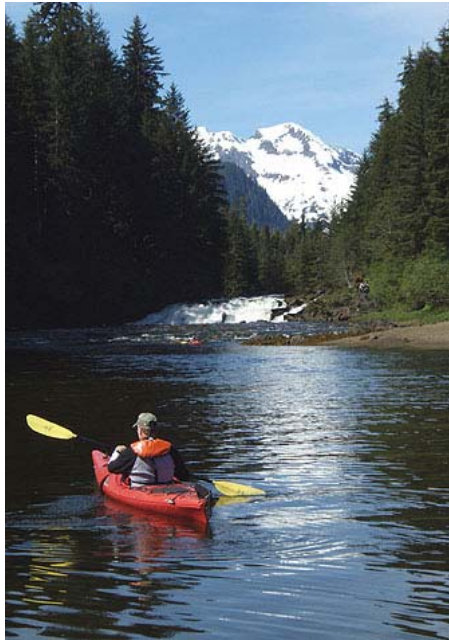


From the National Geographic Sea Lion in Alaska



Kayaking Pavlof Harbor



Humpback whales at climax of cooperative feeding

Chatham Strait & Pavlof Harbor

I wasn't on the bridge more than a minute when my attention was brought to what appeared to be a stump floating in the wide channel of Chatham Strait. "Deadheads," as they are known, are logs that float vertically in the water column and are dangerous to maritime traffic. But this was a shiny one that seemed to rotate on an axis, tilting one way or another. After several back-and-forths on alive/not alive, it turned out to be the head of an elephant seal, seen by only the very earliest of the early risers, and only for two minutes. My first ever, here in Southeast Alaska! The morning got more exciting as two whales and then a grazing brown bear were spotted inside Tenakee Inlet – all this before breakfast! It really, really, pays to be an early riser out on the bow of the *National Geographic Sea Lion*.

We were now sailing nearby a favorite hiking spot of ours, Pavlof Harbor, named "Gavan Pavlova" by Russian explorer Michael Tebenkof. In 1859-1865 this anchorage was reportedly used by Hudson's Bay Co. to conduct illicit trade with the local natives, for whom this bay was a fishing station in earlier times. On shore there are remnants of more contemporary fishing establishments since this is a well-known strong salmon stream starting late July. On our arrival there was a young brown bear grazing on shore sedges. However, once we started preparing our equipment for the visit, he decided it was time to move back into the woods. For the duration of our visit it remained peaceful, though the roaring of the cascade made an impression on all of us.

The hikers returned after an exploration of a temperate rainforest in broad sunshine and dry conditions. It had been muddy to a degree (thank goodness for rubber boots!), and everyone returned with a new appreciation of the difficulties of hiking inside a forest. Kayakers had some peaceful and quiet moments on the water, but finally we were all on board, equipment included, and set off.

Dall's porpoises, the occasional whale, a presentation on humpback s by Pete Pederson, our abandon ship drill, and then it happened: we found bubble-net feeding humpback whales! I was bouncing when I took the microphone and told everyone that siesta was cancelled for today. I called a mandatory meeting on the bow, binoculars and cameras obligatory equipment.

Extraordinary is the only word for what we observed. Between eleven and nine humpback whales (it varied, there was some coming and going) cruised the shoreline of Chichagof Island from Whitestone Harbor to Spassky Bay. They formed bubblenet after bubblenet, and one in particular we saw clearly, because it formed just a few hundred yards from the bow in flat calm water. The explosion of sound and whale body parts was indescribable. That same “herring round-up” was also the same as when we managed to get the hydrophone down in time to listen in on their wonderful vocals – an important part of the feeding organization, along with pectoral flippers and bubbles. These humpbacks use tools for cooperative feeding, just not the same tools we humans are used to finding on the dinner table. In few words: it has to be seen to be believed.

Sunset by whale blow: Point Adolphus where we finished our evening turned out to be a gathering place for humpbacks, and as the sun set and outlined the Fairweather mountain range, the vapor of their breath held long in the still air, rose-colored against forest green.

Our first day in Southeast Alaska. What could possibly remain for us to see?

Cindy Manning, Expedition Leader; Humpback whale photo by Clinton Talley, Steward

