

From the National Geographic Sea Lion in Alaska



A northern sea lion forcefully regurgitates a salmon that was simply too big to swallow



Common throughout northern tropical and temperate waters, the Minke whale can be prey for killer whales

Icy Strait, Southeast Alaska

Sea otters, a Minke whale, humpback whales, an Alaskan brown bear, harbor porpoises, a parasitic jaeger and flocks of black-legged kittiwakes. All in sunshine that defies one's knowledge of coastal Alaska. And all before breakfast; the beginning of another spectacular day in Southeast.

Today was a day to explore around the north end on Chichagof Island, in the heart of what was Russian America. It seems that our adventure gets better each day. The cool ocean was glimmering in the sun. The air was calm and warm. Last year's young kittiwakes were back in their home waters after an open-ocean winter, their parents already having settled in to raise yet another brood. A raft of sea otters rested calmly on their backs, aware of our silent approach and content to lie with head and feet up out of the water. Their bodies would be warm within a coat of fur so dense that the chilling ocean cannot penetrate to the skin.

The Minke whale made a sudden and surprise appearance off to starboard. Perhaps 30 to 35 feet long, this is a sleek and speedy rorqual; a baleen whale that seeks herring and other schooling fish here in near-shore waters. Surfacing close by us four times, this animal showed much more of itself than is usual.

Our hiking legs got a good workout on a small but strategic island guarding the ocean entrance into the Inside Passage. At the outset of World War II, US defense forces recognized the importance of preventing enemy penetration into Alaska. Having a panoramic view of the Gulf of Alaska, Cross Sound and Icy Strait, George Island was selected for the installation of a surplus World War I weapon – a 6-inch naval pedestal gun believed to have been removed from a decommissioned battleship. Some of us explored the island, imagining the plight of the young men that had been stationed here, while others of us kayaked or toured in Zodiacs.

A brief visit to the quaint boardwalk village of Elfin Cove was followed by very close and exceptional encounters with northern (Steller's) sea lions. Massing on an isolated rock at the ocean's edge, these huge pinnipeds have made a habitat choice equally as strategic as that of the US military; countless Pacific salmon of five species pass this rock throughout the summer and autumn months as they migrate to spawn and die in their natal streams. Dinner for a sea lion is but a swim away.

Our evening dessert was foregone; killer whales trump all other things. The tall dorsal fin of an adult male orca moving in random directions held our attention until sleep overtook us.

Bryan Gates, Naturalist

