

STRAWBERRY ISLE MARINE RESEARCH SOCIETY

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**Scuttle Butt – July 2009
By Rod Palm**

Image of the month



Waiting for the whale

photo John Forde

Well, what happened in July? For one thing Fogust came a month early putting a lot of stress on the Whale Watching vessel driver/interpreters. Getting to the whale feeding grounds is a lot easier and safer these days what with the convenience of GPS, radar, depth sounder and VHF radios. It's the finding the whales that's tricky. Once your electronics tell you that you've arrived in the whale feeding ground, the engines are shut off. This turning the key puts you in a whole new realm. There is no more racing along with misty spray pummeling your face and it is silent save for the gentle lap of ripples on the side of your boat. There is an almost startling calm. Looking around you see that there are no reference points or even a real horizon. The water around you just fades out into a damp grey void that encircles you like a dome. There is a feeling of being suspended, even dimensionally moved to another time and space. Peace, then,..... "Phoosh!" It's a blow but it's difficult to tell where it's coming from as sound travels so much faster through the moisture saturated air. The driver slowly moves the boat perhaps 100 meters. Wait....., "Phoosh!" There it is again, sound a little closer. A few seconds later, "Oh my blessed savior! What is that smell?" Anyone in the boat feeling a bit off is now hanging over the side generously feeding the fish. I won't even try to describe whale breath, suffice to say, "Yuck to the tenth power." The boat creeps to a new position, waits....., "Phoosh!" The whale explodes through the surface into your fog shrouded dome. His presence near takes your breath away as he gracefully rolls his great back up and slowly slides effortlessly back into the deep. Again you're in the gray misty dome of silence. When your driver fires up the engines for the

run home, he/she radios the whale's location to the other operators and is in turn advised by an approaching driver to watch out for speed bumps (kayaker's) around Eby Rock.

Hat tricks were frequent in July, that is to say there were several days where Gray, Humpback and Killer Whales were all seen on the same tour. On one trip in Cow Bay, all three could be seen at once.

As our mandate is to monitor various aspects of the marine environment, we are frequently tasked to investigate mortalities. Here's one of interest:

On July 15, a Steller Sea Lion was spotted by one of the Whale Watch Guides on a reef just south of Whaler Island. The posture, head pointing up, of the animal suggested that she hauled out to die rather than having floated onto the rocks and there appeared to be some piece of fishing gear fixed to the mouth.

Peter Schulze and I went to the site and recovered the carcass towing it to Strawberry Isle for closer examination.

This is a female measuring 2.57 meters long. There is a red plastic flasher used in salmon fishing that is hanging tight up to the mouth. The purlon line has made a nasty bleeding cut into the lips. No other visible external or internal traumas were obvious. The body clearly showed this animal was suffering severe lack of nutrition.

While sea lions occasionally bandit from the fishers gear, they generally just get a chunk of the fish. In the instance where they are likely making another pass, they may end up swallowing the rest of the fish along with the hook and attached leader. This flasher can be a serious impediment to the animals normal feeding. Loose flashers seen on sea lion haul-outs suggest that the lions are often able to shake these things off. Fishers, when spotting a lion, will often pull in their gear and wait on the animal to leave or move to a different location.

As a credit to human behavior/attitude I would like to point out that it wasn't that long ago that fisher vessels would cruise up to the haul-outs and shoot as many lions as they could before the animals escaped into the water, explosives were set on the rocks then ignited when the lions regrouped, Naval launches with as many as 6 riflemen and a Lewis gun took their toll, bored Air Force fighter plane pilots occasionally used the Long Beach Rocks haul-out for strafing practice with their Kitty Hawks. The Department of Fisheries even had a bounty on the salmon stealing lions until Spalding's extensive stomach content examination showed salmon to be only 5.6% of their diet while salmon predating Dog Fish and Lamprey Eels represented close to 15%. Today, these activities are an embarrassing skeleton best left in the closet.

Choo for now...Rod

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