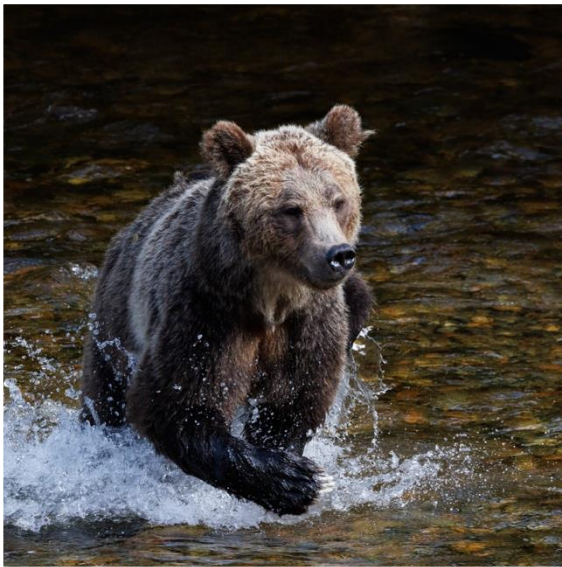


Tour Report

Canada - Festival of Bears

28 September - 13 October 2023

Grizzly bear



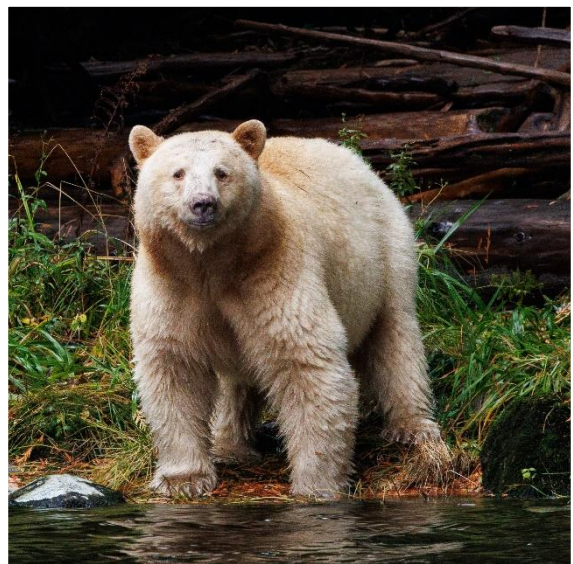
Orca



Humpback whale



Spirit bear



Compiled by Chris Breen

Tour Leader whale-watching pre-tour:
Tour Leaders Festival of Bears & Spirit Bear extension:

Chris Breen
Chris Breen & Mark Carwardine

Day 1: Vancouver Island – whale-watching pre-tour

Thursday 28 September 2023

Chris was already in Vancouver Island and was at the airport to meet the group as they arrived – some from London, and others from various parts of the USA and Canada that they had been holidaying in. One group arrived at lunchtime and the other early evening. Some of the group also arrived independently at the hotel.

It is only a short drive of about 10 minutes from the airport (which is actually just outside Sidney) to the hotel in Sidney where we are staying. Our hotel is the largest in this small town and is a fresh, modern and airy hotel with large rooms and all amenities. As our stay in Sidney is on a room only basis everyone was briefed on some of the options for breakfast and dinner and where to buy lunch to take on our whale-watching excursions. In fact, there is a very nice breakfast café attached to the hotel, and an equally nice restaurant, but there are various other café options, and some lovely restaurants to try out over the course of the coming days.

The office of the whale-watching operation is on the other side of the road from the hotel and those that arrived early enough, collected their floatation suits so that they were ready for tomorrow's outing.

Although most people were tired after their travels, a number met in the bar this evening for a drink and a bite to eat. However, it was early to bed for most in order to be fresh for our first whale-watch.

Day 2: Sidney, Vancouver Island

Friday 29 September 2023

It was a beautiful morning with crystal clear sunny skies and crisp cool air. The forecasted temperature was 15 degrees for later in the day, and the weather certainly lived up to expectations!

Our meeting point this morning was the office of the whale-watch company just over the road from the hotel and those who hadn't yet collected their floatation suits picked them up and we met our guides Oryan and Adrian.

Oryan and Adrian are both highly experienced whale-watching guides who have been taking people out to see the whales in these waters for some years. With them leading the way we headed the short distance to the jetty and down to our two boats. One of the boats – K-Ko – is an aluminium-hulled boats and the other – Emerald Moon – a zodiac. Each has forward-facing seats and seats has a small toilet on board. Both of the boats can accommodate 12 people, but with the make-up of our group consisting of a number of keen photographers we decided to have ten in one and seven in the other. Both are excellent for photography being completely open, but the zodiac is lower to the water which has its advantages, and K'Ko is easier to move around and has a little more space. However, with the size of our group, both boats provide an excellent platform for whale-watching and photography.



It wasn't long before we had a wildlife sighting – at the jetty in fact where there was a California sea lion swimming under the pier – though it wasn't a great view! Next up was a mid-sized Steller's sea lion though again, it wasn't the greatest of views as it was swimming and away from any obviously haul-out. We headed away from the pier in Sidney at a fair pace in an easterly direction and within 10 minutes or so Oryan had slowed down to show us our first adult bald eagle high in a tree.

We continued on our way and paused in the channel between Moresby Island and Stuart Island on the international border between Canada and the USA as Oryan was telling us that it is a good 'mixing point' of ocean currents and a good place to spot whales. Although we didn't pick a whale up ourselves Oryan was notified that a humpback had been seen near to where we were, so we focussed our attention on trying to locate it. It wasn't long before we found it and observed that actually it wasn't one but two moving together. We weren't immediately sure whether it was a Mum and calf or two adults but quickly concluded that it was two adults moving together.



We then spent the best part of the next couple of hours with the humpbacks as they cruised through the water travelling north and feeding. We photographed their blows and they regularly fluked as they dived deeper for food. We stayed with them as they headed north along the western side of North Pender Island and east into a busy but narrow shipping channel between Galiano Island and Mayne Island called Active Pass. Here, the air was completely calm and still and

their blows hung in the air for what seemed like minutes (although it was probably only 30 seconds or so).

As everyone was getting peckish, we retraced our steps through Active Pass and travelled along the south side of Mayne Island to Saturna Island where we stopped at Winter Cove Marine Park, disembarked our boats and had our packed lunch and a leg stretch in the picnic spot. Chris had organised coffee, tea and snacks, though the coffee and tea weren't at their hottest!

Leaving Saturna Island we first headed north to the Belle Chain Islands where there is a huge haul-out of Steller's sea lion and then south through Plumper Sound and paused as we spotted a haul out of 50 plus harbour seals on the beach.



Down through Boundary Pass and into US waters we went past South Pender Island towards Henry Island where we picked up another pair of humpbacks.

They were possibly the same humpbacks we saw this morning though we couldn't get good enough views of their flukes to be sure. Needless-to-say we spent time with them as they cruised and fed. The light was getting better and better now as the sun was beginning to go down.

Having had our fill of the humpbacks it was time to return to shore but not before circumnavigating Mandarte Island which is home to a large nesting population of cormorants – mostly Brandt's cormorants, there were also plenty of double-crested and pelagic cormorants there as well, and of course many attendant gulls.

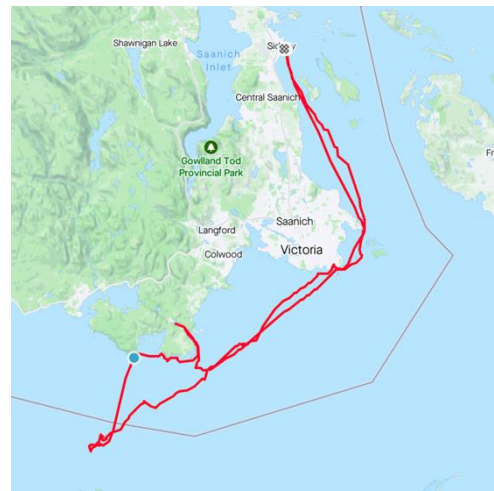
We returned to the jetty just after 6pm.

Day 3: Sidney, Vancouver Island

Saturday 30 September 2023

It is difficult to describe today's whale-watching without a continuous stream of superlatives – it was nothing short of incredible.

The sky was clear and the sea calm, the weather forecast was for 16 degrees, so we were keen with anticipation as we went to the jetty for our 9.30am liaison with Oryan and Adrian, our whale-watching guides. Some of the group did a 'switcheroo' from the boat they were in yesterday and before too long we were all set to get out on the water. Killer whales had been seen off the coast of Victoria to the south so we travelled parallel to the peninsular towards Discovery Island and headed south.



At Zero Rock – a fairly sizeable chunk in the middle of one of the channels that would have caught an earlier era of seafarers off guard (and not doubt has) – we stopped to look at a large raft of surf scoters. And then as we rounded the southern top of Vancouver Island we headed for a little group of islands called Chain Islands where there were hauled out harbour seals as well as cormorants, common murres (guillemots) and a few brightly coloured harlequin ducks.

As we continued on our track, it was clear that for those interested in seabirds there was plenty to see with rafts and rafts of hundreds (if not thousands) of common murres – these were visible throughout the day. Interspersed with the murres were a few rhino auklets and occasionally small flocks of phalaropes (though the species was indistinguishable).



But these were simply distractions for the main event, and when Adrian and Oryan heard that there were no fewer than nine killer whales that had been seen we made a beeline for them. On the northern side of the Juan de Fuca Strait, was a group that consisted of two pods – T60 and T99 and we were with them for some time. They had clearly killed a seal or sea lion recently and were breaching, tail-breaching, rolling and playing.

All of the killer whales we have been seeing are Bigg's (transient) killer whales, which for the time being have really become semi-resident in the area. They are mammal-eating killer whales that hunt seals and sea lions as their regular prey.

Having spent a considerable period of time with them we carried on west for another few kilometres where we paused to watch five humpbacks – it appeared to be two separate pairs feeding in close proximity and another single whale feeding nearby too. Unlike the humpbacks we saw yesterday, these whales appeared to be feeding fairly close to the surface and there was very little fluking and deep diving. As Chris was passing round a snack to everyone in the zodiac (it's hungry work looking at so many whales!) there was an in-drawing of breath as a humpback breached right next to the boat.

From here we headed south-west and into US waters as we heard that there was a group of five killer whales that had been seen there, but on the way we found a single adult female killer whale right in the centre of the strait. Whilst it is fairly normal to see adult males alone, it is unusual to see adult females alone, especially so far away from the rest of the pod. We waited with the female as a nearby research boat wanted to photograph and identify her.

As we were watching the group of five, we could see another group of killer whales which we were told was the T18 group which consisted of two pods – one of six and another of four. But we could also see another group of four nearby too, it was impossible to know where to look – we even one of the researchers over the radio saying “it really doesn't get any better than this”. The researchers follow the killer whales every single day so it really must have been exceptional!

We were looking at killer whales close to the boat, and then another of those great, almost unbelievable moments happened when a female killer whale breached between our two boats. We were left wondering what could happen next!



Precisely what was happening in the area we will never know, but there were clearly a number of killer whales groups that were meeting and possibly hunting together. This is also likely to be a time when adult males would have left their family group and mated with females from another pod before returning to their own family group. One of the males that we saw was a huge, and easily identifiable whale called Galliano. He has a large, and very 'broad' dorsal fin with a distinctive

'nick' at the back. He is known to be in his late 20s.

There were a few other whale-watching boats in the area, but it didn't distract from our viewing in any way – especially as there were just so many whales to see. We must have been with the whales here for well over an hour, but the time just melted away.

From here we headed north, to the southern shoreline of Vancouver Island and paused at Alldridge Point to see a small petroglyph that is known to have been made by early First Nations' settlers and could be as old as 1,000 years. Whilst we were at the petroglyph (which isn't the easiest to see as it is now very faint) we also had a pair of black oystercatchers and a single black turnstone.

It was getting late in the afternoon now and we began to head for home, but not before looking in and around Little Church Island and Church Island where there is known to be a lone sea otter... but he (or she!) wasn't visible today. In the distance, soaring high above Church Point in the thermals

were 30 or 40 turkey vultures and as we cruised around the point and went past Swordfish Island we heard the blow of a humpback – hugging the shoreline and feeding slowly as it moved east.



We needed to stretch our legs, so we pulled in at Pedder Bay Marina for an ice-cream and a coffee.

From here we had another try for sea otter – this time successfully – in an area of kelp around Race Rocks where there were also large numbers of both California and Steller’s sea lions – he was lying on his back amongst the kelp quite happy to be watched and photographed, front paws folded on his chest. It wouldn’t have been right to go for more than half an hour or so without whales, so it was no surprise when we heard the distinctive blow of a humpback, and another, and another. Four, and then five humpbacks cruising and feeding in a nearby channel as the sun was becoming ever more golden.

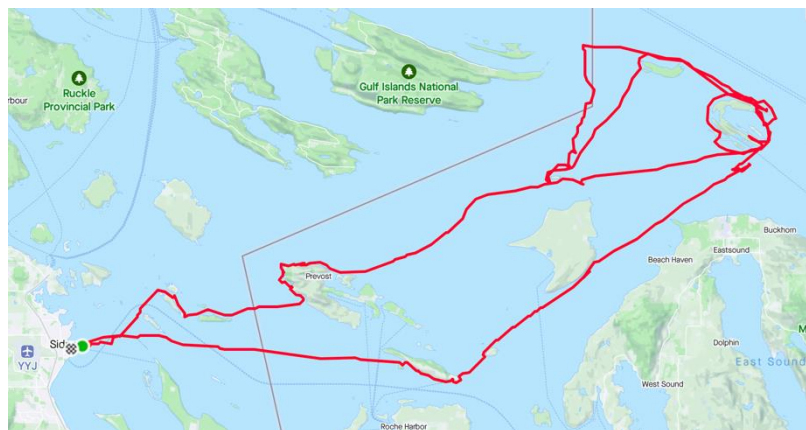
Finally, it was time to head north and back to Sidney – a brief glimpse of harbour porpoise on the way – and we arrived back at the jetty at just after 6.30pm, an hour later than planned, but after a truly incredible day of whale-watching. As our guide Oryan said as we got off the

boats “that was one of the best day’s whale-watching I have ever had.”

Day 4: Sidney, Vancouver Island

Sunday 1 October 2023

As the weather was again scheduled to be calm, clear and beautiful, we had a slightly later start today – 10.30am – with a view to staying out until 6.30pm to enjoy the wonderful evening light that we had yesterday. Oryan and Adrian were keen that we travel east through the San Juan Islands and in the general direction of Vancouver as there were some killer whales that had been regularly seen around a set of some islands (though not for the past couple of days) which they wanted to find. There was also ‘security’ in knowing that one of the American whale-watching boats had already picked up a group of four killer whales close by so if we were unsuccessful, we had a fall-back option.



Our first stop was at the north-western point of Stuart Island where Oryan had spotted a raptor perched at the top of a cliff. We had some good views and established quite quickly that it was a peregrine. Moving on round the island we hugged the coast and found a male Steller’s sea lion, black-tailed deer and a great blue heron fishing in the kelp. We also caught a glimpse of a belted kingfisher, but try as we might, we couldn’t position ourselves to get any photos of it.

As we continued east there were rafts of common murre, a small flock of black oystercatchers, some harbour seals eating fish that obligingly allowed us to get close for photography, and once we got to Echo Bay at Sucia Island, incredible views of the snow-covered Mount Baker. However, we had been on the move for a few hours and there were no killer whales as yet. With both boats going in similar directions but making a complimentary search of the area we looked the Sucia Island group, the Patos Islands and then decided to head west to offshore Skipjack Island where a couple of boats were watching killer whales. We stayed with them for a short while, with one orca on each side of the boat (though a reasonable distance away).

Pretty soon after we got to them, we heard that a group of four or five killer whales had been picked up around the Sucia Islands, where we had been looking – in fact in a bay just to the north of North Finger Island that we went in to to see if they were there. Oryan and Adrian's hunch that there were killer whales there was right, we had just not seen them in our quest!

We spent the next couple of hours with this group – which we initially thought was a group of four, but was in fact a group of five as there was a young male that was moving with them too. These killer whales also had a very small calf – perhaps only three or four months old – and only the size of a medium-sized dolphin. Needless-to-say it was always very close to its mother.



They weren't moving any great distance and were staying very close to the shoreline, and exploring every inlet, every nook and cranny, on the island's periphery. At a certain shady point, right by the shore, they stopped for an extended period of time and there was plenty of tail-slapping, some half breaches, rolling in the water, and tail-breaching. It was difficult for photography due to the light conditions, but fabulous to watch. After some time they continued on around the island and we could see a small group of sea lions hauled out on a beach and as soon as they became away of the killer whales they panicked and began barking and shouting, and incredibly, all dived into the water – which is surely the least safe place to go if you are a sea lion and there are Bigg's killer whales around! Despite a pause in their progress, the killer whales didn't hunt the sea lions and continued round the island into the expansive and sheltered Echo Bay. They were milling on the surface and moving very slowly so Oryan and Adrian switched their engines off – another nearby whale-watching vessel did the same thing – and we sat quietly as they moved from boat to boat rolling in the sea to look a little more closely. One of them even swam right under the stern of the zodiac. It was an incredible sighting.

It was a fitting end to another good day of killer whales, so when they had moved off, we headed west and back to Sidney passing Waldron Island and Flat Top but stopping at Spieden Island where there were a couple of bald eagles, some sika deer and mouflon sheep (imported many years ago and now living happily here). Offshore were a few (rather elusive but visible) harbour porpoises. Finally, it was back to the jetty for 6.30pm.



We all walked up to the whale-watching office and finally took off our floatation suits and said our grateful thanks and goodbye's to Oryan and Adrian who had been tremendous guides over the past three days.

After dinner most of the group met in the bar for a beer and a glass of wine to toast the killer whales of the Salish Sea. Tomorrow is another day!

Day 5: Campbell River, Vancouver Island

Monday 2 October 2023

Today, our whale-watching pre-tour came to an end and the main Festival of Bears began.

It was a slightly later start again today as our transfer to Campbell River wasn't until 10am. So, it was up at leisure, and breakfast at leisure before having to vacate our rooms and meet the transfer bus to take us north-west. All the bags were loaded and we were on our way by 10.15am in cool and rainy weather making the wonderful weather of the past few days seem even more incredible.

We took a 'comfort' and lunch/snack stop in Nanaimo after a couple of hours and then continued on our way to Campbell River, arriving shortly before 3pm. Somewhat coincidentally, Mark and the other 11 to board the trip – who had just landed at the nearby airport – arrived at the hotel within about a minute of our arrival.

The only other formalities of the day were to check in to the hotel, and after a short briefing about meeting times and departure times for tomorrow, to take our baggage to our rooms and get out in the fresh air. Most people then had an early dinner in preparation for tomorrow's adventure.

Day 6: Knight Inlet Lodge, Glendale Cover

Tuesday 3 October 2023



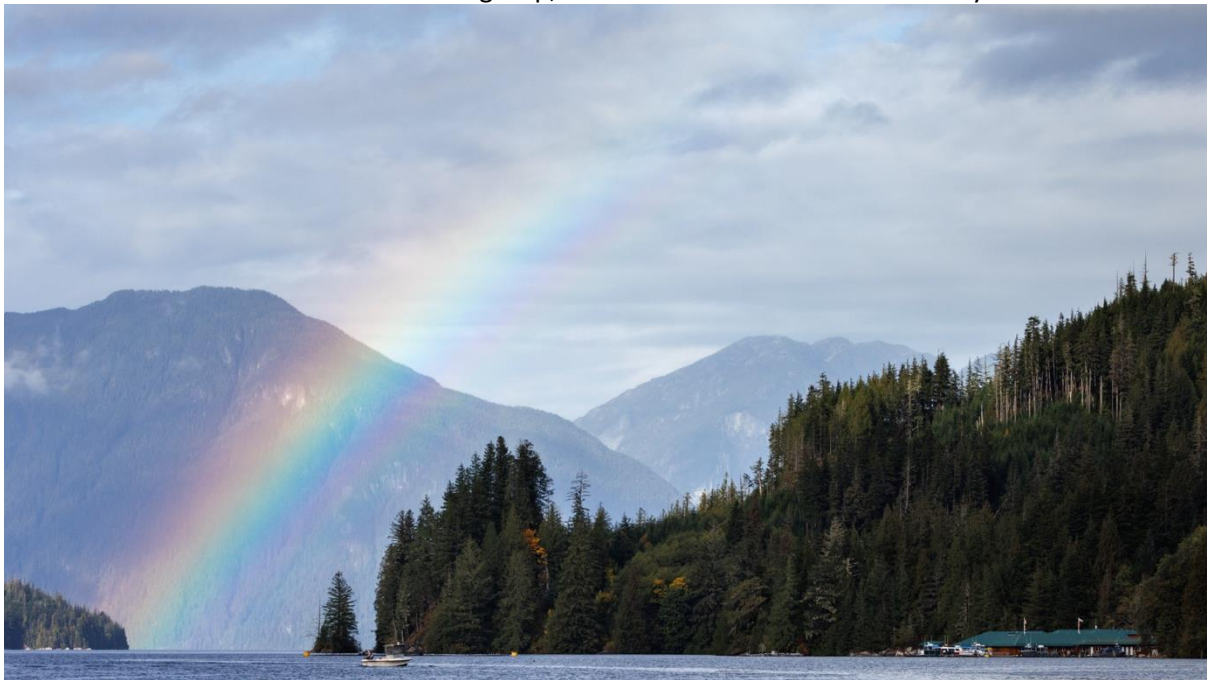
Up at 6.30am for breakfast and then checked out of the hotel by 7.45am, everyone was in the lobby and waiting for the transfer to the float plane terminal with keen anticipation of the day ahead. Harold (who is always super chirpy) and Fred, another transfer driver, arrived on time, and everyone was on the buses and at Vancouver Island Air a few minutes after 8am.

The terminal was a hive of activity with bags being loaded onto trolleys to then be loaded onto planes, and more bags

being tagged to sit in a huge container and wait for our return. Once the bags were sorted out we all went to the back of the terminal and sat under a huge awning while Harold told us how the day was going to unfold. We were heading to the lodge on two 14-seater float planes – one grey and one white – and they would be departing within 15 minutes of each other. It was a 25-minute flight across a beautiful stretch of coastal forest on a still and sunny day. The first flight took off at 9.30am.

We landed on the water just outside the lodge, the float planes pulled up to the jetty and we were greeted by some of the lodge team and stood aside while those passengers who had been staying at the lodge before us boarded the float planes and headed off. Together with our bags we all went to a 'holding' area and were given an orientation of the lodge (and our forthcoming day) by the manager, Tobin. There wasn't going to be time to go to our rooms as they were still being cleaned from the previous occupants, but instead (after a coffee and a snack) we gathered what we needed from our bags and, at 11am, went out on a tour of the estuary. Harbour seals, various gulls, bald eagles and stunning scenery were the order of this first short hour in the Great Bear Rainforest.

We were all back in the lodge for a delicious lunch at 12noon, and once again split up for our various activities which started at 1pm. Some of the group were heading to the bear stands up the river and others were going out onto the estuary again (the tide was rising this afternoon and this has been good for bear sightings in recent days and weeks). On each of the three stands that we used there were no more than three or four of our group, and it was the same for the estuary tours.



Getting to the stand to sit quietly on a bench waiting for wildlife to appear is an experience in itself. First there is a short boat journey across the water to the other side of the cove, then we wait until everyone is gathered together and walk in a tightly knit group to nearby buses for a short ride (5 or 10



minutes or so) to the entrance to the stand. The guide jumps out of the bus to make sure there are no bears nearby and then we walk through a 'caged' entrance-way and down a boardwalk to the river side (or other viewing area), set ourselves up, and then just sit quietly, watching and waiting for things to happen.

Each of the stands had different experiences, but each saw bears. On river stand, we first had a great blue heron sat at (almost) eye level in a tree on the other

bank, then American dipper and merlin, and saw a slight rustling in the trees on the other side of the river. Emma (our guide) pointed it out and we could just see the legs and feet of a bear walking along the bank then it came out onto the river directly in front of the stand. We sat quietly as it padded into the water looking for salmon and, each time it saw a fish, chased it and took a swipe hoping to catch it. Enthralled by this experience we were delighted when a mother and young cub appeared downstream and began walking up the river towards our stand. A female fishing for salmon right in front of us, and a mother and cub walking up the river fishing for salmon – what an experience!

They gradually made their way up the river and out of sight – a (quiet) ‘high-five’ was had between some of us on the stand! But that wasn’t the end of it, the single bear (who we actually think probably had a cub nearby that didn’t want to get its paws wet!) came back downriver briefly... perhaps that was to bid us farewell for the afternoon.

We headed back up the boardwalk and into the bus hoping that the other stands had also had great bear sightings as well – which thankfully they had – and passed the other group heading into the stands as we were boarding the boat to go back over to the lodge for a coffee.

After a quick break, we were back out again with everyone on estuary tours – the tide was nearing its highest level and this was good for seeing bears. There were two bears immediately visible in the estuary, as well as American coot, a young American robin and merlin’s everywhere. The merlins come into the cove at this time of year as the migrant birds are passing through – and only stay for two or three weeks – their primary prey being small passerines.



There were a couple more bears visible in the estuary... all of them digging to eat the roots of silver weed which is high in starch. They are known (in Glendale Cove at least) to eat this when the salmon levels are down (which they clearly are at the moment). Having had our fill of the bears – which were a little frustrating to photograph as they were so intent on eating that they only rarely looked up – we went up the river as far as we could following an immature bald eagle. Once the water level was obviously dropping we came back out to the estuary and headed back to the lodge, taking in some harbour porpoises on the way back.

There was time for a shower before appetisers at 6.30pm and dinner at 7pm, and after dinner Mark gave an introduction to The Great Bear Rainforest. Finally, it was time to retire for the night – all agreeing that it was a great first day at Knight Inlet.

Day 7: Knight Inlet Lodge, Glendale Cove

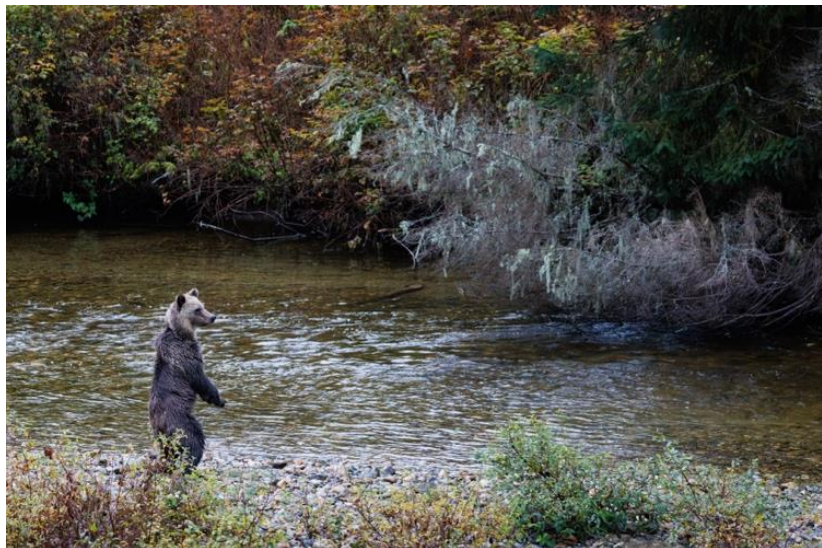
Wednesday 4 October 2023

It is difficult to accurately portray all of the different things that have happened today – there have been so many wonderful excursions and so many bear sightings. So the description of the day is intended to give a flavour of what was seen and is in by no means ‘definitive’ – this is also the case for future days of our stay.

Breakfast at the lodge begins at 6.30am – cereals, fresh fruit and cooked breakfast – after which the excursions begin at 7.30am. There were excursions to the estuary first thing, as well as visits to a couple of different stands. Following the first coffee and ‘comfort’ break there were excursions out into Glendale Cove itself (during the course of which at least one humpback was sighted). There was also a ‘tracks and trails’ tour and a drive/walk excursion to the top of the fjord for some wonderful scenery and photographic opportunities.

Before lunch a small group of us jumped into the boat, crossed the water and walked to the bus, after checking that there were no bears nearby. Our intended stop was the River Stand and as we walked down the board walk to the stand, we could hear loud bear vocalisation echoing through the forest. As we approached the stand, we could see two bears (Flora and Fauna) walking up the river fishing (though not very successfully!). A third bear appeared from upriver walking downstream. Flora and Fauna continued upstream, but the third bear stayed fishing the channel in front of us. She caught a fish and hid with the fish in the water under some low-hanging trees on the opposite bank crunching the bones.

In terms of birds, we saw a belted kingfisher, an immature bald eagle and a great blue heron (fishing) before another bear – a very pale coloured bear, and we think a young male – appeared downstream and began walking upstream. A further bear (dark in colour and probably a male) appeared from the right which the pale bear on our left heard. The young bear turned around and stood on its hind legs to see what (or who) the other bear was, and when he realised he immediately turned and ran.



We returned to the central ‘bus stop’ and then headed straight out again, this time to Tree Stand. The journey to Tree Stand is a little more complicated (but just as enjoyable) and involves a drive and then a second river crossing – led by Kelsie and Effie our guides. Although we saw (somewhat surprisingly) a Douglas’s squirrel swimming over the river there was little else until (typically) we were about to leave when a small cub (this year’s) appeared on his (or her) own and trotted down river. It stopped at a fallen tree just opposite us and proceeded to spend a few minutes rubbing its tummy and its face on the tree. It then rolled off the log and over to the land, stuck its legs in the air and carried on scratching its back. When it had had its fill, it rolled over, got up and carried along its way. We were all concerned about the lack of a nearby mother or sibling but bear researcher Mel suggested that it wasn’t uncommon for individuals to be separated from their young and to then re-group some hours later.

It was back to the lodge for another delicious lunch.

Post lunch, and a very short break, our bus journey to the stand began with Eddy telling us about the reproductive cycle of the brown bear.



The Weir Stand and Finger Stand are accessed from the same point – you first go to Weir and then move on to Finger – but it was a little while before we were able to move to Finger Stand as there was a mum and cub fishing in the river, and as they have priority (naturally!) we had to wait until they had

moved off before we were able to get to the stand. Once there, we were entertained by an immature bald eagle that appeared to be trying to catch a fish but failed, and then struggled to get out of the water and dry its feathers.

A very dark coloured female was walking down river from the weir and stopped right in front of our stand. It caught a fish and, as the bears seem to do, took it under the cover of an overhanging tree to eat it and then disappeared into the forest. She must have done a small circuit in the forest because 20 minutes or so later she reappeared further downstream working her way up river, and once she had moved off again it was time for us to walk back across the bridge to Weir Stand, jump in the bus and head back to the lodge.



At 4pm we were out again and down into the estuary where from a distance we could see two mum and cub pairs foraging. By the time we got closer we realised that one of the pairs was Flora and Fauna – and Flora was actually taking a break from foraging and was sleeping on a log (which for one of the boats provided some excellent photographic opportunities). There were in fact six bears feeding in the area – two Mum and cub pairs and two single females.

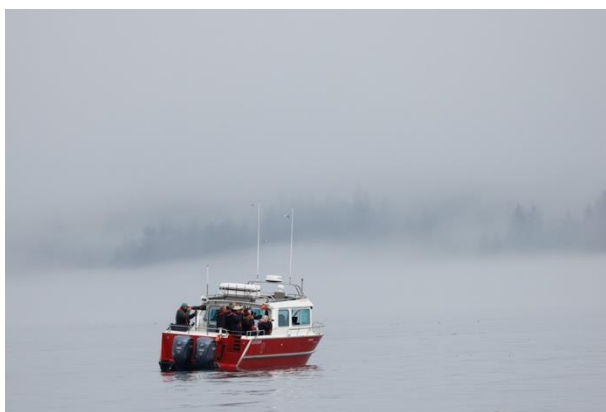
We also saw American crow, northern raven, green-winged teal, American coot and plenty of merlins hunting. Finally, it was time to return to the lodge for appetisers, a drink and dinner. This evenings after dinner talk was by Dr Mel Clapham a bear researcher who told us about the new facial recognition model that works with their trail cameras which they have been developing in order to work out precisely how many bears there are in the area. This is pioneering science that will have a huge (and positive) impact on our knowledge of brown bears, their movements and their activity over the coming months and years.

Brekko was at 6.30 again – and of course beautifully prepared and presented, with a whole range of cooked items as well as cereals and fruit.

The majority of the group, in two boats, headed out on a marine tour – Shaun (who has been working on the water in British Columbia for the past 35 years) was the guide on one of the boats, whilst Richard and Effie were on the other. Chris headed out with Shaun, and Mark was with Richard and Effie.

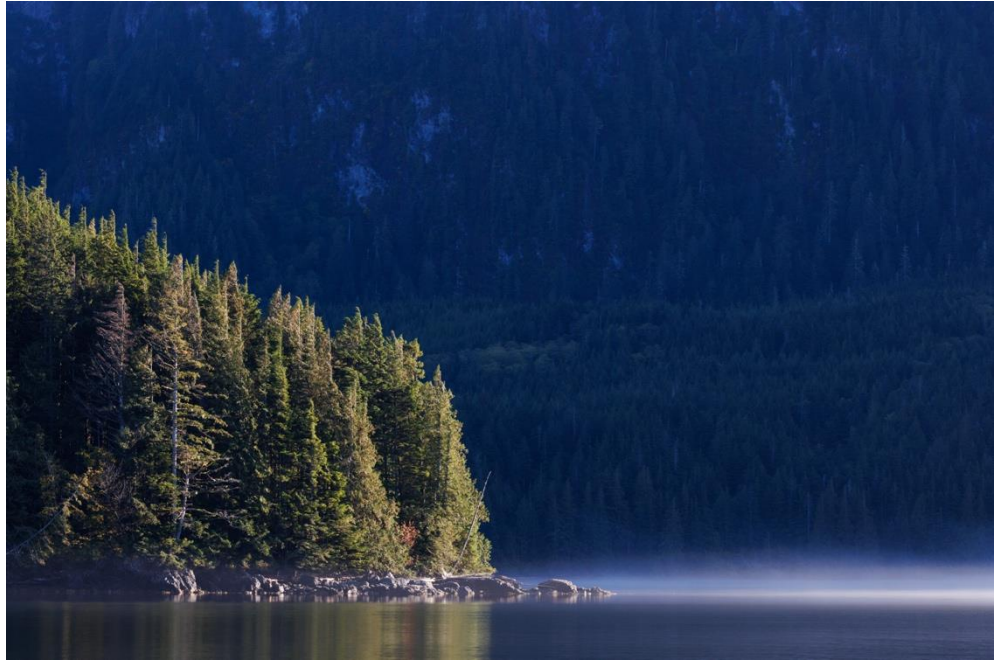


It was a foggy morning – the foggiest so far – and we didn't see a great deal as we took off from Glendale Cove and made our way out into Knight Inlet. The boats split up with the view that by travelling on opposite sides of the inlet we would be maximising our chances to see or hear any whales. Instead of simply heading down the inlet, Shaun turned into Chatham Channel and went around Minstrel and Dorman Island, before travelling along the south side of Turnour and Harbledown Islands along the Baronet Passage and out into Blackfish Sound. Mark's boat had taken a slightly more direct route out to the sound, but the weather conditions meant that (unfortunately) neither of the boats saw whales. Having said that, it was no less interesting as a result, with Shaun talking about the whales and other wildlife of the area.



A fishing trawler appeared from the mist surrounded by gulls, and we paused to chat about the fishing in the area – there is always something interesting to discuss in the wilderness! – and a flock of 30 snow geese (white birds against the white foggy sky) appeared and then melted away. There were also black-legged kittiwakes, western grebes, numerous gulls and rafts of common murre.

We stopped in the fog just north of the Plumper Islands and Shaun set out coffee and biscuits on the back of the boat and we listened to the blows of humpbacks around us – a somewhat eerie, but atmospheric sound in a morning with a very ‘heavy’ sky.



Post coffee, and in Weynton Passage south of Stubbs Island we came across a colony of 100 or so Steller’s sea lions hauled out on a small island. But our quest was for whales, and the fog was lifting, so we continued west and just north of the Pearce Island group we saw our first humpback blow against the dark forested background. It was moving slowly and appeared to be feeding, we then heard a second and third humpback and saw them quickly afterwards. We were able to spend about half an hour with them before they moved off and we headed around Cormorant Island to look at a group of 50-60 sea otters feeding in the kelp beds. With sea otters in full view, we tied the two boats together and enjoyed our picnic lunch – as a lion’s mane jellyfish swam past.



Lunch over Mark and Chris swapped boats and we continued west in search of whales. Richard and Effie spotted a minke whale in the distance near Kish Rock. Apparently, there is a single minke that is regularly seen here and today was obviously no exception. They weren’t the best views, and not especially

photographable, but everyone saw it!

Heading north we found a couple more humpbacks – barely visible through the fog which had descended once again – just off Leonard Point on the west side of Cormorant Island. We didn’t stay long with these humpbacks as the fog was very thick, and instead decided to head in the general direction of ‘home’. There was still a mist in the air (rather than a fog) and we found a pair of whales

feeding off Donegal Head on the eastern side of Malcolm Island. There were huge flocks of gulls coming down to the surface of the water and feeding on fish (presumably herring) that was coming to the top – we presume these were huge bait balls – and the whales were lapping it up too. There were a probably eight or nine humpback whales cruising slowly through the bait balls and we were trying to guess which of the bait balls the whales would go to next – ever hopeful that it would be the one closest to our boats! They appeared to be feeding on their sides – trap feeding – with their mouths wide open hoovering up large quantities of fish before shallow diving and coming back for more. We must have been with them for the best part of an hour before it was finally time to return to Knight Inlet, Glendale Cove and the lodge.

As we cruised back to the lodge, the weather lifted, the sun shone and the light, and colours, on the hillside and over the water was magical.

Whilst the majority of the group were out on a marine tour, some of the group remained behind and enjoyed bear-watching at the stands – which proved very fruitful - as well as a walk above the clouds, a tracking tour and an estuary trip.

As ever, appetisers were followed by dinner and Mark's evening presentation was about humpbacks and killer whales. Then it was time to retire for the night.

Day 8: Knight Inlet Lodge, Glendale Cove

Friday 6 October 2023

After breakfast some of the group headed out on the rainforest walk into the Kwalate estuary about 25 minutes by boat from the lodge – guided by First Nations guide Kelsie. It is a magical walk in a beautiful stretch of the forest. The group looked at cedars, ferns, numerous species of fungi, and then as the trek came to an end had an almost perfect sighting of an American marten.



The weather was beautiful and after lunch we headed out on our various afternoon activities. First off for some was Wier and Finger stands. PFDs (personal floatation devices) on, we boarded the flat-bottomed boat and transferred across to the other side of the inlet. On to the buses and out to the stands, but as we went over the bridge at Tom Brown River there was a grizzly on the left-hand side of the road. Then we arrived

at the stand and Leah and Shaun got out of the bus to check the area for bears. Leah came back to the bus to tell us that there was a bear at the weir, so we all got out quietly and went up to the stand. A large female was getting out of the river and walked towards the stand – it felt so close that we could touch her. She walked under the bridge between Weir and Finger stands and then paused as she passed the entrance to the stands and the bus... and then she continued on her way.

It was hot this afternoon and there was little activity at these two hides – perhaps not surprisingly, as any self-respecting bear should have been lying in the shade! We caught site of an osprey and a young bald eagle and then a bear at the far end of one of the spawning channels. It was only a brief glimpse though as it walked quickly from one side of the channel to the other. A few minutes later it walked back, and we were just packing up and about to leave when a mother and cub appeared in

the spawning channel right next to the road. (It seems that the command “it’s time to pack up and head off” brings out the bears!)

We returned to the bus stop, walked to the boat, and crossed back to the lodge for tea.

A few of the group were keen to learn a little more about the birds of the area, so went out into the inlet with Chris, Anna and Mairi (Shaun was driving the boat). To some extent it was a learning curve for everyone, and it was a very enjoyable (late) afternoon on the water. Green-winged teal, a bald eagle in beautiful light high in a tree, a few mallard and plenty of (hard to identify!) gulls. Then we saw a couple of harbour porpoise and a harbour seal.



Anna had hoped to see a raft of surf scoters, but they were being somewhat elusive, so we travelled further into the inlet in the hope of finding them. We saw a raft of birds in the distance which turned out to be western grebes – approximately 300 or so – and then as we turned to return to the lodge, we found the surf scoters. It was a staggering raft of birds that must have been close to a thousand individuals. Shaun turned the engines off so we could hear the sounds of the wind whistling in their feathers as they took off from the water. What a sight!

It was back to the lodge at 6pm for appetisers and then dinner. Mark gave an after-dinner presentation about the life cycle of salmon, the threats to their existence, and their inter-relationship with grizzly bears.

Day 9: Knight Inlet Lodge, Glendale Cove

Saturday 7 October 2023

It was a noticeably cooler morning this morning but today was our last full day at Knight Inlet and everyone was determined to make the most of it. For some this meant maximising the activities and with any luck maximising the bear viewing opportunities, and for a few this meant skipping an activity in order to enjoy a quiet coffee or tea at the lodge looking out at the incredible view.

As with most mornings there were estuary tours, visits to the stands and also some kayaking. Finger and Weir stands seemed to be especially productive with a female bear (which Kelsie thinks was probably a female called Hoya) walking up the spawning channel as we arrived. As the group walked from Weir across to Finger there was another bear walking up the channel known as Right Angle due to a particularly angular shape of light-coloured fur on the side of its face.

The sky was completely clear and the sun was rising, heating up the land, and the mist was gradually rising too making the landscape look especially moody. After a quiet patch of 20 or 30 minutes another bear (Osa) walked down the spawning channel right towards us – and the light reflecting off the water as he walked through it was a mix of golds, green, blues and oranges. He caught a fish and sat (obscured) under a tree and ate it on a rock. After he walked away Kelsie told us that he did regular circuits of the spawning channel and that he was likely to reappear after about 20 minutes... which he did just as the viewing session came to a close!



Some of us were returning to Weir and Finger stands, but others were doing other activities, so we all boarded the bus and went to the 'bus station' where there were a few 'bus changes', a quick comfort break and then a return to the important business of seeing bears.

From Wier stand we saw bald eagle, raven, crow and merlin before a dark coloured bear appeared at the bottom of the spawning channel near Finger hide. Leah thought it was a bear called Sally (20 years old) who has two 2-year-old cubs. Almost immediately the cubs appeared. Mum caught a fish and ate half of it leaving the rest for one of the cubs. As they moved off up the spawning channel and behind a tree all three were together and there was quite a bit of vocalisation which we thought was probably the two cubs contesting who had the fish.

Even though there can be plenty of 'quiet' time viewing from the stands it is always important to keep watch as you never know what will appear. And on this occasion, we had a brief appearance of an American marten. It walked down one of the bear tracks, came out at the river, sat there for a few seconds and then disappeared. It reappeared about 20 metres further down the channel – giving us enough time to radio the group on Fingers stand so they could see it too.



Younger female appeared at the top of the spawning channel and walked through the golden light and under the stand. It paused right under the stand (for a pool!) and then made its way slowly down the channel towards Finger hide. And, as we were about to leave, and another bear appeared from the corner near Finger stand and worked her way up the channel. It was a great way to end an excellent morning session. So

then it was back to the bus and over the water to the lodge for another lunch which a number of people ate outside on the decking in glorious warm sunshine.

After a delicious lunch we were back out to the stands again, and guess what? There were more bears! Nose, a 12-year-old bear and her yearling cub were exploring the spawning channel together,

and in addition to bears we had raven, bald eagle and even a belted kingfisher. And, before we left the stand for the afternoon Sally and her two cubs appeared on the road and walked past the van. They will have walked past the van numerous times without a problem, but one of the cubs looked to its left and saw its reflection which it didn't like and jumped. All three of the bears then walked under the bridge and past the front of the stand and into the channel.



For many in the group, the last activity of the day was a trip to the estuary. The light was magnificent and there were a couple of bears visible feeding on the grasses... but on this occasion it wasn't Flora and Fauna, it was a mum and a very small cub. Three or four more bears appeared before it was time to head back to the lodge, but all of them this afternoon were in poor light and not great for photography. None-

theless it was great to see them, and it didn't detract from the enjoyment of the excursion... we have had so many bear encounters over the past days!

We were all back at the lodge by 6pm and it was our last evening, so after (another!) delicious supper, and after Kelsie had sung us another First Nations song, Chris said a few words and thanked the incredible lodge team for their hard work behind the scenes, amazing food and guiding over the past few days. And we all thanked the bears for allowing us such incredible access to their rainforest. Mark said a few words, and then Merv – the First Nations CEO of Knight Inlet Lodge – and Brian (the General Manager) thanked the Wildlife Worldwide group for coming.

The evening ended with Mark in the lounge talking about conservation of The Great Bear Rainforest and showing us 25 of his best photos and reminiscing about the experiences we have had during the course of our trip.

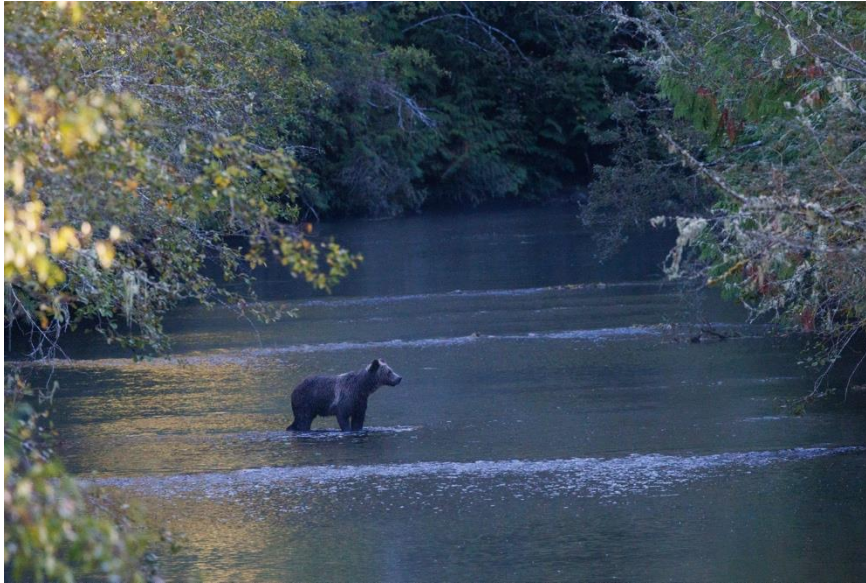
Day 10: Departure from Knight Inlet Lodge

Sunday 8 October 2023

Today the majority of the group headed off to Vancouver and home, whilst a small subset of the group returned to Vancouver for the night before beginning the spirit bear extension to the Festival.

It was everyone's final morning and there were three flights departing from the lodge – the first two were due to depart at around 9.30am so there was time for just one more activity and almost everyone elected to go to the estuary to see what was there. At 7.30am we gathered in front of the lodge for a group photo and those departing on the later flight said farewell to those heading out earlier. It had been a fabulous week and a real 'Festival of Bears'.





Those of us departing on the 11am flight were also able to get out for a final activity and we went to Weir and Finger stands which have been particularly productive over the course of the past days. Today was no exception. Over the course of the 90 minutes or so that we were there we had more than 11 bear encounters. There was a single bear at the end of the spawning channel, Flora and Fauna

appeared near the Fingers stand, Sally and her two cubs appeared between the two stands and walked right next to the Weir stand, and after 20 minutes or so Sally and the cubs had done a circuit and reappeared. We also had two single bears turning up on different parts of the spawning channel. It was an amazing final activity, and a really great way to end this part of the trip.

We returned to the lodge for a coffee and a snack, the float plane arrived just before 11am, and after saying our goodbyes to the lodge team we boarded the plane and headed out of Glendale Cove. The sky was clear as we flew south to Campbell River, but it was a fairly bumpy ride for the early part of the flight. At Campbell River we collected the bags that were in storage and transferred to the Comfort Inn. We had a few hours here before transferring to the airport for our flight to Vancouver and an overnight at the airport hotel. Tomorrow we are travelling north again for the final part of the adventure – the Spirit Bear Extension.

Day 11: Spirit Bear Lodge

Monday 9 October 2023

Today was a transfer day for those of us heading up to Klemtu and the start of the Spirit Bear Lodge extension – but it proved to be much more than that!



After breakfast at the hotel, we transferred across to the South Terminal to check in for our flight and have a coffee while we waited for the departure to be called. In his pre-flight briefing the pilot told us we shouldn't be worried if we heard a banging sound on the fuselage of the plane as this was just ice flying off the end of the propellers and hitting the side of the plane! We left on time at 10am and arrived at Bella Bella

where we were met by Jack and Troy and transferred the short distance through town to the jetty where we met Lou, our boat captain, and boarded our boat. The journey time to the lodge is about 90 minutes but that assumes that you go directly and don't see anything on the way, but we caught sight of some transient killer whales just off Horsfall Island – one big male orca and two females. They were moving quite slowly and consistently so we followed them for a while as they went into an inlet at the northern part of the island. We stayed with them for an hour or more as they cruised

around the islet at the end of the bay and then came back out to a more open stretch of the sea. For at least one person in our group seeing killer whales was a life's ambition, and it was such a good sighting they were over the moon.

We finally arrived at the lodge later than planned and were greeted at the dock by the manager John and directed to the lodge balcony for a drink.

The lodge is designed to look like a First Nations 'Big House' and is situated on a channel overlooking Kone Island. It is a tranquil retreat in a beautiful location.



We heard from the lodge's assistant manager Roxanne who told us about the First Nations history of the area, and their protection of the forest. She handed over to John who showed us around the important parts of the lodge (like the Mud Room where the boots and wet weather gear live) but John was interrupted ...

There was a humpback whale in the channel bubble-net feeding, so everyone went out to the deck to watch. What a start to our stay!

Dinner was a delicious 3-course event which each course announced by the chef, but it was an early night for all of us in preparation for tomorrow.

Day 12: Spirit Bear Lodge

Tuesday 10 October 2023

A breakfast of cereals, fresh fruit and eggs and home-made pancakes was available from 7am – it was still dark outside – and everyone was up in good time. As we were going to be out for a full day there was 'picnic' table laid out with freshly made sandwiches, pasta, couscous, cereal bars, and vegetable sticks for us all to gather and take with us for our wildlife adventure.



We were all down at the jetty at 8am to meet Charlie and our guides Jack and Heather and after a short briefing we headed north. When we had reached our destination we jumped onto a zodiac and were transferred to the shore. It was a muddy (but fairly short and slightly slippery walk) to where we were going to sit and wait, listening to the river rushing past us, the gulls and

crows calling, and wait patiently for any wildlife to come past.

We were all settled by 10am, and after only a short wait (just over an hour) we saw a spirit bear on the other side of the river – first the ‘temptation’ of an ear appeared behind a bush, and then the whole bear... a beautiful honey-coloured apparition that came to the river first to drink, and then to look for salmon. It wasn’t fishing so much as picking up salmon from the side of the river that were either dead, or almost dead, taking to the shore, eating them, and then returning for some more. This went on for 25 incredible minutes. It was an amazing treat and felt like a very special wildlife moment. Everyone was over the moon.

We shuffled about and had our picnic lunches, and settled down again just as a black bear made its way down river on our side. It was unfortunate that not all of the group saw it as it was obscured behind some bushes, but it was very close. We thought it was going to walk on the log in front of us, but it clearly decided that another route had more promise and disappeared into the woods.

We stayed in position for a little longer, but time wasn’t on our side, and we had to leave the comfort of the forest and return to the lodge. But we were spoiled by a pair of humpbacks bubble-net feeding just north of Cone Island so spent a little time with them before arriving back to the lodge later than planned, but in good time for our 3-course dinner... and a toast to the spirit bear!

After dinner Mark gave a short talk about spirit bears in the Great Bear Rainforest.

Day 13: Spirit Bear Lodge

Wednesday 11 October 2023

Our morning pattern was similar to yesterdays – Lou was driving us today and our guides were Jack and Troy – but we saw bubble-netting humpbacks as we headed north in the boat. It seems that the ferry terminal on Swindel Island is a favourite for the humpbacks!

We were off today in search of more bears of course – ideally black bears as they had eluded most of the group yesterday, but despite our best



efforts we were unsuccessful. Having said that, we visiting three beautiful forest locations and did our best, but today the bears weren't out to play.

On our way back to the lodge, as the light just got better and better, we picked up a pod of 15 or so Dall's porpoise playing at high speed on the water... and more humpback's bubble-netting near the lodge.

After dinner, various local artists came to the lodge to display and sell their wares.

Day 14: Spirit Bear Lodge

Thursday 12 October 2023

After another delicious breakfast we went to the jetty where we boarded our boat – Charlie was driving, and Jack and Ryan were guiding – and we headed north and east in a quest for bears (of any colour!) on our final day. Our journey was interrupted by a fabulous orca sighting of a Mum and (very) young calf, a young male and two other killer whales (of indeterminate sex). It was a mirror-glass sea and the light was perfect, so Charlie (as he has done this so much in the past) skilfully cruised with the killer whales to one side of the boat – what an experience!

By 11ish we had reached the river system we were planning to explore – it was a high tide – and were aboard our two zodiacs quietly and efficiently covering as much of the area as we could. Jack spotted a black bear coming to the shore, and it stopped, watched and waited, for a few minutes as it appeared to work out what we were, and that weren't a danger. Satisfied, it relaxed and came for a drink and to look for fish. Unfortunately, while one of the boats had a great view, the other 'saw' it. While we were looking at the black bear Ryan said "look in the other direction and there's a grizzly", which all sounded a bit unlikely, but a quick glance proved that he hadn't been tricking us and that there was a grizzly walking up the other side of the river quite unperturbed by us.

We watched him for 25 minutes before he was too far upstream and not quite so easy for us to see on the tide and in our zodiacs, so we began to float downstream. We paused though hoping that he might make himself more visible, which he did 15 minutes or so later, so we had more great viewing of a completely relaxed bear.



One of the zodiacs was keen to return to our boat for a coffee and lunch whilst the other wanted to stay out, so we temporarily split up. After coffee and a sandwich, we jumped back into the zodiac and headed upstream again as Ryan radioed to say that he had a mother and two grizzly cubs that they were watching. So, another 15 minutes of wonderful bear viewing followed before it was time to bid them farewell and head back to the lodge. Needless to

say we found killer whales and humpbacks on the way back.

Dinner this evening was the best yet – the chef clearly saved the best until last! – with a crab starter, halibut main course and seaweed dessert. Outstanding!

After dinner (at around 7.30pm) we walked up to Klemtu's Big House for an hour or so to learn about the local First Nations and hear about some of the local culture and traditions. And sadly, this was the end of our final day in The Great Bear Rainforest.

Day 15: Heading home

Friday 13 October 2023

Today we boarded our boats after breakfast and went back to Bella Bella. We bid farewell to the Spirit Bear Lodge team and flew to Vancouver and back home... a great trip was had by all!

Day 16: Arrive home

Checklist for Festival of Bears



	Common name	Scientific name	
	BIRDS		
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓
2	Greater white-fronted goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	✓
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓
4	Green-winged teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>	✓
5	Harlequin duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	✓
6	Surf scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>	✓
7	White-winged scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi</i>	✓
8	Common merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓
9	American coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	✓
10	Western grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>	✓
11	Black oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>	✓
12	Black turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>	✓
13	Surfbird	<i>Calidris virgata</i>	✓
14	Wilson's snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>	✓
15	Red-necked phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	✓
16	Bonaparte's gull	<i>Chroicocephalus philadelphia</i>	✓
17	Short-billed gull	<i>Larus brachyrhynchus</i>	✓
18	Ring-billed gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	✓
19	Heermann's gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>	✓
20	California gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>	✓
21	Thayer's gull (Iceland gull)	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>	✓
22	Glaucous-winged gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>	✓
23	American herring gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	✓
24	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓
25	Common guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓
26	Rhinoceros auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>	✓
27	Great northern diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓
28	Pelagic cormorant	<i>Urile pelagicus</i>	✓
29	Brandt's cormorant	<i>Urile penicillatus</i>	✓
30	Double-crested cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritum</i>	✓
31	Great blue heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	✓
32	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓
33	Northern harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>	✓

34	Bald eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	✓
35	Belted kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>	✓
36	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	✓
37	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓
38	Steller's jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>	✓
39	American crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	✓
40	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓
41	Pacific wren	<i>Troglodytes pacificus</i>	✓
42	Varied thrush	<i>Ixoreus naevius</i>	✓
43	American robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	✓
44	American dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>	✓
45	Dark-eyed junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>	✓
46	Song sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	✓
	MAMMALS		
1	American black bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>	✓
2	Brown bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	✓
3	Steller sealion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>	✓
4	Californian sealion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	✓
5	Common seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓
6	Northern raccoon	<i>Procyon lotor</i>	✓
7	Sea otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>	✓
8	American marten	<i>Martes americana</i>	✓
9	Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	✓
10	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	✓
11	Harbour porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	✓
12	Douglas's squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus douglasii</i>	✓