

Tour Report Seldom Seen Alaska Photography 10 - 25 July 2023

Bald eagle



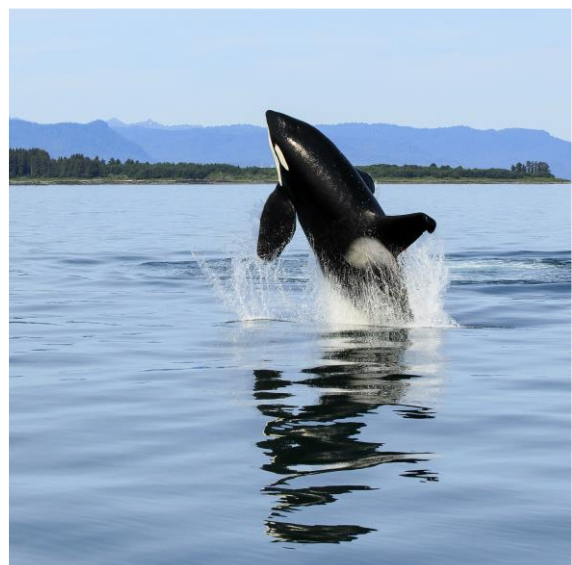
Breaching humpback



Bubble-net feeding humpbacks



Breaching orca



Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1: London Heathrow to Seattle

Monday 10 July 2023

The first day of our inaugural Seldom Seen Alaska tour involved the majority of the group flying from London Heathrow to Seattle with British Airways. I met the group at the gate before departure and it wasn't long before we were crossing the Atlantic. After a long flight, we arrived in Seattle on time and it wasn't long before we had passed through immigration with our luggage (in Seattle you pick up your luggage before immigration).

We made our way through the busy airport to the hotel shuttle pick-up area. With the free phone not working, I dialled for the shuttle on my mobile and it was soon with us. Upon our arrival at the very comfortable Cedarbrook Lodge, we checked in and took our things to the rooms. We agreed to meet for dinner, doing our best to stay up and adjust to the new time zone.

The group enjoyed a light meal and a drink before retreating to our rooms for a very well-earned rest.

Day 2: Seattle to Sitka

Tuesday 11 July 2023

This morning, we all enjoyed an excellent breakfast in the dining area of the lodge before meeting in the lobby for our shuttle back to the airport. We had a late morning flight from Seattle to the city of Sitka, in south-east Alaska. The flight left on time, and we were soon flying north over Canada's Vancouver Island and Haida Gwaii, before crossing back into the USA and the Alexander Archipelago. As we made our approach to Sitka, the clouds cleared and the spectacular backdrop of Baranof Island revealed itself. We soon touched down and were quickly through to arrivals where we met our skipper, Neil. Our luggage didn't take long to arrive on the belt and with limited time before our first engagement, we decided to have lunch at the airport restaurant.

With full stomachs, it was time to catch the shuttle to our hotel for the next couple of nights. We hoped to check-in before we headed off for a little cultural education with the indigenous community. However, upon arrival, we found out our rooms were not yet ready, so we left our luggage and agreed to check-in upon our return.

Neil arrived at the hotel and we hopped in a couple of vehicles to downtown Sitka. It was only a few minutes in the car before we parked up outside the meeting house of the indigenous Tlingit people. The performance was by the community's youngsters, helping them to learn about their heritage and sharing it with people visiting the area. Around the town we saw multiple ravens, a golden eagle was flying over high above, and bald eagles were all around. We returned to the hotel and finally managed to check-in to our rooms before meeting up for dinner. We walked the short distance into the 'city' centre to try and find somewhere to eat but hit a couple of dead ends before we ended up at a diner/bar called Mean Queen. This popular establishment provided us with a typical American meal and a relaxed first evening in Alaska. Still trying to adjust to the time zone, which had changed once again flying to Alaska, we retreated back to our rooms for another early night. We would be ready for our first full day enjoying the local natural history delights.

Day 3: Sitka Sound

Wednesday 12 July 2023

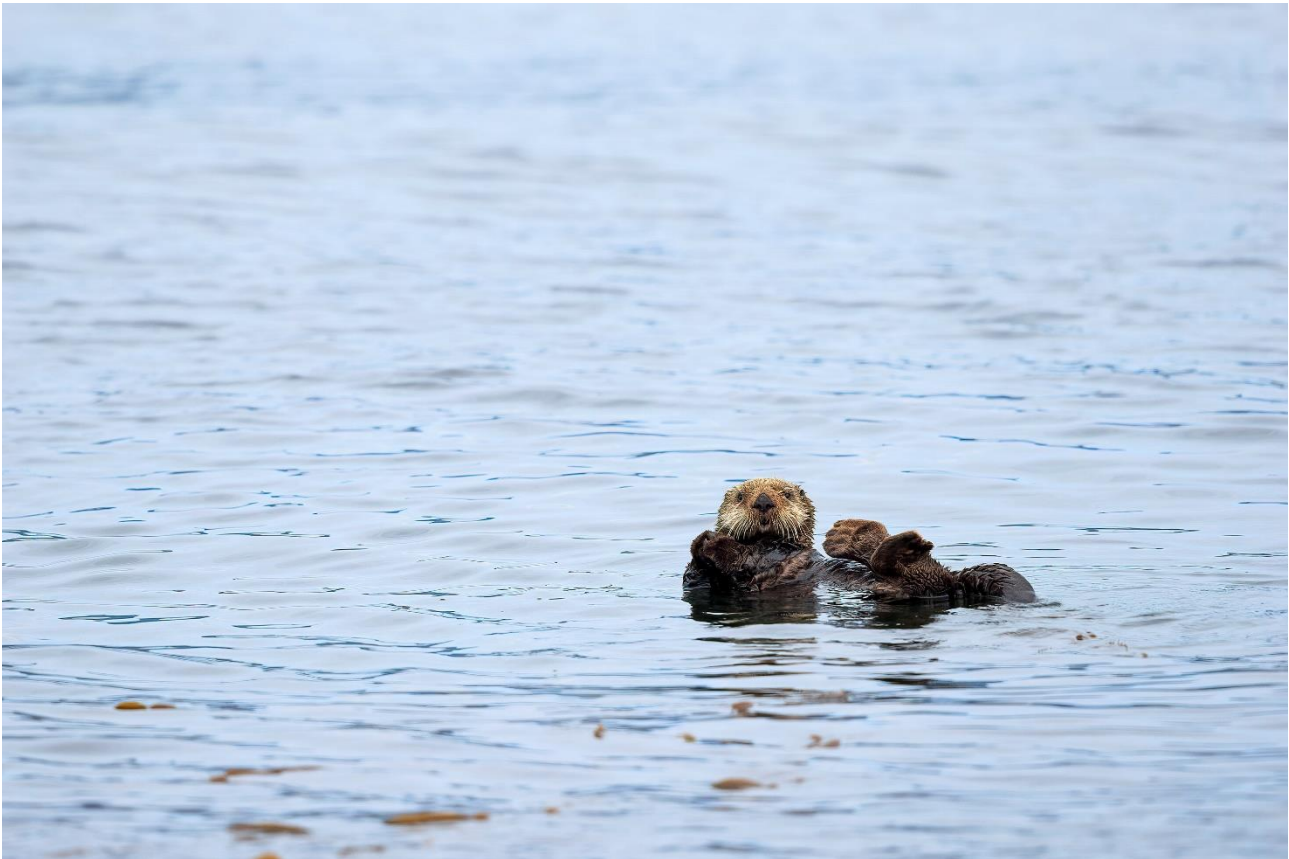
This morning we agreed to meet bright and early, ready for our first day out on the boat with Neil. After grabbing some breakfast at a local café, we headed down to the waterfront and boarded our vessel, Catdaddy. We left the dock and headed out under the bridge which connects the mainland and the airport, continuing out into the sound. Our first stop was a bald eagle nest on the edge of a small island. One of the birds flew from the nest and tried to pluck a fish from the water's surface. We continued onwards, searching for seabirds and enjoying views of black oystercatchers on a rock, while marbled and ancient murrelet kept diving from the water's surface. There were also surfbirds atop semi-submerged islands, and pigeon guillemots were busy feeding in the rich waters.

The sound was full of so much life and we found our first sea otter mother in the kelp with her kitten laying on her chest. We also enjoyed our first views of a humpback as it fed along the coastline of Baranof Island. Neil assured us that we should enjoy many more cetacean sightings over the next couple of weeks and so we kept our fingers crossed.

Continuing further out into the sound to the Saint Lazaria Islands, we had spectacular views of Mount Edgecumbe (a huge volcano that dominates Sitka Sound). As we arrived on the shores of the island, we enjoyed views of rhinoceros auklet on the waters and our first tufted puffins of the trip. These charismatic birds are larger than their Atlantic cousins and their tufty eyebrows are particularly impressive. Other seabirds we saw included common murre (guillemot) and pelagic cormorant.

Neil wanted to see if we could find a raft of male sea otters which are regularly seen in a particular area, and just as he predicted, there they all were. There was also a female nearby with a baby on her chest which was looking relatively relaxed. We also enjoyed another whale sighting, a second humpback which may have even had a youngster with it.

With the day flying by, it wasn't long before we had to head back to shore for lunch. We ate at the pub, enjoying a traditional American meal, before meeting a local naturalist who showed us the prolific marine-life on the rocky shoreline.



What an incredible first day in this stunning part of the world. We really couldn't ask for a better start. With a chance to freshen up and change our clothes, we met up at the hotel reception and walked the short distance into town for dinner at the Italian. Once again, after a busy day and an early start, we headed back to our rooms for an early night.

Today was the day we would start our journey properly. We would be leaving Sitka behind and discovering rarely seen parts of Alaska as we searched for the region's plethora of wildlife. With an obvious focus on marine life, there may also be the chance to see bears and other land-based wildlife as we explored this remote corner of the USA.

And so, in the morning, we gathered our bags and loaded them in the cars as we headed down to the marina, where we transferred the bags onto the boat and quickly boarded. Just as we left the harbour, Neil got a radio message that he had left his phone at home. After a speedy about-turn, we met with Neil's wife at the jetty and set off once again. We headed north out of Sitka and started the long journey north towards the community of Gustavus. We were sent on our way by a couple of sea lions as they frolicked in the water, while bald eagles flew overhead and rested on the jetty posts.

As we made our way through a narrow passageway, Neil informed of us a particularly rare and unusual species which roosted in a tree nearby. As we neared closer, he informed us that these were the elusive Northern flamingos. And there they were, a number of beautiful plastic flamingos perched high in a spruce tree. Continuing northwards, we eventually emerged into the open waters of Salisbury Sound and then explored the islands and calm waters around the islands off of Chichagof Island's western coast. It was here that we saw our first humpback of the day (only brief views) and then a large raft of maybe 50 sea otters in the most magical spot.



Further to the north, we passed through another narrow passageway between Yakobi and Chichagof Islands, continuing on to the amazing natural rock arch at the George Islands. Here we enjoyed views of numerous pigeon guillemots and a couple of sea otters too, while close by there was a sealion haul out on a rocky outcrop which we enjoyed photographing with the magnificent backdrop of the Fairweather Mountains. Moving on, as time was getting away from us, we explored the narrow waterways between some more islands and enjoyed a wonderful encounter with three humpbacks as they dived and repeatedly came up remarkably close to the boat. Three whales then became seven as more joined them, and we witnessed them dive with the most magical backdrop of the mountains behind. It was a truly magical day and after an hour enjoying numerous encounters, it was time to head onwards again to our final destination – Gustavus.

Upon our arrival at the dock at Gustavus, we were greeted by the team from our home for the next few days – Bear Track Inn. After a 15-minute drive, we arrived at the lodge. Set on the edge of the forest within spectacular mountainous surroundings, the lodge was a marvel. A vast wooden structure with incredibly comfortable rooms and some exquisite food. A wonderful retreat in the most magical setting.



Day 5: Exploring the area around Gustavus

Friday 14 July 2023

The group met for a delicious breakfast in the lodge's dining room, refuelling for a busy day ahead. The plan today was to head out on the water this morning and eat our lunch on the boat before returning to the dock and enjoying a gentle walk through the forest in search of some land-based wild delights. The lodge transferred us to the boat after breakfast and it wasn't long before we were pushing off and enjoying our first wildlife encounter of the day – a huge mixed flock of surf and white-winged scoters. We also enjoyed views of Bonaparte gulls as they flew over the water in search of food.

It started as a quiet morning, although the scenery was absolutely spectacular. For the first couple of hours all was relatively quiet, but just after 10 am, we spotted an orca fin off to one side. Then suddenly, we realised there was more than one – in fact, there were several different females (one with a young calf) and a large male too. Then, they were off. The orca took speed, and within what only seemed like a few moments, they were disappearing off into the distance. It was only then that we realised that they were chasing something. There was a group of porpoises that the orca were after. As we tried to catch up, an orca started to repeatedly breach. Suddenly, there was a spray of blood, and we realised that the pod had been successful in their hunt.

As we approached we realised they had killed a Dall's porpoise. They took it in turns to seemingly take parts off of the carcass. Having taken their kill, several of the orca came a little closer as if they wanted to know who their visitors were. Soon after, the male started to tail slap near us before breaching several times right next to the boat. We took this to mean that he wasn't very happy with our presence, so we decided it was probably a good time to enjoy our lunch.



Sitting down and enjoying our lunch, the orcas slowly moved off into the distance and that was the last we saw of them. A rufous hummingbird flew directly over the boat, heading at speed across the water to land – the first hummingbird of the trip.

After lunch, with a limited amount of time, we started to head back north towards Gustavus and stopped off at a rocky outcrop with around 50 harbour seals resting on it, while harlequin ducks, glaucous gulls and tufted puffins were along the shoreline. We continued our journey back to the dock, bumping into a pod of harbour porpoises and a humpback very close to the shore.



We moored the boat and were quickly whisked off to the start of the trail where we would be conducting our gentle walk. Our guide was yet to arrive, so we started the trail enjoying the rich flora that covered the forest floor. We found a number of orchids, squashberry, and wild strawberries, but the forest seemed quiet in regards to animal life. Our guide caught up with us and gave us a lot of insight into the region's geography, geology and natural history while pointing out a native red squirrel and several native bird species including savannah sparrow, Townsend's warbler and ruby-crowned kinglet (think a purple-crowned goldcrest). We walked down to the vast beach and found some fresh bear tracks and what certainly looked like wolf tracks. It was a fabulous couple of hours filled with fascinating information, and it was great to stretch the legs.

We returned to the lodge and freshened up before enjoying yet another exceptional meal. What a wonderful spot in such a remote and wild location. Bear Track Inn is a hidden gem and the perfect place to escape in this vast wilderness area.

Suitably wined and dined, it was time to retreat to our rooms for a good rest before a long day out on the water the next day.

Day 6: Gustavus to Tenakee Springs

Saturday 15 July 2023

The group woke up bright and early for breakfast, tea and coffee. Suitably refreshed, we grabbed our bags and waited in the lounge area for our lift down to the jetty. We unloaded our luggage as we arrived at the jetty and carefully made our way down the ramp to the boat. Loading up the bags into the storage area on the boat, it wasn't long before we were on our way. Today we were setting sail for the small community of Tenakee Springs on Chichagof Island.

Not too long after being out on the water, we saw our first humpback whale of the day, at around 8.20 am, quickly followed by porpoises of which we could not determine the species. As we searched for wildlife and photography opportunities, we saw sea otters, murrelets and both Bonaparte and glaucous gulls.

As we headed across the open waters of the sound, a humpback breached around half a mile from the boat. It breached again, and again. We started to make our way closer to where the whale was busy enjoying itself, leaping out of the water and hitting the surface with such incredible force. The photography opportunities were absolutely out of this world. If anything, the sunlight was a little too bright, but with the rich blue sea and sky, it left us with some beautiful imagery.



As well as repeated breaches, the whale thoroughly enjoyed itself as it tail-slapped and slapped both of its pectoral fins. It really was amazing to witness and particularly special to be allowed so close and capture such memorable moments with our cameras.

With such an action-packed morning, the group had earned a hearty lunch. Today, we were going to 'fire up the grill' in Neil's words and enjoy a traditional American barbeque. Burgers, potato salad and hot dogs were the order of the day and so we sat in a bay enjoying a veritable feast. With this being a wildlife voyage, it

wouldn't be right to enjoy our meal without something interesting popping in to say hello. One of the group spotted a few orca and asked if that was why we had stopped there. We thought they were joking, and only then realised that, in fact, we had been joined by a small group of orca. What luck! As we continued to enjoy our lunch, the orcas moved on and once we were finished so did we.



It was a warm and sunny day, and we were heading to Tenakee Springs where we were staying at a small guesthouse. Tenakee Springs has an interesting history – it was once a community of outlaws and folks who didn't want to be found. It is now a sleepy 'boardwalk' community with a small marina, as well as a ferry and floatplane service. We turned up in the late afternoon and moored the boat in the marina. By now, everyone was well-versed in the process of unloading the luggage and we started to make our way to the guesthouse. There are no roads in Tenakee Springs so we walked with our luggage the couple of hundred yards to the guesthouse. There we met Kay, a delightful woman who gave us a briefing about the house and how everything worked. She cooked a fabulous meal and we were all very happy in this beautiful part of the world.

As a group, we headed out for an evening walk along the boardwalk, exploring this fascinating community. On the town quay/helipad, a few ravens were busy calling and generally making a lot of noise, while some of the locals were out picking salmon berries. As the sun set, a bird that was new to the group made an appearance, a beautiful varied thrush. With another day out on the water tomorrow, we decided to head back to the guesthouse for a good night's sleep.

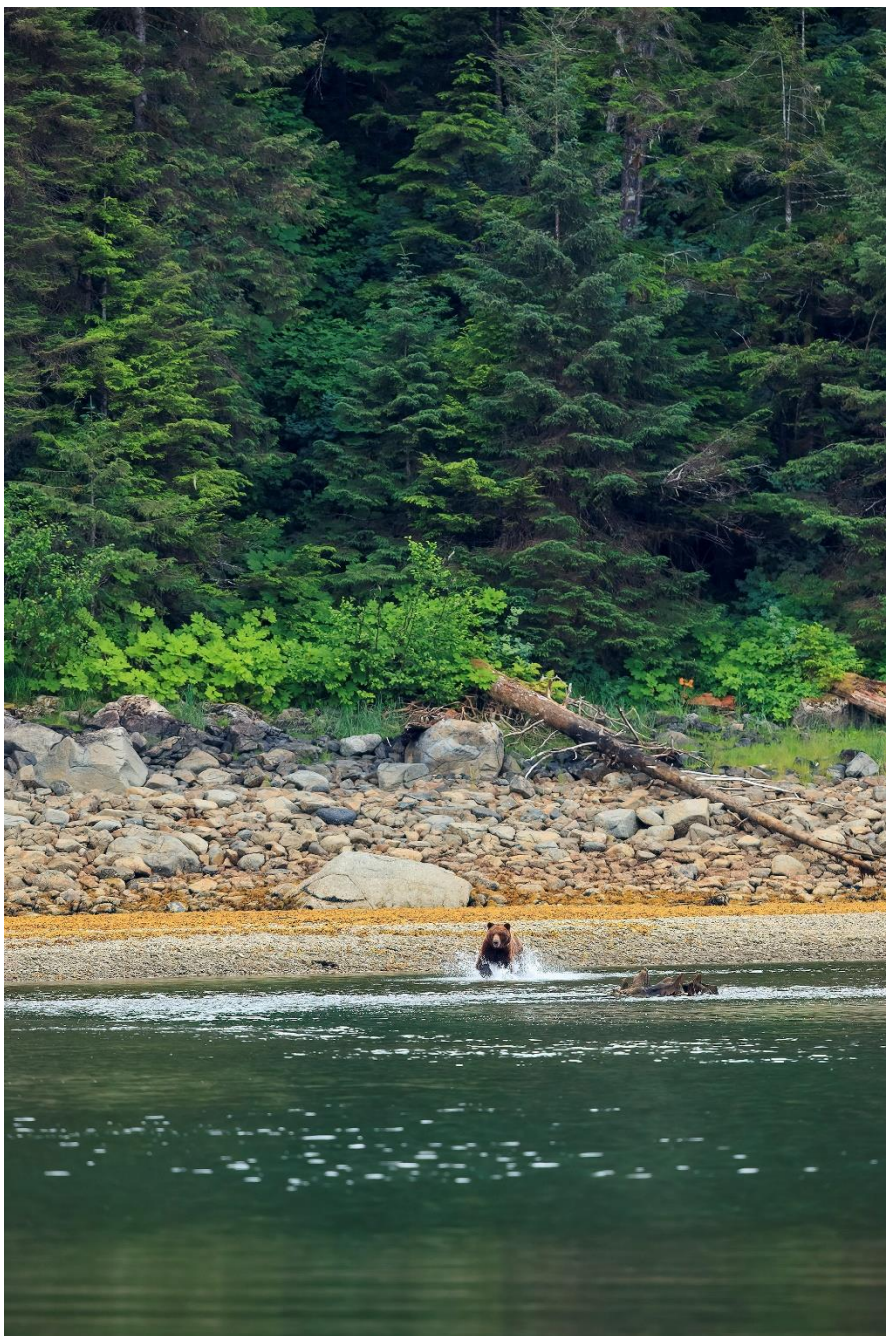
Day 7: Tenakee Inlet

Sunday 16 July 2023

We awoke to a very different day. So far, we had been utterly spoiled with the most remarkable weather, but today the rain gods had decided to deliver their bounty. It was noticeably cooler, there was mist on the mountains and precipitation seemed inevitable. Not to worry – this is a coastal temperate rainforest after all. The group were well prepared and we all made sure to have our wet weather gear at the ready. With the clouds closing in, we left the dock and headed out into the inlet. Only a minute or so after leaving the dock, we encountered a pod of Dall's porpoise, which, for a short while, enjoyed riding the bow waves from the

boat. After realising it was only a quick show from the porpoises, we continued across the inlet to the far side and started to make our west (further into the inlet). As we cruised along the coast we saw a couple of Sitka black-tailed deer, including a mother and her young. They were busy feeding on the grassy foreshore.

It was hard to get close enough for good images, so we continued onwards and turned into Seal Bay. The waters were flat and calm once again, and as we cruised into the bay we could see a shape moving on the shore. This was to be our first brown bear of the trip. There was a creek trickling out into the bay, and the bear was sat on the banks of the stream determined to catch salmon. The bear was nervous, and as we slowly made our approach, it started to retreat. We switched off the engines and started to glide in closer to shore, and luckily, the bear decided to try and continue fishing. The group stood on the bow of the boat and watched the bear catch two different salmon, retreating into the forest each time to feast on its prized catch.



The bear continued to be nervous, so we decided to leave it in peace and let it go about its business. And so, we continued westwards once again, leaving Seal Bay and turning into the neighbouring Long Bay. This second inlet was slightly deeper than Seal Bay, and at the end, we saw another bear. This time, it was even harder to get close to the bear. We could also see common mergansers on the edge of the creek flowing into the bay.

Leaving the bear behind, we had brief views of a third bear and saw several bald eagles as they flew about the fjords and inlets. The area was also home to large numbers of Bonaparte's gull. After lunch, we had to return to the community of Tenakee Springs to ensure we could fill up the fuel tanks for the long journey ahead of us tomorrow.

With the weather setting in, we decided to head back to the guesthouse and enjoy a relaxing afternoon. The weather had really taken a turn for the worse with the rain starting to get heavier and heavier. We enjoyed another

incredible meal thanks to our host Kay, and headed off to bed to get some rest for our voyage to the tribal community of Kake on Kupreanof Island.

After another huge breakfast, we gathered our bags and had them ready to load onto a trailer we hooked up to a quad bike. We drove the luggage down to the marina and loaded up all the luggage into the boat's storage area. And so we headed south and journeyed along the coastline of Baranof Island (the same island as Sitka can be found). It wasn't long before we came across a bear on a beach and we enjoyed prolonged views as it worked its way along the tideline as it searched for food. Photography opportunities were limited, and the bear eventually moved off the beach and up into the forest. Neil turned the boat south once more and we headed towards an area of Baranof Island's east coast famed for its waterfalls.

We arrived at the first waterfall and were certainly not disappointed. This towering cascade of water fell directly into the deep waters of the passage, and as we got closer to the falls, a humpback whale emerged only a few yards from the shore. It was magical to see a full-grown whale so close to the falls and an unexpected bonus.

With lots of ground to cover, we continued further southwards and entered into a narrow passageway to Red Bluff Bay. This incredible fjord was a magical place. Flat calm water, jaw-droppingly beautiful scenery and spectacular waterfalls captured the entire group's imagination. As we sat by a magnificent set of falls, one of the group saw an unusual bird bobbing up and down in the water. It was only after we got a better view that we realised it was a bald eagle which was swimming. We surmised that the bird had tried to catch a fish and ended up waterlogged. We slowly made our way towards the bird as it swam ashore and climbed up a tree. The eagle shook itself, cleaned its feathers with its beak before it took flight and found a higher, more secure perch. We were able to capture some beautiful imagery of the bird as it sat among the branches. Then we noticed a couple of Canada geese resting on the rocky shore, while a belted kingfisher and hermit thrush provided some further interest.



Having enjoyed an excellent morning exploring these beautiful waterways, we crossed the main sound to Kuiu Island and Tebenkof Bay. As we did, we came across numerous humpbacks as they dived in search of food. However, we didn't stop for long as we had a tip-off that there may be bubble-net feeding at Tebenkof Bay. We came across a beautiful rocky island off the coast of Kuiu Island, which was surrounded by numerous sea otters and common (harbour) seals, sat on top of the rocks were numerous bald eagles. It was a great place to try and capture the majesty by taking panoramic images.

Time was getting away from us ,so we carried on down to Tebenkof Bay to see if we could find any whales. It wasn't long before we got a glimpse of our first blow as a whale surfaced. Then we saw it for the first time

– a group of whales all surfacing together before diving down one after another. We just had to hope that now they would partake in community bubble-net feeding. At the same time, we saw a bear wandering along a beach, but we decided to prioritise the whales. Then suddenly, the whales all erupted together at the surface as they worked together to catch the herring – their favoured food. What an incredible sight. Now we just had to try and capture it. Neil has spent years observing this behaviour around Sitka, so he was doing everything he could to ensure we were in the right position.

We spent the next couple of hours enjoying multiple bubble-net feeding events and captured some absolutely incredible images. With only around 100 whales in the world known to feed in this way, we were treated to a unique show. The entire group were smiling from ear to ear, as were Neil and myself, as we lapped up this wildlife spectacle. Your first afternoon watching and photographing bubble-net feeding is something you will never forget. What makes this type of encounter even more special is that the whales call as they prepare to feed. The lead whale, the whale that coordinates the feeding event, calls as it blows a bubble curtain around the school of fish. The call resonates through the hull of the boat and is clearly audible as the whales get closer to the surface. Suddenly, the pitch of the call changes and the whales simultaneously erupt out of the water with their mouths wide open. They catch the fish and then slowly spread out to push the water through the baleen plates and swallow their meal. It really is remarkable. Once they have caught their breath and swallowed their prize, they dive again and start over again.



It is amazing how quickly time goes by when you are busy photographing and enjoying such remarkable wildlife encounters. With a fair amount of water to cover before we arrived in Kake, it was time to move on. We worked our way up the western coastline of Kuiu Island and turned eastwards as we reached its northern tip. Arriving in Kake, we quickly found our mooring. Once the pick-up truck arrived, we loaded our luggage and were soon driving down the road to Waterfront Lodge, our home for the next three nights

On our way to the lodge, we stopped at the bridge by the community's salmon hatchery and saw our first black bears of the trip as they tried to catch salmon swimming upstream. We couldn't stop for long as we needed to get to the lodge for dinner. The group were quickly shown to their rooms, which were very

comfortable, and then we headed downstairs to eat. There was a fabulous feast laid out for us. Our hosts were an indigenous Alaskan family and they served up a wonderful meal in the dining area downstairs. With our hunger satisfied and our thirst quenched, we retreated to our rooms for a well-earned rest and a good night's sleep.

Day 9: Kake

Tuesday 18 July 2023

This morning we decided to enjoy a leisurely start to the day as we had another two nights in Kake and didn't have to hurry. We met up for breakfast before taking a leisurely walk down to the bridge (only a couple of hundred yards) where we could see a black bear fishing in the shallow waters of the creek. The bear wandered up the waterway towards the hatchery, so we decided to move upstream too. We wandered up the road and ended up on the path above the river, looking down as the bear was fishing below. It was apparent that there were multiple young bears visiting as the salmon gathered in the water to spawn.



Neil had arranged a tour around the hatchery with the manager, and after we had spent some time in the rain watching the bears, we walked over to learn about the process. I don't think any of us could have known how complicated it would be. I think we all assumed that they harvested salmon as they came to spawn and then simply raised the fry in tanks before releasing them. In reality, after removing the spawn from salmon, there was so much more to it. An incredibly complex series of processes are involved to ensure that the eggs were viable before hatching them and raising the young fish. It was an incredibly informative tour and it helped explain the benefits of hatcheries for salmon stocks in this remote area.

After finding out all about the hatchery, we exited and found more black bears on the river and a number of bald eagles in the trees above. With rain continuing to fall and photography options limited due to the low light, we decided to head back to the lodge to enjoy lunch on the veranda overlooking the bay. The rain started to clear and the plan for this afternoon was to take the group on drives around the island's roads in search of land-based wildlife.



With Neil at the wheel, we headed through town and followed the road out into the forest. It wasn't long before we saw our first Sitka black-tailed deer as a pair of youngsters stood on the track in front of us. We ventured further up the mountain track, but sadly all was quiet. We decided to turn back towards Kake and see if we had luck on the way. An American marten dashed across the road in front of us and a little further on we had our first glimpse of a porcupine. While we were out on the drive, the rest of the group spent their time enjoying a spot of bear-watching from the bridge.

We were able to conduct one more drive before dinner, but unfortunately, we were not as lucky as before. On this drive, we only enjoyed close views of some deer not far outside of town. We rushed back to ensure we weren't late for what was another excellent meal. We were spoilt by the wonderful food that had been provided for us once again.

Day 10: Tebenkof Bay & Kake

Wednesday 19 July 2023

This morning we headed out on the water once again and decided to return to the area south of Kuiu Island, to Tebenkof Bay. We hadn't had enough of the whale's bubble-net feeding and so we wanted to try our luck once again. The forecast was for wind and rain, but the weather gods must have been smiling down on us as it was only lightly overcast and the water was relatively flat.

Our first sighting, bar the odd sea otter bobbing around in the water, was a group of red-necked phalaropes flying across the water's surface. We arrived at Tebenkof Bay and we couldn't quite believe what we saw. There they were, the whales had all surfaced in a group again, just like a few days earlier.

There was also something else swimming in the water. At first, it looked like a sea lion was swimming along the surface, lifting its flipper out of the water. It was only as it got closer we realised it was, in fact, a shark. We took some pictures as the shark swam along the surface in a rather odd manner. We think it was probably injured or unwell, and that was why it was at the surface for such a prolonged period. The shark kept on

swimming so we focussed our efforts on the whales. We stayed with the whales for most of the middle of the day, enjoying over 50 bubble-net feeding events.



What another incredible day out on the water. We were absolutely blown away by the fantastic feeding events we were able to watch again and again. Just like a couple of days earlier, we could hear the whales' feeding call over and over again through the hull.

At 3 pm, we decided it was time to head back to Kake where we were set to enjoy our final dinner at the Waterfront Lodge. We made good speed time back to Kake with only a couple of brief sightings on the way. We enjoyed another fabulous meal at the lodge and then took a final drive out on the forest tracks to the hills behind the town.

We set out after dinner and took the road north out of Kake into the forest, trying to see what we could find. Tonight, we didn't find any deer, instead, we came across three different porcupines on the big loop. There were a few locals driving around this evening, and unfortunately, moose continued to elude us. We did discover the 'city' dump and decided to take a look as it might be a good spot to find some bears. Indeed it was. Firstly a bear appeared from one side and walked across in front of us and climbed over a barrier at the edge of the parking area. Then, as we moved closer, we saw a mother and two cubs. The mother had clearly been making use of the food waste as she was a little rotund. It isn't the place you want to see wildlife, but you can't blame the bears for wanting to make the most of the easy pickings.

With another busy day behind us, it was time to get some sleep and wake up early for another busy day ahead.

Day 11: Kake to Petersburg

Thursday 20 July 2023

This morning we awoke to a beautiful day. The bay in front of the lodge looked absolutely beautiful as we headed down for breakfast. Well-prepped for a long day out on the water, we had our bags packed and ready

for our lift to the marina. As we were about to leave the lodge, a mink ran across the beach and disappeared underneath the neighbouring houses.

Our first sighting out on the water was of a number of harbour porpoises and some sea otters floating on the surface. We rounded the point heading west and came across our first humpback whale of the day. As we were on a mission, we decided to carry on and see if we would strike lucky with the bubble-netting further south. Today we could see the mountains of the mainland as we exited the bay and started to head east. The next thing we bumped into was a pod of Dall's porpoise, but it was only a fleeting glimpse.

Venturing further east, heading into Frederick Sound, we came across our first humpback of the day. This humpback was an absolute star. It decided to put on quite a show for us, making numerous breaches and providing some incredible photography opportunities. It was absolutely incredible – what a start to the day!



We intended to carry on, knowing we had a lot of water to cover, but instead, we bumped into around 20 humpback whales who bubble-netted the moment we arrived. This was not the only thing that caught our attention. The water seemed to be boiling. It was then that we realised that this 'boiling water' was actually millions of herring swimming at the surface. We were blessed with the most fabulous weather and the wildlife encounters only got better. One of the whales had a baby which seemed to be learning the art of this remarkable behaviour. We did notice that the youngster kept getting left behind and it started to play very close to the boat. We watched as it tailed slapped and then made its approach. It came right up to the boat and rolled over just behind the stern. It was such a delight and something we will never forget. After spending over an hour watching the adults feed and enjoying the company of the baby, it was time to move on and make our way to Petersburg. We needed to fill up with fuel before enjoying the afternoon visiting LeConte Glacier.



As we approached Petersburg, we suddenly hit a thick bank of fog and had to reduce our speed as we were reliant upon radar. As quickly as the fog had appeared, it disappeared and we had a clear run to the refuelling jetty. We had mastered the art of mooring up and refuelling so were soon on our way. We immediately set off to the south-east of Petersburg to LeConte Bay. It wasn't long before we started to see our first growlers (small icebergs) which had carved off the glacier. We slowly motored our way closer, picking our way through the ice field, and came across our first common seal hauled out on a small berg. Slowly but surely, we made our way further and further into the fjord and were all in awe of the spectacular scenery. The birdlife around included Bonaparte's and glaucous-winged gulls, as well as pigeon guillemot and a bald eagle. Vast, near-vertical sides of the fjord towered above us on each side as we zig-zagged through the ice. Finally, we turned a corner and there was LeConte Glacier cascading down from the high mountains above. This spectacular scene was an absolute delight and it provided something different from the past week or so. With the day flying by, we started to make our way back to Petersburg. The sun was now in our eyes and it was difficult to spot small pieces of ice in the water. It meant we had to navigate our way through the ice with great care and it took a fair bit of time before we cleared the ice field and were out in the sound once more.

On our way back to Petersburg, Neil radioed the harbour master and requested a mooring in the marina. We were given a berth and we were soon unloading our luggage. Our accommodation for the next couple of nights was only a couple of hundred yards from the boat so we hauled our luggage and quickly checked in. After a chance to freshen up, we reconvened at reception and wandered to an outdoor eatery next door. The weather was still glorious and we enjoyed a fantastic meal with Neil joining us. After a great evening, we were able to retreat to our rooms for another deserved rest.



Day 12: Exploring around Mitkof Island

Friday 21 July 2023

After some fantastic weather the day before, we expected to wake up to heavy rain and for it to last much of the day. In fact, despite there being heavy cloud cover, it seemed the rain had already passed and we would have a relatively dry day. With a limited breakfast at the hotel, we decided to wander down to a bakery and see what we could find. It was also where we planned to buy the day's lunch.

We then walked the short distance to the boat and headed out onto the water. Today we were taking a route that was new to Neil, working our way through a narrow passageway between Mitkof and Kupreanof Islands. As we headed south, we saw countless bald eagles, but otherwise, the waterways were rather quiet. The landscape, on the other hand, was absolutely beautiful. We cruised southwards as we searched the waters for wildlife, with the mountains protruding from the mist which lay over the islands.

The narrow passage eventually opened up, and we came across some small islands where we enjoyed a murmuration of some waders and numerous common seals sat on the rocks. We kept venturing south before arriving on the coastline of Prince of Wales Island and here we entered a narrow inlet called Red Bay. The tide was really moving and we had to take it slow to keep in the deeper water. Here we enjoyed views of a harbour seal on the rocks while Bonaparte's and short-billed gulls perched atop of some seaweed floating on the water. As we left the bay, a collared kingfisher perched up on a branch but quickly disappeared.

We started to cross Summer Strait and discovered some humpback whales surfacing and diving with a number of common murre (guillemots) resting on the water. We didn't stay long as they weren't bubble-net feeding and the photography opportunities were limited. On the chart we saw a small archipelago called Rookery Islands and decided to investigate. It quickly became apparent that the rocky islands were home to a large colony of common seals a number of sea otters also in the surrounding waters. Continuing onwards, we tried to find more sea otters as this was our number one target for the day. Then, completely by chance, we stumbled upon a huge raft of sea otters – around 200 strong. What an incredible sight it was too. We were treated to prolonged views as they sat in the thick kelp close to shore.



And so, after a fabulous day of exploration, it was time to head back to Petersburg for our last night before returning to Sitka the next day. We made good time with the seas still calm, and entered the narrow passage once more, this time heading north. Arriving in Petersburg, we returned to the same berth as the one we left this morning and made the short journey back to the hotel. Petersburg only had limited eateries so we wandered to the pizza restaurant just down from the hotel. With another feast behind us, it was time to retreat to our rooms for our final night in this magical part of Alaska.

Day 13: Petersburg to Sitka

Saturday 22 July 2023

We headed out first thing to see if we could grab some breakfast from a nearby eatery. We picked up our luggage and headed down to the marina so we could get out on the water for the long journey ahead to Sitka. We headed north, following the coast of Kupreanof Island towards Frederick Sound. As we made our way, we came across glaucous-winged gull, common guillemot and harbour porpoises. Just like it had a couple of days earlier, fog descended on the water and our progress was slower than anticipated.

Our plan was to head back to the same area where we had seen the 20 or so humpback whales feeding a couple of days earlier. As we approached the area where we had left the whales, to our surprise, there they all were. A large group of whales surfaced in tandem and then dived which quickly led to our first bubble-net feeding event of the day. Unfortunately, our visibility was pretty limited due to the cloud cover. The youngster we enjoyed a close encounter with before, appeared close to the boat and decided to come towards us once more. As the adults dived down, the young whale didn't follow and instead ended up alongside our boat. When it hadn't moved for a while, and its breathing slowed, we realised it had been left with us and it was fast asleep. With the engines off, we drifted with the calf for some time until it was time for us to continue our journey to Sitka. We could still hear the adults as they continued to feed out of sight in the fog.



Neil plotted our journey westwards, and we headed across to the shores of Admiralty Island where we were blown away by the natural beauty that was all around us. We came across a pod of harbour porpoises and a couple of humpbacks. With the continued limited visibility, whale watching was tricky and we continued on our long journey across to Baranof Island. As we crossed the open waters of the main strait, we spied a few more humpbacks as they surfaced for a breath and it wasn't long before we were making our way along the north coast of Baranof Island and headed back to Sitka.



As we made our way back, we fought a roaring tide and the weather turned. The clouds enclosed as Sitka came into our sights, and as we headed south, the rain started to fall. We came into the marina and moored the boat. There we were able to unload our bags from the boat and get them in the vehicles for the short drive to the hotel. Before we got in the cars, we enjoyed a bottle of sparkling wine and raised a glass to our fabulous skipper, Neil, as we would not be seeing him again. We couldn't be more thankful for his incredible hospitality, companionship and, more importantly, his remarkable knowledge. What a trip!

By now, the rain was hammering down and we agreed to meet up after the chance to freshen up so that we could go for dinner at a waterfront restaurant called Longliner. With the rain pouring, we caught a shuttle to the restaurant and arranged for a pick-up later on. We enjoyed an excellent last meal in Alaska and reminisced over the fabulous couple of weeks we'd enjoyed with Neil out on the water. Feeling very full, we were picked up by the shuttle and returned to our rooms for our last night in the state of Alaska.

Day 14: Sitka to Seattle

Sunday 23 July 2023

Today we had a leisurely start, and the group took the opportunity to wander into a soggy Sitka town centre and have a look in the shops for potential keepsakes and souvenirs. With a lunchtime flight back to Seattle, we organised a shuttle to get us there with plenty of time. Upon our arrival at the airport we were able to drop our luggage off and proceeded through security. The departure area was incredibly busy as another flight had been delayed and the passengers were filling the limited available space.

Once the previous flight had taken off, our own flight's passengers filled the empty space and it wasn't long before we were boarding. We took off on time and were soon in the air, making our way south to Seattle. We touched down in Seattle and made our way through to baggage reclaim. We quickly progressed through the airport and bumped into the airport shuttle before we had even had a chance to phone for it. We were able to hop aboard and were quickly delivered to the reception of Cedarbrook Lodge. After a slight delay to check-in, we were given our keys and headed off to rest and shower before dinner.

We reconvened at our outside table, enjoying a warm summer's evening, and had a wonderful last meal as a group. It was a fantastic way to spend our final evening together and it wasn't long before we headed back to our rooms for our last night's sleep on US soil.

Day 15: Seattle to London

Monday 24 July 2023

We were able to enjoy another relaxed morning as we had another lunchtime flight, this time back home to the UK. We checked in at a very busy Seattle-Tacoma Airport and managed to join the priority queue for security, so avoided the large queues. Thanks to BA Executive Club cards and tickets, we managed to get everyone in the business class lounge and enjoyed the peace and quiet, as well as the hospitality available. Knowing our flight was about to start boarding, we headed downstairs to our departure gate. We took off and started a smooth and speedy overnight flight back to London Heathrow.

Day 16: Arrive in London

Tuesday 25 July 2023

After a very smooth flight, we arrived in the skies above London first thing and joined the holding pattern before we could touch down at Heathrow. After landing we taxied directly to the terminal and quickly disembarked. It was here that I had to say goodbye to the group as I was catching an onward flight home to Inverness.

We had enjoyed a remarkable couple of weeks filled with countless whales, eagles and numerous bears. It couldn't have been a better trip and the photography opportunities were second to none.

Checklist for Seldom Seen Alaska Photography



	Common Name	Scientific name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13
	BIRDS														
1	Canada goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>							✓						
2	Harlequin duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				✓									
3	Surf scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>				✓									
4	White-winged scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi</i>				✓									
5	Common merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>						✓							
6	Red-throated loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>											✓		
7	Pelagic cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>											✓		
8	Bald eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	✓												
10	Black oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>		✓									✓		
11	Red-necked phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>									✓		✓		
12	Black turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>							✓		✓	✓			
13	Surfbird	<i>Aphriza virgata</i>		✓					✓			✓			
14	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓										
15	Bonaparte's gull	<i>Chroicocephalus philadelphia</i>				✓	✓	✓				✓	✓		
16	Glaucous-winged gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>		✓									✓	✓	
17	Arctic tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>											✓		
18	Common guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>											✓	✓	
19	Pigeon guillemot	<i>Cephus columba</i>		✓	✓		✓					✓	✓	✓	
20	Marbled murrelet	<i>Brachyramphus marmoratus</i>		✓											
21	Ancient murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Rhinoceros auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>		✓	✓										



23	Tufted puffin	<i>Fratercula cirrhata</i>		✓		✓									
24	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓												
25	Rufous hummingbird	<i>Selasphorus rufus</i>				✓	✓								
26	Belted kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>							✓	✓			✓		
27	Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>						✓							
28	Northwestern crow	<i>Corvus caurinus</i>						✓		✓					
29	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
30	Tree swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>				✓									
31	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>				✓									
32	Varied thrush	<i>Ixoreus naevius</i>					✓								
33	Hermit thrush	<i>Catharus guttatus</i>							✓						
34	American robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>						✓							
35	Townsend's warbler	<i>Setophaga townsendi</i>				✓									
36	Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>				✓									
37	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>				✓									
	MAMMALS														
1	Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Harbour porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>				✓						✓	✓	✓	
3	Dall's porpoise	<i>Phocoenoides dalli</i>				✓		✓				✓			
4	Orca (killer whale)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>				✓									
5	Stellar's sea lion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>			✓				✓						
6	Harbour seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓			✓			✓	✓		
7	Black-tailed deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>			✓			✓		✓					
8	Sea otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	
9	American mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>										✓			
10	American marten	<i>Martes americana</i>								✓					
11	American black bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>								✓	✓				
12	Grizzly bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>						✓	✓						
13	North American porcupine	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>								✓	✓				