



The Pale Whale Tales (Internet edition) The official newsletter of the Allison Wonderland

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Editor's corner

Happy New Year from smoky Australia! It's really quite an experience to be living on the bottom of the world, going for a swim in the Pacific on Christmas Day, watching the flames of a bushfire coming over the escarpment into town - not something we're going to be forgetting any time soon! For those who haven't heard, I'm living in Australia now, working on a post-doc at the University of Wollongong, about an hour south of Sydney. My research may be taking me a bit away from whales for a while - I'll be working on the biomechanics of breast tissue for the next eighteen months - but CERF lives on, and this year promises to be one of the most exciting yet.

We're going to be publishing the Pale Whale Tales more often, now that we have an easier-to-use mailing system. Each issue will be full of details of our research and eco-tourism programmes, and will include a backgrounder on some aspect of marine mammal biology (humpbacks this month - harbour seals next month). In the interest of making it as accessible as possible to everyone, we'll keep it to text-only. We'll also make an Adobe PDF version with pictures, etc., but we'll leave that on our website for download so as not to overload anybody's mailbox.

I hope you will enjoy reading the Pale Whale Tales, in whatever format, and that you will stick with us for a while. Those of you who've been on one of our trips

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know first hand how important you all are to the work we do – thank you to all for the help and the friendship. To those who've yet to join us, I hope the Pale Whale Tales will entice you to come to Canada or Mexico with us some day - we'll look forward to meeting you.

In the meantime, all the best to you and yours for the holidays and the new year!

William



Cape Caution 2001

What a summer!

Last summer was a fantastic one for grey whales. At one point in late August, we had at least 35 whales at Cape Caution - whale soup, we called it! We had our usual complement of humpbacks, including several resightings from previous years. White-sides and the occasional killer whale completed the cetacean picture for us, and a new study on harbour seals rounded out our marine mammal catalogue.

2001 was our longest season yet, running from late June right through till the end of September, when Susanne & William finally got chased away from Cape Caution by one too many gales... We finished the season with 40 rolls of film, 20 biopsies, and several video recordings of whales under the boats. We also extended our study area half way to Prince Rupert, making two transects along the outer coast as far as Aristazabal Island.

Perhaps the most exciting part of the summer (aside from 35 whales at a time) was the appearance of the



first friendly whale at Cape Caution. Noddy (G038), a whale we've known since 1994, took a liking to the boats this summer, and put on quite a show. She would roll around the boats, looking up at the excited humans rushing from stem to stern, and even got close enough on several occasions to shake hands or get her nose rubbed by folks hanging over the gunwales! Hopefully she'll continue the behaviour next year.

Introductions

CERF would like to welcome Julie Scott-Ashe as our new Director of Operations. Julie has been working with CERF for two years, both above and below the water's surface. She was a member of the 2000 Dawghaus crew, assisting with dive operations on Lei Lani's PhD research on mysids and on the second stage of our subtidal biodiversity project. Alongside her research duties, Julie rose to the challenge of coordinating CERF's kitchens (all five of 'em!). Last winter, she worked on our humpback whale data, compiling the information into a useful database we will be building on in years to come as we extend our coverage of humpback feeding grounds in BC. During the summer of 2001, Julie joined our whale survey team, working on everything from photo-id to theodolite tracking to biopsy darting. In August, she accepted the invitation to take on the Director of Ops position. Her first assignment in that role was to coordinate the logistics for new research we're beginning in collaboration with the University of Washington on harbour seals in Rivers Inlet. Since the end of the summer, Julie has pretty much been running the whole CERF show, with a few bits of input from William Down Under. She's now preparing to lead a crew on CERF's third expedition to Mexico next February.



Congratulations

Lei Lani Stelle completed her PhD at the University of California, Los Angeles, at the end of August this year. Her thesis, entitled "Behavioral Ecology of Gray Whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) Feeding on Mysids in British Columbia, Canada", was the culmination of four years' hard work - well done! Dr. Stelle is currently a Lecturer at UCLA, teaching undergraduate biology. Her research interests are now turning to smaller cetaceans, particularly the dolphins and porpoises of LA Bay.



Humpback Whales

(Megaptera novaeangliae)

by Anita Holtham

The humpback whale is perhaps best known for dazzling viewers with acrobatic displays including breaching (throwing themselves bodily out of the water), fluking (exposing the underside of the tail before a deep dive), spy-hopping and tail lobbing (raising their flukes out of the water and then slapping them on the surface). Humpback whales are found in all of the world's oceans, and in the Northeast Pacific, they migrate between winter breeding grounds in Mexico and Hawaii and summer feeding grounds along the west coast of North America, from California to Alaska.

These whales were relentlessly hunted from the early 1900s until 1966, when they were finally protected by the International Whaling Commission.

Humpback whales are members of the rorqual family, which includes blue whales, fin whales, and the minke whale. The upper dorsal surface of humpbacks is black, and the underside is a mottled white and black. Adult male humpbacks can reach 48 feet in length and weigh up to 35 tons, whereas the larger females can reach up to 50 feet and weigh up to 40 tons. Individual humpback whales can be identified from photographs of the underside of their tails, which vary in size, shape and colouration from all black, mottled to all white.



Humpback whales are baleen whales which feed by sucking krill (small shrimp-like crustaceans), herring, anchovies and other small fish into their mouths, then expelling water through the baleen plates, leaving behind the fish and crustaceans. They can eat up to a ton and a half of food a day!

The whales mate during the winter months in the south from about November to May, with males mating with several females during one season. Often males aggressively fight for the right to mate with a female. During the breeding season, male humpbacks produce long, complex vocalisations called songs, likely to attract females.

Mexico 2002

Mas ballenas grises - more grey whales

Our first full season in Mexico last winter was an amazing experience, and one that's got us planning a second expedition this winter. We were simply blown away last winter by the numbers of grey whales in San Ignacio Lagoon - on any given day, we could step out of our tents and count some eighty or so whales right from the campsite. By the time we loaded up our car & trailer to go home, we had run through some fifty or so rolls of photo-id film.

We're still sorting through the photographs, but in the first four rolls, we've already managed to match one of the whales there with one of "our" Cape Caution whales, namely CG009 (Milky Way) - a whale who spent every summer from 1994 to 1998 in BC, but who hasn't been seen in our area since. Hopefully as we dig further into the photographs, we'll find a few more. This is exciting stuff in the grey whale world, since



there's always been the assumption that the BC and Washington summertime residents migrated south with everybody else, and although genetics studies have indicated that they are not a separate population, there's never been any photographic proof, until now.

Now we're making plans to go back. Funding is, as usual, going to be what determines how long we can stay (and even whether we can go). At the moment, the plan is to go for a week in February. William won't be

able to make it this year, but Julie & Mark plan to leave Vancouver on the 15th and return on the 24th. They'll be working with a local whale-watching company, who will provide transport, food, fuel, boats and a place to camp, right on the shore of the lagoon.

To make any of this happen, however, we're going to need a minimum of six people. We're still working on the details so we haven't set a definitive price yet, but we expect we'll be able to do the trip for about the same as our summer trips, namely something like \$200 a day. The trip would run from February 18th to the 24th, and start from Loreto, Baja California Sur. If you're interested, please let Julie know as soon as possible (info@cerf.bc.ca).

Details: [click here](#)



That's it for this month. Next month: grey whales & harbour seals. If there are topics you'd like to read about in this newsletter, please feel free to email us with suggestions. Have a great new year - we'll talk at you again sometime in January.

All the best,

William & Julie (& co.)

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