

My Cruise to the Farallon Islands: Sunday, Sept. 5th, 2021

Hullo:

This time, I did the cruise to the Farallon Islands with David McGuire and his Shark Stewards Project, one of our fellow projects at Earth Island Institute. I helped a bit find and talk about whales, while David talked a lot about sharks.

It was a very nice, calm ocean (unusually so), but foggy, with little sunshine until we returned to San Francisco. The Farallon Islands had fewer birds at this time of year, but an abundance of sea lions, both Steller and California species.

And then there were the whales – a lot of feeding activity among dozens of humpback whales we passed going to and from the island.

I enjoyed it and recommend it. David is running some more trips this September and October, and you can get information and sign up here:

https://www.universe.com/events/farallon-sanctuary-and-devils-teeth-wildlife-expedition-tickets-san-francisco-J4VL5Y?ref=uniiverse-transactional_emailer-ticket_reply

So, here are a few photos from the trip. Enjoy!

-- Mark J. Palmer

Who was that masked man? David McGuire, our fearless shark leader (although I noticed he did not volunteer to jump into the water to try to attract a Great White Shark at the islands) was masked, as we all were due to COVID, also required to have our vaccines.



Soon we were on our merry way. The islands (after a couple of hours cruising) showed up through the fog. Amazing place – rugged and otherworldly.



We are well past the breeding season for the islands, which peaks in spring, but there were plenty of birds remaining, plus an abundance of California and Steller sea lions. The Steller sea lions are light brown (when dry); California sea lions are darker brown and gray.







At the islands in a cove called “Shark Alley” by researchers, David had a permit to put out a decoy designed to attract Great White Sharks. Looks questionably like a seal, but David showed us the teeth marks to prove it works. Unfortunately, we watched for 30 minutes, but no sharks visited us. Next time?



And then of course, there were the humpback whales, quite a few of them, who were feeding. In the shot below, you can compare the size of the humpback's fluke, which is about fifteen feet wide, to the heads of the sea lions, which are not small animals.



Here are four humpbacks in a cooperative feeding group. You can see the distinct “humps”, from which early whalers drew their popular name.



They were engaged in what is called “lunge feeding,” in which the whales circle and push schools of fish, likely anchovies here, to the surface and lunge through the schools with their mouth agape, taking in gallons of water and fish, with the water strained out through their baleen plates, leaving the nice raw fish behind to be swallowed. The commotion attracts large numbers of hungry sea lions and birds. Here, a look at the top of the heads of the two humpbacks, with their blowholes. The bumps are called tubercles – not known what they are for.



And here are two humpbacks displaying their lower jaw and throat, with the pleats that allow the mouth to expand enormously as they charge through the school of fish. The Farallon Islands are a major summer and fall feeding ground for these humpbacks.



Underneath the humpback fluke, there is a pattern of white and black, which is unique to each individual whale, like a fingerprint. These flukeprints are used to identify and count whales, up and down the coast, allowing biologists to build a picture of humpback populations, breeding success, and migrations.



Not all is well for the whales along our coast. While several populations have bounced back from near-extinction due to whaling in previous centuries, they still face severe hazards, including pollution, plastic debris, entanglement in fishing gear, strikes from speeding commercial shipping, and global warming messing with their food supplies.

