

Dutch Harbor, Alaska

== PART 2 ==



Read *Part 1* in the Sept 2022 Edition of *Slidell Magazine*.

Story and photos by Donna Bush

Two months ago, I shared with you my first trip to my dream spot in Alaska - Dutch Harbor. I mentioned how difficult it is to travel 800+ miles out into the Aleutian Chain. The sheer distance; unpredictable and often changing weather; plus, the challenge of landing and taking off at the airport, add to the complexity. Yet, for those brave enough to overcome these obstacles, the trip is beautiful and rewarding!

As I shared in the first edition, we had to replace our rental car, a vintage Ford Explorer, within about 4 hours of picking it up. While driving a very secluded mountain road, a mysterious alarm began to sound. The dashboard flashed an ominous message "SERVICE RSC NOW!" The ear-piercing noise would not stop for more than a minute or two at a time. This made it quite frustrating to drive and terrified any nearby wildlife. In addition to this, the check engine light was on and intermittently illuminated "change oil now." As soon as we gained a bit of cell coverage, we called the agency who asked us to return to their location for a quick check. Of course, we were on a tight schedule as we were trying to make it to the hillside above the airport to shoot Ravn airplanes landing and taking off.

When we arrived, techs quickly appeared and began checking the vehicle. Initially, they thought they would be able to reset the code and we could continue on our trip. Another tech walked up to confer and stated that this particular code would continue to cause an alarm until the issue was repaired. He also explained that RSC stood for Roll Stability Control which helps the vehicle avoid rolling over. Sounds kinda' necessary driving on gravel mountain roads. Bummer! Now what? Within a matter of minutes, they had another vehicle parked beside our previous rental and we were transferring our gear to the replacement. Wow! Each vehicle just gets larger! I'm not a fan of driving big vehicles but no way could I put up with the annoying alarm. Now we are sporting a Ford Excursion! As we drive off, I notice the illuminated change oil now on the dash screen. We quickly headed to the hillside for photos but were stopped by a crossing arm signal blocking the road. The crossing arm looked just like one you would see at a railroad crossing, but there weren't any railroad tracks! Being curious, I asked Carlin why there was a crossing block. "It's to stop traffic while airplanes take-off and land. We've actually had landing gear clip the roof of a vehicle!" After hearing this, we were happy to wait!

The arm lifted and we headed to take our photos. I slowed to a stop and thought I would roll down my driver's side window. Well, that's about all I was able to do; think about it. It did not budge! The passenger window had a mind of its own and would occasionally open when the button was pressed but rarely rolled up. Later, I realized the door lock button locked everything except the backseat

passenger side. Such fun! We scored some great shots of both landing and take-off. Afterwards, we continued our tour of the island.

Prior to the trip, we had researched and targeted some subjects. On the list were the foxes of Dutch Harbor that roam the local neighborhoods, like a greeter welcoming you to visit.

Unangan folklore contains many references to the red fox, often referred to as a magical guide capable of transformation. The fox has long been known for its cunning and mischievous nature. While foxes were indigenous to Unalaska and Unimak Island, they did not exist on many of the other Alaskan islands. Arctic foxes from the Commander Islands were introduced on Attu in the 1750's by the Russians. Over the years, both Arctic and red foxes were introduced across many of the Aleutian Islands for fur farming. However, this took a toll on ground nesting birds. Government policy changed from farming to fox removal. A drop in fur prices led to less interest in fox farming. On many of the islands, the foxes died off naturally or were over-trapped. The red fox out-competed the Arctic fox on Unalaska and reigned supreme. Nesting bird populations recovered once the Arctic foxes disappeared and red foxes were reluctant to swim to the nesting locations.

As Carlin guided us around, she shared, "You will see foxes everywhere." Yet we didn't. We were starting to wonder if we were jinxed when we saw one meandering across a parking lot. A few minutes later, we found another lounging inside the fence of the beautiful Russian Orthodox Church.

Also known as the Church of the Holy Ascension, this National Historic Landmark was built in 1898 and has been the spiritual center of the Unalaska community ever since. It was regularly maintained by parishioners until their internment in Southeast Alaska, at which time the military used the Church as a warehouse for the next 3 years with no maintenance. Upon returning home, locals found their beloved Church in terrible disrepair with holes in the roof,

missing shingles, and broken windows, allowing the wind and rain to wreak havoc. The destruction was so great, the modest parishioners could not afford the extensive repairs needed. Only patch work was performed as the building continued to deteriorate. In 1970, the Church was designated a National Historic Landmark and, in 1996, it was restored to its original splendor with funding from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Next door to the Church is the Bishop's House designed and constructed in 1882 in San Francisco. The distinctive Italianate styling and Victorian trim was shipped piece by piece to Unalaska where it was reassembled at its present site. It was destined for Bishop Nestor, who unfortunately was lost at sea during his travel to Unalaska and never lived in the home.

One of the big perks to hiking in this part of the State is the lack of bears and bugs! Trust me, you cannot say this about many places in Alaska. Most of the State is plagued by ferocious biting insects that include black flies, deer flies, biting midges and mosquitos. While we didn't have a lot of time, we did manage to hike a section of the Ugadaga Trail, which leads from Overland Pass Road down to Ugadaga Bay. The hike offered amazing vistas of the treeless tundra dotted with tiny wildflowers, along with the beauty of the Bay.

Speaking of flowers, the lupine around the island really put on a show for us. Lupine are perennials and part of the pea family, with stunningly showy blue to purple flowers. Some of the genus' seed pods can be toxic. It is best to avoid eating them.

The Aleutian Islands provide a rich, diverse and thriving marine ecosystem which is home to over 450 species of fish and invertebrates. This is one of the reasons Dutch Harbor is a huge mecca for commercial fishing of Pacific halibut, pollock, Pacific cod, Atka mackerel, red king crab, sablefish and Tanner (or snow) crab. Several species of salmon, rockfish, flounder, shrimp and sea urchins also

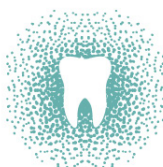


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inhabit the area. With all this delicious and tasty seafood, there's no wonder that the waters are rich with year-round sea otters, sea lions, and harbor seals. The summer months bring humpback whales and harbor porpoises to the bay area; while orcas, Pacific white-sided dolphins, sperm and gray whales are occasionally seen further out to sea.

As we motored through the bay and out to sea for our boat tour, we were thrilled to see the first schools of herring moving in the bay. Where herring are, they will soon be humpback whales!

We motored around several waterfalls and even went ashore to photograph a beautiful waterfall with lupine and other wildflowers in bloom. Nearby were a pair of pigeon guillemots perched on a rock. These black seabirds sport a distinctive white wing bar and large red, webbed feet. They are said to "fly" underwater, swimming with their wings to propel them. Like humpback whales, they enjoy a tasty meal of herring, as well as other small seafood creatures.

We were able to see both tufted and horned puffins as we motored around a rookery island nicknamed "puffin island." In the same Alcid family as pigeon guillemots, the puffins also swim underwater using their wings for propulsion and feet for steering. Both puffins spend the majority of their time in the water and only come ashore for nesting. Mating



for life, the pair both raise and care for their single chick. In order to avoid predation by bald eagles and peregrine falcons, puffins flock together in large groups in the water and fly between nesting and feeding areas as a group in a distinctive pattern resembling a wheel, making attacks difficult.

We visited a haul-out for the endangered Steller sea lion. A haul-out is where these huge mammals rest when not in the water foraging for food. The average adult male is over 10 feet in length and weighs 1245 pounds. While smaller, females average a little over 8 feet in length and 579 pounds. They breed in June, but the fertilized egg does not implant until October with birth taking place the following June. As you might imagine, their diet is entirely seafood. Although they do not migrate, they will change haul-out locations based on seasonal concentrations of their favorite prey.

Of course, we saw one of my favorite marine mammals – the sea otter; who eats, sleeps, mates and gives birth in the water. These cute creatures are actually members of the weasel family, which includes wolverines, minks, martens and badgers. Air trapped in their fur help them to maintain their body temperature in the cold water. They lose this insulation capability if the fur becomes soiled or matted with oil. This is one of the reasons they are often seen meticulously grooming themselves. They rarely travel far



unless an area becomes overpopulated causing a scarcity of food.

Sea otter moms raise their single pup alone without any assistance from the father or any relatives. She will be 24/7 as she raises her infant for the next six to eight months until old enough to survive on its own. The adult is often seen cuddling young on their chest as they bob up and down in the water, like a fishing cork. Curious and cautious creatures, when approached they may dive and surface a bit further away, warily watching; or they may lift their head out of the water to observe and appear as if waving to you.

After a wonderful boat tour of the area, we began our return to the dock. Prior to entering the protected waters, right around where we saw the herring feeding earlier, we think we see a spout or blow from a whale. Our captain paused our forward motion as we all scanned the horizon looking for more blows/spouts, which are a plume of water formed when a whale exhales at the surface. Once we sighted another one, we stayed put and watched as

they got closer, surfacing quite near our boat. Our captain turned off the engines and we drifted for over a mile with a mom and calf humpback whale swimming circles around our boat, staying with us the entire way. Carlin and our Captain shared, "These are the first humpbacks we've seen this summer!"

As I mentioned before, bald eagles are quite prolific in Dutch Harbor. The population of 4700 people live among approximately 500 or more eagles; perching on light poles and docked or motoring trawlers, picking through trash or swooping in to grab someone's lunch or grocery bag. With the fishing industry of Dutch hauling in millions of pounds of pollack, cod and crab, it is no wonder eagles flock to the Harbor. Even though many locals consider them to be overgrown pigeons, they take it in stride. After all, they are the National Bird of our Country and protected from harassment by federal law.

We were limited to how much time we could spend on the island by my return flight. Hoping to pack as much

as possible into our trip, we flew to Dutch on the first flight of the morning and scheduled our return for the last flight of the day at 7:30pm. After an action-packed first day, we began to hear reports of a major storm headed our way. Hmmm! We might actually get to experience the challenge of flight out of Dutch! We were able to reschedule our boat tour from early Wednesday morning to Tuesday afternoon. Even then, the wind and seas were starting to pick up. Over dinner that night, we discussed our options of maybe taking an earlier return flight to Anchorage. Cathy reached her Ravn Airlines contact who agreed that would be the smarter thing to do. We stopped by the airport and were able to change our flights to the first flight of the day. It turned out to be a really good choice, as the two other flights were cancelled for that day and the next!

I hope you've enjoyed my bucket list trip to Dutch Harbor, far out in the Aleutian Chain of Islands. Perhaps this has piqued your interest in pursuing your own bucket list, or maybe even getting off the beaten path!



How to Identify Different Whales by their Blow

The shape and size of the blow is distinctive to each species, based on the size and shape of their blowhole. Gray whales, for example, have a double blow-hole, and their spouts are heart-shaped. Humpback whales have a tall, column-shaped blow. And orcas typically have a bushy-shaped blow.