



Submitted photo by Oscar Frey

A humpback whale rises majestically from the depths of the ocean, giving spectators an incredible view.

Whale-watching a great adventure

BY JOHN WARREN

If you are interested in seeing one of the world's largest mammals (up to 40 tons) and you are visiting Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, between mid-December and the end of March, you would enjoy taking a trip out on the Bay of Banderas to watch the humpback whales.

Recently my wife, Barbara, and I chose to take the trip with a company called Ocean Friendly and it was an excellent choice. Oscar Frey, the owner of the company, met

us on the dock at 8:30 a.m. and gave the group a short talk about the reasons and timing of the annual migration of the whales from Alaska to Mexico and we then boarded the open, 20-foot boat headed out into the Bay of Banderas.

We hadn't been on the water for more than 20 minutes when we saw our first whale blowing "steam" in the cool morning air. We headed for the blow and soon found there were three whales in the vicinity, a mother and her calf and an immature male.

A full-grown female can be as much as 50 feet long and weigh in at 40 tons, so to see an animal of this size moving through the water is an amazing sight. The calf is born after a single year of gestation and weighs about a ton so the growth rate inside the mother is mind-boggling.

After watching the three whales for about 20 to 30 minutes, we left them alone and headed north along the coast and it wasn't long before we saw another male on its own. When we were close to him, Oscar put the under-water microphone into the water and we listened, enthralled, as the sounds of two whales "singing" to each other came through the speaker on the boat.

These songs can last for hours at a time and they vary from pod to pod, depending on where we come from — just like our accents. Apparently the male whale sings with his head hanging downwards and his tail pointing to the surface so that the sound waves bounce off the bottom of the ocean and carry in different directions. It was beautiful to hear the wide range of sounds made by these incredible creatures!

We must have seen between 10 and 12 whales during our trip. But that was not all. We also watched a big loggerhead turtle swimming along on the surface for a few minutes as well as a big manta ray and, of course, the bottle-nosed dolphins were swimming and leaping around us too.

The surface of the ocean here is often alive with small fish, such as sardines. They often break the surface when they are chased by bigger predators from the deep. Just as they escape attack from below, they are faced with the talons and beaks of the birds above them such as pelicans, frigate birds, black terns and blue-footed boobies all looking for food. The poor sardines must have a pretty high stress level!

Oscar and his crew of two were excellent. They were friendly, spoke perfect English to those of us who needed it (us) and were a mine of information about the wildlife and the ocean. Thoroughly recommended!

Fish and Gamers honour members

My limited exposure to wild game left me ambiguous. I had trouble swallowing deer sausage, but rather enjoyed moose steak and buttered, pan-fried rainbow trout. I think I learned to chew lightly after biting down hard on duck breast peppered with shot.



INFINITE OUTDOORS

Richard Burke

Richard Burke is a journalist who is passionate about outdoor living. His column appears each Saturday.

So I approached the buffet table at the annual Lethbridge Fish and Game Association's annual wild game supper last weekend with a bit of uncertainty. The labels read like a global menu but area hunters had contributed the main ingredients from their efforts in southern Alberta.

Prepared by the LA Chefs caterers were dishes such as Japanese Yaki Soba Game Bird Chow Mein, German Moose Roulade, Indian Venison Madras (with authentic red curry and yogurt), and Irish Whitetail Pot Pie.

The sleeper at a few tables seemed to be Mexican Mule Deer Enchiladas: some diners who missed it on the first pass were coaxed to try it.

Said fish and game life member Heinz Plontke, since the dinner organizers started offering wild game meals in the early '90s, the event has become increasingly popular. (The first dinner was held in 1932.) This year, about 300 people attended.

The event recognized club members who contributed to the association's success, and hunters and anglers for their showing in competitions for upland and migratory birds, big game, fishing and photography.

Brian Dingreville, in his final year as LFGA president, was given a life membership for "unselfishly giving his time" the last four years helping boost membership to more than 1,250 from under 1,000. As well, he took the lead in opposing the provincial government's Open Spaces proposal, which was pared back to become a pilot project called Recreational Access Management Plan (RAMP).

He says people are starting to feel good about attending LFGA events, particularly the dinner.

"We seem to have turned the corner. We have a really enthusiastic group who are not afraid to do what they think is right."

His time with LFGA — he also served as big game chairman for 14 years — have been among "the best years of my life." They've helped get him outdoors lots, where he enjoys the "freedom of just getting away."

The epitome of the fish and game, he says, is "seeing the kids come up to accept awards."

Among the young people receiving awards this year was Kara Popson, 12, who was recognized as the Joe Balla Memorial Junior Angler of the Year. Her catches included a two-pound, 13-oz. lake rainbow and a 15-lb., 14-oz. lake trout. She likes fishing at Waterton Lake and Moonshine Lake, in the northern part of the province.

Kara, who started fishing when she was about five years old, says it doesn't really matter if she catches anything.

"I just like being outdoors."

Jim Porteus won the Earl Carr Award for 20 years of "taking to heart his volunteering" in organizing skeet and trap shoots, with a particular eye on safety.

Certificate of merit awards were presented to Richard Roberts, Rick Blakely, Gavin Brinsmead and Dean Weger.

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Rock risk being eliminated

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS — SALT LAKE CITY

A nine-metre slab of protruding limestone near the outside exit of Utah's popular Timpanogos Cave is expected to be blasted away this spring in hopes of eliminating the risk that it might fall on visitors.

Cave officials have released an environmental analysis of the proposal, which also includes a new set of stairs and a sturdier roof near the cave's exit.

Falling rocks are a regular concern on the trail to the cave but the massive slab near the exit is particularly worrisome, said Denis Davis, superintendent of Timpanogos Cave National Monument. Part of it is directly above the cave's sheltered exit and has the potential to maim or kill anyone below, park officials said.

A geologist who inspected the rock formation said it could fall away from the cliff at any time.

"He said it could be there for another 100 years or more or it could come down tomorrow," Davis said.

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