

2015 Alaska Cruise Journal # 4



Angry Birds At our first anchorage on the Alaska Peninsula, we went ashore to stretch our legs and watch a few brown bears actively grazing in the delta of a small river (58 18.686 N, 154 16.898 W).

Walking the beach in preparation for retrieving our shore boat, we were aggressively approached by a pair of black oystercatchers, beautiful birds with striking orange beaks and yellow and orange eyes. Their high-pitched call is distinct and can be heard a great distance away.

Black oystercatchers do not build nests but lay their speckled grey eggs directly on a gravel beach just above the high tide line. Their behavior made it clear to us they were upset because we were close to their eggs. The birds came within three feet of us thrusting out their wings and loudly squawking (**photo**).

We were not sure whether they were feigning injury or attempting to appear larger, but their antics were



2015 Alaska Cruise Journal # 4

clearly their attempt to distract us away from their eggs. We were not fooled but also not successful in finding their well-camouflaged eggs.



Local Knowledge The next morning we used the marine VHF radio to converse with a passing charter captain who told us of bears feeding on a beached dead humpback whale in Kuliak Bay ([58 11.221 N, 154 17.340](#)). Other local knowledge had provided us with a similar experience several years earlier. We headed the 20 miles to Kuliak to watch the brown bears feeding. Our charts indicated that it would also be a safe harbor to ride out some reported strong incoming weather.

King of the Whale We easily found five bears feasting as reported on the whale carcass on the shoreline (**photo on previous page**), and watched the social dynamics of the group for well over an hour. The bears dined together reasonably contented except for occasional squabbles. A sow kept her second year cub away from the feeding. She participated with the group but challenged any bear that approached in the direction of her cub (**photo**).

As the tide came in, the whale floated off shore and only two bears remained feeding. One of the more assertive animals climbed on top of the whale tugging at the whale's remains while the other stood in shoulder high water (**photo**).

That evening was the first of two successive stormy nights. We found that the 13' seas out in Shelikof Strait were less than 2' by the time they penetrated the innermost reaches of Kuliak



2015 Alaska Cruise Journal # 4



Bay. Although the boat tossed and turned a bit, it did not affect our ability to sleep.

Mink Island Dig This past March Carl had read an article in the Anchorage newspaper referring to a report on archeological research that had taken place on Mink Island, a tiny island along Shelikof Strait outside of Geographic Harbor (58 03.514 N, 154 25.742 W).

Searching the charts, he found that it was one of the small outer islands in Amalik Bay, an area already on our schedule for this summer's

expedition.

Further research indicated that the site on Mink Island was excavated from 1998-2000 with additional diggings since then. We planned to use a map and photo from our online investigation to locate the primary dig site. We landed our shore boat to tie up to a large log lying on the beach. As we drew closer, we were surprised to find that the log was actually a recently deceased male Steller sea lion (**photo**).

Mink Island is considered one of the oldest sites of human occupation that has been found along the south-central coastline of Alaska with evidence of occupation dating up to 7,300 years ago.



2015 Alaska Cruise Journal # 4



We felt it was worth attempting to locate the dig where archeologists found many items like well-preserved bear bones and even possibly polar bear bone specimens. The researchers also found the bones of a neonatal walrus that were to be analyzed at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Neither of the latter two mammals are currently found anywhere near this area, but it is possible they got here as the result of climate changes or by trade among the pre-historic populations.

We had read that one of the main sites had been sealed up to protect from future erosion. Using a photo from our investigation, we located the research site. Covered with rocks and a heavy wire mesh, it certainly seems to be secure and protected from winter storms and will be available for further research at some time in the future (photo on previous page).

Mink Island is a wild treeless expanse of rock mostly covered with tall beach grass. From the boat, the grass looked like a lawn, but was actually over waist high requiring careful footing. The location of the dig is marked with an arrow which also shows the group on our way back across the island to our shore boat (photo).

After our visit, there remained two primary unanswered questions. First, what was it about this exposed remote location that would cause earlier peoples to occupy it so long ago?

Second, how did the archeologists find these locations among the thousands of miles of shoreline in this part of South Central Alaska?



Weather Rebounds

Our first two days in Geographic Harbor were cloaked in dense overcast skies with winds to 35 knots. We awoke the morning of the third day to clear sunny skies that permitted us to see the scenic mountains that surround this inlet. We went kayaking in calm conditions and explored the many islets at low tide (photo).

2015 Alaska Cruise Journal # 4



Later in the day, we spotted two National Park Service rangers in their skiff and invited them onboard. We reported the dead sea lion and they asked if we had any photos.

Marc brought out his laptop and showed them images evidencing that the sea lion had been previously branded as X259 for identification purposes. Ranger Allie diligently recorded the details and asked if we could send her a copy (photo).

A Walk On The Beach To add to this perfect day, we returned to the inner harbor to explore in the jet boat. We spotted a lone juvenile

grazing and went to take pictures (photo). After the bear retreated, we wandered further along the shore across a white sand beach bordered by glacially fed azure waters.

The next morning we headed back across Shelikof Strait towards Kodiak. After our last night out in a small cove off the east end of Raspberry Island (58 18.026 N, 154 15.113 W), we arrived in Kodiak.

Our next stop will be to fly back to Mercer Island for a short break after four adventure-filled weeks.

