

Discover Petersburg, Alaska



PHOTOS BY DAVE GIBSON

Whales, seals, and icebergs

Top, left; A behavior witnessed in very few parts of the world, humpback whales engage in bubble-net feeding. Top, right; A two-month-old harbor seal pup is safe from eagles now that it has fattened up from its mother's milk. Bottom, left; Icebergs head out to sea in LeConte Bay.

Dave Gibson
Petersburg, Alaska

Three thousand residents live in the Petersburg Borough on Mitkof Island of Southeast Alaska between Juneau and Ketchikan. Quintessentially a fishing town, it even smells like fish due to the canneries boiling fish heads to extract fish oil. A local woman I spoke to at the seafood restaurant thought, "It smells like money." True enough, 100 million pounds of fish and shellfish pass through Petersburg each year, providing a living for many. Founded in 1910 by Scandinavian immigrants, its nickname is "Little Norway." Norwegian descendants still remain and paint their homes and businesses with rosemaling accents. The best lodging is at the Scandia House conveniently located one half block from the North Dock.

The weather was 62 degrees with a light drizzle for my day of fishing at the end of July. It was 62 degrees with a light drizzle all five days I spent in Petersburg. Planning eight months in advance, none of the charter boat businesses would sell a single seat and I was fortunate to be referred to a part-time captain and college student named Brandon Ware. Luck was with us as a fellow fisherman pulled aboard a 70-pound halibut. We could hear whales exhaling through their blowholes around us, but couldn't see them in the dense fog. In the afternoon we targeted salmon by means of trolling. A pink salmon was landed and two 15-pound silver salmon. I was happy to catch an 8-pound male chum salmon with hooked jaw in full spawning colors which meant I had finally caught all five kinds of Pacific salmon (king, silver, red, pink, and

chum).

Wildlife is most easily spotted along the Mitkof Highway along the scenic Wrangell Narrows. I would see five porcupines during two afternoons I spent driving the 34-mile paved road. Always at the edge of the pavement, they would waddle into the thick underbrush when approached. The exception was a baby crossing the road that I was able to get a photo of. I saw a few soaring bald eagles and six Sitka black-tailed deer. Oblivious to my presence, twin fawns grazed within 10 feet of me for a half hour. Having eaten their fill, they laid down next to each other in the tall grass.

Crystal Lake Fish Hatchery is a good place to see king salmon. A fish ladder guides the salmon into holding tanks where their eggs and milt will be harvested. Dozens of kings were maneuvering at its entrance in the creek contemplating their next move. From the hatchery, one million six-inch king salmon will be released into the wild next May.

LeConte Glacier is the southernmost tidewater glacier in the Northern Hemisphere and a 22-mile boat ride from Petersburg. The 21-mile-long, 800-foot-high glacier has retreated 2 1/2 miles since first being charted in 1794, but is considered fairly stable today. Fishermen used to pack their catch in the glacial ice for shipment to Seattle.

Making sure I was at the correct rendezvous point for my LeConte Glacier tour with Seek Alaska Tours, the harbormaster confirmed that I was. He added that the owner/captain/tour guide Rob Schwartz was a shy reserved fellow who had good stories to tell if I could drag them out of him – nothing could have been further from

the truth! Rob was outgoing, talkative, and informative. He made good company and told his stories without any prompting. Obviously pulling my leg a bit, I suspect the harbormaster is the town comedian who performs his standup at the local theater.

On our way to the glacier, we stopped to look at some Tlingit pictographs painted on a cliff of men standing by canoes and the sun. Chunks of ice in the water became more numerous until we were amongst icebergs of varying size. The temperature dropped 15 degrees. The passage to the face of the glacier was choked with ice which we slowly picked our way through, sometimes rubbing against large pieces. A rip current led from LeConte Bay with one iceberg after another headed out to sea.

Aqua-colored ice interspersed in the snowfield of the imposing glacier greeted us at its base. Most calving occurs underwater and we didn't observe any surface calving while we were there, although it groaned and rumbled from time to time. A bald eagle sat perched on the tip of an iceberg. From late May through June up to 2,000 harbor seals give birth on the ice floes. Eagles are known to prey on newborn pups at that time of year. We saw five mature and immature harbor seals resting on the ice.

A whale watching excursion with Seek Alaska Tours was in order the next day. I've seen scores of whales of three species in different parts of the world,

but have never been able to get a good picture of one – usually just a back or partially submerged tail. I was hoping that this day would be that day.

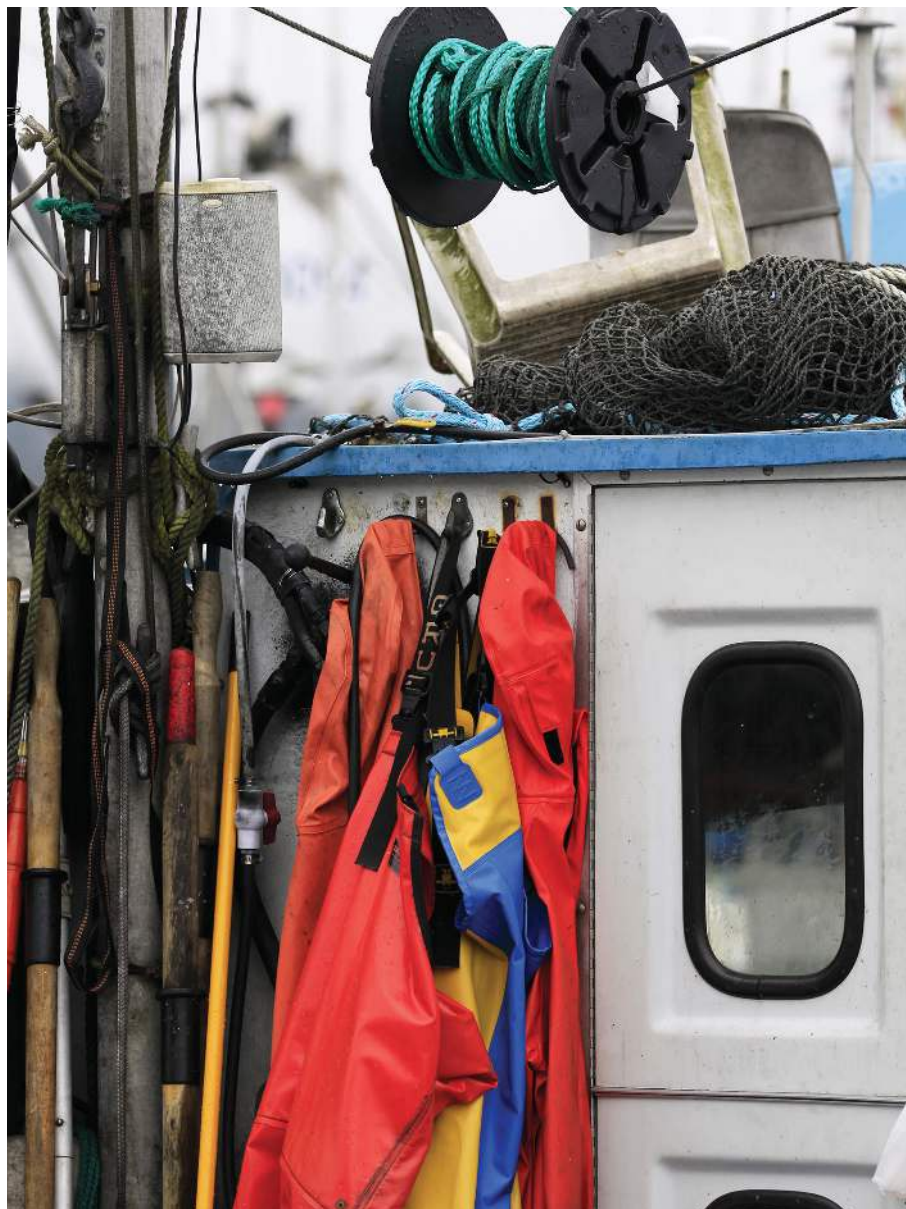
Five hundred humpback whales return to Frederick Sound from Hawaii every summer to feed in cool nutrient-rich waters teeming with krill and herring. A half hour after an enjoyable stop at a buoy loaded with Steller sea lions, we spotted our first whale. As we got closer, we were able to observe their behaviors and listen to their grunts. One breached coming almost completely out of the water! A pod of a dozen and a half, they would dive showing their dorsal fins first and then their flukes. Engaged in a learned cooperative feeding behavior called bubble-net feeding, the whales dove deeply, surrounding a school of herring. By creating a wall of bubbles and moving in an ever-tightening spiraling noose around the fish, the whales corral them near the surface. When one gives the signal, they all rush the herring with open mouths that can hold 15,000 gallons of water; humpback whales can consume up to 3,000 pounds of fish per day. We could hear the humpbacks calling to one another through the aluminum hull of our boat.

The captain would try to predict where they would appear next and take us there, sometimes with great accuracy, sometimes not. This went on for hours

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PHOTOS BY DAVE GIBSON

Porcupines and fishing

Above; A baby porcupine crosses the Mitkof Highway. Right; Fishing is the main activity in Petersburg.

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with the whales feeding approximately every 20 minutes. With no shortage of photo opportunities, at last I was able to capture a nice whale picture.

For information about lodging, go to

www.scandiahousealaska.com or call 907-772-4281. To arrange a whale or glacier tour, go to www.seekak.com or call 907-518-0265.

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