

SEA OF OKHOTSK -FAR EAST RUSSIA 9-20 JUNE 2016

In 2013 I traveled to Wrangel Island in Arctic Russia with Heritage Expeditions. The last day of the trip, a slide show was done about some of the different trips the company offers. They started showing pictures of Ribbon Seals, a species I had previously not thought much about, from their Sea of Okhotsk itinerary and I was hooked. I had signed up to go in June 2015, but finally made it in June 2016 (I will get to that later).

My friend and I decided to fly into the city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on the southern tip of Sakhalin Island, two nights early with fears of flight delays going into Far East Russia. We stayed at the Mega Palace hotel, a grandiose structure situated next to the city zoo and across from a small mammal less city park. The day before the trip started, we joined up with others to go on a bird watching trip to see some of the island's endemic species (mainly warblers and warbler sized birds). The highlight of the day for me was watching a group of about 20 Larga Seals hauled out on some rocks near one of the world's largest LPG plants.

Day 1 – An uneventful 40 minute bus ride to the port of Korsakov and to the Spirit of Enderby ship. The same one that had taken me to Wrangel. From there we left the port and headed north along the eastern coast of Sakhalin Island. While I was doing the mandatory briefings, some of the ship staff saw Minke whales, Harbor porpoise, and Dall's porpoise. All species I had seen in the past.

Day 2 – Today a scheduled visit to Tyuleniy Island was on the itinerary. The island is a strong hold for the Northern Fur seal as a breeding colony. It is also has increasing numbers of Stellar Sea Lions. The island in the early 1900's



was occupied by the Japanese and they slaughtered the seals in the thousands. In 1911 the hunting was banned, and in the 1960's a field research station was set up to study the seals. Besides the Ribbon Seal, this was a species that I had looked forward to seeing. That morning however was overcast and by the time we reached the outskirts of the island, the sea conditions were getting rougher and rougher. I was able to see multiple fur seals swimming by the boat and through my binoculars see distant views on the island. A small team of the crew took a zodiac to the island for a short scouting ship. Upon their return the rough sea conditions and the difficulty in getting the zodiac safely onto the landing site, made stopping here impossible. Luckily I saw plenty of seals next to the boat to be able to “count” them. Unfortunately they were too quick to get decent pictures.

Day 3 – We cruised towards Piltun Bay. The area is currently a place of interest depending on what your interest is. The first being a site for commercial oil and gas wells, and the second being a site for Gray whales that are thought to include a population that migrate not to California and Mexico, but to the South China Sea. Prior to getting into the zodiacs, we listened to a lecture on how Russian marine biologists are placing radio tags on individuals to determine migration patterns. We were able to go out for a zodiac cruise, however rough seas prevented us from going into a small bay that Harbor Seals are reported to haul out in. We did locate three whales briefly, and saw several Larga Seals.

Day 4 – Our next stop was Iony Island, which really is a little more than a bunch of rocks in the middle of the sea. For the birders on the trip (which made up the largest population of our participants) this was supposedly the best spot to see an endemic subspecies of the Whiskered Auklet, for myself the island is a well known breeding site for Stellar Sea lions.



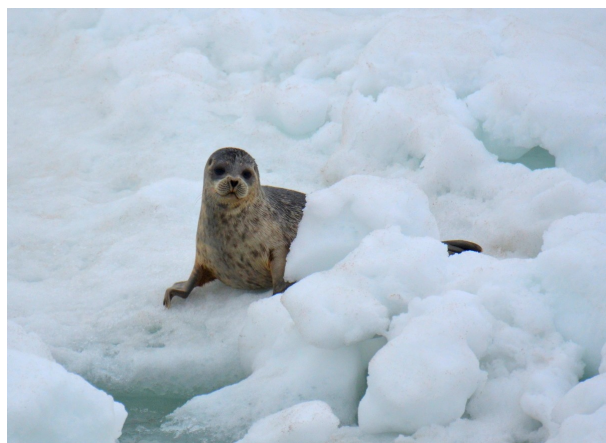


Dense fog made seeing anything difficult in the start, and unfortunately we were only taken around the rocks once. During the majority of the time we had a small escort crew of sub adult males swimming next to and behind our zodiac. I have seen this species of sea lion many times, however had never seen some the behaviors that they did there, including a

female carrying a newborn in its mouth through a portion of a haul out and watching breeding activity in full force. I also sadly saw several males with fishing lines wrapped around their necks, already starting to cut into them. Once back on the boat, we saw Dall Porpoise, and several Minke Whales just before sunset.



Day 5 – we had started overnight to get to the Shantar Archipelago which is a group of 15 islands in the western section of the Sea of Okhotsk. Because the area is one of the last places in the sea to become ice free, it is also one of the best places to look for ice loving species of seals, including the Ribbon Seal, my main target. I was told the previous trip they had over 200 views of the seals, many being males. We had planned to spend two days looking for wildlife in this area. Today again thick fog made seeing anything difficult. Perched along the bow of the ship, I spent as much time as possible looking for seals with the cold. As everyone who has experienced it, ice crushing to look for things is a slow and tedious project. We first saw multiple Ringed and Larga hauled out which gave decent views.



Finally within the first hour we saw our first male Ribbon Seal in all its glory. We tried to slowly move the boat towards it to get better views and it obliged for about 5 minutes.



After seeing the male, we saw three females also hauled out in even thicker fog conditions.



Mid day the ship staff decided we should head down to the southern portion of the archipelago early, where they had seen more seals on previous trips.

Day 6 – Up at 4 am, we spent the morning in the southern ice fields. We again saw plenty of Ringed and Larga Seals, a VERY relaxed hauled out bearded seal, and in the morning I saw two male Ribbon Seals in the water.



Because the seal viewing was slow, the crew decided we would go back up to the GPS location from the previous day. Once we got back the sea conditions had changed and all the pack ice had come together, making going in very difficult. We again saw many more Ringed, Largha and an occasional Bearded Seal, but I did not see any additional Ribbon Seals, despite being the last person to hang out before we left the ice. We did however have a nice pair of Orcas along the ice edge hunting for seals.



Day 7 – Aldona Bay – We had a scheduled stop in the Mal'mynskie Islands, but again rough seas and an impressive rain downpour made this impossible. Instead we took zodiacs into Aldona Bay which was a previous military base in Soviet Times. We spent time walking around the buildings in the rain without seeing any mammals. One of the birders in the group did say he briefly saw a Siberian Chipmunk.

Day 8 – Every organized trip I have been on always seems to find the time to try to add some human culture into the mix. Today was no exception. We had a scheduled visit to Okhotsk Town. The town's historical claim to fame is being the starting point for Bering's expedition of the Russian Far East towards Kamchatka. It currently serves as the center of fishing in the area. On the way into the town we saw multiple Largha Seals in the water.



We then did a quick walk through the town, went to the museum, then watched a singing and dancing demonstration by some of the younger population of the area.

Day 9 – Talan Island – This was first good weather day of the trip. The islands claim to fame is the large number of Crested Auklets that nest here, and is one of the major research places for the species. We did have a brief landing on the island and several people saw a lone Red Fox on the island that had been stranded after walking across ice in the winter. Supposedly every year 1-3 foxes do this. Based on the number of half eaten bird carcasses I saw, it was a well fed fox.

Day 10 – Yamskiye Islands – from a mammal cheating point of view, based on scenery and the spectacle of alcids I witnessed, this was one of my favorite days of the trip. The largest island of the group, Matykil Island, is reported to have 7 million birds nesting on it. We spent five hours from the afternoon to dusk going around the islands and watching thousands and

thousands of Crested, Parakeet, and Least Auklets come ashore for the night. At times it seems the entire air was filled with birds. On a mammal front there is also a haul out for Stellar Sea Lions and we again had sub adult males swimming around the zodiacs.

Day 11 – Our last full day at sea. Our final stop was Astronomic Bay in the Koni Peninsula. The place we stopped was located in the Magadanskiy Zapovednik Federal Nature Reserve. On the way in several Kamchatka Brown Bears were seen grazing near the water's edge. I had my first scope view of a large sow (thanks Morten Jorgensen!) prior to getting on a zodiac for the landing. On the way into the Bay, we saw several Larga Seals and two very curious young Bearded Seals that swam around our boats surfacing very close several times to get a good look at us.



At this point I was keen to look for more bears. Our zodiac driver into the Bay was a Russian marine biologist who agreed to drive us around instead of doing a hike looking for warblers. Besides my friend, three other people joined the mammal watching cruise. We ended up watching three bears, one very curious at close distance.



The warbler based groups saw another Siberian Chipmunk as well as a very friendly Stoat.

Day 12 – we spent the night in the town of Magadan prior to flying home. I went with a small group of people to the Mask of Sorrows monument that was set up for people who had been sent to the Gulags. Along the base of the monument I finally saw my first of many Siberian Chipmunks.



Day 13 – A flight to Moscow, one more night, then home.

A couple thoughts about my trip -

1. I had originally planned to do this trip in 2015. My trip was paid up, my Russian Visa was set up, and I had my airline all worked out. I had told Vladimir Dinets a few months before and he warned me that trips in the area were getting canceled left and right. No, not my trip! Unfortunately a few weeks before leaving, I got a phone call telling me the trip was canceled. I was never given the exact reason why, but on the ship the majority of the Australians (the company is New Zealand based) had some good theories, none of which involved the words United States. Luckily for me, the Russian airline agent (also named Vladimir) in Moscow refunded my Aeroflot ticket with no fuss, as he did not seem surprised at all by my story. Heritage Expeditions also gave several options for the trip cancellation, including offering the trip for 2016 at half price. Thankfully I had gotten a three year Russian Visa as again they have the most difficult application of anywhere I have traveled. I already plan to put my visa to use again next year before it expires.
2. If you ever want to hear a bunch of birders whine at full force being forced to look at mammals, have them have to look for seals in the ice for two days. It was impressive some of the mammal based anger and

jokes I encountered. I tried to explain this was how I felt with all the warbler watching, but this fell on deaf ears...

3. This was my third trip to Russia and by far in all the human populated areas I went to everyone was extremely friendly (ok maybe not American really loud friendly) and courteous. My co worker's sister works in the US Embassy in Moscow and I talked to her multiple times about travel safety in the area and she also reported this as her experience as well. We only experienced one gentleman in Okhotsk Town that followed us around trying to engage any American he could find and tell (not ask) us “Why would anyone want to have a woman as president?” :(.

Trip List

1. Minke Whale – *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*
2. Dall's Porpoise – *Phocoenoides dalli*
3. Orca -*Orcinus orca*
4. Gray Whale -*Eschrichtius robustus*
5. Northern Fur Seal – *Callorhinus ursinus*
6. Stellar Sea Lion – *Eumetopias jubatus*
7. Largha Seal -*Phoca larga*
8. Ringed Seal -*Pusa hispida*
9. Bearded Seal -*Enignathus barbatus*
10. Ribbon Seal – *Phoca fasciata*
11. Brown Bear – *Ursus arctos*
12. Siberian Chipmunk – *Tamias sibiricus*