

Bremer Canyon (WA), Killer Whale Expeditions, Naturaliste Charters, Jan 16-28, 2022.

Steve Reynolds

The author was fortunate to be able to provide photographic documentation for two-weeks during the first month of the 'Naturaliste Charters Bremer Canyon Killer Whale and Pelagic Expeditions' 2022 season.

Outstanding observations of mammals of the Southern Ocean and adjacent coastline were recorded on most days. Nine species of cetaceans and marine mammals were observed, the highlights being daily interactions with Orca, and observations of True's and Gray's Beaked Whales, and a number of cetacean predations by Orca.

This report describes the location and nature of the expeditions, as well as commentary on the mammal watching opportunities provided. Whilst this Orca season is now in its last month, incredible interactions are still happening on a daily basis. Hopefully some degree of normality in travel returns so that plans can be made to visit next season, starting in January 2023.

I am again indebted to Naturaliste Charters for providing the opportunity to observe and photograph the wildlife activity of the Bremer Canyon, and I cannot recommend strongly enough a visit to this wild and remote region of WA, through such a professionally run outfit as Naturaliste Charters. A Marine Biologist is always part of the crew, as well as additional interns, and the experienced skippers and crew members are also adept at locating and identifying marine mammals and seabirds. You are guided with thorough, experienced descriptions of the behaviours and species observed.

Naturaliste Charters are the founding (2015) whale-watching operation in Bremer Bay, and enjoy a close and continuous relationship with Dave Riggs, film-producer and presenter who realised the significance of this pelagic hot-spot over a decade ago.

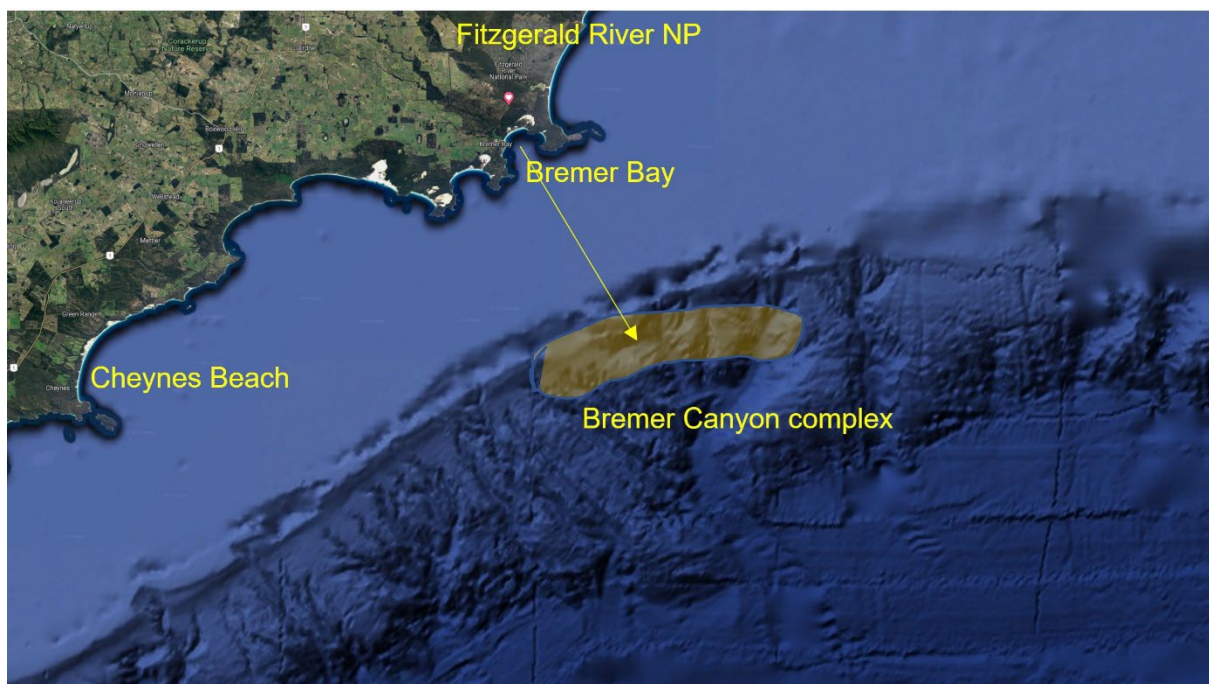
Naturaliste Charters conduct daily expeditions to the head of the Canyon, over 60km offshore, using the 'Alison Maree', a catamaran purpose-built for the Southern Ocean. *Orcinus orca* are the main target species, and their known 'season' here runs for the duration of January to April. Locally prepared food, water, tea, coffee and soft drinks are provided throughout the day, with departures around 8-815am. NC stay out longer than the other operator in the area, especially if good interactions are being enjoyed by the passengers.

Over 200 individual Orca have been catalogued within the Bremer Canyon complex, making this location the southern hemisphere's highest concentration of Orca. Naturaliste Charters' staff work with a number of cetacean research organisations, continually adding knowledge of the species, its prey, and other wildlife encountered. The staff are also familiar with the majority of the individual Orca at Bremer, identified through eye-patch and saddle shape, and dorsal fin characteristics, and are able to identify, at sea, individuals and their relationship to others in the pods. Further identification is followed up each night using the catalogue.

Bremer Bay is a small fishing town on the southern coast of WA, at the western end of the UNESCO Fitzgerald River Biosphere Reserve. Many endemic plants combine with a rugged coastline, minimal development, and pristine conditions to make an attractive nature-adventure destination. While the Orca season runs for the summer months, the coastal waters host visiting marine life at other times of the year, including calving Southern Right, Blue and Humpback Whales. Resident White Sharks haunt Long-nosed Fur Seals and Australian Sea-lions from the many offshore islets.

Bremer Bay has a limited range of accommodation options, ranging from camping at the caravan park, private rentals or hotel options, so advanced planning is recommended. School holidays can make it harder to source rentals, though outside of those times it is much easier. Bremer Bay and a strip along the south coast experiences much cooler conditions than elsewhere, so even in summer warm clothing is recommended.

Out to sea, sixty kilometres south of Bremer, the continental shelf drops sharply from 70m to 800m, and then further into the canyons. Within a few nautical miles, there are depths over 4000m. The Orca season corresponds with the strongest flows of the Leeuwin current pushing south down the WA coast and wrapping around the SW, meeting upwellings of cold nutrient rich waters from the south. Adding to this are hydrocarbon and mineral seeps, all combining to support a seasonal abundance of food. Fish and squid congregations attract shark, dolphin spp., Beaked Whale spp., larger cetaceans, and the apex predators here, the Orca.



Observations

Table of Marine Mammal observations over 10 days, Jan 16-28 2022.

Species	16/1	17/1	20/1	21/1	22/1	23/1	24/1	25/1	27/1	28/1	Daily av (and days seen in 10)
Mammal											
Orca <i>Orcinus orca</i>	52	38	34	26	24	32	18	28	14	34	30 (10)
Long-finned Pilot Whale <i>Globicephala melas</i>	52	0	0	54	0	0	0	0	26	0	13 (3)
Sperm Whale <i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	0	0	0 *2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0 (0)
True's Beaked Whale <i>Mesoplodon mirus</i>	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.1 (1)
Gray's Beaked Whale <i>Mesoplodon grayi</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0.5 (1)
Short-beaked Common Dolphin <i>Delphinus delphis</i>	0	22	0	0	0	0	12	3	5	7	5 (5)
Offshore Bottlenose Dolphin <i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0.4 (1)
Australian Sea-lion <i>Neophoca cinerea</i>	8	10	na	na	8	11	10	14	10	8	10 (all)
Long-nosed Fur Seal <i>Arctocephalus forsteri</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0.1 (1)
Additional marine spp.											
Hammerhead Shark	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.4 (4)
Whaler Shark	1	0	2	0	4	1	1	0	0	0	0.9 (5)
<i>Mola alexandrine</i> (Sunfish)	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0.2 (2)

Whilst several days were missed due to weather conditions, **Orca** were encountered on every expedition undertaken during the two-weeks the author was present. The Orca of Bremer Canyon characteristically patrol a depth of around 800m, reflecting their dive capability (800m/15min). They have been observed eating fish and squid, however their most dramatic hunt and prey are the various Beaked Whale species that feed on squid and sea-urchins at much greater depths. 'Typically,' when a pod (3-5) or individual Beaked Whale is detected, the Orca move from a scattered, small pod (5-8) to a combination of three or more pods (20+ Orca), using vocalization and tail/fin/body slaps to communicate over large distances. The prey is wounded through tail biting and is also held under and prevented from deep diving while it tires. Without shearing teeth, the Orca's final move involves skinning and almost complete consumption of the prey, often leaving only the head and vertebral column. Food is shared amongst the combined pods that attended the kill.



We observed the final moments of one kill, on a **True's Beaked Whale**, as well as the aftermath of five more. At this peak time of the season, there is evidence of cetacean kills every 1-3 days. The timing is not consistent, there were periods of a few days with afternoon kills, whilst at other times we arrived in the morning to find the aftermath of a predation, with huge oil-slicks and a concentration of seabirds.





The week prior to my visit, a deceased Gray's Beaked Whale was found on a nearby beach, potentially mortally wounded in an attack, however this cannot be verified as it was already decomposed and interfered with by the public. Incidentally, another Gray's BW was found stranded at Dunsborough, in the SW coast south of Perth, at the same time.

A free-swimming pod of **Gray's Beaked Whales**, initially thought to number over a dozen by a passenger but not verified at more than five, was observed one afternoon in rainy, dull conditions. Remarkably, the matriarch Orca known as 'Split-tip', who figures highly in Beaked-Whale predations, was also seen only a few hundred metres away at the time. Some do get away!



Sperm Whales were observed by other mariners at the time of this report on one day, apparently 2 x young males, though they seem to increase in number later in the season, when maternal herds can be observed in Mar/Apr.

Long-finned Pilot Whales were observed on 3 days in 10, with over 50 individuals in the extended pods on 2 of the days. They demonstrate an interesting relationship with the Orca of the canyon. No

predations by Orca have been observed at the canyon, and very few recorded in the literature worldwide. The LFPW certainly group together closely in the presence of Orca, offering an appearance of group strength.



The south coast of WA experiences a pilchard migration at this time of year, which fluctuates widely year by year. Verbal reports from a Pilchard fisherman this year mentioned 120T taken in January 2022, compared to 8T last year. With the pilchards come Southern Bluefin Tuna as well as Common and Striped Dolphins. No Striped Dolphin were seen on this trip, however **Short-beaked Common Dolphin** were regular just outside the headlands, both on morning and afternoon transits. Offshore Bottlenosed Dolphin were also present one day.



Australian Sea-lion *Neophoca cinerea* were observed daily at the natal colony on Glasse Island, and this also hosted a **Long-nosed Fur Seal** *Arctocephalus forsteri* one day. Other colonies of both occur along the southern coastline and it is also not unusual to also see these species at sea.



Other non-mammal regulars seen in the pelagic waters of the canyon in January included Hammerhead Sharks, Whaler sharks and Sunfish, *Mola alexandrina* (below).



It is worth noting, for those that don't follow the Naturaliste Charters Bremer Canyon Killer Whale and pelagic Expeditions FB posts (link below),

<https://www.facebook.com/bremercanyonkillerwhaleexpeditions/>

that since January, there have been a number of very exciting sightings of other cetaceans not commonly observed anywhere. These included:

- **Dwarf Sperm Whales** (predations x 3, over two days in a row in March),
- **Southern Bottlenose Whale** (Predation, February),
- **False Killer Whales** (pod of 50+, March),
- **Gray's Beaked Whales** (predations, March),
- **Cuvier's Beaked Whale** (predation, April),
- unk. Beaked Whale spp. ((Free-swimming and predations, March)

That is an exceptional seasonal record for marine mammal enthusiasts, and brings home the point that it is often the predations, and the experience of the NC crews to get into a viewing position of those predations, that are providing unparalleled access to some very uncommonly seen cetacean species. Albeit in tragic circumstances!

I am indebted for the opportunity to Paul Cross and his staff at Naturaliste Charters, and especially the crew of Jamie, Dundee, Pia, Kayla, Machi, intern Naomi, deckies Kim, Kane and Karina, plus Keith Lightbody for continuing to lead the photographic support.

<https://www.whales-australia.com.au>

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