

The Inside Passage of Alaska

By Norbert Wu

Aboard the 'Glacier Seal'

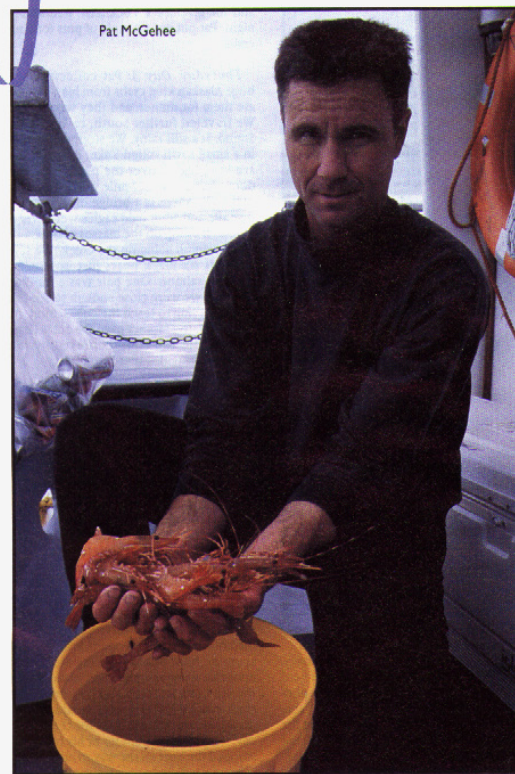
"There's a black bear over there near the point," Pat McGehee said.



We all looked toward the point, a good half-mile away—and could see nothing. "He's about four feet up from the surface, climbing around."

We looked and looked, and still couldn't see anything. As our boat got closer, I could make out a black speck, but I couldn't be sure if the speck was on my glasses or if it was a bear. For all I knew, it could have been a rock, an elephant, a tire, or a piano. All of us got our cameras out, just in case. It was our second day aboard the Glacier Seal, and we had learned that Pat, the captain and owner, had Superman-like powers of observation. He was right, of course; the speck turned out to be a bear, not a hot tub, and all of us got good photographs as the boat cruised to within a few yards of the bear.

Pat McGehee is that rarest of breeds: a



knowledgeable naturalist, skilled photographer, excellent boat captain, and courteous host all rolled into one. Having a skipper who knows photographers' needs is half the battle when trying to obtain photographs from a boat. As a battle-scarred veteran of more than 150 cruises over 15 years of nature photography, I should know. In most boats, photographers often have to push and demand to get the crew to accommodate their photography. I've been on many boats where all work ended at dinnertime—which, unfortunately tends to happen right before sunset, one of the best times to photograph. Having a skipper who is a photographer himself wins the war. Pat was perfectly happy to continue our whale watching or other activities as long as there was daylight.

On the last day of our trip, we followed a pod of whales right until sunset, which didn't happen until 9 p.m.! That kind of commitment is rare to find. An excellent photographer himself, Pat was as excited as the rest of us to photograph whales, yet our group's photography and desires always came first with him. He showed our group the best of the famed Inside Passage of southeast Alaska. We photographed nearly everything possible in just one week: humpback whales, bears, bald eagles, Steller sea lions, salmon, icebergs, glaciers, glorious sunsets, and more.

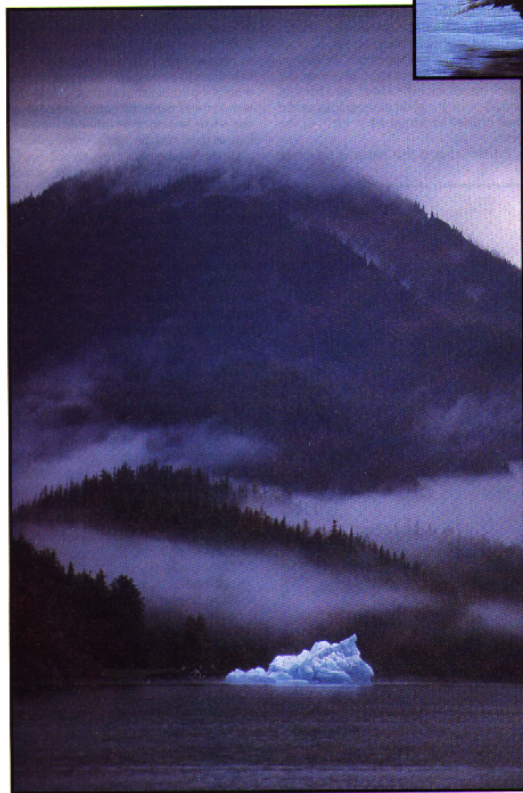
We did it all in complete comfort and with the skillful and gracious help of Pat and his crew. The Glacier Seal is a 60-foot boat that has been set up for the needs of photographers and nature lovers. It contains three levels. The bottom level consists of five staterooms, each with a sink and double bunk beds. The main floor is the lounge and bridge area, featuring huge windows all around, for a nearly panoramic view of the scenery. Doors open onto the back and front decks, allowing easy access for photography. The roof deck provides a special unobstructed area for sightseeing, relaxing, and unparalleled opportunities for photography. I found the boat to be superbly comfortable, clean, and perfect for photography. The cook, Jeanette, did a wonderful job. We feasted on salmon, steaks, shrimp, and great soups and desserts throughout the trip. Pat contributed to this gourmet extravaganza by setting out pots for king crab and shrimp overnight in several locations.

Trip Log

The best way I can describe the trip is with excerpts from my trip log.

Monday, Day 0: Fly in, stay overnight at Breakwater Hotel.

Tuesday, Day 1: Boarded the boat and traveled south from Juneau. We stopped first at a point where five or six bald eagles were sitting in trees. Pat threw out a small fish and we photographed an eagle flying down and



picking the fish up. Later, we entered water where icebergs were everywhere. The icebergs come in various colors ranging from clear to white to deep blue. Pat said that the deep blue icebergs mean that the icebergs are made of older glacial ice. He was able to maneuver the boat right up to a large, intensely blue iceberg. We sat there for half an hour, touching it and marveling at its color

and texture.

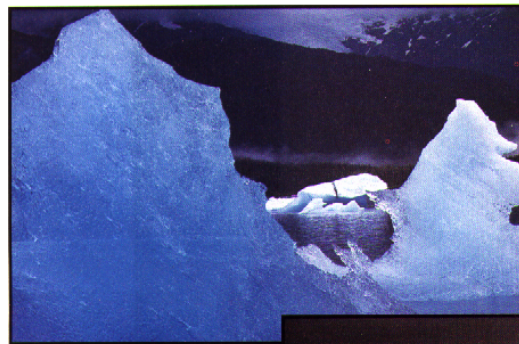
Wednesday, Day 2: It's drizzly and foggy. We traveled up Tracy Arm, a spectacular fjord with a glacier at the end of it. We photographed harbor seals lying on small icebergs throughout the trip. The glacier at the end of Tracy Arm was phenomenal! We spent two hours just observing the glacier. Icebergs were frequently calving off the glacier,



falling off with a crack like an explosion and then a huge roar. A flock of gulls was constantly flying around the glacier, making for dramatic photographs. The crew collected some glacier ice to keep in the food coolers and for glacier-ice cocktails! Wednesday night, Pat put out a couple of pots for king crabs.

Thursday, Day 3: Pat collected two huge Alaskan king crabs from his pots; we ate them for dinner, and they were great. We traveled further south, to Frederick Sound. It's still rainy. We stopped for fuel in a small town called Kake. Pink salmon are jumping all over the place near the dock. Just a quarter-mile or so from the fuel dock, there is a bridge over a creek. Juvenile and adult bald eagles were everywhere, feasting on the masses of pink and chum salmon going up the creek. We saw perhaps six black bears just upstream, hunting salmon. One pair was a mother and cub; we were close enough to see the mother trying to teach the cub to hunt. At one point, the mother gave the cub a large salmon, but the cub—confused by the salmon's struggles—let it get away.

Friday, Day 4: It stopped raining, and the sea is flat calm—as it has been the entire trip. We spent all day photographing humpback whales. This place (Frederick Sound) is incredible. It is a sunny, gorgeous calm day; we have overdosed on whale photographs; and there have been no other boats or sign of human life anywhere! This is a vast wilderness, and it seems untouched. Although I've traveled very extensively to wilderness areas, I have been to few other places in the world like this. I have finally seen the famous bubble-net feeding that the whales do. It's quite evident. The whales go underwater, blow a circle of bubbles that serve to concentrate the krill, and then feed on the krill. We also spent an hour photographing Steller sea lions that were basking on an island. I shot the sea lions sleeping and fighting in the shallows. We had dozens of whales calmly diving all around the boat for the whole day. Pat pulled off another of his tricks: He stopped the boat on the way to our anchorage and predicted a spectacular sunset. We



all got out our cameras—and sure enough, the sunset was fabulous.

Saturday, Day 5: I've been waiting for a day like this for a long time. We woke up to a heavy fog in the morning, then sailed out of it to the north end of Frederick Sound. At around 11 a.m., we followed the clearing fog back to where we had been originally and finally found some whales. I don't know how Pat knew, but he got excited when we found a group of whales and told us to get ready for lunge feeding. We saw the typical ring pattern of bubbles, and then six or so whales came up through the middle of the bubbles, with their mouths wide open. I had heard about this and seen photographs of this behavior, but I felt privileged to see this myself. Renee, another photographer on the trip, kept saying over and over again, "I can't believe I am seeing this. I can't believe I'm seeing this." I felt the same way. Pat McGehee knew exactly what was going to happen. He said that the whales were feeding on herring, not krill, today—which is

why they came out of the water today in their lunge feeding behavior. Spectacular stuff. We also saw and photographed several breaches, where the whales jumped completely clear of the water and made a huge splash coming down. There were a few more boats today following the whales, but still, this is nothing like the other whale watching trips I've been on. The entire Sound was almost deserted, and it was flat calm all day.

Pat is a master at following and predicting the whales' behavior. He is getting us very close to the whales, without scaring them off or disturbing them. Another spectacular sunset, and Pat set out some pots for shrimp overnight.

Sunday, Day 6: Some of the photographs on the boat are "whaled-out," so we decided to spend the afternoon beachcombing. We looked for whales in the morning, with no success, then stopped in Kake again for fuel and water. We walked back to the creek and got some great photographs of

the mother and cub bears, with no rain this time! After lunch, Pat dropped off most of the photographers for beachcombing (they came back with some wonderful rocks, driftwood, and shells), but a group of whales was right by the island, so I stayed on the boat. We saw some fantastic breaches and some awesome lunge feeding, both right in front of the boat. Then we picked up the beachcombers and spent the rest of the afternoon and evening following the whales. We also saw killer whales and Dall's porpoise. Pat's shrimp pots got some huge shrimp. There was an even more spectacular sunset.

Monday, Day 7: It started raining again in the morning, but cleared up by 9:30 a.m.. Back to Juneau for my flight home.

Last Words

It does rain in southeast Alaska. On our trip, in late July 1997, it rained during three out of our seven days. Temperatures range from the low 50s to 70s. Rainwear is



essential, as is a pile jacket for colder days. On the warmer days, shorts and T-shirts work just fine. I brought a pile jacket, a Gore-tex rain parka, two pairs of jeans, a few T-shirts, two pairs of sweat pants and a sweatshirt, and tennis shoes. That's all I needed.

If you are hoping to photograph in Alaska, this is a place and a trip to seriously consider. The inside passage normally is calm, so no one on our trip got seasick or even close to it. Pat McGehee really knows his stuff: he knows just where to put the boat for Steller sea lions, humpback whales, and just about anything else Alaskan. The best time to see humpback whales is June to August, with mid-August being the best time. The weather in the summer is as good as it gets.

And, as you can see, the photographic

opportunities are spectacular. I speak from extensive experience: if you're a nature photographer, this is about as perfect a trip as I can recommend. ♦

For information about booking your own trip to the Inside Passage, contact: Inside Passage Charters, 10006 Crazy Horse Drive, Juneau, AK 99803, phone 907/789-0454, fax 907-789-4127; or Nature Images Alaska / Adventures Northwest, 7001 70th Avenue, NE, Marysville, WA 98270, phone and fax 360/653-4412.

Norbert Wu regularly leads natural history and photography expeditions to the finest diving and wilderness areas in the world. Norb recently returned from two months in Antarctica, where he led a pho-

tographic expedition (sponsored by the National Science Foundation's Artists and Writers Grant) to photograph the marine life there. His latest work was recently shown on National Geographic Explorer on September 7, 1997; he did the underwater cinematography for the segment on the new Deep Flight submersible. His most recent books are Selling Nature Photographs and Creeps from the Deep (the latter a children's book about deep-sea creatures). He will be leading a trip to Alaska's Inside Passage aboard the Glacier Seal in August 1999. For more information, or to order Norbert Wu's books, contact Mo Yung Productions, 1065 Slnex Avenue, Pacific Grove, CA 93950, or call 1-800-4NORB-WU (1-800-466-7298), fax 408/375-4319.