

Mega mysteries

Encounters with isle humpback whales prompt Jim Darling to chronicle his observations

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They're big, they're friendly, their songs are hit records, they visit regularly, and when they do, they practically play in our back yard, and yet, we know almost nothing about them. What are they doing out there?

That's the question posed right on the cover of the new book "Hawaii's Humpbacks -- Unveiling the Mysteries," a splendid and colorful handbook about the creatures, which visit Hawaii every winter. Written by cetologist Jim Darling, photographed by National Geographic's Flip Nicklin and charmingly illustrated by Susan W. Barnes, the book is a handy guide -- not to everything about humpbacks, but to everything we know so far about humpbacks.

For example: Despite their name, no one has ever witnessed humpback whales actually ...

..."I have no idea why we don't see this behavior, humpbacks mating," muses Darling. "It's been 30 years and hundreds of thousands of observation hours by researchers and whale watchers in Hawaii alone, not to mention the rest of the world. Sooner or later someone is bound to get a photo. The explosion in numbers of humpback whales over the last couple of decades tells us they are managing both just fine without us."

The book, produced by Whale Trust on Maui (all profits go to support research and education programs), has other surprises for the casual whale enthusiast. One is the fact that humpback populations are booming and that their annual migration to the island chain seems to be a fairly recent phenomenon.

"My understanding is there are relatively few references to whales in Hawaiian culture, compared to those of other indigenous peoples where whales were major part of their lives," said Darling.

As a teenager surfing the west coast of Vancouver Island, Darling often saw gray whales loafing just outside the breaks, although he had no idea what species they were. Later, in a summer job driving a tour boat, he noticed more pods of gray whales, even though the latest literature said they shouldn't be there.

"One thing led to another," said Darling. "In the midst of my master's study on gray whales, one of my advisers, Roger Payne, asked if I knew anyone who would come to Hawaii to record humpback songs. Took me a couple minutes to make that decision!"

The encounters with Hawaii's humpback led Darling toward a Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Cruz. His interest in whales over the last three decades has pretty much paralleled the general public's growing fascination with all things cetacean.

"Whales matter because we need things in this world that are beyond us. They know this ocean planet in ways we cannot possibly imagine. They make us want to know more, engage our curiosity, make us care, inspire ..." said Darling. "How valuable is that?"

"The more we recognize the value of living whales, the more likely they will be protected.

OBSERVATIONS

From Jim Darling:

Why do they breach? "I don't know. Breaching is very common and occurs in all age groups, by males and females, on breeding grounds and feeding grounds, when whales are alone or in group. Best guess? Plain exuberance."

Do humpback males sing to attract mates? "All the research to date shows that the only whales attracted to singers are other adult males."

Do the humpbacks hang around Hawaii? "There are successive waves of animals arriving, staying for a portion of the season -- randomly moving throughout the main islands, then leaving just as other waves arrive, and so on."



Anything that increases awareness of how whales help us understand our world through science, education or art will help protect them.”

reminiscent of Flip Nicklin • illustrations by Susan W. Bates

Darling has been living among the humpbacks so long that he recognizes individuals, generally by the fluke markings. “We have several favorite whales who have been seen repeatedly over the years,” said Darling. “One example is Frank, one of the first singers we worked with underwater, whom we have come across several times since 1979.”

Named after Frank Sinatra or Frankie Laine?

Underwater photographer gives whales their close-up

Flip Nicklin, National Geographic expert in underwater photography, is the man responsible for many of the stunning images in “Hawaii’s Humpbacks.”

Five damp questions for Nicklin:

Question: How do you get interested in photography?

Answer: I got interested in journalism from Bates Littlehales, a longtime staff photographer of National Geographic magazine and a friend of my father’s. I grew up in the diving business, and my grandfather was a hard-hat diver; that led me to an interest in the sea. Of course you need to have special gear to shoot pictures underwater, but only a fraction of my work is underwater.

Q: Do the whales “pose,” or are they otherwise aware of you? Has the situation ever been scary or dangerous or fun or playful?

A: The photography that I do is primarily journalism. I cover whale research. In shooting researchers or whales, I look for real situations rather than contrived. Working at sea there are certainly hazards -- storms, rough water, boat troubles are all routine. There is also the fact that we work with large, powerful animals that deserve one’s respect and attention. Whales can be funny and scary and playful. They are like strange dogs: No matter how much you love them, you don’t want to take their good nature for granted.

Q: Does the camera “see” farther in the water than the human eye? Is there any post-production digital tweaking that helps?

A: A digital camera is only good for about 25 percent of the distance you can see underwater. When you process digital RAW-format files, it is like developing a negative image, and you do have some say in how you interpret the image.

Q: How does water photography compare to dry-land or aerial photography? Working for National Geographic, do you need to become a master of all climates and situations?


A: My work includes underwater, aerial and conventional journalistic coverages. At National Geographic it is important to have a wide range of photo skills, at the same time many of us have specialties.

Q: What kinds of pictures are hanging on the walls of your home?

A: Ink prints and wood blocks and Japanese fish prints -- nonphotographic interpretations of nature.

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