



Studying Whales in the Wild

The following events took place between August 1st and August 15th, 2012, on Cormorant Island, near Port McNeill on the north-east side of Vancouver Island.

From August 1st to August 15, I volunteered to help with a whale research project on Cormorant Island, near Port McNeill. (*See the last page for a [map](#) and other images.*) The purpose of the research was to determine the vocalizations/sounds of **Minke whales**. From an observation point on land on the north side of Cormorant Island, my work involved tracking visually (with help of binoculars) Minke whales and other marine mammals in Cormorant Channel and to record our sightings. Our work covered 6 hours of each day either from 8am to 2pm or from 2pm to 8pm. Even though I have had a deep interest in whales my whole life, this would be my first taste of field work/studies on whales. I was privileged to have Joe (my brother) and Sam (my son) join me on the trip and to help me with the work.

August 1st - I can remember our first day volunteering. We were scheduled to work from 2pm to 8pm. It started to rain and it definitely did not feel like summer with cold offshore winds blowing. We may have seen a few seals over those hours – that's it! The weather conditions and no sightings of whales certainly did dampen our enthusiasm for the work. As evening approached, the weather improved and the sun shone. At around 7:45pm, Joe and Sam returned to our campsite to grab a few items. While they were away, I heard two loud spouts twice within a few minutes. I was looking around up and down the whole channel to locate the whales. At 7:50, two Minke whales surfaced right in my sightline of my binoculars! What a sight! I wrote down the data. A few minutes passed and Joe & Sam returned. I told them they had just missed the whales when the 2 whales surfaced even closer to our point on land travelling westward, and gave them their first experience of viewing Minke whales. What a way to finish our day! This first event was a sign of things to come for our 2 weeks on the island.

August 2nd – In the morning, we were able to spot and track a Minke whale for about 15 minutes to the west of our location. However, we were unable to observe any other Cetaceans during the remainder of our scheduled shift.

Fog rolled into the area each morning for the next few days hampering our efforts in spotting Cetaceans on those days. However, we were able to enjoy animals on the beach such as shore crabs and gunnels. We were also able to view other wildlife in the area, such as Bald eagles, Harbour seals, and Stellar sea lions. The breaths of Stellar sea lions are loud enough and when heard, they can be mistaken for spouts of dolphins or porpoises.

(Note that I have very few pictures of whales to show from this two-week long experience/work because most sightings of whales were seen through the binoculars.)



Studying Whales in the Wild

August 3rd - Sam and I were up early (6:30am) and we were already down at the beach. We saw a group of Harbour porpoise heading west and we could hear spouts of larger whales but we were unable to determine what specie of whale as there was fog in the area. At 7am, we went back to our campsite to prepare our breakfast. At around 7:15, we heard a few loud spouts. Sam ran down to the beach to see what was happening while I continued to cook our breakfast. At 7:25, I heard a few loud spouts and then, Sam returned with excitement to say he saw two Humpback whales surfacing and spy hopping. **Lesson I learned**: when I hear spouts, stop everything I am doing and go see some whales! **Unfortunately**, this lesson was remembered and applied more often in the middle of the night. Yes, I would hear spouts in the middle of the night on a number of occasions through our remaining time there. I would get up in the middle of the night and go down to the beach to take a look only to ask myself what I was doing since all I could see was darkness while hearing spouts and knowing Cetaceans were close by!

Later in the morning of August 3rd, we were able to see one group of four Dall's porpoise heading in a north-east direction, one of them being a juvenile. These porpoises were a joy to watch. Having read about them and seen pictures of them for so many years, it was awesome to see them in the wild!

August 4th – I was up early again and I was down by the water at 7am when I saw a group of four Harbour porpoise heading in a north-east direction. When the water is calm and flat as it is in the morning, it is easy to spot the Harbour porpoise. In addition with less boat traffic in the morning, it is also easier to hear the spouts/breaths of the porpoise when they surface making it easier to track them. At 8:50am, another group of Harbour porpoise was spotted. It was difficult to determine how many were in the pod but there were at least 2 of them.

August 5th – No luck in spotting any Cetaceans. Just heard them overnight!

August 6th – No luck in spotting any Cetaceans, again! Just heard them overnight, again!

August 7th – Around 1:30pm, we were able to spot a Minke whale twice. It had been a few days since we saw a Minke last so it was exhilarating to see one again.

August 8th – In the afternoon, we first observed one Harbour porpoise going eastward. Shortly afterwards, we started tracking one Minke whale on the far side (north side) of the channel that was travelling west. It then travelled southward towards our observation point. When it was approximately half way through the channel, a second Minke appeared on the near side (south side) travelling east. The first whale was identified by Sam as “Eclipse” because of its distinctive higher arch when diving compared to the other whales. [Sam read the Minke whale catalog and learned quickly some of the specific characteristics of each whale.] The two whales



Studying Whales in the Wild

joined up, travelled north-eastward to the far side of the channel. They continued eastward, and was last seen still together heading southward presumably along the east side of Cormorant Island. We hope that there was some communication between those two whales during this event.

August 9th – Jared Towers is the whale expert who is conducting the research project on Minke whales. He is a member of the Marine Education & Research Society (MERS). Jared was able to arrange for us to go on a whale watching tour on the commercial boat based out of Alert Bay. We were able to see two different groups of Humpback whales. Our excursion was the most exciting when a group of Pacific White-Sided dolphins appeared and started to ride our bow waves. They remained with us for 15-20 minutes, and the dolphins really were the icing on the cake! All three of us made it back to the island in time for our shift work, and we had a feeling that we were happy enough with what we saw on our boat tour that we didn't have to see anything else the rest of the day. (See picture on the right of 2 Humpback whales.) For our volunteer shift, we actually didn't see anything the rest of the day.



On the boat tour.



NOTE: Cetacean activity appeared to increase in the channel over the remaining days there.

August 10th – Around noon, I was scanning with the binoculars eastward when I saw the first Orca (Killer whales) of our trip. I first noticed the dorsal fin of a male Orca which was 6 feet tall (the known size of dorsal fins of adult males). He was followed by a number of other whales, and we guessed the pod had up to 8 whales. I was amazed that I was able to spot them 7 to 8-km away and recognize them immediately. We were able to track the Orca for about 30 minutes as they travelled from east to west through the channel. We found out later from Jared that those Orca were “Transients”, meaning they are the mammal-eating whales (instead of fish-eating ones).



Studying Whales in the Wild

Later that evening, we went to Jared's house. We helped him move the Minke whale skull to a hole so it could be buried for "cleaning" by decomposition. It was heavy, even with 4 of us holding it. Jared showed us some of his other artifacts, like a dolphin skull and a backbone segment of a Humpback. We joked with him and told him he should start up his own whale museum.



Minke Whale Skull (approx.. 1.5-m long)



Holding a dolphin skull.

August 11th – I was woken up at 4am in the morning as I heard 5-6 spouts. I am not sure why I made note of these spouts. During the day, we were able to spot one Harbour porpoise, one group of Dall's porpoise, and one Minke whale on the north side of the channel.

August 12th – At 3:30pm, we first spotted two individual Harbour porpoise. Then at around 5pm, we were able to track a Minke whale and a Humpback whale at the same time. The Minke first was travelling east towards the far side of the channel, then changed directions going south towards the nearside of the channel (along Cormorant Island). Then, the Minke whale headed west. As the Minke was going southward, a Humpback whale appeared mid-channel travelling west. It was a bit hectic and challenging to track both at the same time and make the proper recordings for our observations.

Jared was with us for some time along with some colleagues. Jared was able to demonstrate his wealth of knowledge and experience by one simple act. When the Minke was surfacing, Jared looked at it with his binoculars for no more than 5 seconds, and then identify it immediately by name. I was stunned by how quickly he could identify it! Anyways, Jared later presented two gifts to us: a Minke whale ID catalog and a DFO Transient Orca catalog. As one of the authors, Jared's name appears next to 2 other names, Graeme Ellis and John Ford, who are distinguished in their studies of Orca. They are names of which I have come across many times in my own studies and readings over the years.



Studying Whales in the Wild

August 13th – We saw Harbour porpoise and one Minke whale. We were able to track the Minke for about 15 minutes and it appeared to be foraging (feeding) as it was going back and forth through an area during that time. Later in the afternoon, Sam was able to see another group of Transient Orca (and unfortunately, I missed out because I was taking a nap!).

August 14th – Starting at 8:45am, we tracked two Minke whales for 45 minutes. During that time, they travelled east, then south, reversed to head north, and then, finally travelling westward. At around 9am, we tracked two Humpback whales that were to the east of us and these whales were heading southward. At 11am, we tracked a Humpback whale going from east to west. Then at noon, we spotted Harbour porpoise going to the northeast.

August 15th – Our last day. I was woken up at 4:30am by highly active dolphins and Humpbacks whales in the area. As the daylight appeared, we could still hear the Humpbacks in the area but because of fog, we were unable to see them. I thought this would have been a nice way to finish our work by seeing these whales. Please fog - go away! Well, by 10am, the fog had cleared but those whales had cleared out of the area as well.

However, it wasn't long before we sighted 2 Minke whales. What was amazing was that there were a large group of seagulls gathering (sitting) on an area of water presumably because they wanted to feed on a large school of fish under them. I remembered that the Minkes also would be feeding on the same fish, so we should monitor the patch of seagulls. As one of the Minke's approached the patch, I set my binoculars only on the seagulls in hopes of seeing the Minke surface there. And within a few minutes, the whale surfaced right in the middle of the patch, scattering the birds. The whale seemed to be travelling relatively slowly, so I was able to see a number of times the mouth and snout (which I had never seen before) plus the full dive sequence of the whale.

After the Minke whales had left the vicinity, we were able to spot two different groups of Humpback whales in the early part of the afternoon. We tracked one group of Humpbacks for about 45 minutes. This group of whales gave us a nice parting gift as they literally stayed in the channel and put on a "show" for us. They slapped the water surface with their flippers termed pectoral slaps. They spyhopped (lifting only their heads out of the water to take a look around). And for a number of dives, their flukes/tails were up and out of the water. They truly sent us on our way home happy, with memories of awesome experiences that will remain with us the rest of our lives.

I hope I was able to articulate what I experienced and the significance of these experiences in this written work. (Originally written on August 22, 2012.)

- Ivan Ng





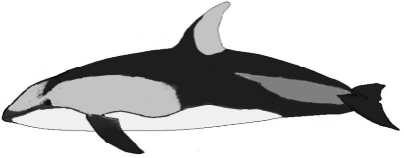
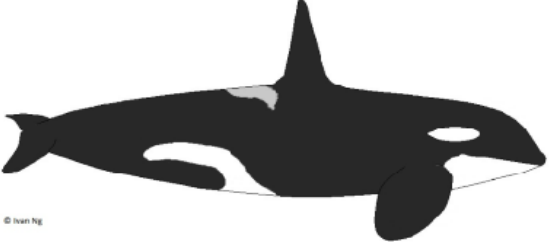
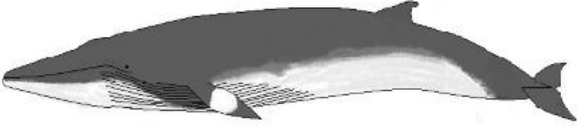
Studying Whales in the Wild



Alert Bay is the town on **Cormorant Island**.

Port McNeill is the closest town on Vancouver Island.

Diagrams of Cetaceans are not to scale.

Dall's Porpoise 	Harbour Porpoise 
Pacific White-Sided Dolphins 	Orca (Killer Whale)  <small>© Ivan Ng</small>
Minke Whale 	Humpback Whale 