

Tracking Orcas at the Helm with Captain Dundee

RELATED EXPERIENCE:

Bremer Canyon Killer Whale Expedition FULL DAY (SHARED)



CONSERVATION IN ACTION

- Participate in citizen science programs to identify individual Killer Whales on tour
- Includes hosting of Project ORCA and other research personnel on board



As soon as Captain Andrew Johnstone (better known as Captain Dundee), a Naturaliste Charters skipper with a huge smile, starts talking, you realise that you're in for a treat. "We know around 150 of the whales we see each season personally," he says. "After seven years in the Bremer Canyon location I've learnt to drive with them... and they've learnt to swim with me."

Captain Dundee is referring to a phenomenon that has evolved over many years at the helm. Whereas eight years ago he had to search far and wide to find Orcas, these days they come to him most of the time. "For the past few years they've been greeting us. We leave them to their own devices as we observe and watch, and intriguingly they now sometimes include us as they engage in their predatory behaviour and attacks," he says. "They drive their prey – for example Beaked Whales – right to us and pin the animals up against the vessel."

Although finding Orcas has become easier over the years, Captain Dundee still uses a variety of tracking methods to get close to the animals. "It comes down to GPS tracking, incredible eyes, and knowing where they like to hang out," he says. "Our deckies are

great spotters, and every morning we put out the challenge for guests to participate, too. If a guest spots an Orca before a deckie, the pride in their face is amazing."

Captain Dundee stresses that although they do see Orcas regularly and are in tune with their behavioural patterns, each day is an unknown. "Some days we observe the whales relaxing, just chilling and cruising around; other days can be sporadic and we don't see much of them as they spend their time deep diving; then there are days when we now realise the Orcas are actively hunting," he says. "And if we can't see them we look for birds. Whenever we see a swirl of birds looking down, waiting for scraps from a kill, we know there might be Killer Whales."

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Learning About the Photo Identification Programs with Pia Markovic

RELATED EXPERIENCES:

Bremer Canyon Killer Whale Expedition

FULL DAY (SHARED)

Dunsborough or Augusta Whale Watching

3 HOURS (SHARED)

CONSERVATION IN ACTION

- Participate in citizen science programs to identify individual whales on tour
- Includes financial contribution or in-kind support to Project ORCA, Department of Biodiversity, Conservations and Attractions and Western Whale Research



There's an iPhone feature that sorts photos using facial recognition, categorising frequently photographed faces into groups. Interestingly, it can work for Southern Right Whales too, albeit a little more haphazardly.

"Basically, there are different ways of identifying all whales. And because Southern Rights have distinctive callosities (louse-covered callouses) on their faces (rostrum), we essentially use facial recognition to identify them," Naturaliste Charters marine biologist Pia Markovic explains. "This is usually painstakingly categorised by a scientist, but emerging technology is helping advance this. It even works on phones if you have enough photos of the same whale."

Pia explains that Naturaliste Charters research staff use different identification methods for different whale species when recording and photographing their unique marks. "With Humpback Whales we look for scarring on their dorsal fin and other unique markings on their body. With Blue Whales we again look at the dorsal fin as well as look for unique markings on their body. With Orcas we are looking for marks on the dorsal fin, eye patch and saddle patch. And with Sperm Whales we are looking at their tails," Pia explains.

Guests, too, are encouraged to note down any unique markings on whales they might see while on an expedition, helping Pia and the team of marine biologists expand their information database.

"Through photo identification, we learn more about population size and composition, migratory distribution, and individual usage of a resting area over its lifetime," Pia explains.

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"The collecting of whale identification images – which is done in a collaborative effort with Western Whale Research – can provide an insight into an individual whale's life, as well as the species." Defining Geographe Bay as an 'emerging aggregation area' in 2019 was reward enough for the scientists and Pia. "This means one step closer to protecting these whales," she says.

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Recording the Behaviour of the Earth's Largest Creature with Pia Markovic

RELATED EXPERIENCE:

Dunsborough or Augusta Whale Watching
3 HOURS (SHARED)



CONSERVATION IN ACTION

- Participate in citizen science programs to identify individual Blue Whales on tour
- Includes financial contribution or in-kind support to Western Whale Research



When you ask Naturaliste Charters marine biologist Pia Markovic what she loves most about Blue Whales, there's no wavering when she answers. "Blue Whales are the largest animal on the planet – bigger than dinosaurs," she says. "And learning more and more about them every day is both thrilling and rewarding."

Pia explains that it was originally understood that Blue Whales travelled solo for the most part, but over the last few years local marine scientists have discovered that they prefer to move in pods. Working with Naturaliste Charters has corroborated this. "We've seen

incredibly large," she explains. "For us, it's the group dynamics that are really remarkable. What direction is the pod heading in? How big are the whales? Is there a calf in the pod? Any information collected is donated to Western Whale Research, who have been conducting whale surveys in the area for the past two decades."

The Blue Whales start arriving to Geographe Bay in November and usually stay until the end of the year, providing ample opportunity for multiple sightings. For Pia, seeing guests become involved with the spotting is a big highlight.

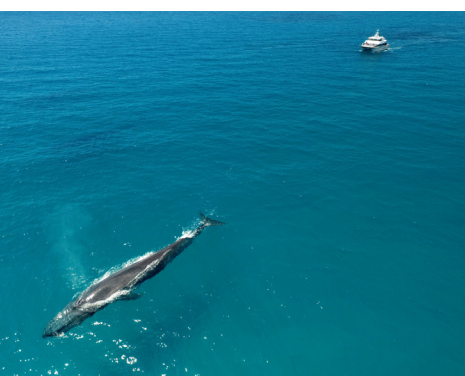
"Guests on board the cruise can help us spot the whales. They aren't usually expecting to see a Blue, so when they do it's very memorable."

up to eight whales in one area, suggesting that they travel together," she says.

Naturaliste Charters marine biologists began recording the behaviour of Blue Whales approximately three years ago out of personal interest, focusing predominantly on their behavioural patterns.

"We watch the Blues in the shallow, gentle waters of Geographe Bay, and usually they don't do very much because they're so

"Guests on board the cruise can help us spot the whales. They aren't usually expecting to see a Blue, so when they do it's very memorable," she says. "Each year the likelihood is increasing and nowadays we generally see them five days out of seven, so the odds are good."



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Pelagic Birdwatching with Daniel Mantle and Plaxy Barratt

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FULL DAY (SHARED)



Seabird guides Daniel Mantle and Plaxy Barratt say there's something extraordinary about observing birds while at sea. "Watching seabirds mastering the strong oceanic winds is just about the pinnacle of birding for both us," Plaxy explains. "The spray, the wind, the rocking boat... it's magic."

The two pelagic birdwatchers are regular guests and seabird guides on Naturaliste Charters expeditions, keen to share their knowledge with other sea bird enthusiasts. "By helping people recognise and appreciate the seabirds that they're seeing, I hope we can help instil an interest in the birds' conservation and protection," Plaxy says.

Throughout the year local birds such as Flesh-footed and Little Shearwaters, Great-winged Petrels, and White-faced Storm-Petrels – along with visitors from much further afield including Indian Yellow-nosed, Black-browed, and Shy Albatrosses – make regular appearances. The Bremer Canyon location, too, has gained a really strong reputation for attracting rare summer seabirds.

"Great and Cory's Shearwaters, Barau's Petrels, and the rare and stunning Amsterdam and Chatham Albatrosses are some of the species we might see throughout the year," says Plaxy.

Dan and Plaxy especially enjoy bringing guests' attention to certain species' unique behavioural patterns, such as those of the White-faced

Storm-petrel. "We see them jumping from spot to spot across the ocean surface, pushing off with their webbed feet," Dan says. "Most Storm-petrels patter across the water in similar manners – as if they are 'walking on water' – and are sometimes referred to as Jesus Birds."

"By helping people recognise and appreciate the seabirds that they're seeing, I hope we can help instil an interest in the birds' conservation and protection."

What elevates the Naturaliste Charters expeditions to even further heights is the opportunity to watch seabirds and Orcas interact. "The highlight at Bremer Canyon is watching the birds following the Orcas and scavenging for scraps when the Orcas make a kill," Dan says.

"Larger predation events can attract thousands of seabirds and the excitement of involving the guests in photographing the action and searching through the masses of seabirds for that special rarity is always a great buzz."

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Hear the Tales of Naturaliste History Film Maker, Dave Riggs

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What life is hiding on the sea floor? Naturaliste history film maker and Naturaliste Charters tour guide, Dave Riggs, will soon find out. "I'm in the process of sourcing camera systems that will be capable of withstanding water depth to at least 800 metres," Dave says. "And when I do find out what's going on down there, I'll be sharing my findings."

This thirst for knowledge and exploration is what drives Dave. No stranger to adventure, he's filmed apex predators in the Antarctic; dived the Neptune Islands, the White Shark capital of Australia; and filmed Bull Sharks and crocodiles going head-to-head with each other in the Northern Territory.

Dave is probably best known, however, for his video *The Search for the Ocean's Super Predator*. "In 2003 when filming for Australia's CSIRO we had a Sperm Whale stranding off Bremer Bay and we put a satellite tag on a Great White that was there at the time," he recalls. "Four months later we retrieved the tag. The shark and the tag had been eaten by something with an internal temp of 27°C, indicating that the predator was a warm-blooded animal. That formed the basis of this film."

The research and film work led Dave to the discovery of the largest aggregation of Killer Whales in the Southern Hemisphere. "That's when I hooked up with Naturaliste Charters," Dave says.

"We were all children once and we all still have that sense of mystery. On an expedition we are exploring the unknown. It's genuinely mind blowing."

Dave's appetite for the underwater realm is what drives him to capture his incredible underwater photographs and videos, and those on-board Naturaliste Charters expeditions are privy to a world inaccessible to most land-dwelling mammals. "We were all children once and we all still have that sense of mystery," he says. "On an expedition we are exploring the unknown. It's genuinely mind blowing."

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