



Fall Whale Watching 2007

September 18

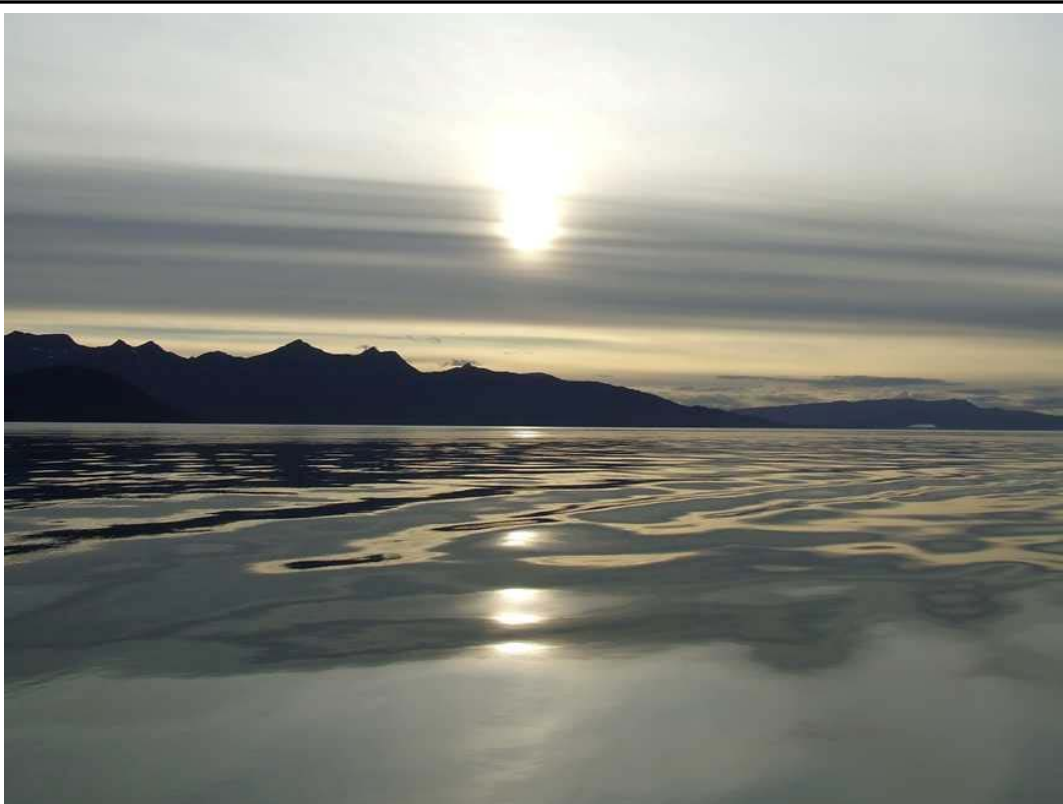
On September 10th I left the homestead for the last time this season, but I wasn't quite ready to pull the boat out of the water. I had hopes for cohos, but more importantly for whales. Though the stormy days tend to outnumber the good ones, September is one of the finest months for whale watching around Juneau. Those sunny crisp days when the sky is deep blue and the water glassy calm, when everything is crystal clear and stunningly beautiful, green mountainsides reflected in the sea, terminal dust powdering the tops of the highest peaks, cottonwoods and mountaintops turning yellow... Those are the best days to be on the water. The light has changed from the endless hazy glow of summer to sparkle brilliantly off the ocean and set the trees golden in the evening. On those days, whale blows explode like cannons, mist lingering in the motionless air, and it is perfect.

Tuesday was that kind of day and I spent most of it in my office. Raining since Thursday, the clouds had parted overnight and the winds calmed. I was crabby. My plan was to take advantage of the weather and the mild marine forecast to do a boat dive, something I hadn't managed to accomplish all summer, and I badly needed to get underwater. My gear was already loaded on the boat, but I failed to find an enthusiastic bubble/boat watcher, and as the day wore on I became more and more irritable. You'd think that after all the "adventuring" I'd done this summer I'd feel satisfied with staying home, but my efforts to resist the pressure of the good weather failed utterly and I succumbed to sun anxiety for one last summer day. I had to take advantage of it, I had to get out!

So despite my severely poor mood and lack of energy, I pulled myself together after work, grabbed a six-pack of Pacifico, and took off from Douglas Harbor at 5:30, beer in hand. I figured I could at least head south for a while and drift around in the sun if the seas were calm. It was slightly choppy in the channel, but as soon as I hit Taku Inlet the water flattened and the view was glorious, the sun beaming from behind bands of hazy clouds behind Admiralty, already low on the horizon. I continued toward Pt. Arden and decided I'd go as far as Dody Cove and then drift for a while. Dody Cove is memorable in my mind for a similar September day nine years ago when my crew and I made the very last Taku Glacier cruise with Allen Marine Tours. It was the first time I'd encountered the great Stephen's Passage Group-Up and I was blown away. At least 40 whales fed in and around Dody Cove, their blows making rainbows in the sunshine. A group of seven whales had passed right beside the boat while we were shut down and whales were everywhere around us. The memory is as clear as the day was.

So with that somewhat bittersweet memory in mind I passed Pt. Arden, my mood slightly lighter now that I had big water around me, the pains and frustrations of city life far behind. As I curved around the point I saw a blow rise in the distance, then another, and another and another. I grinned—there were whales! Of course I knew the group-up was probably taking place (I'd seen evidence of it on my last few trips to Snettisham), but figured they would be farther south than I wanted to travel after work. As I zoomed along, the blows didn't seem to stop, all bunched up along the coast of Admiralty. Then four more whales exploded in front of me, much closer, right along the western edge of Grand Island (which, incidentally, is where I'd intended to dive). I watched these until they disappeared, then continued on toward Admiralty until I found the whales I'd first spotted gathered half way between the southern tip of Grand and Admiralty Islands. The sun was low over Admiralty, bathing everything in bright light and illuminating the undersides of the whale tails as they dove. Blows rose high in the air and lingered, glowing orange in the sun. True to fall group-up behavior, the whales were mostly in small groups of two to four, spread out within a radius of a mile, and fluked every time they dove deep. Whales surfaced everywhere and blows were constant. Once I stopped and took in the scene I saw that I was at the southern extreme of the group and I could see blows out to Grand Island and all the way to the northern edge of Dody Cove. I counted at least sixteen individuals, which means there were probably closer to 30 or 40 whales in the area.

Mostly I hung out with a group of four whales including a mother and calf. The calf was tiny compared to the others, often lingering on the surface after the others dove or rising before them. He/she seemed small for this time of year. This group took long series of breaths before terminal dives, and about a minute after they disappeared a charismatic pair of whales rose about 100 yards away. Two minutes after they fluked, the group of four resurfaced. It was too good a scenario to pass up! While I wasn't watching these six whales, I listened to the other whales breathing and snorting, blows echoing occasionally off Grand Island in the still. All around me the oily water parted for massive gray backs, and flukes slid silently into the water. It was my last hurrah for the summer, a gift, and I lingered in the area as long as I could—an hour and a half or so. I made my way back to the harbor in the dark, finally at peace with the end of summer. The next day a huge SE storm came in that lasted all week, and that was just fine with me... One Sunday I hauled the boat from the harbor and it now sits next to my house for the winter...probably!



Admiralty on the way down

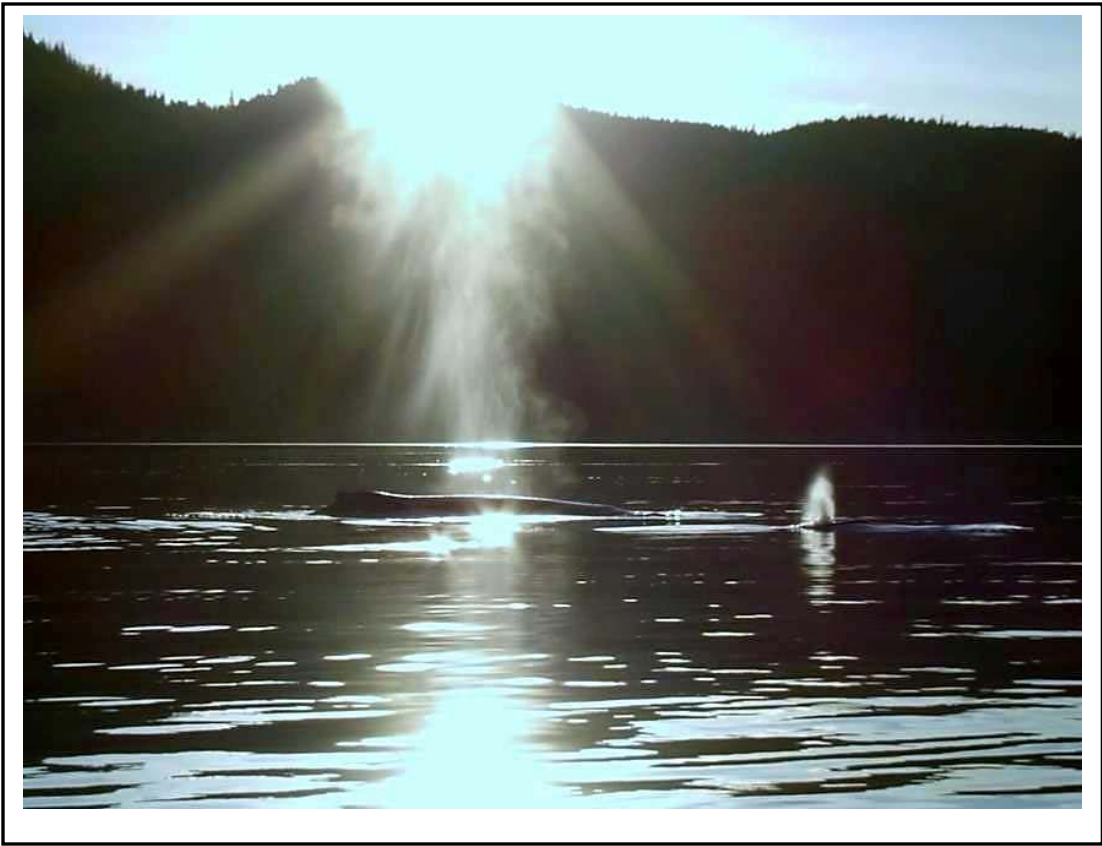


Grand Island



Rosy mist and terminal dust—the entrance to Snettisham is in the background









Notice the calf with the little blow in front of its mother

