



MANCHESTER CRUISING ASSOCIATION

Wildlife at Sea

6 April 2006 John Palmer

John explained that his first taste of sailing was on the Norfolk Broads as a post-A-level adventure. With a few self-taught friends he set out on a well-lubricated gap week in the exotic East (now of course they go to Vietnam for a year). One of the locals did give them a bit of a scare: a loud fog-horn like sound emanated from the reedbeds nearby (John played a recording). This was not some squiffy local baying at the moon (as I'm told they do over there) but a bittern advertising for a mate. It's a noise (I later discovered) made by the gastrointestinal tract of the bird rather than by more conventional methods - which makes it a rather impressive burp.

John's interest in sailing waned for a while but later he put in a number of impressive passages including one from Vancouver to New Zealand. This transpacific epic (in a 26 foot Maurice Griffiths design) was with two others and lasted 101 days. From this and his other trips he had accumulated a good number of interesting photos and stories.

Birdwise, we saw albatrosses, boobies and frigate birds. The albatross - it seemed to be the same one - came to circle them each day as if to check they were OK. Sometimes it came with a young one, sometimes on its own. Occasionally it landed on the sea a few yards away and watched them for a while before flying off. I suppose there's not much else to do out there - one wave looks much like another. The frigate birds are opportunists of the highest order. Too lazy or too cool to fish for themselves they wait for other birds to catch fish and then simply rob them. Sometimes, they do go to the trouble of hovering over schools of flying fish when their scary silhouette panics the fish which take off and (no sweat) get eaten.

The boobies are the gannets of the Pacific and appear to be around in some numbers but it was a solitary swallow that stole the ornithological show for me. This turned up on a cruise in the Atlantic and sat tamely on the fiddle by the ice box or on the companionway steps. Refusing all offers of food and water, it quietly moved aside to allow access to the fridge before moving back again. Apart from being spooked when John touched its tail (and who wouldn't be) it spent a quiet night before disappearing in the morning. We all wished this frail confiding creature well.

Creatures-of-the-deep-wise we were told of flying squid (a bunch of these easily-confused creatures jumped on board in following seas and were promptly eaten by the crew ala frigate bird); dolphins; leaping pilot whales; Portuguese man-o-war jellyfish passing in their thousands.

John gave us an interesting and entertaining 40 minutes (it was just half a normal slot) and many of us wished it could have been longer.

It would be wrong not to record a story from the discussion that followed on memorable encounters with wild-life. An audience member (he should remain anonymous) revealed that, woken by a call of the wild (well of nature anyway), he climbed through the forehatch and was simultaneously finding relief over the bow, admiring the glorious sunrise and wondering whether to wake his colleagues when he saw, near the end of his glittering arc, whiskers and two large brown eyes gazing up at him. No it wasn't a rather camp moorings officer out collecting dues in his inflatable but a slightly irritated seal. Well, we presume it was irritated but you can't really tell with seals. It could just have been amused.

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