

Nautical Nature Notes

Caro Walford



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Martin told me recently about a crossing of the Bay of Biscay by his mother and two of her sisters in the 1920s on their way to India to join their missionary doctor father. They were on the deck in thick fog and one of the sailors was taking soundings swinging a greased lead. By sleight of hand he pulled it up with a hairpin stuck on the lead. “There you are girls,” he said, “There’s mermaids down there.”

This charming story led me to look back over around 50 years of sailing, and a lifetime of loving the sea; looking at it, swimming in it, sailing and above all, the wildlife. Sadly, there were no more mermaids and nothing more exceptional than a trip down memory lane to share.

It started with mackerel fishing trips in Cornwall on holiday as a small – and very seasick – child, and looking at the chopping up of enormous and ferocious looking conger eels as we walked along the Mevagissey quayside on our way out. On Herm Island years later while being taken octopus hunting by a fisherman I was horrified when we found one under a rock and he turned it inside out to kill it!

My ‘grown up’ experiences of nautical wildlife start with sailing in an *Arpège* in the Atlantic in the early 1970s, travelling North from Madeira to England. We were becalmed for a couple of days, the boat was gently rolling, pans clattering, the sail slapping and nerves were shredded. Sitting alone, disconsolate and fractious on the coach roof I noticed in the distance a fast moving grey cloud of seabirds in a clear blue sky. I could see the sea ‘boiling’, and closer to I saw that fish were jumping and leaping out of the water – and there were the dolphins. The whole group stopped quite close to the boat, whirling round fast, corralled by the hunting dolphins and with seabirds diving



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and plunging into the middle. Suddenly the fish broke free and the whole scene shot off into the distance, leaving me excited and breathless.

Sailing to the Caribbean another unusual dolphin moment occurred when the cockpit was empty, a jigsaw puzzle keeping us occupied below in the heat of the day. We heard very loud squeaking noises penetrating through the hull and shot up to find a small group of dolphins leaping up on their tails. They appeared to be looking for people and as soon as they saw us they set off again on their journey. Magical! I will never forget the thrill of finding flying fish on the deck in the morning, the stripy pilot fish who accompanied us for days and the tiny, fragile Mother Carey's Chickens (Stormy Petrels – such a dull name!) who skim the waves their whole lives, apart from nesting.

Of course there have been numerous dolphin experiences over many years, all of them memorable and thrilling. Off the north coast of Spain a few years ago we watched parents teaching their baby how to play tag under our boat for over an hour; and in Muros a huge group appeared on cue when our daughter Eleanor and grandchildren Cora and Finn were with us, feeling sad not to have seen any – and then there they were playing around us for a long time. They knew!

Crossing the English Channel has had its wildlife excitements too, from sailing through a huge swarm of jellyfish when the children were young, while they sat on the bow trying to count them for about an hour to exhausted and bedraggled racing pigeons resting in the rigging of our old S and S 34, and the fun of seeing how many different species of birds we could count. Gannets deserve a whole article of their own, providing endless joy when watching them plunge into the sea like dive-bombers. On a rip-roaring downwind sail on the west coast of Ireland, we were fascinated by the many groups of twenty or more flying low and fast on the uplift from the waves, taking turns to lead, then dropping back for the next one to take over. They provided a wonderful distraction from the somewhat challenging conditions!

Thinking back, over many years, I realise that I don't remember much sea life in the Baltic. Pink granite, birch and pine trees, hawks in the forests, but where were the sea birds? Overfishing maybe?

We had two very unusual moments while sailing our junk rigged Sunbird 32 schooner back to England from Northern Spain last year. Motoring towards Ribadasella in miserable cold and wet conditions, a tiny sodden bird materialized at our feet in the cockpit. Slowly it warmed up and started to explore, hopping up and into the cabin where it perched on a mug surveying the scene, flew into our sleeping cabin and out, onto bookshelves and eventually found my grey tangled hair when I went



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below, and decided it was the perfect spot! After about an hour of exploration it emerged into the cockpit again and sat on a winch under the doghouse. Then, after an initial foray into the dreadful weather, and somehow finding us and returning, it eventually set off when the rain had stopped and flew towards the nearest land. We believe it was a juvenile wren blown from the land in the wind. We hope it made it back!

Our other very surprising visitation last year occurred following a short sharp squall just north of Isle d'Yeu when a huge bumblebee was found very sad and more dead than alive on the cockpit floor. I had been told by a friend that if you find a bee crawling it is because it's thirsty and weak. So – I brought up a small plate with a dribble of water and some honey and eased the bee onto the plate. Almost invisibly it started to revive and I put the plate onto the seat. Shortly after, another exhausted bee, almost twice its' size, flew in and collapsed onto the plate in the *Lalji* Café. After about half an hour, revived and refreshed, they both flew off.



And so to an outing to Newtown Creek this Autumn and a short 36 hour sojourn at anchor next to a family of seals. We loved watching them during the rise and fall of the tides, listening to their mournful hooting and gentle grunting as they communed together. It was peaceful and relaxing and a reminder of the beauty of our watery world which we all love so much.

I hope my reminiscences have jiggled a few memories of the amazing life in our oceans and seas which add so much to the joys of Life on the Ocean Waves.