

Sensory Delights



Get Real by Brooke Bessesen



Underwater ballet - part 1 of 3

Naturalist escapes desert for humpback whale research

Dawn broke soft and gray with a captivating hint of the Hawaiian bouquet—plumeria, ginger flower, nanahonua and orchids—swaying in my head like a slow, sensual hula. White frothy curls marked the ocean's edge and all along the beach, tiny crabs bid adieu to the moonlight and disappeared into sand silky as powdered sugar.

I had come to cloud-capped Maui on invitation; the Center for Whale Studies was willing to grant me a glimpse into the world of cetacean research. Standing on the balcony of my waterfront rental, I sipped a steamy cup of tea and watched a dozen humpback whales in the dim morning light, sleek black bodies bespeckling the watery landscape below. Some of the whales were breaching, tail-lobbing or lolling on their backs, pectoral flippers sticking out of the sea like tall black and white sails, undoubtedly exploring the novel sensation of gravity. I swallowed one last tawny mouthful of tea and padded inside to organize my gear.

A short drive south on the Honoapiilani Highway delivered me to Lahaina's historic epicenter. Artists propped easels and spread tablecloths under the landmark banyan tree, a 134-year old floricultural behemoth that fills a full city block in the charming tourist-driven village. It was Monday and towering cruise ships sat anchored at a distance. Soon, their passengers would begin pouring ashore for an extravagant day of food and shopping.

Our team met at the wharf in a flurry of greetings. I signed

permit documents listing me as an RA (research assistant) for the Center for Whale Studies and as the sea turned teal under the rising sun, we began loading the organization's Glacier Bay Renegade.

Humpback whales annually migrate from cold arctic and Antarctic feeding grounds during summer months to mild equatorial breeding and birthing grounds in the winter. Many of the North Pacific population end up in Hawaii where several research teams work the tepid waters from January to April; they are all dedicated to long, grueling weeks in the sun, gathering palmary data and trying to make sense of the complexities and contradictions that make up a season's findings. Some, like Mark Ferrari and Debbie Glockner-Ferrari, have been studying the humpbacks for over thirty years.

Mark and Debbie began their work in 1975 and later founded CWS. Their benign, non-invasive research focuses on mother-calf relationships and has offered valuable contributions to the scientific community. Debbie, a petite, soft-spoken doyenne with a shoulder length bob of wavy brown hair was the first person to figure out the external characteristics that distinguish male from female.

The air was moist and still, save for an impish breeze that briefly cooled my skin before turning to tease the yellow flag rose starboard designating our boat a research vessel. Mark was at the helm. (Debbie, busy with the couple's teenaged daughter, Chantelle, now only goes out on

Saturdays.) Despite his notorious no-nonsense leadership, Mark's clear blue eyes, usually hidden behind dark sunglasses, suggest a more sensitive side, a softer underbelly.

"Watch your back," he called from the wheel. Gripping the slip's royal blue Astroturf with my bare toes, I hoisted heavy cases of underwater photography equipment onto the forward deck rail of Hoku-lani. From there they were efficiently passed back by Jim and Kevin, two seasoned RAs who travel from the mainland every year to help.

Jim is tall and tanned chestnut with a garden of thick white hair that still shocks him when he sees a photo of himself. Kevin has been friends with Mark since the third grade and serves as one of the organization's vice presidents. Dueling heads of gray hair, sun-painted complexions and easy interludes are testaments to their decades of shared history.

We were also joined by acclaimed Maui photographer, Randy Miller, an affable fellow with the lean build and toothy smile of a man half his age, who seems genuinely unaware of his incredible talent for bending light and composition into stunning two-dimensional sculptures.

A short list of rules from Mark and some good-natured ribbing I find common among closely knit groups, coils of bone-colored rope unknotted and tossed to shore, and our team of five pattered out of Lahaina Harbor in search of humpback whales.

Coincidentally, my fascination with the sea began in the same Pacific waters when I was only four years old. It was during a summer visit with my father, who worked for one year as a doctor on Oahu. I still remember the first time I saw the ocean, the awesome enormity, the roiling waves of turquoise and white, the strum of some innate internal chord.

It was in those early years, watching television shows starring Jacques Cousteau from my Colorado living room that I learned about gigantic air-breathing mammals who sang heart-aching melodies from the depths of

Original *Take Five* guy, sons playing at SCPA

Jazz legend Dave Brubeck, along with sons Chris and Dan Brubeck, and special guest Bobby Militello play May 1 and 2 at Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts.

Performances are Thursday at 7:30 p.m. and Friday at 8 p.m.

Single tickets are available for \$70 from the Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts Web site at www.scottsdaleperformingarts.org or the box office at (480) 994-2787.

One of the most well-known jazz pianists of all time, Dave Brubeck continues to challenge and excite new generations of musicians and audiences with his daring improvisations.

Joined by his talented sons, trombonist and bass player Chris Brubeck and drummer Dan Brubeck, along with saxophonist Bobby Militello, he will perform a mix of classic and new arrangements, including his signature song, *Take Five*.

During his long, remark-

able career, Dave Brubeck has toured the world and received countless honors, from a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and induction into the International Jazz Hall of Fame to a Jazz Master's Award and the National Medal of the Arts from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. The University of the Pacific also honored Brubeck with the establishment of The Brubeck Institute, dedicated to the furtherance of contemporary music of all styles, with an emphasis on improvisation.

The Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts is at 7374 E. Second Street in downtown Scottsdale, four blocks south of Indian School Road and three blocks east of Scottsdale Road.

Free parking is available in the public parking garage located to the west of SCPA and directly behind Los Olivos restaurant on Wells Fargo Avenue.

the deep blue; humpback whales, Megaptera novaeanglia, stretching up to 50 feet in length and famous for their long, fluid pectoral flippers and characteristic knobby-marked rostrums.

I grew up to work with animals and enjoyed many unique experiences with them. However, from the moment I closed the back cover on Roger Payne's poetic science chronicle, *Among Whales*, I longed to hear humpback music through a hydrophone. I imagined it dangling beneath me into the mystical abyss like a fishing line that would hook the songs and carry their vibrational notes to my headset above. The pace of the song is very grand and extended and appears to me to be set to the slow rhythm of the ocean swells—the rhythm of the sea, Payne wrote.

I also wanted to see humpbacks in their element. Not on the surface; I had already enjoyed many whale-watching excursions where these goliath souls sidled up to the boat, spyhopping to peek into our strange floating tub. No, I wanted to see them on their terms, under the water, where they were free to dance, unfettered, through the liquefied space.

And today, at long last, I would.

Part 2 continues in the next issue of *Take 5*.

Scottsdale resident Brooke Bessesen is the author and illustrator of the children's book Look Who Lives in the Desert!, and author of the children's book Zachary Z. Packrat and his Amazing Collections. For more about the author, go to www.BrookBessesen.com

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Underwater ballet - part 2 of 3

Naturalist escapes desert for humpback whale research

As our boat bumped across ever-changing ripples that stretched as an aqueous desert between West Maui, Lanai and Molokai, I stabilized myself on the forward deck, leaning heavily against the windshield, and scanned the horizon as I do when piloting an airplane, looking for dark specks in a seemingly endless field of blue.

It wasn't long before we spotted our first blow, a mist of crystalline droplets tossed skyward when a whale arrives at the surface and exhales massive lungfuls of held breath. Each species has a unique blow, a signature of sorts. A right whale's is V-shaped, a sperm whale's leans forward and to the left, and the strait narrow geyser of a blue whale can gain thirty feet of altitude and linger in the air.

A humpback whale creates a puffy, oblong cloud reminiscent of an umbrella dripping with dew. It usually surfaces several times in a row, taking easy breaths before lifting its head slightly higher to capture one last enormous inhale, and then diving down for several minutes. It is at this anticipated moment between the final draught of oxygen and the round "footprint" of smooth water left behind that the whale makes its name-sake arch of the back, lifting its dorsal fin high in the air and sometimes presenting the full breadth of its tail fluke above the water; a glorious vision that has inspired seafarers and artists throughout millennia.

Mark swept us to the left and moments later we were

motoring behind an MCE group, short-hand for Mother-Calf-Escort, meaning a female humpback, her recently born calf and a male who currently holds breeding rights. From the bow, Jim recorded every minute of their behavior on video.

The threesome was traveling smooth and steady in a northerly direction. Their backs glistened like wet charcoal and when the adults and youngster rose in unison, the sight was particularly skookum, broad and bantam backs side-by-side.

Mark tried to stay upwind of their blows and called "snot alert" every time the dewy mist threatened to sneak across the bow, at which point all cameras were sent into momentary hiding. With time, sea water can be corrosive as battery acid and aside from causing marring artifacts on the lens, it can settle into the camera's housing and begin a quiet campaign of destruction.

After getting enough surface footage and photos to identify the adults and logging the standard litany of details—time, date, number of whales in the group, direction of travel, observed behaviors, etc.—Mark tempered the throttle and made a grand U-turn, leaving the trio to their morning stroll.

Propelled by scientific interest and rewarded with morsels of understanding, the hours whizzed by as we documented humpbacks that dwarfed our 26-foot catamaran. When one escort made a terpsichorean breach—forty tons of baleen whale flung into full view and



A giant's tale breaks the water.

Photo by Brooke Bessesen

reclaimed by the ocean in a whirling mega-splash—we carefully netted brownish skin samples that lingered at the surface and processed them into salt-filled vials for DNA testing.

Mark, Randy and Kevin had been taking turns collecting underwater video and photographs while Jim and I shot images topside but as we spied a new cluster of blows and cut toward it, Mark barked, "Jim, Brooke, get ready to go in."

The boat bounced and shimmied as Jim and I struggled to keep balance while quickly donning masks and fins. Then we prudently scrambled onto the narrow back platform where we positioned ourselves, sitting elbow to elbow, legs straight out, flipped feet held over the rushing sea wash. Everything happened so fast, the moment of my consumption arrived with no time for reverent contemplation.

"Go. Now," Mark hollered, and we slipped into the sea.

Part 3 continues in the next edition of Take 5

Scottsdale resident Brooke Bessesen is the author and illustrator of the children's book *Look Who Lives in the Desert!*, and author of the children's book *Zachary Z. Packrat and his Amazing Collections*. For more about the author, go to www.BrookBessesen.com

Miss Saigon continues at Fountain Hills Community Theater

Place: Fountain Hills Community Theater, 11445 N. Saguardo Blvd.

Production: *Miss Saigon* by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, with lyrics by Boublil and Richard Maltby Jr.

Plot: *Miss Saigon* tells the tragic tale of a doomed romance involving an Asian woman abandoned by her American lover. The setting of the plot is relocated to 1970s Saigon during the Vietnam War, and Madame Butterfly's American Lieutenant and Japanese geisha coupling is replaced by a romance between an American GI and a Vietnamese bar girl.

Players: The musical stars Jesse Berger, Mark Burkett, Michelle Chin, Ricky Duarte, Jasmin Feliciano, Nick Feliciano, Brian Elam, Darren Scott Friedman, May Gibbs, Dawn LeSueur, Luo Ma, Ben Medina, Angelie Meehan, Uki-ah Odom, Andrea Robertson, Douglas Simmons, Michael Stewart, Ronald Tang, and Kayte Zhang.

Particulars: The show plays through May 25. Shows are Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; and Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$20 for adults and \$15 for kids younger than 12. To order, call (480) 837-9661.



Michael Stewart and Kayte Zhang star in *Miss Saigon*

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Naturalist escapes desert for humpback whale research

A chill scurried up my spine. The female's tremendous pectoral flipper, a burst of white refracting as vibrant aqua, was the first thing my brain registered. Then the outline of her entire contour came clear against a backdrop of cerulean blue. A breath played hopscotch in my throat. She was utterly, fantastically beautiful!

This mother was resting roughly 10 meters beneath the surface with an escort nearby. And hovering under her chin was an elegantly diminutive version. The calf slipped under her protective wing and peered up at us, cautiously curious, not unlike a human child staring from behind his mother's leg, and the sight of her wrapping her flipper over his small frame gave me an incisive maternal tug.

This was the trait Debbie most loved about humpbacks — their long pectoral flippers. "They give them more grace than other whales," she would say, "And they use them for touch, too. A mother can pull her calf close if she chooses to. They're very tactile."

Suspended in this otherworld, I became aware of a legendary sound, the one I had wanted to hear: humpback music, a lone singer in the distance. No hydrophone. No headset. His musings, a scintillating symphony, echoed through the open water and tickled my eardrum without aid of electronics.

Despite years of research, specialists in humpback communication remain stumped about the production and purpose of the males' harmonious sounds. No air is

expelled during the song and contrary to early hypothesis, females do not seem particularly responsive to it.

Watching mother and calf in a slow-motion ballet set to the mysterious hymn of their kind, a voyeur to this living performance, I considered how few humans had ever been witness to such a scene.

We dove down to capture sub aqua images and identified the calf as female. At one point as I snorkeled above them, circling round the group with long, smooth fin strokes, the baby took a sudden interest in me. I stopped in the water. She veered toward me and swam ever closer until her enormous head was but a few feet from mine. I could have easily touched her but it would have shown bad etiquette, so I simply gazed into her glossy pupil where my intense curiosity was mirrored.

Our eyes simultaneously rolled as we examined one another head-to-toe.

I was mesmerized by the sheer size of her, already outweighing me by over three tons. And what an awkward little creature I must have appeared, gangly and ill-equipped for this ocean habitat.

After countless seconds of relative stillness she made a leisurely arc around me before breaking our once-in-a-lifetime whale-human connection and resuming rank down near her mother. That unique encounter is eternally etched in my mind.

When the group waved goodbye with scalloped tail flukes and disappeared from view, I swam back to the boat

and pulled myself aboard, reeling with exhilaration.

Amazing was the only word that seemed able to leap the chasm from brain to mouth and I sputtered it over and over to the delight of the crew.

As the afternoon wind began to flutter our bimini top in earnest and the sun stretched its golden arm across the glistening indigo, we headed back to the harbor. Cutting the engine, we turned in at the ash-pier, motored past a long row of lanky masts that wobbled on our wake and slinked into our slip nine hours after embarkation, waterlogged but rident, bantering about the day's highlights.

"You hit the jackpot," Kevin later declared as we ferried items onto the dock and tied bulging orange floats around the perimeter of the boat to protect the hull overnight. "Today was definitely a ten!"

Familiar with the unpredictability of searching for wildlife, I was thankful we had an outing that ranked so high on the universal scale.

Although found nearly worldwide, humpbacks are an endangered species. Once traversing oceans by the hundreds of thousands, numbers were slashed by extensive hunting in the 19th and 20th centuries, a time when whaling practices decimated entire populations.

At the end of my trip, I stopped by Mark and Debbie's to say farewell and mahalo (Hawaiian for "thank you.")

As we sat surrounded by hefty plastic cases, computer equipment and research documents, I asked Debbie, "What is the most difficult part of doing your whale research?"

She thought for a moment and then replied, "Trying to adapt a family between two places."

The Ferrari family would soon be making the long trek back to Louisiana, where they reside the other eight months of the year.

I glanced out the window; tides rolled in the bright and a buttery blue horizon stretched beyond. Only a few distant blows could be seen. April was marching by with tick tock diligence and most of the humpbacks were begin-

ning their seasonal passage to the Gulf of Alaska—a long, perilous journey—one from which some of the whales, those too weak to endure the tribulations, would not return.

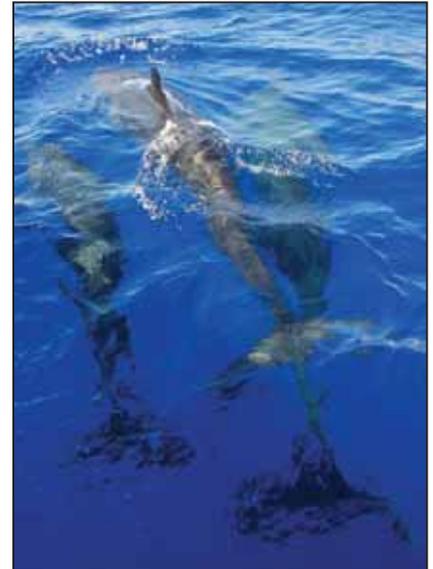
I thought about the calf who had winged through the gelatinous atmosphere approached me in those wild azure heavens. I envisioned her tucked next to her mother, facing the voyage across open ocean and considered the likeness of these humans and the whales they study.

Every year, both migrate great distances away from Hawaii and back again, pulled by something too profound and complex to fully understand or describe.

"Is it worth it?" I questioned Debbie further. She smiled and answered in just one word.

"Definitely."

That afternoon, as fields of sugar cane broke away beneath us and our 757 folded its wheels over the green



Three whales swim past the research team.

Photo by Brooke Bessesen

mounts of Maui, banking hard to cross the vast marine, I peered down on a sliver of shifting earth and silently wished them all safe travels.

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