

Sensory Delights



Get Real

by

Brooke Bessesen



Underwater ballet - part 3 of 3

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.

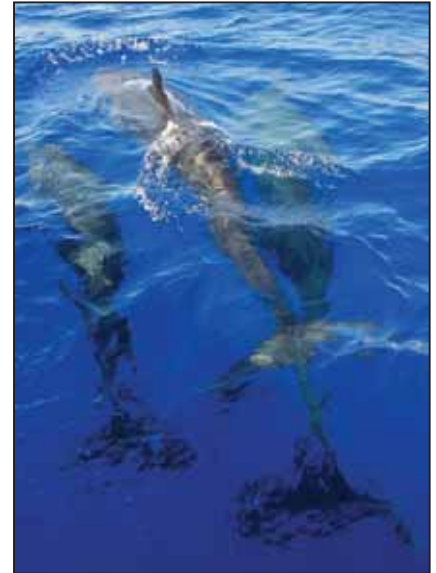
I thought about the calf who had winged through the gelatinous atmosphere approached me in those wild azure heavens. I envisioned her tucked next to her mother, facing the voyage across open ocean and considered the likeness of these humans and the whales they study.

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.

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.BrookeBessesen.com

Fountain Hills Community Theater

Place: Fountain Hills Community Theater, 11445 N. Saguaro 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 is 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, Ukiyah 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.