

## **Monday Morning Diversion**

By Peter Dale.

It was one of those seas so smooth, the horizon so distant, that you could imagine that it was a wall of blue right in front of you holding up the sky. It was the kind of stillness that lets you hear individual waves break on the rocks rather than the muffled roar which you get so used to that you don't hear it. The seals yelped and whined in their colony around the rocky pool below us. A few minutes focussing on one spot and I was able to pick some seals out basking in the morning sun. The kelp rose and fell with the little swell glinting as the water washed through. A small dinghy was putting its way around the little bay checking on cray pots. The last one lifted and replaced, the boat chugged to shore and the bloke jumped out onto the shingle without getting his feet wet. He began doing sorty-out stuff that you can only do on land with a two metre boat. He must have been cleaning fish because half a dozen black back gulls turned up from nowhere and squawked around the shore line for a while. About a mile out a white hulled fishing boat with a blue cabin top was motionless, probably at anchor, cod fishing? Who knows. Could have been making a cup of tea for all I knew. Which gave me a good idea. A cup of tea was required to punctuate my thoughts, along with completing the waking up process. Waiting for the jug to boil I wondered for the thousandth time why it was that people painted their boats in the very colours that made them invisible in a storm and therefore impossible to find.

Bell Tea. "Feel Alive!" Worked for me. The red stripes on the light house gleamed in the morning sun, the rays bouncing and dancing off the glass at the top, its shift over, having become something that could be seen from the sea by day rather than something that had to be seen by night. I started scanning the bay for seals for entertainment. A few splashes turned out to be gannets diving. I could pick out the splash out of the corner of my eye but by the time I had focussed, the bird would be on the surface again ready either to eat the fish or to shrug and flap away again for another round. Then I picked one out in the throes of diving, saw it plummet, fold its

wings and splash. Level of difficulty, three point five. A perfect approach, all grace in the execution, but I thought just a little lack of nuance in the completion. Let's see what the judges say. She has stayed in the water looking around with a ring of confidence. Eight point nine, eight point nine, nine, eight point two, nine point three, and oh dear! What have we here? Six point one from the Russian judge! She usually reserves those scores for American gannets. What a sensation! This should keep us talking for at least a minute! Disconsolate, the gannet flapped off into the horizon, perhaps contemplating what it would take to get a medal in the two hundred metre event later in the day.

Off to the left, out about a hundred metres from the rocks a black shape flashed on the edge of my vision. Seal or dolphin? My eyes swivelled to the spot waiting with idle concentration. Another blur of black just to the right of my focus; and another. I brought my eyes back a bit to scan a wider area. Fin. Big fin. Dolphin, big one, and in close. I sipped my tea. This would be fun. And then a really big fin, like a conning tower in an old war movie. Not dolphin. Might be a whale? And then another big fin right up out of the water, a glistening length of back.

Orca!

Small wonder there were no seals in the water. When I listened for them I heard not a sealy sound. They knew all right, and if they were talking to each other in their fright they were keeping pretty quiet about it. Another huge fin out of the water and then a ripple as the orca pushed ahead in the engine room making a bow wave that nearly broke the surface. More fins, four maybe five this time, and then a flash of white just below where the eye would be, and another splotch of creamy white. One fin came up, and tacked away just like a mainsail, but breezeless. Giant triangular fins rose and fell in a now you see it now you don't kind of way, a ripple the only evidence of whaleness, repetitions fleshing out their existence. How many of them? They say that you should double the number you can see on the surface. Maybe a dozen? Tons anyway.

They nosed their way around the rocks absolutely without haste, seeming design or plan. The boys were in the 'hood, just checking stuff out, upfront and very

visible. One wheeled 180 degrees on its axis, its fin still out of the water, maybe scolding its next door neighbour for invading its space. ‘Get out of my face, Mabel!’ Maybe just checking on the kids. ‘Dad, Joe touched me!’ ‘No I didn’t!’ ‘Yes you did. You touched me hard!’ ‘Quiet you little bastards or you will feel the back of my tail!’

They were now in water so shallow that their bellies must have been just about scraping the bottom. Still they idled along on a Monday post prandial jaunt with no particular place to go. And all this in silence from where I stood, for I had moved out onto the deck, binoculars picking up the patches of white. Keith, too, was feasting his eyes, unable to put into words what his vision was processing. Mostly it came out, ‘Jesus!’ I got out stuff like, ‘Three!’ and ‘Holy Smoke’ and more pointlessly, ‘Look at that!’ because that is exactly what he was doing.

Meanwhile the bloke had hauled his tiny boat up onto the little trailer and was stacking stuff onto the pannier on the front of his quad bike, oblivious to the event, or the scene for that matter. The orcas cruised right into the shallows almost where he had been standing, but certainly within twenty feet of the glistening shingle at the water’s edge. Lucky he was well up the shore. It was a sphincter tightening reminder of seeing that old footage of an orca taking a seal off the shore in Patagonia and shaking the tripe out of it before swallowing it whole on one of those BBC docs with Sir Richard Attenborough, so it must have been true. Especially when he stood in his gumboots in a close-up right at the shoreline, hoping we would think that even the great man himself might be taken. Keith remarked that someone had actually seen an orca take a seal just along the coast a bit at Kirikiri Bay.

Anyhow, if the bloke down below us had actually seen the orca, he was blasé to the point of absurdity and must have seen just too many unusual events in his life for this one to rate. It would have been way past cool, because you would have to have someone watching to make that kind of effort to be cool. Then I found myself hoping he wouldn’t see the whales at all. Sort of thing that could give a man a heart attack, or even worse, shit himself and then look around to see us watching him.

By now the orca pod was drifting around a rock, a strip of back, a fin, a glimpse of white extrapolating the whale whole in our minds. They slowly

approached the seal colony. All quiet there. Silence of the lambs. Would the killer whales try to get into the nursery pool? There were usually twenty or thirty pups swimming and basking while mum and dad were out at the supermarket, or the pub, or copulating while the babies were being looked after.

But the entrance to the nursery pool was too shallow, and the pod brushed around the point which is actually the very point of Cape Palliser (although it doesn't look like it, being about a little over a mile from the light house, which for completeness is on Rocky Point.) Then the pod made its way down the other side of the point, a distance of maybe thirty feet across the rocks and nosed their way through the kelp, still within a blowhole's spout of the colony, and on into Green Bach Bay. An utter lack of motion from the seals, the great stillness that comes when large numbers hold their breath at the same time. Meanwhile the bro's made the occasional surge and ripple just to let the seal colony know that they knew who was where, but it was a lazy sunny Monday morning and seals were only on the menu if they dropped in front of their noses. It's a mammal thing.

Gradually the orcas moved around the coast and out of our line of sight. We could have gone down there and carried on watching but it was better to hold onto the novelty value than make a treatise out of it, and anyway it was time for a coffee. The bloke with his boat fired up the quad bike and trundled along the road, a little wet line left in the dust for the first hundred yards. A crayfishing boat waltzed into the little bay with its personal cloud of seagulls and dropped a line of ten pots with red buoys right where the whale pod had been just half an hour ago. The whines and yelps and barks returned and splashless diving recommenced in the seal nursery. Out of the water, their coats sleek, their beseeching spaniel eyes watched the world, beauty personified. Who would have thought a creature so gorgeous could smell so nose - wringingly awful! Around the pool they swam secure. The boogie man that comes in the night when you least expect it had been seen in the day and all cautionary tales emanating from the fishy mouths of their parents would henceforth be gospel.

In the foreground a flax had pushed out its flower head in an early attempt, its flowers green and unopened, last year's seed pods empty but still attached. The manukas lay still, their tops like backswept hair in retreat from the prevailing wind. A

magpie flew across, black and white on blue. I took a bead on it and shot it just for practice with an invisible rifle. A campervan and its own swirl of dust passed by, a crackle of tires on metal road. It drove up to the lighthouse, turned around and drove back. Been there, done that.

It was an hour before the first seal ventured to sea, and even then only one. Maybe a sacrificial one. Sacrifish-seal? The one that drew the short whisker? The kelp glinted and shrugged. It had seen it all before.