

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Whales' return could boost coastal tourism industry



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A tugboat carefully leads the USS DeWert from the Eastport breakwater Tuesday after the U.S. Navy destroyer spent four days in Eastport as part of the town's Fourth of July celebration. A large crowd gathered on the breakwater to say goodbye to the crew. Town officials estimated that 10,000 people came to Eastport over the holiday weekend and enjoyed parades, contests, vendors, concerts, and many other activities. (Bangor Daily News/Sharon Kiley Mack) *Buy Photo*

By Sharon Kiley Mack, BDN Staff
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As she stood on the deck of the historic schooner *Sylvina W. Beal* in the Bay of Fundy, Deb O'Vadka's eyes filled with tears at the sight of a surfacing finback whale — second in size only to the blue whale.

"This is like Christmas," she said.

O'Vadka had ridden a Harley-Davidson motorcycle from Indiana to Maine, and seeing a whale was on her "bucket list." "It is something I always wanted to do and it is amazing," O'Vadka said. "I can't quite find the words."

But O'Vadka's Maine experience goes well beyond whale watching.

It extends to the lobster dinner she and her husband were planning on ordering that night. It includes the breakfast they bought that morning and the lodging they paid for over the past week.

Whale watching isn't just a pretty accessory in coastal towns — it is an economic engine. Last year, that engine stalled when rain throughout June and into July threatened to scuttle the season.

But almost as if they sensed the ship captains' distress, the whales returned in August as they hadn't in years. Boaters said the sheer numbers of whales off the coast of Maine were astounding, and they are saying this season portends to be just as exciting.

Steve Lyons, marketing director of the Maine Office of Tourism, said the state keeps no statistics on the number of passengers or the financial ramifications of whale watching but said it is clearly helping the tourism industry.

"Whale watching has always ranked very high when people request information from us," Lyons said Wednesday. "It is ranked number four in a list of 30 to 40 activities in Maine."

Lyons said the ripple effect can be felt at restaurants, motels, and souvenir and gift shops, as well as in summer employment, and boat supply and repair businesses.

"Certainly, any industry that brings people and tourists to a specific location will benefit the entire region," Lyons said.

Boat captains up and down the coast of Maine — the Maine Office of Tourism lists 26 whale watching businesses — are reporting frequent and early whale sightings this year.

Capt. Jamie Robertson of Robertson's Sea Tours out of Milbridge said his passengers got a rare view this week of white-sided dolphins.

"I've only seen one before and that was several years ago," he said.

"The weather's good and the numbers of passengers are up," Robertson said. "Even the humpback numbers are good."

At Eastport, Capt. Rob Gordon of the *Sylvina W. Beal* said an aerial survey conducted by Canadian whale watchers indicated his area's humpbacks were feeding off the eastern coast of Grand Manan Island, although they were spotted several times in June off the coast of Maine.

Gordon said his passengers have also spotted endangered right whales on past voyages.

But the waters were full of other wildlife this week: Minke whales, finback whales, seals, porpoises, eagles and sharks were spotted.

Some of the whales are familiar to the nine whale watching boats that ply the waters around Head Harbour Light.

There's Gonzo, a minke that frequently breaches and is identified by a curved dorsal fin. There is Bread Knife, with a serrated edge to its fin, that has been returning to the harbor for at least 20 years.

"Then there is Poor Old Stumpy, who has no dorsal fin," said Gordon. "He's been coming back for all of the last 10 years."

Aimee Knowlton, a research scientist at the New England Aquarium, leads a crew from Boston to Lubec each summer to study the whales.

July is showing "a little bit of an early start" to whale season, Knowlton said recently. "They go where the food is."

The food was literally jumping out of the water off the coast of Eastport on Wednesday. Small herring, locally known as brits, were leaping ahead of the whales and porpoises. The bait was apparently enticing to a shark, spotted just off the Eastport breakwater.

Local fishermen see the early return of the whales as an indication that the fish are plentiful.

At Cap'n Fish's in Boothbay Harbor, Marie Schopper is calling this "one of the best seasons ever." Schopper said passengers are seeing several kinds of whales, basking sharks and dolphins.

"It's a good, good season and our numbers of passengers are way up from last year," she said.

To locate a whale watching business near you, visit http://www.visitmaine.com/attractions/nature/whale_watching/.

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