

TRIP REPORT

Sunday September 16th, 2021

“Farewell to Puffins” Fundraiser Boat Tour



Prepared by: Amanda Colbert

*all photos provided are TSSS & A. Colbert's property

Vessel, Captain, and
Crew provided by:



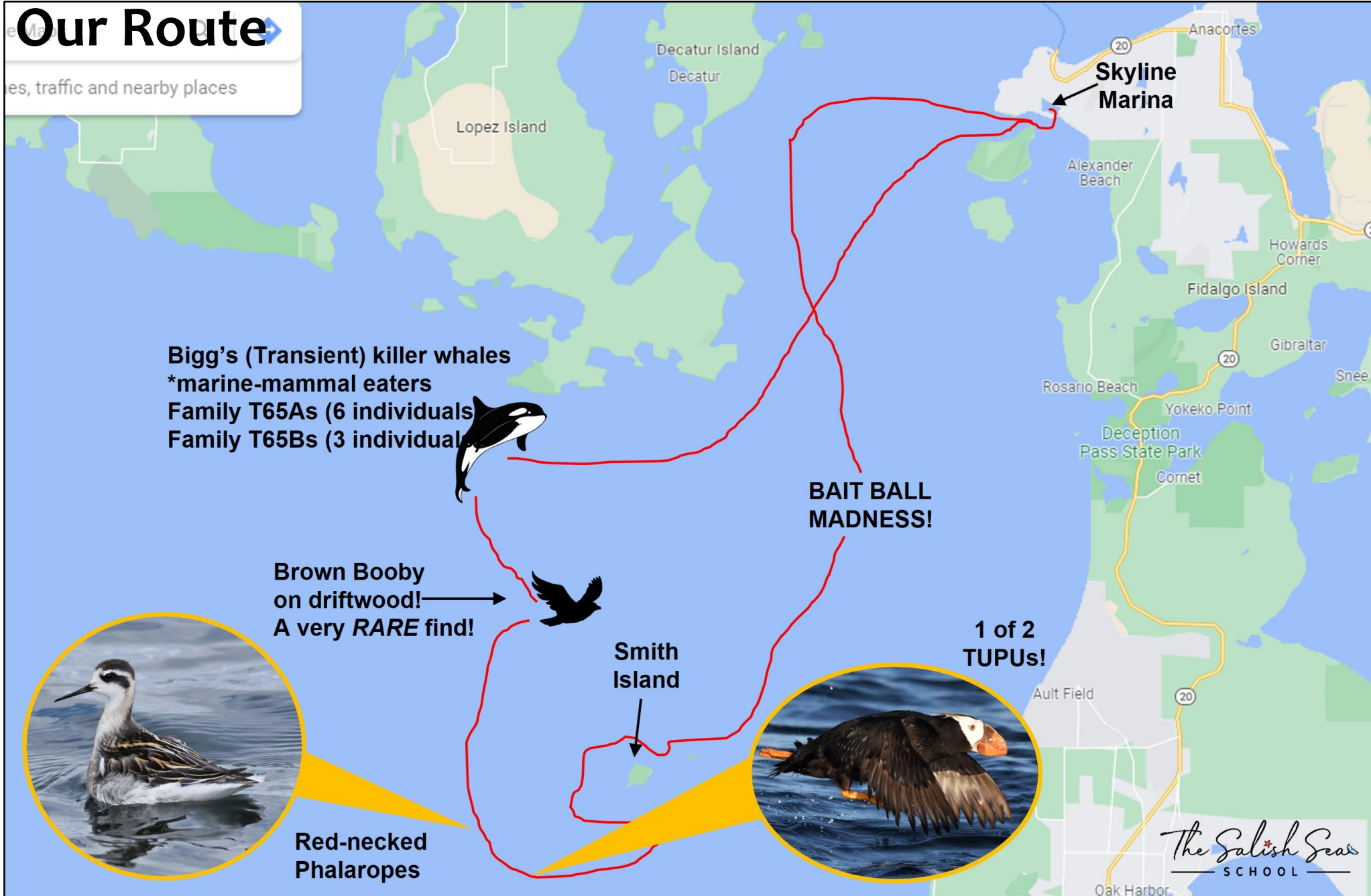
CAPTAIN: Matt Stolmeier
DECKHAND: Trevor Derie

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Amy Eberling
EDUCATION COORDINATOR: Amanda Colbert

After a very soggy morning, we were all very HAPPY to see the skies clearing and the sun pop out. Crew and guests got to know each other a little better, and I was super delighted to learn that we had people of all knowledge and experience levels on board—it makes for the most exciting trips to have others get pumped up right along with me!

Below you will see the route that Outer Island's Blackfish II embarked upon.





Not long into the trip, our first great wildlife encounter was with two family groups of Bigg's (or Transient, and marine mammal-eating) orcas, the T65As and T65Bs! T65A is mother/matriarch "Artemis" and her five offspring – T65A2 "Ooxjaa" (meaning "Windy" in the Tlingit language) **(M)**, T65A3 "Amira" **(M)**, T65A4 "Ellifrit" **(F)**, T65A5 "Elsie" **(M)**, and T65A6 "Callisto" **(F)**. T65A's sister, T65B "Chunk" and her two offspring T65B1 "Birdsall" **(M)**, and T65B2 "Nettle" **(F)** were also present. This made for a quick, but awesome look at 9 individuals, total.

The biggest surprise of the night was the **VERY** rare Brown Booby (BRBO), first located by another whale watching vessel just northeast of where the orcas were. Check the range map, below, to see just why this was such a rare sighting and a SPECIAL treat, especially for Amy, myself, Trevor, and Captain Matt!

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Next, we began the serious scour for Tufted Puffins! We headed due southwest from the BRBO, scanning each congregation of birds on the water. In the process, Captain Matt spotted this itty-bitty bird—a Red-necked Phalarope (pronounced fal-a-rope)!

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Our students in the late summer 2021 struck the chance of seeing many small flocks of these birds, to which one student nicknamed them “sea-spinners,” and another student called them “hummingbirds of the sea.” We adore these cute birds but also really wanted to get to our TUPU friends!

AT LAST—Captain Matt to the rescue! We have a TUFTED PUFFIN!

...who was slightly “tuft-less”



I would call this individual semi-tolerant as he gave his (or her!) adoring fans some good looks.

Showing off just a bit by ruffling up its chest and stretching/flapping its wings, it wasn't long before this individual was off to the races! And what a bumbling (but CUTE) effort to get airborne it was! The photo above shows this bird as if its walking on water before gaining enough speed for lift off.

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ALMOST airborne!!

I can't describe how **GREAT** it was to get our guests acquainted with the Tufted Puffin! With an estimated 24 breeding pairs at Smith Island, and it being the tail-end of the season, this was an extra-special treat I hope you will treasure as much as we do!

We also witnessed an in-flight flyby of a TUPU, courtesy of Trevor, which gave guests the chance to see the physical effort TUPUs exert to stay airborne, versus the longer, more graceful flapping of the gulls and the scoters that were also seen out near Smith Island. TUPUs, while decent flyers, have evolved to be excellent swimmers, hence the slight auk-wardness (haha) in the sky.

Other birds to note around Smith Island (which were a bit difficult to photograph, for me, due to decreasing light) were: White-winged Scoters, Surf Scoters, Rhinoceros Auklets, Common Murres, Red-necked Grebes, Red-necked Phalaropes, Harlequin Ducks, Brandt's Cormorants, Double-crested Cormorant, Heermann's Gulls (most abundant), California Gulls, Western x Glaucous-winged hybrid gulls, a handful of Short-billed Gulls (name change from "Mew Gull"), a few dozen Ring-billed Gulls, plus maybe more (I am by no means a gull expert, and most are tricky species to identify until they're breeding adults!)



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Motoring away from Smith Island on the Northeastern side, headed north to Rosario Strait, we came across one of the largest "bait balls" that Amy and I have witnessed all season. It was like a bird tornado! I really expected a Minke (pronounced Mink-e) whale (filter-feeding, baleen whale) to possibly pop up, thinking it might be feasting on the forage fish below. The cacophony of gull squawks and screeches filled our ears as we moved closer for better looks at sunset.



The evening was a bit chilly, but otherwise, absolutely perfect. A waxing crescent moon and some light clouds had me thinking about the opening graphic for DreamWorks Animation with this photo! But the most delightful sky of the evening was still yet to come.



No matter how many times I witness a Salish Sea sunset, I am absolutely blown away. This is Bird Rocks in the background, with Lopez island behind it, as we made our easterly turn headed for Skyline Marina.



This trip and the group that came along with us brought all the best luck and the best vibes. Not only did we find and get to spend a little time with our target bird, the Tufted Puffin, we had a rarity bird AND orcas, too!