

Close Encounters in Barkley Sound

By Amy Hancock

They could see the blow hole spray off in the distance indicating there were Gray whales feeding in the area, just as they expected. The engine of the whale watching zodiac boat is cut well over 100 metres from where the first whale was spotted. Excited to have spotted these feeding whales in Barkley Sound near Ucluelet on the west coast of Vancouver Island, these keen observers sat back and got ready to enjoy the show.

They were about to get a lot more of a show than they had ever anticipated.

“We were whale watching near the western shores of Barkley Sound, said Brian Congdon of Subtidal Adventures. He has been operating whale and wildlife tours in Ucluelet for over 30 years. “Then suddenly one individual whale decided he wanted to play and swam right over towards us!”

There he stayed, up close against the zodiac turning his head upwards so his giant eye could look at the people on the boat. I guess you could say this curious and friendly Gray whale was ‘people watching’. Weighing over 35 tonnes and measuring over 15 metres, this magnificent creature came close enough for his new friends to reach out and touch him.

“This hardly ever happens,” shared Congdon. “Not only did the whale allow us to reach out and touch him, he kept coming back for more. He was obviously aware of his position next to the boat and even rubbed against it a little bit to scratch the barnacles on his head!”

It was springtime when Congdon and other local whale watching operators started to be approached by the whales. Congdon mentioned it was always the same whale that comes to the boat and sometimes he brought a friend. The whales continued to act that way for several weeks after the first encounter. His experience in identifying individual whales allows Congdon to think he may have seen this friendly Gray whale before.

“We had an experience like this one about 15 years ago and I think it might actually be the same whale,” said Congdon. “It was the same time of year and this individual kept swimming up to our boats. I will have to look at my old photos and see if I can identify him.”

Gray whales are migratory animals. Each spring 20,000 Gray whales migrate from the warm breeding and nursing grounds in Baja, Mexico towards the nutrient rich seas near Alaska and beyond where they feed. Many of these whales stop for the season in Barkley Sound to feed on spawning herring and other food sources. Several individual whales are identified year after year as resident Gray whales. Sometimes these identified whales are not spotted for a couple of seasons, but as it seems, this friendly individual may have returned to our little piece of coastline.

“Close encounters like these are just the icing on the cake for wildlife viewing. We get a close swim by maybe once a year if that but to actually have a whale physically come over and hang out is pretty rare

and it only happens every 5 years or so.” Congdon continued, “We cut our engines at 100 metres and if anyone wants a closer look, it’s totally up to the whale!”

The whale was so close to the boat that passengers could see barnacles that were living on the whale’s skin opening and closing as they fed on microscopic plant life in the water. Little hairs could be seen on its wet, cold skin and that mysteriously warm eye, tilted upward to make contact with its admirers, gave them the experience of a lifetime.

“People are so incredibly moved by this experience,” exclaimed Congdon. “It is just amazing.”