

POINT REYES LIGHT

Volume LX No. 51/ Point Reyes Station, California

February 21, 2008



BOLINAS > Mardi Gras parade pulled costumed locals out of their shells. /12



VALLEY > Craft collective in Forest Knolls features antiques and classy goods. /10



ARTS > Watercolor orchids by Bolinas artist will be on display at Fort Mason. /5



CALENDAR > Chinese new year will be celebrated all week at the Point Reyes Library. /20

Preschool head resigns in face of silent board

by Justin Nobel

The Papermill Creek Children's Corner Board of Directors placed Executive Director Meg Frye on administrative leave on February 4. Two days later, Frye submitted her resignation to the board. Parents were notified in a letter from head teacher Nadine Varley, now the acting executive director. Some parents were happy to see Frye gone—at times she had clashed with popular teachers. Others were outraged and wondered why the woman who had helped secure much needed funding was all of a sudden ousted. Most people are confused and

Please turn to **page 14**

Less ice, late grey whales

by Justin Nobel

Arctic sea ice covered an area 40 percent smaller than the long-term average last year, a change that has likely affected the southbound migration of grey whales.

Last Saturday, visitors at the Point Reyes Lighthouse spotted three whales traveling north. Grey whales typically pass Point Reyes from late December through early February, during their massive migration from the frigid waters off

Please turn to **page 22**

A literary angle on art

by Jacoba Charles

An arching tangle of willow guides you into a small room. The sound of falling water intersects with textures of leaf, flower, river and forest. A series of sculptures, made from natural objects such as kelp, stone and the slim boughs of native trees, are presented against blank walls, tracing delicate shadows on the floor.

Almost a quarter of the room is filled with a pond built with rock, driftwood and bark chips. Water pours into it from a waterfall flowing down a screen, onto which digital nature photographs are projected. Nearby is a rough bench made from a thick, weathered plank.

This is a collaborative art installation, titled RePose, currently on display at Gallery Route One in Point Reyes Station. The interplay of sculpture, digital imagery and water is designed to incite contemplation of the human relationship with nature as the viewer wanders through.

The installation reflects on the legacy of Wallace Stegner, author and pioneering wilderness advocate. It is one of five art exhibits planned to coincide with the literary conference entitled "Geography of Hope: Celebrating Wallace Stegner" that will be held in town next month.

"Our intention was to create a space

Please turn to **page 8**

A peloton of bicyclists pedalled past Tomales Bay Monday in the third annual Tour of California. The route crossed 40 miles of Highway One and ended in Santa Rosa. Photo by T. Yeatts

HABLANDO /4

How and for whom the Latinos voted and why

OBITUARY /8

Lance Leonard Brown, 1947-2008

ASK MISSY /15

Our children learned to swim at shell beach

Extended Sheriff's call /3

>> A Forest Knolls woman lost her dream bike when burglars kept into an old dairy barn she rents on Tamal Road.

>> Whales

continued from page 1

the Chukotka Peninsula in Russia to the balmy lagoons of Baja, and back.

"These are arctic whales and the Arctic has been changing dramatically," said Wayne Perryman, a biologist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) Southwest Fisheries Science Center.

"I think it's fairly safe to say that over the last couple decades the median of the migration has gotten later. It's also safe to say that on average there is less ice in the Arctic than there was two decades ago, but the causal agent is tough to figure out."

Whales feed on the fringe of the sea ice during the summer. Some scientists hypothesize that when there isn't as much arctic ice, grey whales feed longer up north and therefore get a later start, explained Perryman. Another theory is that the shrimp-like creatures and tube worms that whales feed on move north with the ice's retreat. Whales, following their prey, start their migration on time but now have a longer area to traverse.

The lack of ice reflects warming temperatures in the Arctic, said Perryman, but also seasonal fluctuations in ice due to shifts in ocean currents and wind patterns.

"Last year there was almost no ice at all," he added. "It's really, really bizarre."

Mass migration

Grey whale migration is documented by scientists at Granite Canyon, about 11 miles south of Carmel on the northern edge of the Big Sur coastline. Two decades ago, the median date that the southbound migration passed the canyon was January 12. This year the peak occurred about January 24—nearly two weeks later—according to a report compiled by NOAA biologist David Rugh.

Come summer, chilly water churning off Chukotka begins to warm. Days get longer and tiny floating algae called phytoplankton bloom. Jellyfish and krill carcasses drop to the seafloor, becoming fodder for tiny shrimp-like creatures and tube worms. These are vacuumed up by grey whales, which gouge their massive heads into the seafloor, forming grooves in the soft mud as they filter mile after mile of ocean bottom muck.

In September and October, for reasons not entirely understood, the whales slowly begin traveling south. Some scientists refer to the impulse to migrate as "zugunruhe," a sort of grey whale ennui. As many as 20,000 to 30,000 whales gather in the Bering Sea and during a three-week period from late November through early December, some mate.

Their first major hurdle is the Alaska Peninsula, an arc of volcanic islands that uncurls like a witch's finger from the bulky northern state, extending more

Grey whale mothers and calves travel behind the pod for safety. Photo by Wayne Perryman.

than 1,000 miles into the Pacific Ocean. Grey whales hug the southern shore of Unimak Island, a desolate snow-capped slab about a third of the way down the peninsula.

The whales pass Narrow Cape in the underbelly of Alaska, Takoosh Island near the U.S.-Canadian border, Yaquina head in Oregon and Point Reyes and Point Vicente in California. They end their journey in Mexico at Laguna Guerrero Negro, Laguna Ojo de Liebre and Laguna San Ignacio.

They stick to the edge of the continental shelf, where dives down for shallow food sources are possible, and they never swim in water much deeper than 100 feet, avoiding deep topography like canyons and trenches. The whales travel about 91 miles a day, at a pace of about 3.8 miles per hour, according to Rugh. They tend to pick up speed at night, perhaps because they are less distracted. It takes whales just over 50 days to complete the roughly 5,000 mile journey.

Whales pass Point Reyes near the middle of January and reach Baja by the end of the month. By early February some are already returning north. Recently impregnated females travel ahead, followed by adult males and immature females. Mothers with calves don't pass West Marin waters until April or May. Large groups of whales are easier for prey to spot than pairs, said Rugh, and it is believed young mothers remain behind to travel in the safety of seclusion.

"We tend to think of them as robotic and programmed," said Rugh, "but they are actually fairly adaptive animals."

Mass observation

Perryman spends his winters spotting whales at Granite Canyon, where biologists started counting whales off Granite Canyon in 1962. The offshore canyon draws the whales closer to shore, making them easier to see.

According to Rugh, prior to 1980 the peak southern migration at Granite Canyon happened on January 8. Since then, it has pushed back to around January 15. Rugh attributes the difference to what he calls "a major oceanic regime shift in the

Northern Pacific," a result of an increase in El Niño events which helped contribute to a cool-down in the North Pacific.

"Another shift may be underway," said Rugh. "Whales may be coming south later because they have spread further in their summer feeding grounds."

This means they have further to swim when migrating south, accounting for the delayed migration time.

Grey whales may be feeding further north because they are following their food source, which flourishes at the ice's edge. A fluctuating summer ice front is common in the arctic and results from shifting wind patterns and other yearly and decadal cycles not entirely understood.

One possible impact of global warming is the delayed formation of ice, although that too is influenced by local wind conditions. But Rugh questions whether the formation of ice triggers the whales to move south. If that was the only motivator, he said, whales would stay in the southern Bering Sea or the Gulf of Alaska for the rest of the winter rather than head south to Baja. Rugh attributes the tendency to migrate south to "an internal clock that tells them the time is right, ice or no ice."

Why might whales have evolved such a clock?

One reason may be that migration is a survival strategy in avoiding killer

whales. "If you stayed in the same place the killer whales would know where you were and they'd be on you," Rugh said. The migration might also have to do with thermal issues. It's better for young calves to build a fat reserve in calm warm waters than in the stormy cold Arctic. A third reason is physiological: whales need to be passing water through their lungs to breathe, which means they need to be moving. They are also negatively buoyant. If they stay still they will sink, so they must stroke their flukes to stay afloat.

"One option is to just swim in circles," says Rugh. "The other is to go in a straight line. As long as they're swimming, why not go south where it's warm?"

So they go south. In February they begin going back north, and spectators flock to West Marin to watch them.

"This isn't a canned program," says Point Reyes National Seashore ranger Melinda Repko, who directs whale watchers at the lighthouse. "It's wild. Most people just kind of shake their heads. They don't even have words."

You can look for grey whales at the Lighthouse on weekends through April. Docents are at the observation deck with binoculars from 11 a.m. to 4:39 p.m. Buses leave from the Bear Valley Visitor Center. Ticket sales stop at 3 p.m. The Point Reyes National Seashore also encourages volunteers to help coordinate whale watching.

AUTUMN MONDAY Realtor



(415) 806-4088

*Specializing in Inverness and
West Marin properties*

Bradley Real Estate



SEASHORE REALTY

BOLINAS & WEST MARIN

Flower Fraser

(415) 868-1234



118 Aspen Road, Bolinas

\$798,000

an & Ridge views,
TWO BEDROOMS
FIVE BATHS
OFTEN AT THE BEACH
BOESFBEMBOETROBML
EBOOMVEX