

33,000 miles of wildlife

When **Steve Brown** and his wife Trish set off to sail around North and South America, they expected most of the wildlife to be in tropical regions... but the biggest surprises were at the northern and southern ends of their five-year voyage



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Johannessen, Terje Lokken, Paul Josse,
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Hogg, Paddy Griffin, Steve & Trish Brown.

When Trish and I did our 30,000-mile, four-year circumnavigation of the globe, it was the life beneath the waves that so captured our imagination. We spent time in the water at every opportunity and were rewarded with memories that will last a lifetime: diving and snorkelling in the warm waters of the Caribbean, the Pacific Ocean, in the Galapagos Islands, off the Great Barrier Reef and through the Indonesian archipelago. Taking photos of the myriad of reef fish and then spending hours trying to identify them. Playing with the Galapagos sea lions, turtles, manta rays, dolphins, and diving with sharks of every kind including dozens of hammerheads around Kicker Rock in the Galapagos.

The standout memory was the time we spent in the water with a humpback whale mother and her one-week-old calf in the islands of Tonga. I have since had the opportunity to spend much more time around humpback whales and have come to fully appreciate the

curious, playful nature that explains why it was that this mother was happy to let us hang in the water while her newborn played around her and slowly built both its weight and strength for the rigours to come.

As we set out on what was to become a five-year, 33,000-mile circumnavigation of the Americas via the Northwest Passage, with side trips to South Georgia and Antarctica, we did not anticipate being able to match those wildlife experiences a second time.

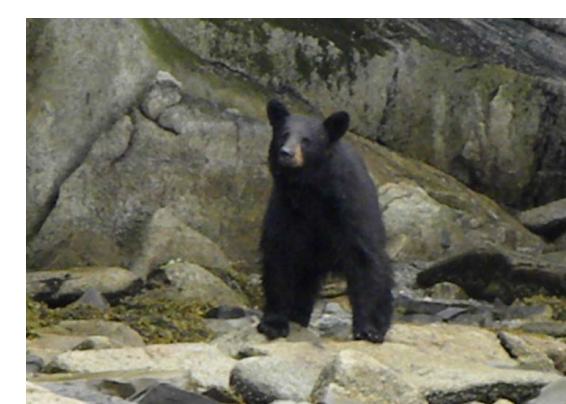
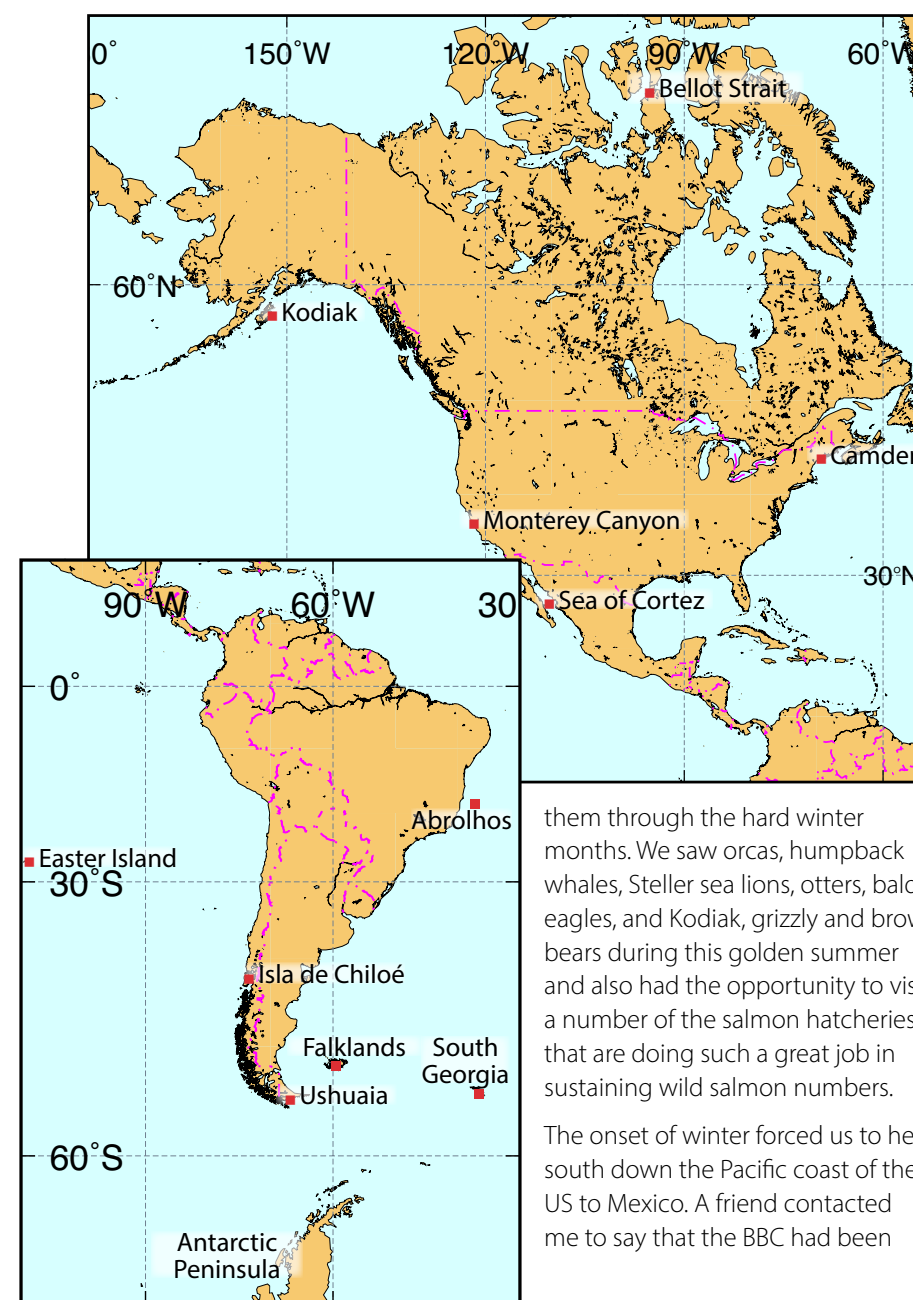
Our passage north from Camden in Maine to Halifax gave us no indication of what was to come but as we approached Newfoundland we saw the first of many whales, mostly humpbacks but also many minke whales heading north like us into the Arctic. Baffin Island gave us our first sighting of a polar bear and tens of thousands of sea birds. The iconic polar bear was to be a feature of our Northwest Passage transit, with the last one seen

as it walked across the sea ice towards a yacht that had grounded on a floe as it tried to follow us through the ice-choked Bellot Strait, the only route through the Northwest Passage during the difficult conditions found in 2014. Fortunately for the husband-and-wife crew they were able to extricate themselves from the floe before the polar bear could have them for its lunch.

The rest of our journey across the northern coasts of Canada and Alaska and then south down the Bering Sea was notable for the large number of orca (killer whale) sightings.

Novara spent the winter in the fishing dock in Kodiak, Alaska, and we returned in late spring to spend six memorable months following the great salmon run along the coast of Alaska and down the inside passages of British Columbia. This is one of the natural world's great events and attracts a wide variety of other wildlife that rely on the salmon to sustain

Right, after enjoying swimming with tropical fish during their circumnavigation of the world, Steve and Trish were expecting much less wildlife in the Northwest Passage – but the polar bears, below, confounded expectations



screening a nature watch event off the coast of Monterey, California where the upwelling created by the Monterey Trench had been attracting large numbers of humpback whales, Californian sea lions and huge numbers of dolphins and sea birds. Following a short detour and a very early morning start I placed *Novara* over the northern end of the trench and the next four hours gave us some of the most amazing wildlife experiences we had ever witnessed. As soon as we were in position the spectacle began with humpback whales breaching all around us, the sea alive with Pacific dolphin and Californian sea lions and more birds than I have ever seen at one time. As the feeding frenzy moved we slowly followed, until the tripper boats from Monterey appeared and we no longer had the sight to ourselves.

Moving down the Baja Peninsula and into the Sea of Cortez we had sightings of the many grey

them through the hard winter months. We saw orcas, humpback whales, Steller sea lions, otters, bald eagles, and Kodiak, grizzly and brown bears during this golden summer and also had the opportunity to visit a number of the salmon hatcheries that are doing such a great job in sustaining wild salmon numbers.

The onset of winter forced us to head south down the Pacific coast of the US to Mexico. A friend contacted me to say that the BBC had been



whales that come down from the Arctic each year to give birth in the warm, shallow lagoons along the Pacific coast of Mexico. The Sea of Cortez is a wildlife hotspot; a variety of whales including orcas come to give birth and mate each year. Moby rays perform their incredible flying leaps for reasons still unknown and whale sharks come to feed on the annual plankton blooms.

I am not a big fan of long ocean passages and the three long legs from Mexico to Ecuador, southwest to Easter Island and then back south east to Puerto Montt at the northern end of the Chilean channels were sadly lacking in wildlife, but as we approached Isla de Chiloé the wildlife appeared once more: Magellan penguins, Pacific dolphin and our first albatross all came out to greet us.

Whales and dolphin were our constant companions as we worked our way south through the channels, with the snowclad Andes as the backcloth to this stage of our adventures, through the Magellan and then south into the Beagle channel to Ushuaia. We spotted a large group of fin whales for the first time as approached the eastern end of the

Beagle, slowly feeding along the shore.

Our onward passage to the Falkland Islands was accompanied by the ever-present albatross with penguins and seals spotted as we neared Port Stanley. The southern winter was spent with *Novara* snug in the old Royal Navy bunkering station of Camber Dock, although even there she suffered a little from the many storms that lash the islands each winter.

Aggressive elephant seals lined the shore, barring access to our dinghy

Returning in spring we next headed to South Georgia, remote, wild and spectacular. The next six weeks were spent surrounded by an explosion of wildlife, the numbers swollen by the return of fur, Weddell, leopard and elephant seals that come to give birth and breed anew.

We visited the largest king penguin colony in the world at St Andrews Bay, 250,000 breeding pairs and upwards of



750,000 penguins scattered across the hillsides, a mixture of little fluffy brown blobs and the beautiful plumage of their parents.

Having successfully completed the famed Shackleton Traverse we then had to negotiate the aggressive fur seals and the equally aggressive but much larger elephant seals that lined the shore barring access to our dinghy.

The leopard seals also have an unwarranted dangerous reputation (unless you are a penguin), but the many we saw were either basking in the sun or inquisitively following or dinghy whenever we headed to shore.

In many of the anchorages we visited around the island, leopard seals would come each night and “sing” beneath the hull. We were able to record this “singing” and were intrigued as to its purpose. On our return to the British Antarctic Survey base at King Edward Point we asked the scientists working there. Their theory is that it is to attract a mate and the seals use the yacht’s hull in the same way that they use icefloes, to amplify the sound.

South Georgia is truly awe-inspiring ➤

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Top left, whale shark in the Sea of Cortez and top right, albatross started appearing in Chile. Above, elephant seals lined the Antarctic shore. Right, the world's largest King Penguin colony at St Andrews Bay, South Georgia





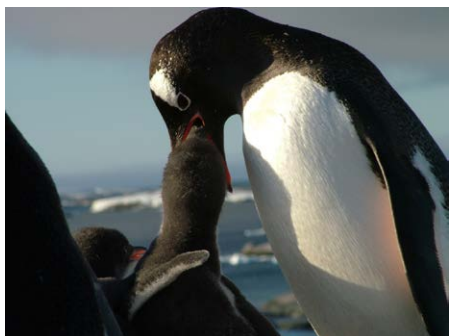
Above, humpbacks at play. Below, singing leopard seal. Bottom, a penguin mother feeds her chick



but the return journey to the Falklands is brutal, and we had to weather a storm with hurricane strength winds for 42 hours, that forced us to run south east away from our destination.

After a two-month layup in Port Stanley our next stop was also to be my second visit to Antarctica, and although I was familiar with the wildlife we would encounter, it was to be no less amazing. There are not many places on our planet where humpback whales will come and play with the boat, but once again we had many encounters with this inquisitive, playful, intelligent animal.

Chinstrap, Adele and Gentoo penguins were seen throughout our eventful journey south down the coast of the Peninsula, through the photogenic Lemaire channel and on to the northern tip of Adelaide Island where our onward passage was stopped by a wall of ice. We were able to get some great images of mothers feeding their chicks at the



colony in Port Charcot and Port Lockroy.

With our time in Antarctica coming to an end we made our way back north we crossed the entrance to Queen Charlotte Bay and then into the secure anchorage at Portal Point in Wilhelmina Bay. We saw a number of humpback whales slowly swimming in pairs but crisscrossing in a way that I had never seen before.

We were surprised and sad to see a dead humpback calf washed on to the rock

After working our way into the anchorage we were surprised to see a dead humpback calf washed up on to the rock. It was perhaps a year old and there was no evidence of attack by orcas nor injuries sustained by a collision with one of the many cruise ships that bring passengers down to the peninsula each year. Having inspected the young animal we contacted the British Antarctic Survey base at Rothera to notify them of our find. They asked us to take and freeze samples for further analysis to see what could have caused the whale's death. It seemed a sad end to our time on the peninsula.

While waiting out some bad weather in the Drake we explored the outer coastline around Deception Island, and could not understand why the penguins withstand a constant battering from the waves as they return from their feeding grounds, many sustaining life-threatening injuries.

A fast sail back across the Drake Passage took us to Port Stanley once more before we sailed on to Piriapolis in Uruguay to prepare the boat for the multiple hops up the Brazilian coast. The only notable wildlife event was a two-day encounter with humpbacks once more cavorting off the shallow breeding grounds of the

Abrolhos Archipelago, 48 hours with the males breaching, tail and fluke-slapping as they competed for mates.

The rivers of French Guiana, Suriname and Guyana seemed disappointing after such spectacles, and even our forays into the jungles lacked excitement. Snorkelling and diving in the warm Caribbean waters reminded us once again of life beneath the waves, and our final leg from Cuba up the coast of the USA seemed devoid of wildlife until we encountered a large group of humpback whales heading to feed in the Arctic.

This leg brought *Novara* and me full circle back to Camden, Maine where our adventure had begun: 32,950 miles of wildlife that will live in my memory forever.



Steve Brown and his wife Trish completed a four-year circumnavigation on their Oyster 56 *Curious*, before buying *Novara*, an ice-strengthened Bestevaer 60C Aero-rigged schooner, in 2014. Steve's adventures include an east-to-west transit of the Northwest Passage, Easter Island, the Chilean channels and Tierra del Fuego. Sailing and mountaineering expeditions to South Georgia and Antarctica followed and Steve has returned to Maine after his 33,000-mile circumnavigation of the Americas.



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