
Browse, Baby, Browse!

Posted on [May 25, 2012](#) by [admin](#)

After three and a half years of faithful blogging, I humbly request a long-term hiatus. I am up to my earlobes in alligators—figuratively, not literally (although you never know with me)—working on several fun but time-consuming writing projects. Yes, I have some new manuscripts in the hopper.



So please, I invite you to peek around and read some of my previous blogs. The words will take you on wildlife adventures and journeys of the mind. There are dozens of posts, mostly essays about my animal experiences and bits of creative wandering, all pretty timeless in nature.

Peruse a category—maybe [A Traveler's Journal](#) or [Poetry & Other Writings](#). Or use the search bar to find posts about specific animals, like for example [dolphins](#). Of course I recommend searching [Golfo Dulce](#) since I did a couple years of marine research there and have gobs of great photos

and stories.

May I suggest a sampling to get you started?

[Nature is a Mother](#) (the birth of a humpback whale)

[Southern California Oasis is a Birdwatcher's Paradise](#) (a day of nature with my dad)

[My First Deployment with HSUS: 200+ Animals Rescued from a Hoarder](#) (interesting)

[Native Australia: Our First Trip Down Under](#) (a photo essay)

[A Poem of Thanksgiving](#) (hope you like it)

[It All Started with an Elephant](#) (about my work at the Phoenix Zoo)

[A Summer Sensation: Mexican Free Tail Bat Video](#) (a treat to see)

[The Spilling of Words onto Paper](#) (midnight scribblings in the jungle)

[Born Free: A Gecko Story](#) (a backyard rescue)

[Living in Puerto Jimenez on the Osa Peninsula](#) (people and places)

Happy reading!

Posted in [Life as an Author-Illustrator](#) | Comments Off

An Earth Day Poem: Cool Critters

Posted on [April 27, 2012](#) by [admin](#)

In honor of Earth Day, I have decided to share a poem that I wrote many years ago. It is a clear reflection of my early wonder and awe at the diversity of life. My brother Dan, who plays in a well-known Denver band called [Dogs](#)



[in the Yard](#) transformed the poem into a song, which can be heard on the [kid's page](#) of my website. I play it at author visits too. It's actually turned into somewhat of an elementary school hit!

Cool Critters

Our planet has so many faces,

living in the most amazing places:

jungles, prairies, deserts dry,

oceans deep, mountains high.

There are hogs and frogs and prairie dogs,

bugs and slugs with funny mugs,

rats and bats and little meerkats,

wallabies and manatees.

Cool critters.

Beauties, and beasts, and itty-bitty twitters.

They're down in the holes, they're under the ice,

the seals and salmon, the moles and the mice.

Everybody loves cool critters.

Our earth is home to many creatures.

Each one has its own features:

scales, feathers, fur or quills,

tails, talons, fins or bills.

They flutter, jump, swim or walk,

and with each other they can talk,

with whistles, chirps, howls or brays

clicks or hoots or roars or nays.

There are hawks and fox and river crocs,
slimy snails and humpback whales,
white rhinos and buffalos,
cockatoos and kangaroos.

And if you take the time to look,
on a hill or in a nook.

Who knows what you might come across,..
a spider or an albatross?

An albatross?!?

Don't forget the flying moths, and two-toes sloths,
small aardvarks, great white sharks,

elephant seals and moray eels.

And everyone's looking for their meals.

Cool critters.

In herds, and packs, and pods, and litters.

They're under the seas, they're high in the skies,

the birds and the bees, the fish and the flies.

Everybody loves cool critters.

-Brooke Bessesen, circa 1995

Posted in [Earth's Amazing Creatures](#), [Life as an Author-Illustrator](#), [Poetry & Other Writings](#) | Comments Off

Wake-up! There's a Rooster in the Kitchen

Posted on [March 23, 2012](#) by [admin](#)

There is one bird I love most at my dad's ranch—the cutest, sweetest, most beautiful little rooster in the world. He likes to sit on your lap and have his ruddy feathers stroked and he's so friendly you can scoop him up in one loose hand.



So you can imagine my concern when Kevin and I arrived to babysit [the ranch](#) for Dad and Marie-Laure and discovered that the rooster was acting sick. ML told me he pecked around like he was eating but he didn't actually take any food in. His beak was a little overgrown and when I felt his breastbone he was much too thin. Beleaguered with packing for their enormous trip, ML hoped I might know how to help.

After my folks got on the road, I tried to hand feed the rooster. *Nada*. He half-heartedly pecked into my cupped palm and then got woobly and sat back to recover his balance. By afternoon he was fluffed up and motionless and I knew he would not survive another cold night without food.

Because birds have incredibly high metabolisms they can lose weight (and strength) very rapidly. Once they pass the tipping point and can't keep up their body temperature, it's a quick fall into hyperthermia and most don't survive. Heat is critical! At the zoo we put sick birds into an incubator set at 104°F. Of course here at the ranch I don't have an incubator, so I found a pet carrier and a space heater and got my beloved rooster set up in the warm kitchen.

At the zoo we inject subcutaneous fluids to help stabilize the body. No medical fluids here, so I found a large dropper and did my best to get him to drink at least a little water. It wasn't enough to rehydrate him, much less contribute the calories needed for recovery.

At the zoo we have syringes with long soft tubes that can be slipped down into a bird's crop for adding high-calorie gruel. No such thing exists on the ranch. Or does it??? I got to wondering if I could make something to do the

trick. Instead of a syringe, I had the dropper—maybe that would work. I hunted around the house until I came up with a length of relatively soft tubing off an old bottle pump. Amazingly the tube fit perfectly in the tip of the dropper and with a few test runs over the sink, I had a working delivery system.

Next I mixed some water with raw egg (wierd maybe, but recommended because chickens are omnivorous) and then soaked and added some lay crumble. I poured the runny contents into my dropper and Kevin held our patient still while I carefully ran the tube into his crop. Years of experience and a good eye assured I didn't go into the lungs.



After the tube-feeding I put the rooster back in his carrier and cranked the heater. But he looked terrible. Much worse, in fact! Instead of sitting, he collapsed onto his chest, eyes closed tight. My mind spun with worry. I was confident I hadn't gone into his lungs (confirmed by the fact he wasn't coughing). And even though the tube wasn't quite as soft as it should have been, I didn't think I'd punctured his crop—I'd been so cautious. Maybe he had an illness that kept him from eating and was exacerbated by adding food. *Ugh*. Nothing to do but wait.

I tried reading. Checked email. But every 10 minutes I scurried back to make sure my chicken was still breathing. He slept a long time—the sleep of someone who needs it. Then as I quietly prepared dinner, he suddenly popped up and started ravenously eating from his dish. It worked! I trimmed his beak and he's been gorging like a Roman king ever since.



Kevin and I thought having a chicken in the kitchen was SO funny! We cracked up every time we sat down to eat a few feet away. *I'll have waffles and coffee... oh, and the rooster wants another serving of scratch, please.* Ha!

Perhaps you have already considered the downfall to all this folly. Every morning we were rattled awake by his startling predawn crow, which rang through the house like a living alarm clock. Okay, that part was not so funny.

Posted in [A Traveler's Journal](#), [Animal Rescue](#), [Family Fun](#) | Comments Off

Calling All Whale-Lovers and Would-Be Scientists

Posted on [February 24, 2012](#) by [admin](#)

People frequently tell me they have always loved animals and wish they had followed their dream of working with them. Many are also intrigued by science and would be thrilled to play even a small role in discovering something new. Well now there is an opportunity for those people—for *you*—to become citizen scientists and contribute to knowledge of whale communication. You can even do it right from your computer. It's called [Whale FM](#).



This exciting online program was developed by an innovative team of researchers who realized more ears are better when it comes to analyzing acoustic data (that is, sounds). Orcas and Pilot whales use sophisticated arrays of sounds, or calls, to communicate with one another. By recording those calls with hydrophones and studying them, scientists may begin to understand what the whales are saying.

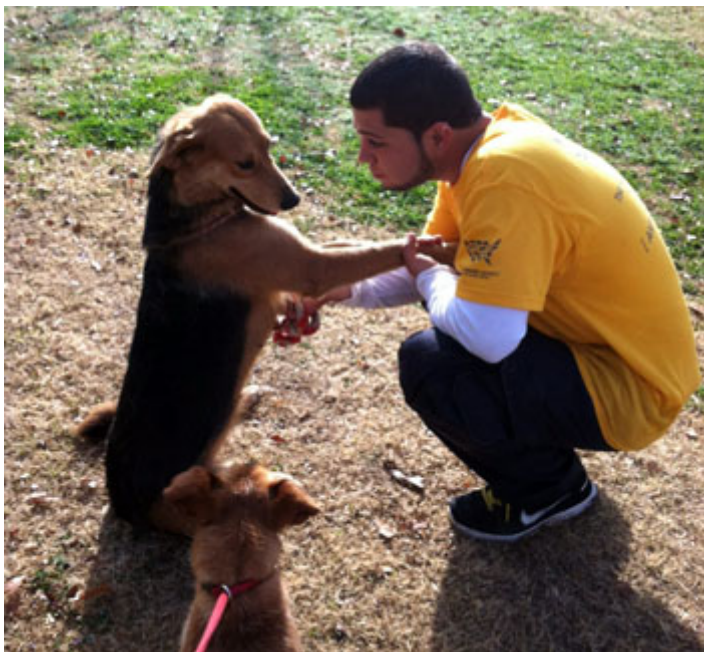
Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to help the researchers group similar sounding whale calls together. Basically, you are presented with an audio clip of one call along with a spectrograph and an oceanic map showing where in the world the call was recorded. Then you are given several other clips that are potential matches. After carefully listening, you decide whether a pair can be made. It's a fun challenge. Forget the game apps, this may become your new addiction!

Moreover, if/when these whale calls have someday been translated into a language humans understand, you can tell your grandchildren that you were part of the research team. I tend to think those would be some pretty solid bragging rights.

Posted in [Earth's Amazing Creatures](#), [Family Fun](#) | Comments Off

The Wagging Tails Make It All Worthwhile

Posted on [January 27, 2012](#) by [admin](#)



Oletta took a photo of Adrian comforting this dog while the one she was walking approached to make friends.

It's the end of January and I'm in California on deployment with the [Humane Society of the United States](#) Animal Response Team, assisting over 80 dogs (and a few cats) that are awaiting adoption from a confiscation case. As always, the circumstances that lead law enforcement to take custody of the animals are deeply disturbing—but my teammates and I try not to dwell on such thoughts while we are here. Instead we focus on providing excellent care and raising the animals' spirits as much we can.

Delivering food and cleaning cages is only part of the job. Dogs are social and have emotional needs as well as physical ones. So we spend time touching, encouraging and playing with each dog twice a day during long walks on the grass. Some of them have never had daily meals and personalized attention. After their exercise, we offer soft blankets and giant cookies (not unlike good 1960's

flight attendants) and you can see the gratitude in their eyes.

All of our new canine friends deserve homes but they each have their own brand of charm. Some are silly and gregarious. Others are thoughtful and shy. Just spending time getting to know their personalities fills me with joy.

I'm serving aside some of the coolest people, too. Our crew works hard but keeps the energy fun and I've really connected with my roommate Oletta. She runs a very special dog camp in Oregon called Adventurous K9, where

the dogs go off-leash in a pack and enjoy long romps through the forest. You will absolutely *love* the pictures and videos on her website!

<http://www.adventurousk9.com/>

The dogs here are finding homes day by day and getting them ALL placed with loving families is the ultimate goal. But we are already making their lives better. It's heartwarming, really. For all the stuff I do with animals, I think maybe my rescue work, this work—making a difference in a time of crisis—brings me the greatest fulfillment. The results of our effort are so tangible, so immediate. Hunger is fed. Pain is relieved. With tenderness, even fear is forgotten.

And every day brings the most symbolic reward... a roomful of wagging tails.

Posted in [A Traveler's Journal](#), [Animal Rescue](#) | Comments Off

Nature is a Mother

Posted on [January 22, 2012](#) by [admin](#)

A small group of kayakers paddled alongside the shores of the Osa Peninsula in Golfo Dulce, sunlight reflecting emerald rainforest on the cerulean sea. Oaring their way around a tip of land and into a serene bay, the threesome unexpectedly came upon an enormous Humpback whale. At first delighted, the people quickly realized the fifty-foot leviathan was behaving strangely. It was swimming slowly and in circles. Concerned, the kayakers stopped at a safe distance and watched.



Our crew signed a poster for a local woman who came down every day to cut blankets for the dogs. Oletta is standing next to me.

The whale descended. Minutes passed. When at last it rose again, it began breathing heavily as if in pain. Its blowhole gapped open and closed with increasing strain. The kayakers ached with compassion, their fiberglass crafts bobbing over tiny ripples caused by the labored inhalations. *What, if anything, could be done to help the distressed whale? Was it dying?* Suddenly the water flashed crimson. Great plumes of blood swelled from the behemoth as it drew a final jagged breath and slipped below the surface.



As the kayakers peered down at the black form, an odd movement twisted the depths. Moments later, a small wrinkled mass surged upward and broke the water's surface—a newborn calf—pushed into the daylight by its mother for its first sweet breath of air. The kayakers had watched the birth of a Humpback!

When one of the men told me this story years after its occurrence, his eyes twinkled with a hint of tears. Such emotion seems inevitable. Whales have long inspired reverence in the human heart, and having seen other kinds of babies born myself, I know the miracle of nativity leaves no witness untouched. But their experience was made even more amazing by its rarity—only a few people have *ever* seen a Humpback delivered! Despite years of research, mother whales still keep their secret. Magnificent titans, they surface and dive like black stitches across blue fabric, weaving mysteries of life we have yet to unravel.

Posted in [Costa Rica Adventures](#), [Earth's Amazing Creatures](#), [Pacific Coast Splendor](#) | Comments Off

Time to Celebrate!

Posted on [November 25, 2011](#) by [admin](#)



Humpback whale breaches in Golfo Dulce

Jump for joy! The impending Yellowfin tuna farm permitted for construction near the mouth of Golfo Dulce has been stopped! As Jorge would say, “Yipy!” In early November SETENA (Costa Rica’s Environmental Secretariat) took decisive action when it ended negotiations with Granjas Atuneras de Golfito S. A. The foreign interest conglomerate had been pushing for seven years to develop the tuna farm but was finally blocked after failure to comply with a Supreme Court order to perform an environmental impact study.

Well, *they* might not have conducted an investigation in Golfo Dulce, but Jorge and I certainly did. It was the tuna that first spurred our research. In January-February 2010 we undertook our first multi-species sighting survey to collect and publish baseline data on sea life before the area could be changed or damaged by a mariculture project. The interesting findings from that study, which were presented in my [2010 project report](#), justified funding for the recent extension survey in July-August of this year.

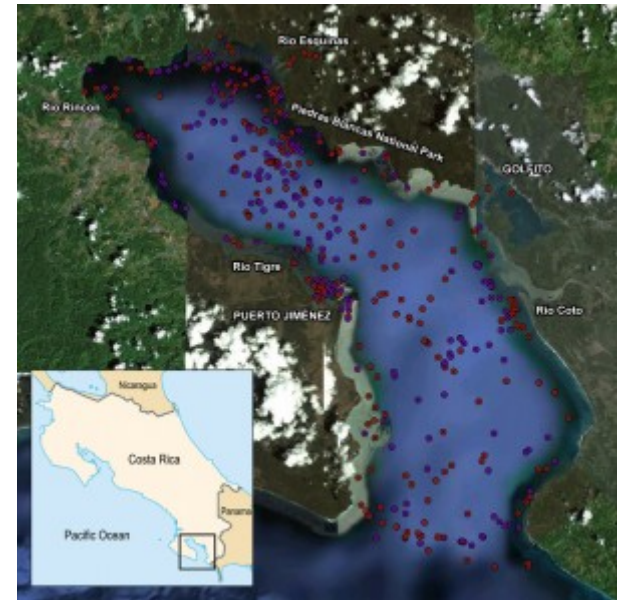
Which brings me to my second bit of exciting news: The [Rainy season extension of the multi-species marine sighting survey in Golfo Dulce, Costa Rica, July – August 2011, final report and comparative summary](#) is now available. This new paper not only illuminates details of our 2011 (rainy season) findings but offers a comparative look at the 2010 (dry season) data.

In fact, if you combine both surveys, Jorge and I logged a total of 55 days on the water for a total of 424 observation hours. And we recorded 458 sightings for over 38 species of marine wildlife! *Whew!*

What were the highlights?

- Well, our data indicate that Humpback whales from both northern and southern hemispheres utilize Golfo Dulce. Birthing events were reported to us during both seasons and we personally witnessed nursing.
- We identified over 80 individual Bottlenose dolphins inside the gulf. We also documented skin disease in the population, which could possibly be linked to human activity.
- Along with sightings for Olive Ridley sea turtles and critically endangered Hawksbill sea turtles, we found Golfo Dulce to be a year-round breeding and feeding ground for *hundreds* of Pacific Green sea turtles!
- And by marking the distribution of pelagic sea snakes, we revealed a resident colony of xanthic (all-yellow or predominantly yellow) pelagic sea snakes in the upper reaches of the gulf.

What an honor to be able to share these incredible insights—Golfo Dulce is clearly an important marine habitat for many species! BTW... I've posted photos and video of several animals in previous blogs and on my [Facebook page](#), so you might want to browse around.



All our sighting points from both surveys (red = dry season 2010, purple = rainy season 2011) reveal high-use areas for marine fauna inside Golfo Dulce.

Now that Golfo Dulce is no longer under imminent threat of a tuna farm, there is time for even more research. Many excellent biologists are conducting studies on specific species and their emerging data is just as exciting as ours. In fact, there is every indication that Golfo Dulce will gain international recognition as a rare tropical fiord with a unique ecology. So thanks to everyone who worked so hard to protect it!



Jorge holds up a Yipy candybar during our 2010 survey. It became a running joke between us.

Posted in [A Traveler's Journal](#), [Costa Rica Adventures](#), [Earth's Amazing Creatures](#), [Life as an Author-Illustrator](#), [Pacific Coast Splendor](#), [Poetry & Other Writings](#) | [Comments Off](#)

The Human Heart Knows No Bounds

Posted on [October 28, 2011](#) by [admin](#)



Have you ever seen that Pass It On billboard with Christopher Reeves in his wheelchair and the simple words *Super man*?

There is nothing more inspiring than a hero. Someone who goes up against impossible odds, holding to a dream. Someone who faces devastation and yet refuses defeat. Someone who forges past unthinkable obstacles to reach extraordinary achievement. And the greatest hero does it all for the service of others.

We see heroes in movies all the time—sometimes wearing red capes. And we love them! Why? Because they reflect that pureness inside each of us that wants to believe if the world threatened to crush us, *we* too would rise like a phoenix, *we* too would stand for the underdog, *we* too would save the day.

We love heroes because they raise the bar on our own humanity.

Eric Northbrook is my cousin. He's not a movie star like Christopher Reeves, but he did start a foundation called [HeadNorth](#), which helps people with spinal cord injuries reclaim their lives. Who would do such a profoundly compassionate thing?

A hero.

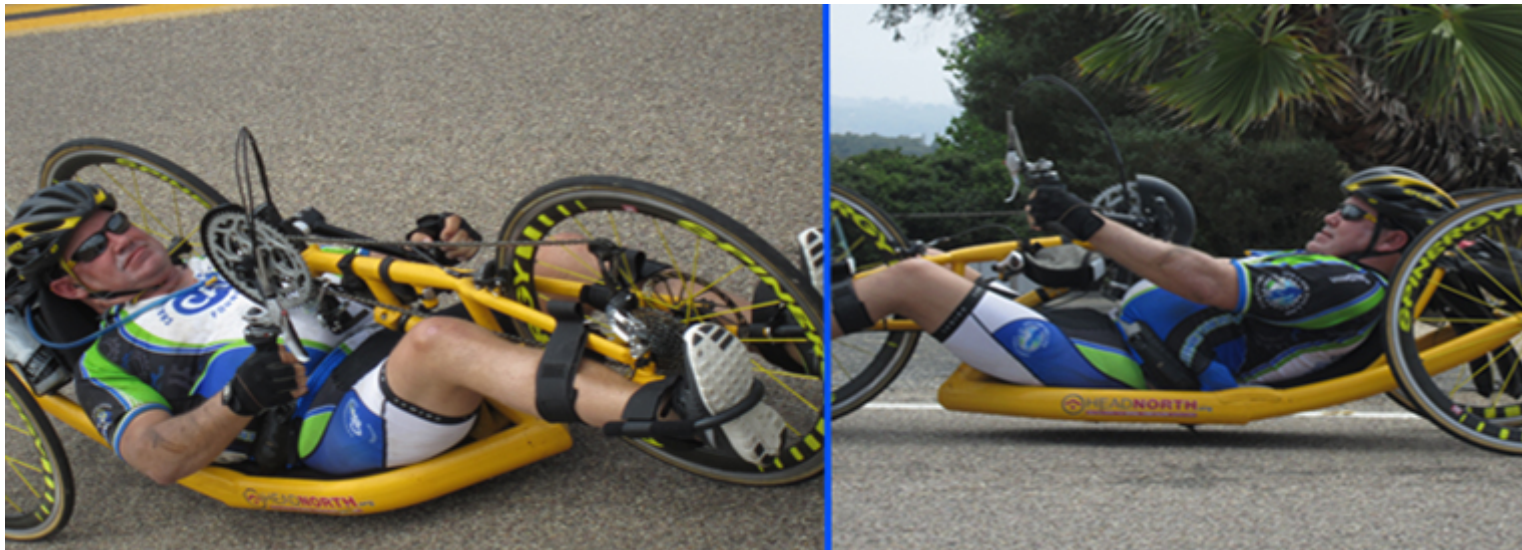
In January 2006 Eric was living the American dream, a successful commercial real estate exec with a lovely wife, Denise, and two adorable kids. Then his world went spinning. He was paralyzed in a motorcycle accident. Suddenly paraplegic, he had every excuse to collapse in despair. Instead he built a foundation. With Denise by his

side, he not only regained his own footing but helped others find theirs. He took the fall and came back fighting, invincible.

Then Denise died. In 2010 she passed from cancer at only 43 years old, leaving Eric a bereaved husband and single father. It is agonizing to imagine. Who overcomes such unbearable heartbreak?

A hero.

Despite it all, Eric keeps going. This month he took the Challenged Athletes Foundation Million Dollar Challenge—a seven-day, 620-mile bike ride from San Francisco to San Diego—using only his *arms!* In a recent email he wrote, “I am dedicating this ride to my late wife Denise and our two beautiful children Justin and Sydney.”



Raising the bar. That's my cuz.

Okay, truth is Eric and I are 3rd cousins and we don't really know each other. I follow him through my mother's emails. But the family tie still feels significant. It makes me think maybe I have a little of what Eric has inside me. Courage. Stamina. Faith.

Of course all of us do.

Hopefully we are never pushed to reveal our strongest selves through the kind of inconceivable tragedy that Eric has faced. But knowing he is out there braving it for the greater good is incredibly inspiring. It makes me stand a little taller against the odds. Work a little harder to reach my goals. Give a little more to help others.

Eric is a super man. He may have traded the red cape for a hand cycle... but, man, he still *flies*.

Posted in [Family Fun](#) | Comments Off

Do I Know You? Building a Foto-ID Catalog of Bottlenose Dolphins in Golfo Dulce

Posted on [September 23, 2011](#) by [admin](#)

Most of you know I have been working toward identifying the Bottlenose dolphins (*Turciops truncatus*) inside Golfo Dulce. After my first round of research I was able to recognize about 40 individual dolphins, some of which can be seen in my [2010 report](#). Now, after two years of laborious investigation, I have come to identify about twice that many!

You may be wondering how exactly one goes about identifying dolphins.

Well, pioneering biologists studying various species discovered ingenious ways to distinguish individuals. Jaguars have unique spots. Gorillas have unique nose prints. Dolphins have unique dorsal fins. By examining the shape, natural markings, scars and trailing edge, a dorsal may appear as distinct as a fingerprint.



Of course dolphins don't sit quietly at the surface while you study the



Dorsal A lives in Golfo Dulce, Costa Rica

intricacies of their dorsal patterns, so ID work is best done through photos. A good close-up photo allows us to visualize, even trace, the dorsal outline. Once we “know” this dolphin, we can often recognize it from a distance. We can then go back and look for it in other sighting photos and thus begin tracking its movements, as well as associations with fellow dolphins. It's a tedious task, yet also exciting. Every sea of dorsal fins suddenly becomes an intriguing puzzle of who's-who!

If you followed my [facebook page](#), you may remember seeing a picture of a Bottlenose named Dorsal A. Dorsal A was the first dolphin Jorge and I recognized during our 2010 survey. With a fully severed fin, it's no surprise that Dorsal A stood out in the crowd. But variances are rarely so obvious. Here are a few more of Golfo Dulce's Bottlenose dolphins to test your discerning eye:



There are similarities. But take note of EVERY mark—especially nicks and notches in the trailing edge that could be seen from either side. Would you recognize these individuals if you saw them again? With side-by-side photos, I suppose you would.

Okay, so now you are probably wondering, *why go to so much trouble?*

Researchers create Foto-ID catalogs and databases to expand scientific understanding of dolphin populations and their habitats. That is my goal for the Golfo Dulce group and I hope to rally other Golfo Dulce researchers to collaborate. By combining current, historical and future photos, our database will have broader impact. But good science is only part of it. I am also sharing my Foto-ID images to serve outreach programs.

Familiarity breeds a sense of responsibility—we are more likely to help those we know—so [Osa Conservation](#) has been working on a Community Dolphin Project to introduce the locals to the most recognizable and/or commonly seen individuals. By connecting people with their dolphin neighbors they will hopefully be inspired to protect them... and the gulf.

For me it's a circle of work. Wildlife. Science. Knowledge-sharing. Conservation. And if I'm lucky enough to meet a few dolphins in the loop, how in the world could I complain?

Posted in [Costa Rica Adventures](#), [Earth's Amazing Creatures](#), [Pacific Coast Splendor](#) | Comments Off

GOLFO DULCE 2011, PART 4: And Her Eyes Sparkled with the Secret of It

Posted on [August 26, 2011](#) by [admin](#)

Now the days float by in blues and teals and misty greys. I feel like Margaret Wise Brown's black kitten, peering from my seaward vessel in search of life's secrets. *What will we find today?* Perhaps a little island.



the back of a resting green sea turtle with free-loading barnacles

Although our motor is plenty powerful, we are still at the mercy of the water, our boat falling into rhythm with the waves. Rumba rolls. Foxtrot ripples. Sometimes there comes a swaying chop that turns our dance into a wild salsa and leaves us laughing like giddy children.

Only once have we met the kind of intimidating swells that could topple us. We were skirting the waters near the open Pacific when the wind picked up. Suddenly we were being touselled by 6-foot waves that seemed to be fighting over which direction to go. Jorge held tight to the controls and powered us into the face of each contender so as not to be hit broadside and overturned.

Water splashed willynilly into our boat and, as I struggled to keep my weight planted, I got to thinking about the marine radio that we didn't yet have and how this whole research thing was just a tinge on the edgy side. Thankfully the battle lasted less than an hour, the bullying waves wandered off like street punks and the gulf smoothed over. Jorge acted nonchalant but I could tell he was rattled.

Of course it rains—it is the rainy season. Huddled in waterproof slickers we always keep our course, faithful foolhardy souls. But downpours are rare and our visibility has remained excellent. And just in case you have spent even a moment wondering if it's all worthwhile...



Bottlenose dolphins traveling in a protective pack with a newborn (look closely!)



baby Humpback whale by mama, nursing (see the milk?), resting (see the paired blowholes?), spyhopping (see the bumps on its head called tubercles?)



our 2010 data showed all the sea snakes in upper Golfo Dulce are bright yellow... I just love them!



dolphins are said to leap when searching for food, which may be better seen from above the surface

Each day brings new discoveries and adds to the wonderful images adrift in my head*. Each day is the same and yet so very different. Each day I wonder... *What will we find today?*

*I have been posting additional photos and videos on [Facebook](#).

Posted in [A Traveler's Journal](#), [Costa Rica Adventures](#), [Earth's Amazing Creatures](#), [Pacific Coast Splendor](#) | Comments Off

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