



## Observations from the Mendenhall Glacier

# Juneau's Winter Whales

February 12, 2009

## Upcoming ... Fireside lectures

### Friday, February 13 \* 6:30 & 8pm Juneau's Winter Whales

Learn where whales spend the winter; not all go to Hawaii. See more at right.

### Friday, February 20 \* 6:30 & 8pm Black Bears for Neighbors

Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist Ryan Scott and his associates have radio-collared several Juneau black bears over the past five years. Dig into the behavior and habits of our urban black bear neighbors with data collected from the radio collars. See how this information will be used in the future management of Juneau's black bears.

### Friday, February 27 \* 6:30pm & 8pm Giant Pacific Octopus: The Elusive Cephalopod

Sherry Tamone and her colleagues at the University of Alaska have marked and recaptured giant Pacific octopus in Kachemak Bay. Sherry will share details about the population of these marine super cephalopods and their migrations in the Gulf of Alaska.

### Friday, March 6 \* 6:30pm & 8pm Mendenhall's Black Bears

Join visitor center rangers Doug Jones and Laurie Craig for a 2008 update of the glacier area's wild black bears. Get acquainted with this year's 13 bears through stories and photos.

**\*\* We'll have a special book signing, too!** Mark Kelley and Nick Jans will autograph copies of their 2008 book **Black Bears of Alaska's Mendenhall Glacier**.

More at [www.mendenhallglacier.org](http://www.mendenhallglacier.org)

Fireside lectures are free and occur on Friday nights in January, February and March. Visitor center doors open at 5:45pm with the first lecture at 6:30pm and repeat at 8pm.

On Friday, February 13 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) researcher John Moran will present a Fireside lecture on his studies of Juneau's humpback whales. His primary focus for this program will be the activities of Juneau's whales and whale researchers during the winter months in Alaska.

John has spent the last three winters studying humpback whales in Prince William Sound and Southeast Alaska. This collaborative effort, between NOAA's Auke Bay Laboratories (ABL), the University of Alaska Southeast Sitka, and the University of Alaska Fairbanks, is assessing the impact of humpback whale predation on over-wintering Pacific herring.

Humpbacks have unique markings on the undersides of their tails that can be photographed and used to identify individuals. Juneau's whales normally migrate from the cold, rich waters of Alaska to Hawaii in winter for breeding and birthing. While in the warmer waters, the whales feed very little. With the use of photo ID, researchers have been able

to identify individual whales that stay in Alaskan waters late into the winter, while others have already migrated to the lower latitude breeding grounds.

Similarly, there are some whales that return to the Alaskan waters early. The combination of late-staying and early-returning whales makes it possible to find whales in the Juneau vicinity every month of the year.

In 2008, researchers at NOAA's Alaska Fisheries Science Center posted a website dedicated to Juneau area humpback whales. The site provides photo identification methods, as well as information on humpback biology, life history, and research. Site users will find details on how to match their own sightings or photographs of whale flukes against the web-site catalog that identifies 108 humpbacks that utilize the waters between Taku Inlet and Berners Bay. The site also reminds the Juneau whale-watching community and visiting whale-watchers about the rules of approaching humpback whales. NOAA's website for whale information is [www.afsc.noaa.gov/ABL/Humpback/](http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/ABL/Humpback/).



This is humpback whale is number 1879, known as "AK" because of the scars of its left fluke that resemble the letters that are Alaska's abbreviation.

# Tongass Science Conference

## February 17-19

The Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska is our nation's largest national forest. Nearly 17 million acres in size, it encompasses the largest intact temperate rainforest on earth, and it is home to abundant fish and wildlife. But management of the Tongass is at a critical juncture.

The Tongass Science Conference, sponsored jointly by Audubon Alaska and the Nature Conservancy, is bringing together local and national scientists to discuss opportunities to integrate fundamental concepts of conservation biology into management strategies for conserving the biodiversity and ecological integrity of the Tongass National Forest. All events are free and will be held at [Centennial Hall](#) in Juneau.

### ***Evening Presentations***

**Tuesday, February 17, 7:30 pm**  
*Culture and Place: A Native Perspective on the Tongass Forest* [Byron Mallott](#), Senior Fellow, First Alaskans Institute and Director, Sealaska Corporation.

**Wednesday, February 18, 7:30 pm**  
Climate Change & Potential Impacts to Coastal Rainforests Terry Chapin, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

**Tongass Science Conference Science Symposium Thursday, February 19, 8:00 am to 5:00 pm**

The all-day event starts with a keynote address by Jerry Franklin, University of Washington: *Conservation & Management of Old Growth Forests*. Other topics include: *Island Biogeography, Watershed Conservation, and Tongass Market Economy*.

***Audubon Alaska and The Nature Conservancy are sponsoring a conference on the Tongass National Forest. Find the full agenda of the conference at [www.audubonalaska.org](http://www.audubonalaska.org)***

## ***Naturalist's Notebook***

The intensity of Jane's voice on the phone tells me something significant is being discussed with the caller. It's Saturday afternoon, February 7, and we share visitor center hosting duty in the observatory.

"What time did it come down?" she asks into the phone. A long silence follows as she listens to the caller. When she hangs up she turns to me with the news from Thane.

"An avalanche just came down the mountain, closing Thane Road," Jane tells me. "The call was from a neighbor checking on me. Snow is thick on the road and ran out into the water about 20 feet."

Like many remote neighborhoods, Thane residents rely on each other. They have a neighborhood alert phone tree to be sure everyone is safe in exactly this circumstance. Jane's neighbor Paula called to be sure Jane was not trapped in the heavy wet snow that rumbled off Mount Roberts.

Due to the immensity of the avalanche, Thane neighbors had been told the road would not be cleared until the following day, so everyone needs to make arrangements for the night. The group had already organized transportation. Jane says the neighbors on the town side will meet in a half hour and walk the beach together in daylight while the falling tide exposes safe beach areas. They will be met by others on the neighborhood side of the closed road who will drive them home. She packs her belongings and leaves the visitor center

right away. Jane promises she will call me when she gets home.

An hour later I check my computer's online media sources for news of the avalanche. Finding nothing I phone the weather service office on Back Loop Road for details. The weather forecasters have not been informed yet. Being Saturday, the usual administrative duties of a full Department of Transportation staff are not being performed as they would have been if the avalanche occurred during business hours. No doubt on-duty DOT officials are scrambling to assess the avalanche situation and be sure Thane Road drivers are safe.

At 4:30pm, the visitor center phone rings. Jane has just walked in the door of her Thane home, she says. All had gone well. I drive home to Auke Lake relieved.

The next day my visitor center coworker Irene relays her involvement with the avalanche. She lives at the opposite end of town. Her Out-the-Road neighbors share the same closeness and concern for each other. But other circumstances bring her focus to Thane today. Her husband is a DOT equipment operator. Sunday morning he'd been flown by helicopter to the Thane side of the avalanche where he now waits in a friend's pickup. He will be

the eyes and ears of the department while his coworkers clear the road.

In particular he will observe and protect the Thane area while the Howitzer gun mounted on Douglas Island fires cannon shells across Gastineau Channel. DOT blasts the mountain to release any residual avalanches prior to equipment operators working in the avalanche zone. When Irene talks to Jane she learns the Thane neighbors have already introduced themselves to her husband and offered invitations to spend the night, refill his thermos of coffee, or help in any way if the avalanche is not cleared successfully by nightfall.

Juneau's mainland road system stretches only 50 miles or so, yet neighbors 36 miles apart reached out to care for each other in this time of need. My coworkers and their friends extended the outstretched hands of thoughtful neighbors across those miles. It's why we live in a small town and take care of each other.

For a video newsstory of the avalanche blasting go to [www.juneauempire.com](http://www.juneauempire.com) and scroll down the web page until you find the link on the lower left side.

***Observations from Mendenhall Glacier and Naturalist's Notebook***  
are written by US Forest Service naturalist  
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Winter Hours Thursday-Sunday  
10am to 4pm