

Seal Team TSSC Takes Gloucester and Little Salvages !

Gary Lehman

(Photos: Paul S. Bob B. Denise B. Gary L.)

The Scuba Sports Club has an annual September tradition of sojourning to Gloucester, Massachusetts to scuba dive with the seals of Little Salvages and Dry Salvages. These two little islands are approximately 3 miles offshore of the picturesque town of Rockport. Typically, we leave around 8AM with six divers with a plan for two dives at the Salvages; then the dive boat returns to Gloucester's Cape Ann Marina shortly before lunch time. After a short stop to disembark divers and gear, intrepid 25' *Down Under* embarks another six divers, and eases out of Gloucester Harbor back into Stellwagon Bank for a 30-minute cruise to The Salvages for more seal diving! This year we had the following divers on the morning and afternoon teams, either diving or providing surface support: Michelle M, Denise B, Jack R, Paul S, Ed D, Bob B, Paul S, Katelynn K, Mikhayl M, Sheri B, Romel A, John F and Gary L.



Those of us who have participated in these seal dives are hooked for life, and return whenever we can each year. One of the true joys of the 'occasionally challenging' diving in the northeast is diving with the seals at The Salvages or nearby Isles of Shoals (about twenty miles due north off Portsmouth, New Hampshire in the Gulf of Maine). It is truly a magical experience. We dive with both gray and harbor seals; gray seals are much larger with a long dog-like nose, and harbor seals are smaller and lighter in color with a short stubby nose. (It is interesting to note that the German word for 'seal' is 'seehund' -- which literally translates to sea-dog -- and everyone who plays 'tug of war' with dogs quickly understands the reason for that! What's more, *the seals even bark!*)

Once you arrive at the dive sites near these little islands, seals pop up above the water on every quarter, with their inquisitive, playful eyes and expressions -- as if to ask "did you come out to play with us today?" And we did indeed do just that! Northeast diving has its own SERENGETI, and it is only thirty miles northeast of Boston, just slightly offshore. You need to give it a whirl!



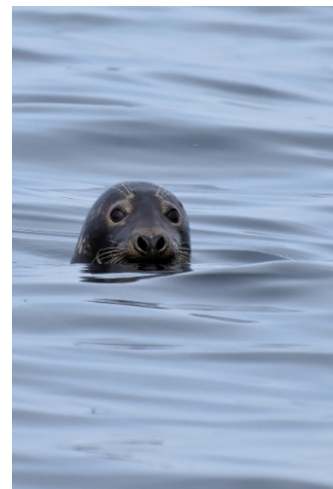
Seal diving at Cape Ann calls for ***a shout out to our legendary friend Captain Fran Linnehan.*** He has been plying these waters, diving and providing chartering services for 33 years, and we marveled at the precision of his navigation -- getting us unerringly to the dive site despite the shroud of early morning fog. Once at the dive site, Captain Linnehan provides insights into how to have the best seal encounter, and advises his diving clients to enter the water, follow a compass heading for a short swim, and then to *settle in and wait on the bottom.*

Captain Fran knows that the seals' natural curiosity and playfulness will impel them to come over to investigate. "Mind you", advises Captain Fran, "don't chase the seals!" If divers chase them, the seals take off - and the divers *might* see sets of fleeing hind flippers! However (our experience bore this out repeatedly,) stay quiet and hunkered down -- and they will come over to say hello, swimming close, and even mouthing your fins, camera gear, shoulders (and even the back of your head, right Bob?!). Captain Linnehan has extensive knowledge not only of these waters and the resident seals, but he is a PADI and NAUI-certified instructor who has dived the world. Captain carefully and discretely assesses each diver, buddychecking divers' gear before signaling that backward flip off the boat's gunwale. He ensures a positive, personalized dive trip, and takes care of each diver's individual needs. And the trip back to Gloucester is never long enough, brimming with lively, engaging conversations with Captain about near everything!



The dive itself is straightforward – off the boat, down to the bottom (about 30'), a short swim on the compass heading provided -- and then wait for the fun to begin! Drysuits are preferred even in mid-September, with temperatures on the bottom around 50-54F. (That said, I had a 5mm wetsuit and hood, and was fine for the first 40-minute dive our team enjoyed. I passed on the second dive because

honestly, nothing could have topped that first dive!). With all those seals swarming all around us, playing 'tug of war', nibbling on our fins, playing and hanging out, *this was the best dive of my life!* Treat yourself to this treasure of northeast diving!





Seals taking a break on Little Salvages, with Dry Salvages (capped with seabird guano) in the background

OK, so...let's talk about white sharks. Yes, white sharks will make predations on seals; yes, there are white sharks preying on the burgeoning seal population on Cape Cod (only around fifty miles southeast); OCEARCH is tagging juvenile white sharks off the east end of Long Island; and the seal population at The Salvages has doubled in the past few years. Yes, it is counter-intuitive to scuba dive with white sharks. Yes, a tagged 9' white shark named 'Cisco' was at the exact place we were diving in July. To which we say "Cisco – and all your relatives - live and be well". Because without the white sharks making predations, seals would overconsume the haddock, menhaden, striped bass and other keystone species. So yes, we will continue to dive The Salvages, trusting that our paths don't pass too close to a hungry adult white shark intent on a predation.



Why not make a long weekend of your Gloucester seal dive!?

I drove up Thursday (avoiding Friday traffic), settled in for a hearty New England 'chowdah' and baked haddock, and got a great night's sleep in that crisp, briny air at my comfortable, reasonably-priced inn. Camping is available nearby as well. On Friday, I enjoyed a *fabulous*

whale watch with Cape Ann Whale Watch, observing frolicking minke and humpback mothers with their calves with expert commentary from the naturalist aboard. The menhaden, blues and striped bass were all over-- at times the water roiled with frantic menhaden (also known as mossbunker) trying to escape the marauding, voracious bluefish.



The town of Gloucester is charming and picturesque, dominated by the Gorton fish factory. The iconic Fisherman's Memorial ('*They that go down to the sea in ships*' 1623-1923) and accompanying Fishermen's Wives Memorial are beautiful and moving, inscribed with the names of so many who have lost their lives in the inherently dangerous profession of deep sea fishing. The names of the Captain and crew of the swordfishing boat *Andrea Gail* are there, immortalized in Sebastian Junger's book *The Perfect Storm*. Gloucester's back streets and pier areas also offer up antique and craft shops with

maritime themes, the Gloucester Maritime Heritage Museum, the Whale Center of New England, and the Diving Museum.



Hey -- first bowl of 'chowdah' is on me !

