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Cedar Beach Ocean Lodge & 49th Parallel Dive Charters

Vancouver Island BC, Home of the Boeing 737 Artificial Reef

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THE BOEING 737 AFTER THREE YEARS.

After just over three years beneath the waves, the Boeing 737 Artificial Reef not only continues to attract divers but colonizing marine life as well. The exact number of aquanauts and marine critters that have been drawn to this novel site is impossible to calculate. Suffice to say – very many. Check out Peter's website at www.divemaster.ca, move to "Passenger List" and you can find an up to date accounting of the species now aboard the aircraft (or is that *underwater* craft?). At the time of this note, 104 different species are listed. A recent and particularly exciting "newcomer" is a tiny juvenile yelloweye rockfish *Sebastes ruberrimus*. It has taken up residence at the forward supporting bracket, just below the plane's nose.

Many of our guests specifically request a dive at the plane as part of their package. A number of these divers have a special connection with the Boeing 737. Former pilots, crew, maintenance staff as well as design and construction hands have taken the plunge to revisit their relationship. Other divers who volunteered to ready the plane for sinking have also made a

pilgrimage to the site. Even folks who observed the original project from their workplace or home have explored this unique aluminium reef.

Although festooned with much marine life, the Boeing 737 Artificial Reef essentially remains the unit that was sunk on February 14th, 2006; one noteworthy 'adjustment' has been made. The First Nation sea urchin mask, once affixed to the nose of the plane, has been re-located. Safety concerns resulting from a loosening of the mask's attachment rope, prompted Peter to move it. He has positioned it, wreath-like, in front of the previously mentioned anterior-most support bracket. Although its wooden spines have deteriorated and broken off, the sea urchin continues to welcome divers with its 'toothy grin'.

ROUTINE DIVE, EXTRAORDINARY EVENT

Over the many years of my diving experience, one fact seems to have emerged. The more time one spends under water the more one is likely to encounter something unusual and exciting. A special dive memory may often occur during a routine exploration of virtually any site and at any time. The critical factor is being there to observe it.

Recently, such event happened for me -- on my 2,850th dive. On March 8th of this year, 49th Parallel Dive Charters/Cedar Beach was hosting a group of Vancouver divers. For the second dive of the day, we selected Escape Reef in Stuart Channel. This site is one of our regular stops and offers a variety of marine life at comfortable diving depths. Visibility was poor, due to an unseasonably early phytoplankton bloom. Undeterred, our intrepid divers decided to soldier on. Such a scenario is not uncommon for Pacific Northwest divers.

After Peter's dive briefing and a few comments from me about what critters might be encountered, we took the giant stride into action. For this particular dive, I was partnered with Alithea Nunes and we slowly made our way through the murk to about 70ft. Here the visibility was somewhat better (perhaps 20ft.) It was very dark - - virtual night dive conditions. Undeterred, we moved along as directed at the briefing. Alithea and I began surveying the bottom for items of interest. Some minutes along the trail, the beam from her dive light illuminated a tanner crab *Chionocetes bairdi* resting upon the sand. Approaching closer, it



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became obvious that the specimen was moulting – shedding its exoskeleton (shell). Our timing was impeccable. The process had just begun. The crab had just starting to back out between a widening gap between the top and bottom of the exoskeleton. After a few moments of observation, I carefully grasped the vulnerable beast and place it my collecting bucket (an orange and white bait bucket that accompanies me on most dives). Although we encountered numerous other interesting critters during the course of our exploration, the moulting tanner crab would be the highlight for the dive. Indeed it would have been a highlight for any of my previous 2,849 dives! Such an event has only happened for me once or twice before.

Back aboard the *Red Urchin*, I gently placed our emerging companion in a small plastic ray filled with seawater and group members gathered around to share the event. Numerous photographs were taken to document the proceedings– two of which appear herein. As we proceeded back to Telegraph Harbour Marina, the struggling crab managed to completely extricate itself from the now too small “suit of armour”. The process took a little over an hour. At this point, we had a discarded exoskeleton and a very soft, vulnerable crab. What to do? Now feeling responsible for the little fellow, I placed it in a bucket of seawater and took it

back to Cedar Beach and the safety of our garage. It took several days for the crab’s exoskeleton to sufficiently calcify and make it hard to the touch. Daily water changes insured life sustaining oxygen levels.

On the *Red Urchin*’s next voyage to Stuart Channel, I was able to release the now hardened and fully functional specimen to the spot on Escape Reef where the memorable diver/crab encounter began. The remarkable story had ended. Or has it? Perhaps our paths may cross yet again?

FLASHBACK: This story may have actually begun a week earlier on Dive#2849! At virtually the same spot, while diving with Ron Akeson and a group from Adventures Down Under, Bellingham, Washington, I had encountered an embracing pair of tanner crabs at virtually the same spot and depth. The smaller of the two was the approximate size of Dive#2850’s star performer. Some species of crab copulate at the time of the female’s moulting process. Could I have witnessed the ‘preliminaries’ on Dive#2849, missed the ‘critical act’ and arrived on Dive#2850 for the final ‘undress’? An unsolved mystery!

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For a full set of these images go to the photo gallery at www.divemaster.ca and select Crab molt March 8th 2009

Enjoy !

Call or email us soon to arrange your next diving vacation.