



The Cactus Wren•dition



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Bald Eagle

by Andrew Cahill Hoppin

A Coastal Journey to San Juan Island, Washington

by Neil Rizos

The early morning fog is slowly beginning to lift, revealing low, dark clouds above and curtains of rain showers in the distance. I am sitting nearly motionless among the dark, jagged rocks exposed by the outgoing tide. Thirty feet in front of me, nearly a dozen Harlequin Ducks emerge from the calm water and clamber up the seaweed draped rocks. Completely indifferent to my presence, the small flock of males and females preens and rests. This is exactly the moment I have been waiting for: The chance to observe beautiful, relaxed, wild birds exhibiting their natural behaviors in a picturesque setting. Several ducks are sleeping peacefully. A few are serving as sentries, constantly scanning the skies for threats from the abundant Bald Eagles or the occasional Peregrine Falcon. But most are engaged in the vital task of waterproofing and maintaining feathers – demonstrating amazing contortionist skills as they apply oil all over themselves, gathered from the preen gland at the base of the tail. I watch for some time, mesmerized by the beauty of my surroundings and enchanted by the fascinating behavior of these lovely creatures. As I photograph and sketch my subjects, ideas for paintings, etchings and sculptures flood my imagination. Predictably, the spell is broken when the heavens open and I scramble for shelter under the canopy of the towering Douglas firs on the shoreline.

This journey began on February 28, 2018, when my partner Stephanie and I packed the car and departed Los Angeles for a



Harlequin Ducks in a rare, tranquil moment.

California Highlights

- Morro Bay – The off-season at Morro Bay made our visit both affordable and crowd-free. We spent the morning exploring the bay area and lagoon, but the high winds and rain were relentless. We saw at least a half-dozen Sea Otters with young, Harbor Seals and the expected assortment of birds—pelicans, cormorants, gull and shorebird species—all easily observed from shore. <http://www.parks.ca.gov>
- Piedras Blancas - We were excited to encounter the elephant seal rookery at Piedras Blancas, near San Simeon. The rookery was very active, and the seals may be safely viewed from walkways above the beaches. The males are enormous at four thousand pounds and thirteen feet long. Elephant seals use these areas throughout the year for birthing, breeding, molting, and rest. <http://www.elephantseal.org>
- Humboldt Bay NWR – A beautiful setting definitely worth visiting any time of year. Birds seen included Aleutian Cackling Goose, Tundra Swan, Brant, Northern Harrier, Marbled Godwit, Marsh Wren and a good variety of other shorebird and passerine species. https://www.fws.gov/refuge/humboldt_bay/
- Humboldt Redwoods State Park - This magnificent 51,000 acre park, (part of Redwoods National and State Parks) preserves the largest expanse of ancient redwoods on the planet. Living organisms of this size and age, standing together in silence, dissolve boundaries between the plant and animal kingdoms. These awe-inspiring groves, composed of thousands of trees, create a cathedral-like effect not soon forgotten. <http://www.parks.ca.gov>



A quick, on the spot sketch of Harlequin Ducks to inspire a painting or etching. Pen/paper, 6" x7"

month-long visit to San Juan Island, Washington. Guided chiefly by our interest in birds and other wildlife, as well as our appreciation for places of natural beauty, we plotted a coastal route, avoiding highways whenever possible and limiting our travel to four hours each day. We had twelve days to reach Anacortes, WA, a distance of approximately 1,400 miles. From there we would take a ferry to Friday Harbor, San Juan Island. We planned for several multi-day stopovers in areas of particular interest. The west coast of the United States is a vast area, comprising everything from desert to rainforest, and one could easily explore it for a lifetime and never experience it fully. The following is a selection of highlights from our journey.

Oregon Highlights

- Harris Beach State Park (Brookings) – Our first stop in Oregon merits a look, if only for the scenery. Miles of broad, sandy beaches offer ideal shorebird habitat especially during migration, and many seabird species inhabit the cliffs and



The rocky shoreline on the eastern side of San Juan Island, looking northeast.

islands. We saw Pelagic Cormorant, Common Murre, and Black Oystercatcher. https://oregonstateparks.org/index.cfm?do=parkPage.dsp_parkPage&parkId=58

- Oregon Coastal Highway - Oregon's 363 miles of coastline provide spectacular scenery, great birding, whale watching, and uncrowded beaches to explore. <http://www.oregoncoasttravel.net/>
- Charleston Marine Life Center and Museum - We spent two days in Charleston at the University of Oregon's Institute of Marine Biology. Worth a visit is the Marine Life Center and Museum across the street. The area's beaches and forests are great for birding; California Sea Lions also graced the harbor docks each evening. <http://www.charlestonmarinelifecenter.com/>
- Oregon Coast Aquarium – Located in Newport, this aquarium affords the chance to visit a seabird aviary, providing up-close encounters with Tufted Puffin, Horned Puffin, Rhinoceros Auklet, Pigeon Guillemot, Common Murre, and Black Oystercatcher. <http://aquarium.org/>

Washington & San Juan Island

- Heavy rains along the Washington coast meant birding during that portion of our trip was done while driving north from the mouth of the Columbia River to Seattle. The area between Seattle and Anacortes is a major migratory waterfowl wintering ground and we saw large flocks of Snow Geese in the fields along Route 5. Needing to catch a ferry, we didn't stop to look, but we'll make those fields (and birds!) a part of our next Pacific Northwest adventure.
- The ferry from Anacortes to Friday Harbor takes about an hour. During the sunny, calm passage, we saw Pelagic Cormorant, Pigeon Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet, Surf and White-winged Scoter. Arriving at Friday Harbor, we delighted in the slower pace of life. People were friendly and remained so, even while driving – which we came to appreciate as we explored the island on foot and by car during the month we stayed. San Juan Island is 24 miles long, 9 miles wide and, after Orcas Island, is the second largest island in the San Juan archipelago. A variety of habitats from dense forests to open fields and, of course, abundant fresh and salt water environments, support hundreds of bird species throughout

the year. The tidal zone habitat is varied too, and different birds and marine mammals favored certain areas over others.

- Birds - Birds we found particularly interesting, either for their novelty or artistic significance: Trumpeter Swan, Hooded Merganser, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Harlequin Duck, Pigeon Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet, scoters (Surf, White-winged, and Black), Cormorant (Brandt's, Double-crested, and Pelagic), Bald Eagle, Golden Eagle, California Quail, Black Oystercatcher, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Chestnut-sided Chickadee, and Pacific Wren.
- Marine Mammals – We were a few months early to see the migratory Orcas, and the resident Orca population of about 80 is too widely dispersed to be seen regularly. Moreover, the summer months are your best bet for whale watching. We did see lots of Steller Sea Lions, California Sea Lions, Harbor Seals and a few otters.

Other wildlife commonly seen are Black-tailed Deer, European Hare (introduced as a food source for humans) and Red Fox (introduced to control those same hares!). During our four weeks on the island, the daily temperature was usually in the mid-50s, with a mix of sunshine and rain, producing constant visual variety on land, sea, and sky.



Harlequin Ducks – Foggy Morning - 9" x 12" study for a larger oil painting.

And so, from my rain-sheltered place under the trees, I continued to watch the ducks, now about fifty yards away. Using my spotting scope, I was able to observe carefully the Harlequin's complex markings and note both individual and group behavior. Completely absorbed with the birds, the usual sense of time and place dissolved, and I experienced the world in a way perhaps similar to the wonderful creatures in front of me. I was gently brought back to blue skies and a rising wind as, one by one, the ducks returned to the water, also compelled by unseen forces which seek expression in form.

Neil Rizos is a professional painter, printmaker, and sculptor, specializing in birds. To learn more about the artist and his work visit www.rizosart.com and www.birdjournaling.com.