

BOOK REVIEW: *Stellwagen Bank: A Guide to the Whales, Sea Birds, and Marine Life of the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary*

by Simon Perkins

Stellwagen Bank: A Guide to the Whales, Sea Birds, and Marine Life of the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary by Nathalie Ward, Down East Books, 1995.

In 1992 the U.S. Congress designated Stellwagen Bank and the waters immediately surrounding it as the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary. For a vast majority of human visitors, this new sanctuary means one thing: whales. The thousands of curious tourists who, each year, board the fleets of whalewatch vessels bound for the Bank return to the dock satisfied, yet largely oblivious to the existence of all but the leviathans. This is not the fault of the very capable onboard naturalists. They would need weeks or months to adequately describe the riot of life in the waters over Stellwagen Bank. It would take an entire college course or one book—this book.

Nathalie Ward of the Center for Coastal Studies in Provincetown has produced a dense, highly informative volume that is at the same time very readable and visually attractive. She accomplishes this, in part, by combining concise scientific information with lighter narrative written by various other Stellwagen Bank authorities. Indeed, this book was written by a host of authors, too many to name and all chosen by Ward, the primary author and project editor, to represent and describe their respective areas of expertise and interests.

Ward explains in the preface that this book tells more than the biological story of Stellwagen Bank. "We wanted to create a book that described how marine life and people used the Bank, a habitat guide." The inclusion of narrative by the other writers not only provides pertinent information from authoritative sources but also offers the reader a measure of balance and an opportunity to read between the lines—to gain insights into the attitudes and lifestyles of the many different types of people for whom the Bank is a source of sustenance. In this regard, the chapter titled "Fish and Fishermen" is especially effective in describing the troubled world of modern commercial, marine fishermen. They are given a voice in the poignant words of Frank Mirarchi, a Scituate fisherman: ". . . when I think of the future, my satisfaction falters. I'm certainly not the first person to live from the sea; I don't want to be one of the last."

The early chapters of the book describe such subjects as the Bank's "discovery" in 1858 by Captain Henry Stellwagen, its geology, and its oceanographic character. We learn that the Bank is a submarine plateau, submerged beneath roughly 100 feet of water, that extends for roughly twenty miles in a line between Cape Cod and Cape Ann. Ocean currents deflected

vertically by the contours create strong upwellings from deeper, surrounding waters, and nutrients transported within these upwellings into the upper, sunlit layers of water provide ideal gardenlike conditions for an abundance of free-floating plants called phytoplankton. These plants form the base of a rich food pyramid that includes, to name a few, zooplankton (microscopic animals that eat the phytoplankton), shellfish, finfish, jellyfish, turtles, birds, whales, and humans. Some of the more conspicuous inhabitants, such as the larger fish, birds, seals, and, of course, whales, porpoises, and dolphins are described in detail in later chapters. The final chapter includes discussions concerning the future of the Bank and its conservation.

The task of producing a multiauthor volume often presents daunting editorial challenges, but in this case, whatever differences in literary style that might have existed among the many contributing writers were all but eliminated.

The layout in this book is rather complex and, in some places, slightly confusing. For example, narrative is occasionally split between noncontiguous pages by separate essays or information boxes, and the reader is left to search for the remaining text (e.g., page 39 to 42). The addition of "continued on page xx" notations might have alleviated this minor problem. Also, the authors' names and their affiliations are given in the margins next to their essays rather than following the title of the essay. A reader could thus begin a new section without noticing the change in authorship, and knowing something about the background of the writer is half the fun. All unlabeled text is written by Ward herself.

This 232-page paperback is not quite pocket-sized. A more compact design might have been more convenient for anyone wishing to carry it with him (for instance, on board a whalewatch vessel). On the other hand, the handsome full-page or double-page illustrations with accompanying text (e.g., pages 96-97) might have suffered within the spacial constraints of a smaller format. More than 200 photographs and illustrations adorn its pages. Some of the photographs are particularly outstanding, such as Richard Harbison's images of marine invertebrates (e.g., pages 52-53). Paul Murray's shot of a giant blue-finned tuna in hot aerial pursuit of a bluefish (page 121) is nothing short of spectacular.

Readers looking for bird information will not be disappointed. The ornithological content is ample, with an entire chapter devoted to seabirds. Several local birders made significant contributions to this section. To name a few, Wayne Petersen wrote an essay on seabird distribution and created the seasonality and abundance chart on page 81; Bob Abrams, David Clapp, Blair Nikula, and Peter Trull contributed excellent bird photographs; and many unnamed, behind-the-scenes players (without whose dedication our knowledge of local seabirds would be scant) have logged literally hundreds of hours offshore recording seabird data in Massachusetts waters (and elsewhere).

As editor and author of this excellent new book, Ward has orchestrated a

complex symphony, in which she plays one of the instruments. By carefully arranging the myriad notes that make up the melody and harmony of Stellwagen, she reminds us that the Bank and all systems like it are about much more than whales.

The Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary headquarters in Plymouth, Massachusetts, can be reached by calling 508-747-1691. Further information is also available on one or both of the following two home pages on the internet: <http://vineyard.er.usgs.gov> (Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary) or [http://www.provincetown.com/coastal studies](http://www.provincetown.com/coastal%20studies) (Center for Coastal Studies).

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