ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

When death comes to Homer's Bishop's Beach on Kachemak Bay

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BISHOP'S BEACH -- This beach at the base of the Homer hillside is the town's portal into Kachemak Bay and the North Pacific Ocean. People live along the shore of the bay as far as the road goes, some 30 more miles, where it ends at the head of the bay with an abrupt dive down dizzying switchbacks to two communities of Russian Old Believers.

People live away and upward from the shoreline in a tier of homes that rises to capture more sweeping views of the bay and mountains. Homes on the edge of the 1,000-foot bluff have the best views, but at any elevation there is a mishmash of shacks, cabins sprouting unwieldy add-ons, and trophy retirement homes fronted with heat-losing glass.

The way to Bishop's Beach is a short walk from "downtown" Homer, a compact area no larger than 10 square blocks. The route from the Sterling Highway down Main Street passes the Mermaid Café and Old Inlet Bookstore, Bunnell Street Art Center and Two Sisters Bakery, with its smell of savories and espresso. The snow in Bishop's Beach Park can be thigh deep. But on this January day, there's no snow at all. The road ends in a parking lot, recently paved and marked with actual parking spaces. Whenever you arrive there, someone is always sitting in a Subaru, SUV or pickup, gazing outward. Bishop's Beach is Homer's relief valve, opening out from the town into the bay like a sigh.

Everyone in Homer shares the beach — alone, in pairs, in swarms of kids, moms, dads and dogs. Roaming kids and dogs are called back occasionally. During summer, we greet one another as familiar faces among the throngs of tourists, but in winter, we bundle up beyond recognition in whatever combination of less-than-stylish clothes will keep us warm and dry.

Beach carnage

I walk Bishop's Beach alone now. A few years ago, I walked with Kiana, my Samoyed gone blind in the last year of her life. She was too weak to jump in and out of the car during that last year and she would huddle in the back. I miss her doggy joy at the first hit of salt air. In her earlier days, she would have run off immediately to sniff the tall grass that flanks either side of the path to the beach, reading the arcane language of dogs who recently passed by.

When I walk the beach, the alive and the dead as well as the dying become real news. Barnacles, mussels and tangles of seaweed wash up or live in woven patches of communities on the rocks in the lower reaches. Acorn barnacles, their hinged shells waving at the tops of gelatinous stalks, wash in on pieces of rotting wood. Once,

Kiana flipped a small halibut out of a pool with her paw, surprising us both and, no doubt, the halibut. Wet rocks shine.

On my past walks, storms brought the occasional dead murre or gull or soft spongy spheres of colonial tunicates called sea pork.

Today, it's a carnage of murres and the spiny head parts of rockfish or sculpin, species too arcane for me to identify with certainty. The murres are spread out along the wrack line, their once-pure white breasts torn open, exposing the keel they balance on so gracefully in flight. Their dark, comic feet jut out from their rounded bellies. Tufts of bloodied clumps of feathers are strewn about and tangled in the seaweed.

A few months ago, it was sea otters, dragging themselves onshore and then dying in front of us. Now this.

What is being lost?

Back in town, beach walkers report to anyone who will listen at the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters or at the Kachemak Bay Research Reserve. They post plaintively on the Kachemak Bay Nature Watch Facebook page, intended, no doubt, to share tidings of whale sightings and birders' joy when spotting unusual species out of range or out of season. But a different sort of report is piling up, like sightings of 100 or more dead murres at low tide on Mud Bay inside the barrier of Homer Spit or carcasses below eagle nests before the breeding season.

Who will get in bottom of this? Who will tell us what it all means? That's the job of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Migratory Bird Management, who now has a hotline. The hotline has yielded more than 200 reports, according to Robert Kaler of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"It's been a full-time job to keep track as well as follow up with folks for additional information," Kaler wrote in an email. "We hope people continue to submit reports; it's an excellent way to help us monitor the geographic scope and duration of this ongoing seabird mortality event."

Yet, an accurate count and knowing the specific cause of death will not help me understand what is being lost.

I teach children about life cycles and the web of life I learned about as a child. It wasn't until the death of my father that I recognized a cycle of death, a web woven as much by death as life. Death allowed minerals and energy to be taken up the food chain and recycled after more death to the base of the pyramid again. It's death that sustains it all. The death of the herring that dove deep into cooler waters sustained Kachemak Bay whales into the winter. They lingered before making their journeys to Hawaii, living off the blubber they've packed on. The death of the murres and the otters sustains the eagles who will fast as they sit on their eggs and tend their young for long hours in the season of mating and nesting.

The cycle of life, driven by seasons of plenty, is interwoven with the cycle of death, driven by seasons of famine. The cycles themselves are driven by the rhythms of what we think to be an inanimate planet, its ocean swirling cold water and nutrients upward into the light or lying still under a gigantic pool of warm water as persistent as the protoplasmic alien in a 1950s horror flick that some of us remember as "The Blob."

But there's nothing Hollywood cheesy about this story. It's about more than the death of the requisite young ingénue, too pretty to die, but whose death the story requires. If this were Hollywood, it could be a story about the rescue of the children, yes, the children, by some heroic, bright young scientist who saves the planet from the seemingly unappeasable appetite of the Blob, slithering its way into every inlet and bay, mindlessly engulfing everything in its path.

But the Blob is us.

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Where to report

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has prepared a fact sheet detailing what observers can report as well as the phone number and email address to use: http://1.usa.gov/1Puvp4h.