



“Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays
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That Gull

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Exceeding all expectations, my cruise to Alaska less than two years ago allowed me to discover new wonders at every turn. Sailing has to be tops for me but life on a floating resort ain't all that tawdry either.

I met the organist, Mr. Duffy from Nashville, who sports, sequined slippers and a foot-plus green top hat with a yellow feather even longer. I was impressed with the Kimball Theatre pipe organ equipped with such accessories as a glockenspiel, sleigh bells and bird whistles and of course got to hear them all during a free Friday noon concert. Equally amazing to me was seeing no security in place at the State Capitol which is where the organ is.



The little otters were fun to watch – lined up on their backs in extensive formations, heeding us not at all. Lots of eagles as one might expect. Whales here and there and the lazy [fat] sea lions, happy to stretch out on a rock, occasionally sliding back into the water when so motivated.

Of course, I returned with hundreds (thousands?) of great shots of everything from the intriguing wildlife to the snowy mountain peaks to the calving glaciers. Sorted by date (or did my camera do that for me?) some were shared soon after the trip, while many others wait . . . for what, I wonder. (And, yes, I also made an album which perhaps someday I'll look at again – probably after that for the Sea Cloud.)

I assure you I was never without camera – my “big” (but not compared to what I saw on board) with a telephoto lens and my “regular” which could easily be popped into my purse and went everywhere with me. Turns out that convenient little one did everything I required.

I was also blessed with the perfect travel companion who allowed me to roam and explore to my heart's content. I can't think of a day when this didn't pay off but, for this column, I'm homing in now on Juneau, August sixteenth.

Returning from the capitol to the ship, I stopped in awe. Other passengers walked around me not as excited as I about the birds just there for the taking. Photographs, of course. There were hundreds! Unperturbed by my attention, they continued their birdy pastimes, including one proud mother with her youngster.

Terrific pictures – lots of terrific pictures, tucked away for the future.

Every so often I'd pull out seven or eight – of course, it's a gull, most like a herring. Maybe I'd pull out a



book or two to affirm my wisdom. Everyday gull . . . check. Hey! I'm not so bad after all! All right, the thought did nag – gulls do not have black feet.

Sibley, Stokes (twice), Peterson, Audubon, even the Golden Field Guide, all told me I was either wrong or they were. Well then. I can be stubborn but even I still have a modicum of common sense. (Maybe a little more.)

Too many good shots not to use in a column but then I'd better be darned sure I knew what I was talking about. Time to get back to Twan Leenders at RTPI.

I'm on the page with a bunch of legitimate gulls but mine is a Black-footed (wouldn't you know it?) Kittiwake. (There's also a red-legged on the Pribilof Islands.) “Abundant on breeding cliffs, wintering off shore. The adult is recognized by its sharply defined triangular black wing tips (no trace of white spot). The more commonly seen immature resembles several of the dark-headed gulls but is told by the combination of dark neck band, short black legs, and black wing tips, and very slightly freer tail. Often flies low in the water.” Golden Guide. (So that's what those are! I never expected to identify more distant birds on the wing.) You can find them on either coast, never inland.

Since they can also be an East Coast bird, they appear in the Audubon Handbook, eastern birds. “An agile, oceanic gull that breeds on northern sea cliffs and ranges widely at sea off our coasts in winter. Flight agile, on quick, shallow wingbeats. Follows ships, snatching food from water's surface, even diving from the air like a tern. . . Call a nasal kitti-wake, often heard in chorus in nesting colonies.” So now we know where the name comes from.

Stokes adds they may follow fishing ships at sea to feast on refuse.

Sibley calls them common. “Almost exclusively seen on open salt water. Nests in large colonies on steep cliffs above ocean, often with murres and fulmars; scavengers and often attracted to fish-processing plants or boats. Commonly seen plunge-diving like terns. A small gull, with relatively long and narrow wings, quick and stiff wingbeats. Note short bill, short dark legs. Rhythmic, repeated kitti-weeik. . . with hollow, nasal quality, mostly near nest site. Generally silent in winter.”



I couldn't have found a better place to observe these birds. They were far too tame (or happily settled) to be bothered by me.

Now I have to wonder if they were silent or so noisy that I simply ignored the ruckus.

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