

Text and photos by Lawson Wood

False Killer Whales

— *Enchanting Cetaceans of Dominica*



Once or twice in a rare Blue Moon, opportunity sometimes comes along and hits you on the head—or in my case, I was hit on the head—by a juvenile sperm whale.

Let me recap. Along with a small group of like-minded conservationists and underwater photographers, we were working under a special permit issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries on the Island of Dominica (pronounced *DOMINEEKA*) to try and identify returning sperm whales and other cetaceans.

Dominica is the youngest of the Caribbean islands and is flanked by Guadeloupe to the north and Martinique to the south, which are both French colonies. Inevitably, many of the locals speak a derivative of a French, Carib and West African creole known as Kwéyòl.

Ancestors of the original Carib Indians, the Kalinago still live by traditional fishing and farming methods and are rather distinctive in appearance, resembling South American Amazon tribes and are much shorter in stature.

The Kalinago name for the island is Wai'tukubuli. The local beer is called Kubuli!

Extremely mountainous in aspect, two of the peaks are over 1,300 metres (4,500ft). I can honestly say that the topography is incredible with fantastic rain-forest fauna and flora all found within cloud-topped peaks, dra-

Eye of scarred sperm whale, Band Aid



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pod of false killer whales patrol the seas around Dominica; Rugged coastline of Dominica draped with mist; Pair of false killer whales (inset)



matic gorges, caverns, waterfalls and hidden lakes. There are many hot sulphur springs and one of the dive sites is known as "Champagne" due to the continuous streams of bubbles coming up through the reef.

The underwater reefs also resemble more tropical dive sites due to the rarity of curious fish species, thousands of colourful crinoids, black coral forests and superb colourful sponges.

And so to sea...

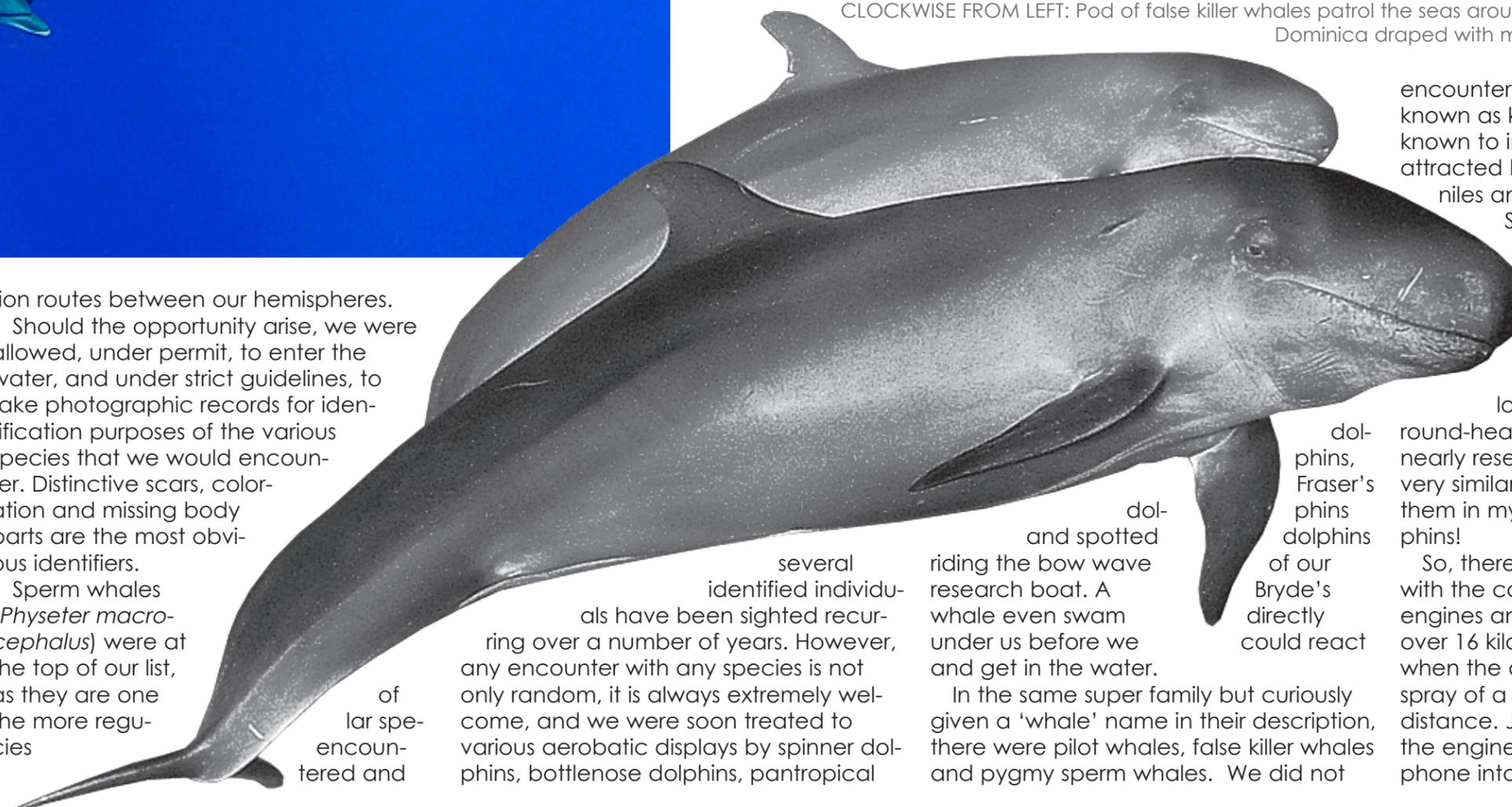
Struggling along approximately five to ten miles off the western (Caribbean) coast of Dominica, our goal was to catalogue as many cetacean species that use these deep waters as breeding and feeding grounds on their annual migra-

tion routes between our hemispheres.

Should the opportunity arise, we were allowed, under permit, to enter the water, and under strict guidelines, to take photographic records for identification purposes of the various species that we would encounter. Distinctive scars, coloration and missing body parts are the most obvious identifiers.

Sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) were at the top of our list, as they are one of the more regular species encountered and

of lar species encountered and



several identified individuals have been sighted recurring over a number of years. However, any encounter with any species is not only random, it is always extremely welcome, and we were soon treated to various aerobic displays by spinner dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, pantropical

dolphins, Fraser's dolphins and spotted dolphins of our Bryde's directly could react riding the bow wave research boat. A whale even swam under us before we and get in the water.

In the same super family but curiously given a 'whale' name in their description, there were pilot whales, false killer whales and pygmy sperm whales. We did not

encounter any orca (unfortunately also known as killer whales), but they are also known to inhabit these coastal waters, attracted by the large number of juveniles and calves of the larger whales.

Speaking of which, whilst orca are members of the dolphin super family, so are false killer whales. Like orca, false killer whales are also known to prey on other dolphins and sperm whales, however they look more like pilot whales, or round-headed dolphins, than anything nearly resembling an orca, yet they have very similar behaviours. I have renamed them in my personal logbook as killer dolphins!

So, there we were, bobbing along with the constant drone of our vessel's engines and the roll of the oceanic swell over 16 kilometers (ten miles) offshore, when the distinctive plumed exhalation spray of a sperm whale was seen in the distance. Jerry, our captain, quickly cut the engines, dipped his directional hydrophone into the water and confirmed the



THIS PAGE: Views of the cheeky juvenile sperm whale, Band-Aid—nicknamed thus due to the scar over his left eye—that pushed underwater photographer/dive writer Lawson Wood out of the way with its large head

sonar clicks of a juvenile sperm whale.

We maneuvered into position ahead of our moving target and quietly slipped into the water. Undeterred by our presence, this young small fellow, at over 12 metres (40ft) in length actually swam directly towards us (me!) I then found myself squished between the research boat and a the spy-hopping whale, which casually shunted me out of its way by its rather large and scarred head.

Hey, don't worry—I was out of there! This was a BIG baby beast, which quite pointedly informed me who was the boss.

After the initial shock and seeing my compatriots swimming off after Scarface, it took all of my effort to catch up with them. The sperm whale, which deigned to allow me to have an encounter, can only be described as magical. Now nick-

named, Band-Aid, due to the curious scar over his left eye, he put up with our intrusion into his space for over 20 minutes before he very obviously vented all of his orifices and sounded in front of us. What an end to a rather perfect day.

Day two

Day two was another matter altogether. There was an ocean, empty of noise, out there.

We motored and plunged through a rising oceanic swell, and the constant rain battered our hopes. It was so bad at one point that we lost sight of the island of Dominica. Our captain continually tried the hydrophone, but other than a few distant dolphin clicks, there were no whales within ten miles of any of our positions.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Landscape shot of Dominica; Playful dolphins mixing in the waves; Typical Dominican homes dot the hillside; Wild dolphin leaps out of the sea

Our team leader Brandon Cole (ever the optimist) informed us that there may not be any whales in our research zone, as they always swim away whenever false killer whales are in the vicinity—a behavior that had been observed on previous occasions. “So, keep a look out for false killer whales!” he said.

They are kind of like large dolphins, with that same wry, or sly grin, but are almost black in colour and have rounded bulbous heads, not dissimilar to a pilot whale.

Impatiently, we strained our eyes as the very patient boat captain scoured the ocean and deployed his hydrophone to search for any indication of life in the depths.

We did not know at the time, but when false killer whales are hunting, they travel in stealth mode—completely silent—as

they attack their intended prey. So, the ocean was silent—for hours—and then, just in front of us, a black, rounded head breached, and then several more immediately behind it.

Brandon Cole immediately identified them as false killer whales (*Pseudorca crassidens*). They were hanging around, enjoying their own company and socializing.

Get in the water!

With heightened adrenalin and nervousness, we all entered the water and swam slowly towards where the group could be seen

on the surface. They certainly spotted us before we spotted them underwater in the low visibility, as we were quickly battered by their sonar clicks when they all swooped around us, to check out visually what their sensors were telling them. (Stupid, slow, landlubbers, pretending to be dolphins, uttering unrecognizable

squeals and whoops trying unsuccessfully to communicate our love and passion for the species!). What a joke. They left us floundering about on the surface.

Just when we were about to give up hope and return to the research boat, a young bottlenose dolphin (*Tursops truncatus*) appeared.

Very quickly, a large male false killer whale returned, swam in and started to escort his ‘cousin’ towards the larger group, then a second false killer whale appeared and acted as ‘shotgun’ on the other side of the dolphin. I had a moment of unease over the plight of this young fellow, as false killer whales are

known (as mentioned) to go into stealth mode when hunting, but when interacting with other dolphins, they have been observed to mimic the sounds of other species and also to actively hunt and kill other dolphins.

I may well be wrong, but, for me, it looked like a young dude had just swam into the wrong neighbourhood. Soon, the small dolphin was in the middle of at least ten BIG guys, many of whom were exhibiting very obvious sexual behaviour, as well as rather exaggerated movements. Thankfully, whilst this scene was being played out beneath us, we all had a window of opportunity to duck-dive down and quickly snap as many photographs as possible of this quickly changing scenario.

The false killer whales (killer dolphins) have a very distinc-



tive, rather large, toothy, sly grin, which they continued to flash at us, as if they were stating, "We know something you don't," or, "Don't mess with us—we may look like we are smiling, but the teeth are big and sharp, and the little guy is ours!"

I had a rather unsettling feeling, which, as the pack led this young innocent dolphin away from us, that this may be the last time anyone would ever see the dolphin again.

Our group was somewhat stunned, yet exuberant over the encounter, yet all of us had quite an uneasy feeling during

the encounter. Rather humbling, these beasts made us feel amateurish, ungainly and clearly out of our depth.

The rest of the week yielded few results other than sightings of small dolphin groups, the killer dolphins had certainly spooked the bigger whales as well as ourselves. Deciding to concentrate on a few reef dives before leaving our lodgings at the Titiwi Inn in the capital Roseau, we were soon enthusing about the very high quality of reef life, colourful critters and friendly fish.

Dominica had certainly lived up to its reputation as being the

whale watching capital of the Caribbean, but no-one had prepared us for the quality of the reef diving.

Things you need to know

As Dominica was formerly a British protectorate, electricity is all 220v (British style plugs).

Most hotels will have 110v adapters.

Driving is also British style, and cars usually drive on the left side of the road. For those more nervous types who would rather not negotiate the narrow, winding, often single-track roads on the island, there are local taxis and minibuses that are quite inexpensive and very regular.

Currency is the EC\$ (Eastern Caribbean Dollar) which is approximately 2.67 to the U.S. dollar. U.S. dollars are accepted everywhere, but the exchange may not be in your favour.

Flight services are handled

by America Eagle (American Airways) from Miami and Tampa (via Puerto Rico) or with Liat or Winair for transfers from Antigua, Barbados, Virgin Islands, St. Maarten, Guadeloupe, Martinique and St. Lucia. There is a departure tax of EC\$59.00 (US\$23.00) payable at the airport.

For those who love island hopping, there is a 300-seat catamaran ferry that operates between Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique and St. Lucia.

Whale watching scientific permits are rarely issued and then only to bona fide enthusiasts who will pass over photographs and a report to the ministry in charge. Tourists can go whale and dolphin watching on a number of boats, but are not allowed in the water.

The Dominica Hotel and Tourism Association (DHTA) can be found at: Dhta.org. Diving information can be found at: Dominicawatersports.com.



Dominica

Lawson Wood was raised in the Scottish east coast fishing town of Eyemouth and spent his youth exploring the rock pools and shallow seas before learning to scuba dive at the tender age of 11. Now over 44 years later, Lawson has been fortunate to make his passion his career and has authored and co-authored over 45 books mainly on our underwater world. He is a founding member of the Marine Conservation Society, founder of the first Marine Reserve at St. Abbs in Scotland, and made photographic history by becoming the first person to be a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and Fellow of the British Institute of Professional Photographers solely for underwater photography. For more information, see: Lawsonwood.com ■



THIS PAGE: Scenes of a pod of false killer whales surrounding and escorting their captive, a single dolphin, away from the divers