

Rhythms of Return

At the Peterson Bay Field Station, we are lucky to share this amazing place with learners and visitors from across Alaska, the United States, and the world. For many, watching tidepool sculpin dart through the watery crevasses at Otter Rock, ducking under the towering stems of devil's club, or peering at the carnivorous round-leaf sundew plants in the bog is a truly new experience. As naturalists, it is fun to share in their wonder. These guests see the Field Station and surrounding environment with new eyes, and help us to remember again how utterly amazing, strange, and complex these organisms and ecosystems are. A first visit is a time for giddy exploration.

Though these first experiences are great to witness, something particularly special occurs when people return to the Field Station. This summer has been full of such returns. We had a family out here in early June – two adult sisters and their families. Both sisters had come here for an Alaska Coastal Ecology field trip as elementary school students, back in the early years of the Field Station circa 1986. They described sleeping in the Field Station, before the yurts existed, and exploring the tidepools and forest. They were excited to be back so many years later and share it with their families.

When the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program stayed at PBFS for a 3 day marine science field trip in July, a few students let us know as we were loading the boat that they had been over here with their schools before. One attended Soldotna Montessori School; the teachers there bring their classes of 4th, 5th, and 6th graders on a field trip with CACS each spring (some to PBFS and some to the Kasitsna Bay Lab). Part of the intention with these cumulative field trips is that the older students can serve as mentors for the younger students, exploring alongside them and sharing the knowledge and love for this place that they have accumulated over prior years. This carried over to the ANSEP trip, with this teen boosting the excitement of everyone for tidepooling, and eagerly recalling many uses of local plants. Especially meaningful was watching them remind others to be careful with the creatures in the intertidal zone and to return rocks as they found them – knowledge and connection was authentically translating into stewardship!

Last weekend, a family of 11 stayed in the yurts for two nights. Grandparents, fathers, children and friends gathered here to fully enjoy some of the lowest tides of the summer. One of the fathers had first been out with an Alaskan school about ten years ago, and promptly decided that he needed to return with his own children and parents. For some of the kids, this year was their fourth trip to the Field Station. As we reflected on their experiences, one of the teens, for whom this was the second time here, explained that he thought that this year he was better at tidepooling and noticed a lot more. The grandfather added that by returning again and again to the same tidepools, he is better able to appreciate the complexity of the ecosystem, the diversity of life, and the smaller organisms and components that might otherwise be overlooked. Another family member elaborated that now he realizes there is so much more than just the charismatic sea stars!

And yesterday, I waited down at the dock to greet a group of guests. Conrad Field, and his daughter Eryn, were the naturalists onboard. It was wonderful to welcome them back to the Field Station. For many years, Conrad was a naturalist with CACS and continues to be a dedicated volunteer. When my fourth grade class came to China Poot and Peterson Bay, Conrad and his wife Carmen were my naturalists! I still remember hiking through the mossy forest to Moosehead Point, stopping to observe a pile of feathers as Conrad helped us to deduce the drama that had unfolded here. I've been learning from Conrad ever since. He and Carmen were the resident naturalists at the Field Station for many

years, and their accounts of both the typical wildlife and unusual events of the Island Peninsula have deeply shaped my own understanding of this dynamic place. A couple years ago, things came full circle when Eryn's 6th grade class came out to the Field Station for their Alaska Coastal Ecology field trip. I've been learning from her too!

And yesterday, as I helped Eryn set up slides of plankton under the microscopes for the guests and we exclaimed in surprise at the strange appearance of a cumacean and a (not planktonic) red spider mite, I realized that the Island Peninsula offers ever more moments of wonder and joy, whether this is a first day out here or a thousandth day. I hope you are able to come explore alongside us soon, and return over and over again to this place that reveals more of its magic and science each time.