

Underwater Adventures with Eco-Photo Explorers

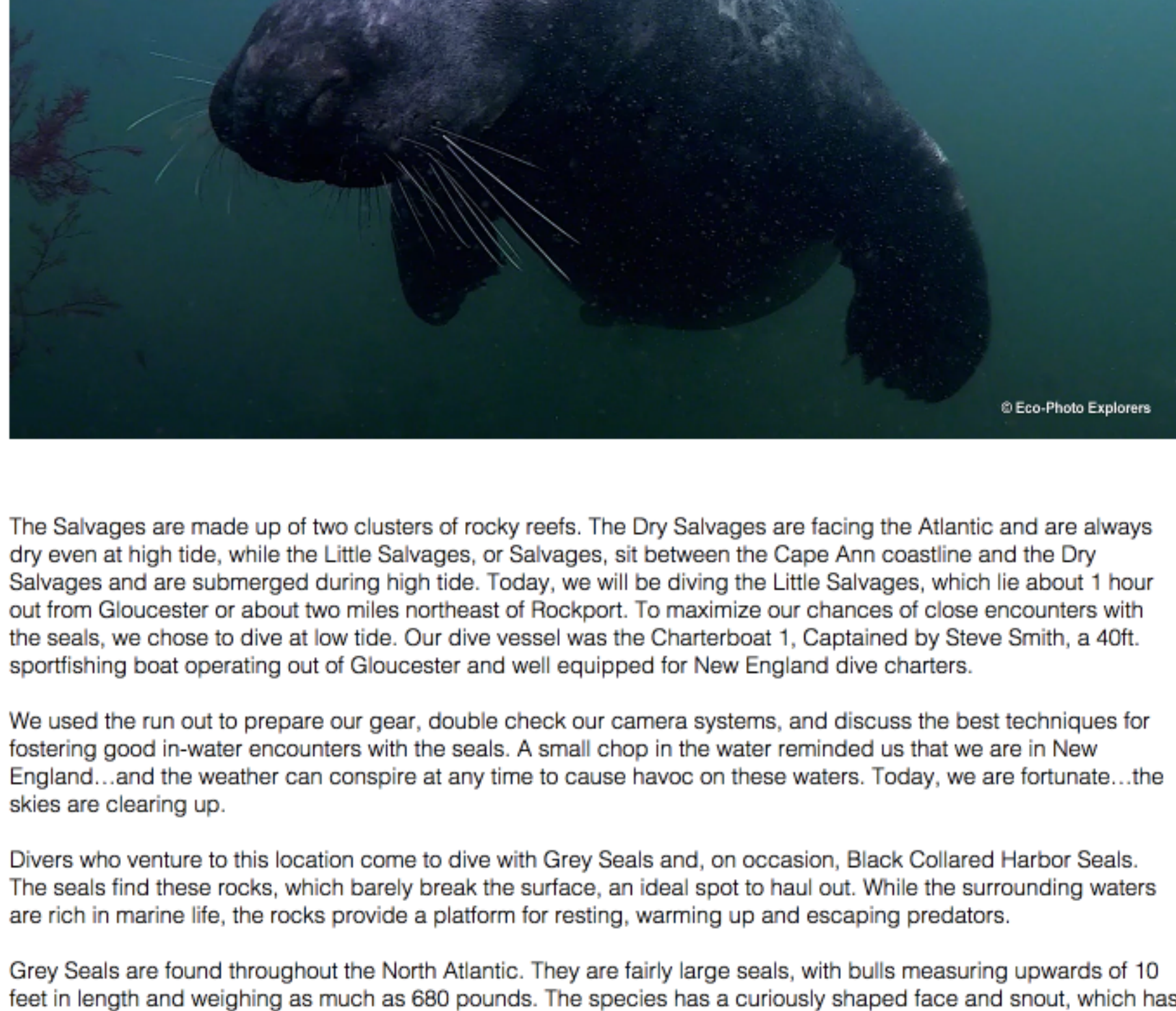
The Seals of Gloucester

October 8, 2018 | Article and photos by Michael Salverezza and Christopher Weaver (Eco-Photo Explorers)

"The Dry Salvages—presumably les trois sauvages—is a small group of rocks, with a beacon, off the N.E. coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts...."

... The river is within us, the sea is all about us; The sea is the land's edge also, the granite into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses its hints of earlier and other creation; The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone; The pools where it offers to our curiosity The more delicate algae and the sea anemone. "

The Dry Salvages is the third of T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets, a classic of 20th-century English poetry. Although Eliot began this poem with an explicit reference to this lonesome group of rocks offshore from Gloucester, Massachusetts, he never mentioned them again. Rather, his eloquent prose evoked beautiful images of life on and around this rocky outcropping. Our mission on this somewhat overcast late summer morning was to more fully explore the waters below the Salvages...and dive with the seals that now make these rocks their home.



The Salvages are made up of two clusters of rocky reefs. The Dry Salvages are facing the Atlantic and are always dry even at high tide, while the Little Salvages, or Salvages, sit between the Cape Ann coastline and the Dry Salvages and are submerged during high tide. Today, we will be diving the Little Salvages, which lie about 1 hour out from Gloucester or about two miles northeast of Rockport. To maximize our chances of close encounters with the seals, we chose to dive at low tide. Our dive vessel was the Charterboat 1, Captained by Steve Smith, a 40ft. sportfishing boat operating out of Gloucester and well equipped for New England dive charters.

We used the run out to prepare our gear, double check our camera systems, and discuss the best techniques for fostering good in-water encounters with the seals. A small chop in the water reminded us that we are in New England...and the weather can conspire at any time to cause havoc on these waters. Today, we are fortunate...the skies are clearing up.

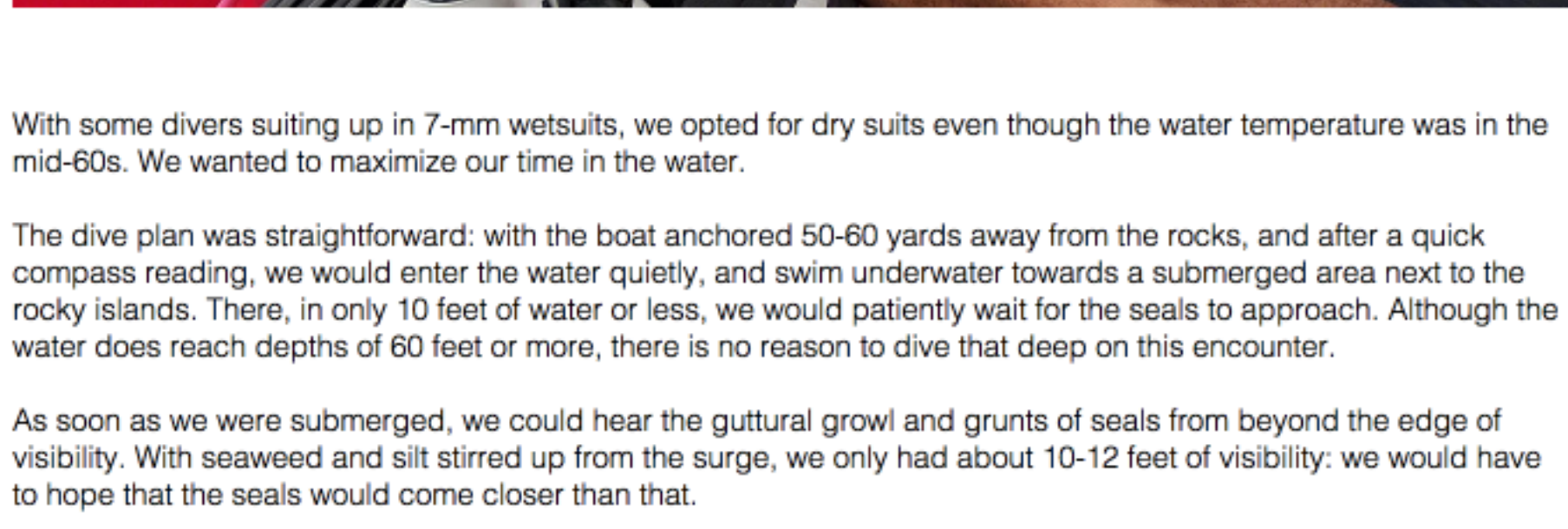
Divers who venture to this location come to dive with Grey Seals and, on occasion, Black Collared Harbor Seals. The seals find these rocks, which barely break the surface, an ideal spot to haul out. While the surrounding waters are rich in marine life, the rocks provide a platform for resting, warming up, and escaping predators.

Grey Seals are found throughout the North Atlantic. They are fairly large seals, with bulls measuring upwards of 10 feet in length and weighing as much as 680 pounds. The species has a curiously shaped face and snout, which has inspired comparisons to dogs.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, the Grey Seal was hunted to virtual extinction. After the Congress passed the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972, a survey of the entire Maine coast found only 30 Grey Seals. However, since then populations have steadily grown. Healthy groups of seals can now be found from Maine down to Massachusetts, and even into New York and New Jersey.

As we approached the rocks, we could barely hear the barks of the seals above the sucking sound of the water as the surge rose and fell against the barnacle encrusted outcroppings. We caught a faint whiff of guano from the droppings of cormorants and sea birds that also use these rocks to rest and hunt for food. In the water, a group of seals regarded us with empty curiosity.

It was time to dive.



With some divers suiting up in 7-mm wetsuits, we opted for dry suits even though the water temperature was in the mid-60s. We wanted to maximize our time in the water.

The dive plan was straightforward: with the boat anchored 50-60 yards away from the rocks, and after a quick compass reading, we would enter the water quietly, and swim underwater towards a submerged area next to the rocky islands. There, in only 10 feet of water or less, we would patiently wait for the seals to approach. Although the water does reach depths of 60 feet or more, there is no reason to dive that deep on this encounter.

As soon as we were submerged, we could hear the guttural growl and grunts of seals from beyond the edge of visibility. With seaweed and silt stirred up from the surge, we only had about 10-12 feet of visibility; we would hope that the seals would come closer than that.

After a short swim, we took our position with cameras at the ready, and waited. At first, we caught only fleeting glimpses of the seals as they flew by at a cautious distance. As with any pinniped, these seals are most comfortable in the water and their grace and elegance in swimming only hints as their speed and maneuverability. Swimming after a seal is not only fruitless, it causes them to retreat in fear. The only successful strategy is to wait, refrain from making quick movements and look around, because they may be right behind you!

Soon enough, a modest sized seal approached from the hazy distance. Within seconds, this amazing animal was inches from our cameras and eyed us with an inquisitive look. While it is foolish to anthropomorphize any animal, it was difficult not to believe that this seal genuinely wanted to hang out with us. That is, until it released a large streaming burst of bubbles from its nose, followed by a few low grunts, and darted off. Was the burst of bubbles a threatening gesture, just playing around or was this seal mimicking our exhaust bubbles?

Since we did not know if this a threat, we tried not to make direct eye contact and avoided making any aggressive movements. On occasion, bulls may deliver a direct message letting you know not to mess with his harem!

The encounters with the Grey Seals continued throughout the morning. We spotted small fish, several lobster and numerous other crustaceans on the bottom, but it was the seals that held our attention.

Of course, soon time was up and we had to surface, board the boat and head back to Gloucester. The trip back was filled with excited stories of various seal antics and encounters and one hour only felt like minutes before we were pulling into the harbor.

Gloucester holds a legendary place in the lore of the sea. For centuries, fishermen have braved the North Atlantic from these ports to catch their bounty...often risking life and limb in the process. In the center of town the iconic fisherman statue, as well as the Gloucester Fisherman's and Wives Memorial, serve as monuments to these brave souls and their wives and families.

For divers, these waters team with interesting marine life and amazing dive opportunities. We can now add another reason to come here...the opportunity to dive with the beguiling Grey Seals of Gloucester.

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