

Text and photos by Barb Roy

Over ten years have past since my last dive in Hood Canal. I'm not sure why, probably because I've been so focused on exploring the pristine waters of British Columbia that the extra effort of driving so far south has always deterred me. But when Adventures Down Under, a dive shop in Bellingham, invited me to join their group for a Hood Canal dive charter, I was too curious to say anything but yes. What I do remember from my last visit is seeing a field of tall, spindly sea whips during a shore dive and admiring the amount of octopus on another. I also remember how good some raw oysters were after picking them up from a beach during a community seafood festival, especially when they were covered in red cocktail sauce!

But for this trip our group of seven met up with Don Coleman, owner and operator of Pacific Adventure at the Pleasant Harbor Marina on the west side of Hood Canal,

off Highway 101. It was a typical chilly January day where air temperatures may have climbed to a balmy 30°F (-1°C). I was just happy for the warm sunshine and

pleasant attitudes all around. The distance to carry our gear from the car to the boat was short, and the 38-foot (11.5-meter) boat had plenty of covered deck space

to spread out on. A warm cabin below was great for changing into our dry suits.

During the 30-minute run to Pinnacle, our first dive site, Don

explained a bit about himself and how he got started in the dive business.

"I learned to dive in 1997 in San Carlos, Mexico, with my son

while on a four-year family sailing trip. We crossed to Hawaii in the spring of 1998 where I became an instructor, then we went back across to Washington State in the



Washington State's
Hood Canal





Ron Akeson (left) filming a large lingcod at Hood Canal; Pacific Adventure dive boat, *Down Time* (above); Divers Connie and Jay ready to test new drysuits (top right)

Pinnacle

Fortunately the Pinnacle site yielded calm water, fairly clear visibility and the sun was still smiling! The boat utilized one of the mooring buoys placed by Washington Scuba Alliance (WSA) and tied up to it. The mooring buoy would also be used as a descent line to directly drop onto the pinnacle below.

"Currently we have four WSA buoys in Hood Canal—Pulali West Wall, Pinnacle, Broken Leg and Flagpole," added Don, just before his briefing.

"Pinnacle is my favorite site for the variety of struc-

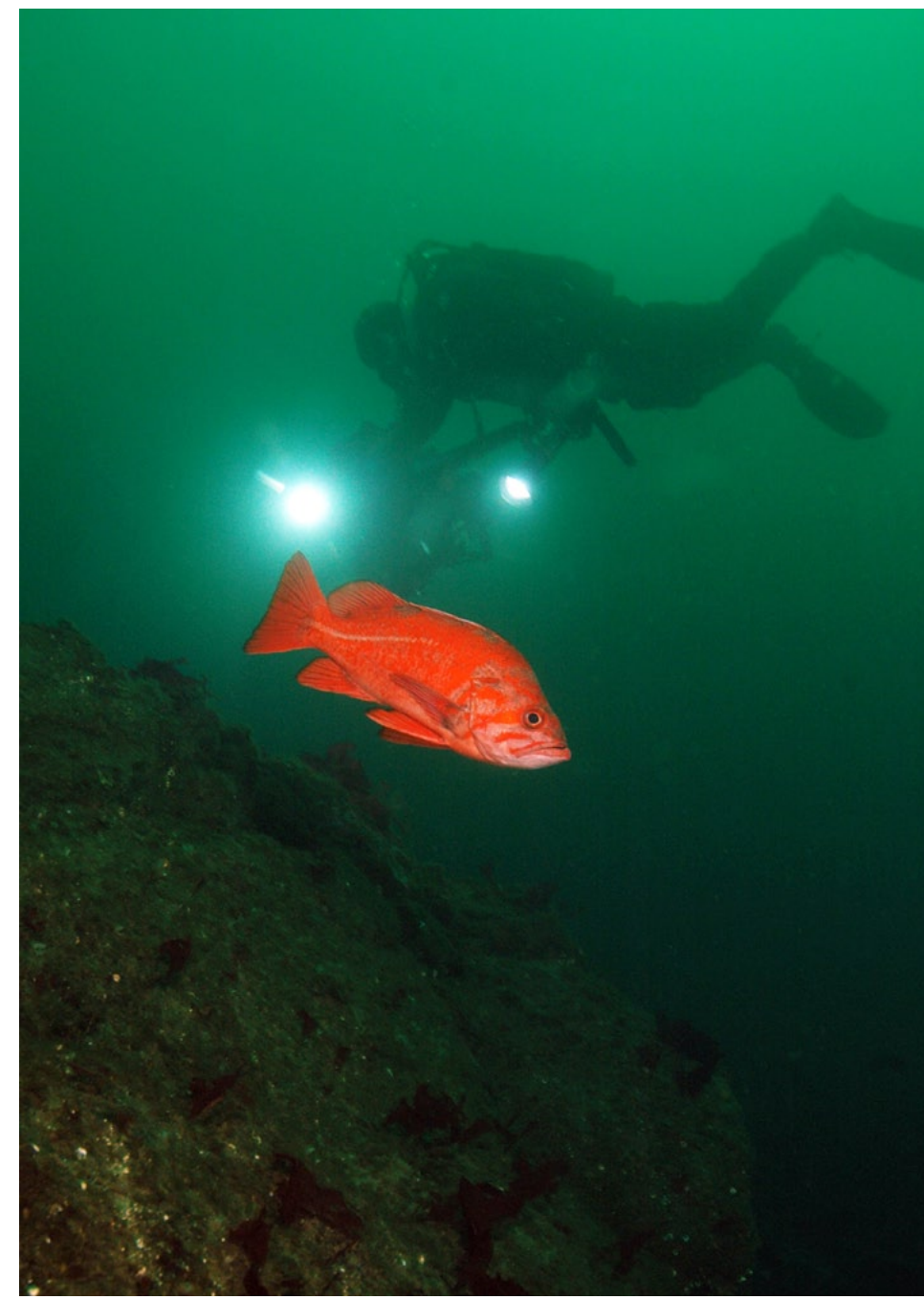
tures at the location and the abundance of critters. The site is large enough that I don't have to see the same parts each dive. For me it takes at least three 50-minute dives to completely explore the entire site, I move pretty slow."

He continued to tell us more about the site, directions to find critters and depths. As soon as Don mentioned a

pair of wolf-eels with eggs, everyone instantly became enthusiastic about jumping in as soon as possible. Only during a behind-the-scenes tour at the Vancouver Aquarium had I ever seen a ball of wolf-eel eggs before.

To increase my chances of actually finding the wolf-eels, I joined up with Ron Akeson, the group organizer and a marine biologist, figuring if anyone can find them he could. Although my Nikon camera is housed in a fair-sized Aquatica housing with duel strobes, it seemed small in comparison to his massive video housing with duel lights as they sat next to one another on the deck.

Nevertheless we began our descent to 40ft (12m), passing several immense lingcod resting on slabs of rock—I would guess probably females because of their size, ready to disperse clusters of eggs if the right guy comes along. When I approached for a photograph, they didn't budge. We even came across several small males, already guarding batches of eggs. They too were docile except for one that became fixated on my yellow Force Fins, swimming around several times before



Diver with vermilion rockfish

spring of 1999 where I learned to dive in cold water. In the spring of 2002, I started my dive charter business and have had a blast exploring and sharing Hood Canal since then," he said.

When asked how many boat diving sites he frequents in Hood Canal, he replied, "We have six dive sites that are favorites—Pulali East, South and West Walls, Pinnacle, Broken Leg

and Black Point. Another four we do on request as weather and current allow—Rosie's Ravine, Arrowhead, Flagpole and Elephant Wall. Most sites are not current sensitive except Rosie's and Flagpole. For us, wind is the major factor when choosing a site. Our popular shore dives include Sund Rock, Octopus Hole, Jorstead Creek, and Point Whitney."



escorting us away.

Large black, copper and yellowtail rockfish were very prevalent at all depths, some free-swimming and some perched on rocky outcroppings of the sloping terrain. Then all of the sudden a bright orange fish swam by. We were both in awe. Probably one of the most colorful of all the rockfish is the vermilion, displaying deep rich colors of red and orange, like this one.

To our delight more appeared. Judging from their size and quantity, this might be a resident population. They didn't seem to mind having divers around, because I was able to collect numerous shots

as they gracefully swam about.

According to the book *Coastal Fishes of the Pacific Northwest* by Andy Lamb and Phil Edgell, a large female vermilion is capable of releasing as many as 2,600 tiny young, usually during the winter.

Since Ron and I were the last ones in the water, we didn't really see much of the others on our dive. I spotted a lone adult male wolf-eel in a den and was taking advantage of its tolerance to my camera when Ron signaled me over. Okay, maybe he found the pair of wolf-eels!

At first I did not see the smaller female wrapped around a yellowish-white ball of eggs, until I got closer. The male quickly let us know where the parameters were and as long as we respected the distance, he was content. The egg mass was about the size of cantaloupe melon. Unfortunately using a wide-angle lens on my camera didn't help much, but Ron acquired some fabulous footage which he later shared.



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"I have not done a lot of diving in Hood Canal previously," admitted Ron, "But after doing a day of diving with Pacific Adventure, I wondered why not. Naturally I survey an area for the health of its marine life while diving, trying to note its diversity. Seeing the pair of wolf-eels and lings with eggs tells me this area is doing okay. The wolf-eels were a real treat to see and they were exactly where Don said they would be during his briefing, so it just was a matter of finding them."

The rockfish were a big hit with Ron as well, "The biggest surprise for me was the health of the rockfish populations in Hood Canal. At Pinnacle there were numerous

large vermilion rockfish, a species I rarely, if ever, see in Puget Sound or the San Juan Islands."

Later Ron sent me several images of the wolf-eels with their

them how they enjoyed their dive. Jim Copher and Mike Meagher, also from Bellingham, were out on the boat testing a new housing Mike has constructed for the

Hood Canal

bundles of life, which he took from his video. Very cool.

Pulali Point

The second dive location, Pulali Point, was not far away, marked by another WSA buoy. As we enjoyed a hot cup of soup and a delicious sandwich, I chatted with the other divers, asking

GoPro camera.

Mike commented, "While Hood Canal does not appear to have the invertebrate life the San Juans do, I am still looking to do more dives here. I love diving at Pinnacle because there are always wolf-eels and lings when we visit it. And I like Don's boat and his crew. He does a very professional job of briefing the divers, and tells you with great accuracy where to find subjects. That sort of knowledge is beneficial to the underwater filmmaker, allowing us to go right to the subjects we desire to get shots of. Jim and I will be back on Don's boat soon. I do have some decent video posted on YouTube from the Pinnacle site and Hood Canal." [See <http://www.youtube.com/wolfeeldiver>]

More of Mike's videos can be found on YouTube by doing a search for "MikeMeagherProduc-



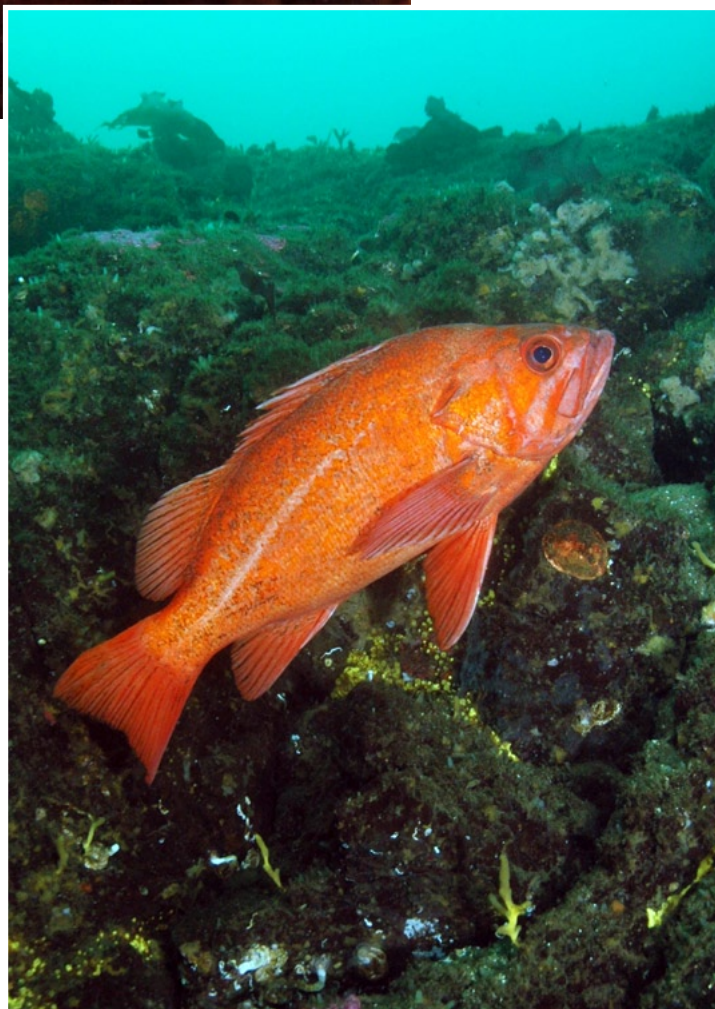
Wolf-eels protect their eggs and nest (above); Male wolf-eel hiding in crevasse (far left); Striped sea perch (top)



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Sunflower seastar;
Vermillion rockfish;
Lingcod, starfish
and sea cucumber
on rocky reef

in many parts of the world.

When checking out a crab crawling around a possible octopus den, I noticed a small painted-greenling fish, camouflaged upon some dark red and brown pieces of kelp. Sometimes I just like to pause, admiring little creatures like this (I still had my wide-angle lens on) and watch how they go about foraging. Even the huge boulders we found covered with



tions" to locate his channel.

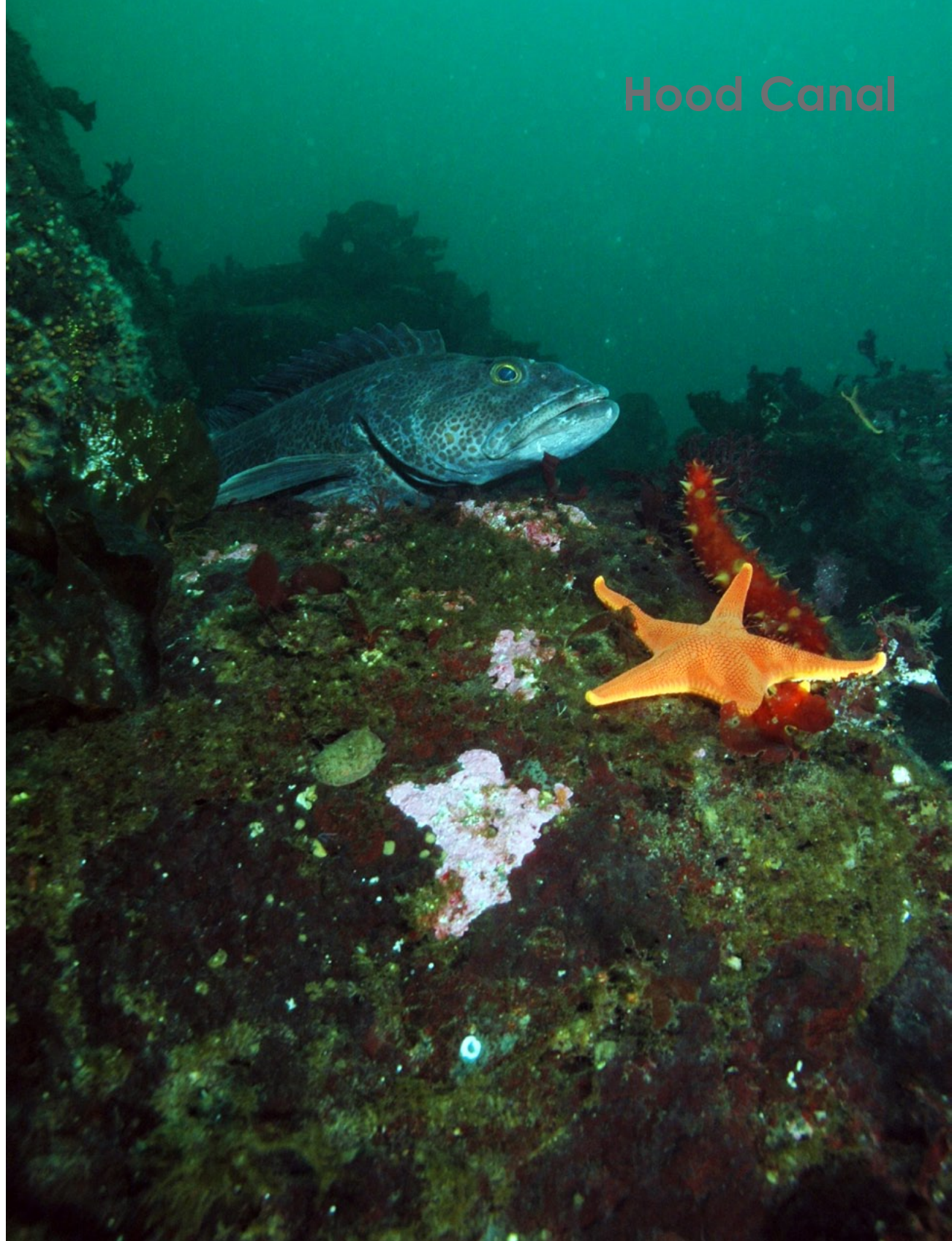
Mike hopes to have his new housing available to market in a few months, which according to him will be "unique in the world". He also states it will have improved underwater optics and oversized controls for divers wearing gloves, not to mention it has already been pressure tested to 330 feet.

Another buddy team was Connie Zastrow and Jay Lonner, testing out their new drysuits. "In my heart of hearts, I'm a tropical water diver," said Connie, "but, that being said, I want to love cold water diving, and I thought Hood Canal was a great place to take the plunge. It really was a good place to start—small boat, attentive crew, no current and plenty of interesting things to see." Both Connie and Jay hope to return this spring for more exploration.

Ron and I entered the water (was it colder?) at Pulali and followed the mooring buoy line down to the site. Tall white

plumose anemones decorated the rocky landscape. Connie and Jay waved as they passed by, heading deeper. The descent was not as steep as the previous dive but a nice stretch of wall allowed me to get below more large lingcod. I've always loved the emerald green hue of northwest water when shooting upwards to frame my subjects in.

Lately I have heard there are dwindling sea star populations in many parts of the northwest, baffling scientists. Some areas have been devastated. Here in this part of Hood Canal they all seemed fine. Many believe pollution is the cause and others feel it is a natural cycle since it has happened before. My bet is that pollution is the culprit, because other marine species are also dwindling in some areas—a trend I am seeing



Hood Canal

yellow zoanths had tiny critters between their tiny yellow bases when you look close.

After coming across Mike and Jim with their new proto-type on a quad-pod and waving at the camera, we headed for a group of copper rockfish. Each fish seemed to have their own special area on

the reef, as did the vermilions. However, black rockfish were everywhere.

Before long it was time to ascend. While hanging around the 20-foot depth (six meters), I watched a dozen striped perch bounce about from one rock pile to the next like the small groups of fish do in the tropics with coral heads. Their silvery irides-



Painted greenling resting on rocky reef (above); Diver with video camera at Hood Canal

Hood Canal

needing air or Nitrox fills, Don is able to accommodate at his dock and can provide rental tanks for those diving with him. Be sure to reserve before hand. Divers can also rent gear and have their tanks filled at Hoodspot 'N Dive.

Another oceanfront fill station can be found at Mike's Beach Resort in Lilliwaup, on Highway 101. They offer accommodations and beach access (fee applies to non-resort guests) to the site called Flag Pole. I watched a couple of video clips on their website and now want to dive there to photograph their cloud sponge gardens! Ron ad-

vises to bring a dive kayak though. Next trip...

For more information visit: www.pacadventure.com or www.pleasantharbormarina.com. ■

rooftop seating."

One of the things I always like to ask local operator about their special segment of the diving world is if they have ever experienced any awe-inspiring encounters. Don answered, "Hard question, too many memories,

like my first yelloweye rockfish, first wolf-eel eggs, first six gill shark, and many special memories diving with new and old friends. But one dive in January of 2011 I sighted three six gill sharks on one dive!"

"Yes, yes?" I persisted.

"I was fortunate to see three six gills on one dive, the site however is at or just beyond recreational limits for depth so I hesitate to say much more. Over the years six gill sightings have not been uncom-

mon at several of our sites. If we wanted to name one site with the most sightings within recreational limits it would be Rosie's Ravine. We have also had sightings at Pualali Point, Rosie's, and Flagpole. Usually the most likely time to see them has been mid to late summer."

I was happy with my one-day dive charter in Hood Canal and plan to return in March when Ron and his group will spend two days exploring the area. I am excited to check out some of the other sites where I can also take my kayak out when not diving. The water is calm enough, at least where we were, paddleboards can also be enjoyed. Don has suggested other activities like a drive up the river valleys or a day hiking in the Olympic National Park.

Just last year I spent a couple of days hiking the Mt Townsend

trail and Hurricane Ridge where I was able to collect some breathtaking imagery of wildlife and scenic mountain views.

For visiting divers to Hood Canal

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cent blue bodies shimmered in the sunlight to the point I had to catch a few images of them.

Upgrades, awesome tales and topside excursions

On the way back to the marina, after another cup of hot soup and a couple of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, Don said, "My wife Diane manages Pleasant Harbor Marina. Over the past few years upgrades included replace-

ment of old wooden/Styrofoam floats with composite docks, a new fuel dock, a new pool and hot tub for tenants, remodeled restrooms, showers and a laundry facility. We offer permanent and transient deep-water moorage for boats up to 120 feet. By mid-June we will complete replacement of our old main building with a new building where we will have a restaurant (we're famous for our pizza) and an upstairs pub with outdoor

