

# Stroking Past the Cold

GUTSY

SALT SPRING SEALS  
DIVE INTO ISLAND  
CIRCUMNAVIGATION  
ON JUNE 25

By PAT BURKETTE  
Photos by John Cameron

“No guts, no glory” could be the Salt Spring Seals’ motto. Few would question the intestinal fortitude of this group of a dozen women and men, most aged 50-plus, who swim in the icy Pacific Ocean year-round.

And we’re not talking a quick dip here.

The Seals complete distances of two to five kilometres three times a week in summer and at least once a week in winter, while wearing five-millimetre-thick wetsuits, snorkels and fins.

If you’re sitting on a log at Vesuvius Beach with a blanket around your shoulders when

At left: A group of Salt Spring Seals perched on some seal-like rocks. Previous page: Ready to dive in.



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— SALT  
SPRING SEAL  
CATHERINE  
GRIFFITHS

the Seals show up for an early evening swim, they’ll tell you to stroke right past the cold in ocean-water swimming and try it for yourself. Wetsuits and salt water make you buoyant, they say, and after about 10 minutes of vigorous aquatics, an endorphin high kicks in so that you forget the frigidty and just feel great.

They’re enthusiastic about the benefits their sport offers, like muscle strengthening and mobility, weight control and overall fitness.

They also describe the thrill of observing an underwater world of sea creatures and plants, or the joy of swimming beneath a full moon on a black summer night. And when they get into the water and swim way way out, they make the whole thing look easy.

But that doesn’t mean they haven’t had their share of swimming in stormy seas, dodging driftwood and debris or navigating life’s tricky currents.

They’ve done all of that to get to the glory, which for a Seal, isn’t about seeking praise. Seal glory is more a state of absolute happiness, as in “to be in one’s glory.” Some of the Seals, like Catherine Griffiths, who’s called “the jock” by her fellow swimmers and joined up when a hip injury sidelined the running she’d done to keep fit for 30 years, talk about the tough times too.

Last spring Griffiths completed the Seals’ final five-kilometre training swim prior to their June open water marathon from Crofton to Vesuvius — called The Crossing — which raises money for the Island Wildlife Natural Care Centre, even though she had a pressing personal issue on her mind.

When the Seals finished their swim, changed out of their wetsuits on the beach, had a cup of tea and hot

chocolate and started chatting, as usual, Griffiths dropped her bombshell.

“I waited until we got the five-K swim in and then I told them I was going in for surgery the next day.”

Griffiths hadn’t been about to let her breast cancer diagnosis interfere with everyone’s swimming. No way.

“A lot of things have happened to people and it hasn’t ended their lives,” she says.

She found immediate support from her fellow Seals, several of whom have also had cancer or other serious health problems.

“It was like, ‘we’ll let you come with no hair and swim, you don’t need to be embarrassed.’”

“Positive people,” adds Griffiths, “encourage you to live your life.”

After treatment, Griffiths was back in the water.

“I’d get my chemo on Wednesday and I’d swim on Friday for 40 minutes. I took a leave from work. I didn’t take a leave from swimming.”

That kind of gutsiness is really at the heart of Seal glory. Living life to the fullest without fear is the thing, whether it’s evidenced by a healthy person enjoying the challenge of ocean swimming or by someone overcoming an illness that shakes a sense of normalcy and puts human fragility in its stead.

Griffiths says it best. “Stretch yourself a little further. That’s what life is all about.”

According to Diana Hayes, who established the Seals in 2002, the ocean is a great place for doing some of that stretching. She says being in the water, in tune with nature and the elements, transforms and strengthens the mind as well as the body.

“It’s kind of timeless and it’s very Zen. You’re absolutely in the moment.”

Back in 2002, Hayes made her own mind/body connection after being hit with the double whammy of breast cancer and her mother’s death from a recurrence of the same disease. Debilitated and depressed, Hayes was unable to enjoy the running and horseback riding she had done to maintain fitness.

Then she had a dream about swimming with fish. A poet and photographer, Hayes followed her dream’s inspiration and travelled with friends to Sombrio on a cold February morning to shoot her dream images. She rented wetsuits and, after the shoot was over, dove into the cold Pacific surf. The water allowed her to rediscover the joy of movement and she realized what her unconscious mind was trying to tell her body: “get into the ocean.”

She bought gear, which typically costs about \$500, and built strength through swimming all that winter and spring. She felt whole again. Hayes also felt in unison with the seals she saw on her initial lone swims, so Salt Spring Seals was a natural name for the swimmers who joined in. They’re a mixed group, made up of people with health issues, or those who just love swimming or want to keep fit.

Peter Eyles is one of the latter, as well as being one of two male Seals. He has no problem being in the minority.

“I enjoy the company of women and they’re a great group,” says Eyles. As an artist, Eyles also enjoys seeing underwater life, counting the sighting of an octopus off Ruckle Park as a favourite Seals moment.

Wannabe Seals may be able to eyeball Seal swimming more than usual this summer. The group plans to make some version of an around-the-island swim a reality, perhaps on succeeding weekends, morphing “The Crossing” into “The Circumnavigation.”

Hayes took inspiration from Rob Dyke, who swam all the way around Vancouver Island (1,400 km) between June 30 and October 2, 2005.

“Meeting him opened up a door for me,” says Hayes. “I thought, ‘hey, the sky’s the limit. I want to swim around Salt Spring.’”

To that end, the Seals will stage a first five-km leg from Bader’s to Vesuvius beaches on Sunday, June 25. There are 84 kms of coastline to contend with, some of it daunting. But that doesn’t mean the Seals won’t, as always, be going for the glory.

For more information about the Salt Spring Seals, call Diana Hayes (537-2538), Elly Silverman (537-2780) or Pat Parkes (653-4917). ✨



**S**alt Spring photographer and poet Diana Hayes was inexplicably drawn to the ocean, beginning with an archetypal dream in which she was swimming with fish. Inspired by that dream, Hayes created a Swimming With Trout photographic series that debuted on Salt Spring in 2002, and became an ocean-swimming “seal.”

