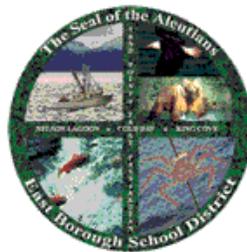
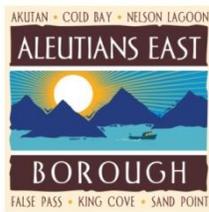


In the Loop



Bringing the Aleutians East Borough, the AEB School District and Eastern Aleutian Tribes together by sharing common goals.

Sea Lion Attacks Sand Point Deck Hand in Harbor

Joe Dillard's winter fishing season was unexpectedly cut short last Sunday after an aggressive Steller sea lion jumped on board a fishing boat he was working on, latched onto his right thigh and tore into his flesh, leaving three gaping holes. It happened at about 4:30 p.m. on January 20th aboard the F/V Celtic in the Sand Point Harbor. Dillard, a deck hand, and other crew members had just returned from pollock fishing but didn't have much luck.

"We pretty much got skunked on that trip," Dillard said, "so we came in to switch our gear over to rig up for cod fishing."

Dillard said when they pulled in and turned the boat around, he saw a sea lion that appeared to be 2,000 pounds, looking at him and snarling. He and the other crew members didn't think too much about it at the time. They pulled the pollock drag off the reel and stacked it on the net. Then they cleaned the net. Dillard said one of the crew members mentioned that he didn't like the look of the sea lion hanging around nearby, but they shrugged it off and continued working.

“About 30 seconds after we had that conversation, wham! It got me in the right upper part of my leg, between my knee and my hip,” Dillard said. “It happened so fast. It started pulling me over the side. I happened to have my hands on the rib lines of the net, and I just white-knuckled it as hard as I could,” he said. “I looked like Superman, hanging over the side.”

Dillard said at the point, he was in fight or flight mode. He said the only thing going through his mind during that instant was to survive.

“All I thought was, “Live. Don’t go in the water, and to hold on as hard as I can,” he said.

Dillard said moments later, the sea lion let go.



Deck hand Joe Dillard was attacked last weekend by a Steller sea lion while working aboard the F/V Celtic in the Sand Point Harbor.

“I pulled back as hard as I could. The next thing I knew, I was back on the stern of the boat. I ran as fast as I could, doing hurdles over the bins and other stuff on deck.”

At one point, he hit the deck on his knees.

“I started to tear up as the pain began setting in,” he said.

Another crew member asked if he wanted him to call 911, but Dillard declined his offer.

“I didn’t realize the severity of the wound at that point,” he said.

“Somehow, the sea lion didn’t rip through my pants. I don’t know how

that’s even possible. I felt a little lump there and thought it was a good size blood blister. It was starting to hurt, so I thought I should probably go to the clinic and get checked out.”

Crew members from a nearby fishing boat gave him a ride to the clinic. Once there, he removed his pants to investigate the source of his pain, while the skipper of the F/V Celtic, Dale Pedersen, and the visiting clinic doctor, stood nearby watching.

“All three of us were like, ‘Whoa!’” Dillard said. “I remember looking at Dale, and saying, well, that’s not good. It looked like a damn shark bite!”

Dillard said there were three holes in his right thigh, two small ones with 3-inch tears and a big one in the middle with a ten-inch gash. He estimates that it took about 75 stitches and 20 staples to close his wounds. He’s using crutches now and resting as much as possible.

“It is an incredible amount of pain,” he said. “Standing and sitting is the worst part because it stretches out the stitches. They’ve got me on Tylenol 3s. They wanted to put me on something stronger, but we’re limited in rural areas.”

Despite the constant pain, Dillard realizes it could have been much worse.

“I lost a little bit of muscle and a lot of fatty tissue,” he said. “You could literally see the muscle in my leg contracting. The doctor told me it was one of the worst sea lion bites she had ever seen. Luckily, it missed all the arteries and main nerves. The doctor’s exact words were, ‘You don’t realize how lucky you were!’”

Dillard said if the sea lion had managed to pull him over the side of the boat and into the water, things might have turned out very differently.

“The air temperature was about 33 degrees and the water temperature was about 35,” he said. “So, if the sea lion had wrapped around me, in all probability, I would have died. I was just lucky I was able to hold on.”

In addition, Dillard said if the sea lion had punctured his leg just a couple of millimeters deeper, it probably would have reached nerves and the main artery. At that point, he would have required surgery. For now, his prognosis is good, as long as infection doesn’t set in. He said if the doctor hadn’t been at the clinic at the time, he would have needed to be medevaced out on an air ambulance to Anchorage.

“I’m lucky, though. Thank God! Someone up there must like me,” Dillard said. “I didn’t stop praying for an hour and a half after it happened. I’ll be down for about a month or two and will probably get some physical therapy. It’s pretty bad, but I’ll live.”

This is the third sea lion attack in Sand Point in recent years. Sand Point Police Officer Dave Anderson said last fall, as crew members of the F/V Marauder were offloading fish at Trident Seafoods, a sea lion jumped up six feet out of the water and over the rail. While a deck hand was moving a corner of a deck plate, the sea lion bit him on the rear end.

“It pulled him backwards,” said Officer Anderson. “The whole thing took maybe a second.”

His back side hit the rail and the impact was hard enough to jerk the massive animal off him. Fortunately, the deck hand only required a few stitches. Two years ago this month, Michael “Mac” McNeil was working on board the F/V Cape St. Elias while the vessel was tied up at the dock in Sand Point. At the time, he and other crew members were taking off a pollock net and replacing it with a cod net, just like Dillard had been doing this past weekend. Moments later, as McNeil was standing with his back to the stern ramp, a sea lion launched out of the water and clamped onto McNeil’s calf with its powerful jaw.

“His calf muscle was torn up pretty good,” Anderson said. “It’s kind of eerie now when you’re walking out on the dock there and you’re vulnerable.”

Officer Anderson is compiling details from Dillard’s attack after interviewing Dillard and the other



crew members. He took photographs, video and is putting together a case report on the incident.

“There are pictures on the Sand Point Department of Public Safety [Facebook](#) page of the vessel, the guy’s leg and the bite,” said Anderson.

This recent attack combined with the other two are unnerving for fishermen and their families. There is little fishermen can do to protect themselves from sea lions, other than keep their distance from the federally-protected animals, whenever possible.

Dillard has some advice for fishermen and others who are out in the Sand Point Harbor.

“Keep your eyes and ears open and be aware of your surroundings,” he said. “You might see them swimming around in the water and think everything’s fine, but it takes just seconds and they can jump up several feet out of the water and onto a boat like it’s nothing. If you see a sea lion nearby, it might not be the worst idea to take a 15 – 20-minute break to see if they go away.”



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