IPF TEAM SIGHTS RARE ARNOUX BEAKED WHALES WHILE ON MISSION AT THE COAST



© International Polar Foundation

Last week, International Polar foundation President and Founder Alain Hubert along with Tim Grosrenaud went on a traverse to the coast to retrieve the last of the cargo that was delivered at the end of last season. While at the coast, they discovered a plethora of marine wildlife.

It’s quite common for members of our team to come across packs of penguins, weddell seals and seabirds when venturing close to the ice shelf terminus along the coastlines in this region of Queen Maud land, East Antarctica However, the land-based animals here are far outnumbered by marine animals that call this corner of the world home.

The cold waters that surround Antarctica make for some of the world’s most oxygenated, nutrient-rich waters. These rich waters make for an attractive feeding ground for many ocean species. Naturally, these cold waters, rich in krill and other organisms, attract the ocean's biggest inhabitants as well as its apex

predators.

It’s not uncommon to see pods of orcas and other whales such as the Antarctic minke whale just off the edge of the ice shelf where they majestically bob and swim around the icebergs and sea ice navigating the sea in search of their next meal.

However, the trip to the coast last week included a special surprise for our two-man team. When they arrived at the water's edge, they encountered a small pod of four Arnoux’s beaked whales (Berardius arnuxii) swimming quietly along the pack ice at a very short distance. This is in fact a very exciting and rare sighting. Even laying eyes on this species is extremely uncommon!

The international community of marine biologists still know very little about these mysterious creatures that have been sighted predominantly in these fertile waters off the coast of Antarctica. Besides a handful of sightings, mainly in the Southern Ocean, there have been a few cases of the Arnoux’s beaked whale being washed ashore and stranded on the beaches of Argentina and New Zealand, which has allowed biologists to study their anatomy.

However, a dead whale tells you much less than one busy breathing and living in the water. Scientists have never had the opportunity to study this animal up close and in depth, which is why very little is known about their feeding behavior and how they live.

Although sightings are quite uncommon, due to the remote nature of their preferred habitat, it is believed that the Arnoux’s beaked whale is not endangered but rather it is just well acquainted at living a life out of the spotlight. A wise behavior that certainly explains why the species has never been targeted for commercial hunting.

Besides enhancing our knowledge about the biodiversity and the conservation potential of the region, perhaps this most recent sighting of this rarely encountered species could inspire marine biologists to travel to this part of Antarctica to better understand the way these whales live and how climate change could potentially affect their habitat and livelihood.