

'Button' bucks gone wrong

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A foursome of young bucks fell upon some good luck Sunday as they were pulled from the icy waters of Stephens Passage by a group of locals out to enjoy the last few days of recent sunshine. These good Samaritans describe their experience as "one of those defining moments in life."

Their story

The winds blew hard down Taku Inlet that day, said Tom Satre, captain of his 62-foot charter vessel the Alaska Quest. The fury of the gusts had whipped the water into white-capped waves, which Satre guessed were topping out around three feet.

Satre was born and raised in Juneau. At 60, he's spent a lot of time on the water and seen more than a few four-legged creatures making their way to and from the islands in the region.

His sister, Sharon Kelly, who describes herself as a birding enthusiast, scanned the horizon with binoculars as they motored toward Taku Harbor.

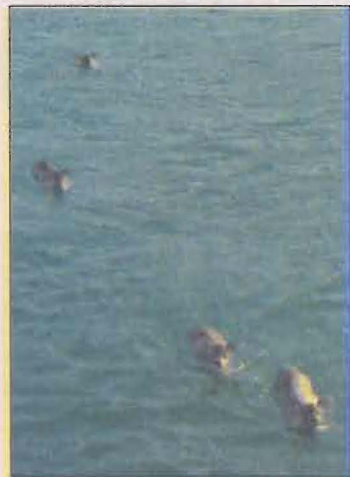
This State Marine Park is located 25 miles south of Juneau and boasts a public dock, a public use cabin and few other decrepit buildings. It's a fine place to get out of the weather and soak up the sun. For the four family members — Satre, his daughter Anna Satre, brother Tim Satre and Kelly — this was to serve as a locale for a Sunday luncheon.

But as they neared Point Arden, Kelly spotted something in the water. She raised her binoculars. Expecting to see the bobbing body of a sea lion or the



Above left: Four Sitka black-tailed bucks pulled from the waters of Stephens Passage Sunday recover on the back of Tom Satre's 62-foot charter vessel, the Alaska Quest. All deer were transported to Taku Harbor and witnesses reported they all recovered from what appeared to be exhaustion and a bit of hypothermia.

Above right: Four deer swim toward the Satre's boat Sunday. Once they reached the vessel, Satre said they began to circle the boat and looked obviously distressed.



COURTESY OF SHARON KELLY

heads of eiders, instead she saw ears — deer ears.

Kelly ran to get her brother.

Satre slowed the boat, and the group began to watch the group of four juvenile Sitka black-tailed deer.

"They swam right toward the boat," he said. "Then, they started to circle the boat. They were looking up and looked like they needed help."

This was the first time he'd ever seen deer in this much distress, Satre said. They were foaming at the mouth, and not able to make it onto the swim step, they instead swam under it. The group knew something had to be done.

Satre guessed the bucks

were of last year since their antlers were very small, for some just nubbins, and hardly large enough for him to grab on to. So he fashioned a lasso and, one by one, hauled them by the neck onto the back of the boat.

According to Kelly, the typically skittish and absolutely wild animals came willingly and once on the boat, collapsed with exhaustion. They were shivering, she said. A few could not hold up their heads. She didn't know if two would make it.

"They couldn't stand up on their own," Kelly said. "(And) they couldn't shake the water off their coats. We didn't want to touch them, but it was clear they were happy to be there. They

probably would have crawled on board if they could have."

Kelly is right. Riley Woodford, an information officer with the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, said it's all a matter of survival. And wild animals fight every day to survive.

"It's the lesser of two evils," he said. "If they're desperate, they don't care. This has happened before with animals being chased by predators. (For instance,) last summer a sea lion jumped in someone's boat after being chased by killer whales."

Perhaps these deer were chased into the salty waters by a

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COURTESY OF SHARON KELLY

One of the four Sitka black-tailed bucks pulled from the waters of Stephens Passage Sunday is seen being transported via wheelbarrow by Tom Satre after reaching Taku Harbor. Witnesses reported all the deer recovered fully from what appeared to be exhaustion and a bit of hypothermia.

Rescue: Deer recovered after warming

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wolf, which Woodford said could be one explanation. Perhaps, he said, they were driven out by adolescent dispersal, which happens naturally as populations begin to expand. Or maybe these were migrant deer looking for an area with more food. Either way, these juvenile bucks, who otherwise faced dire consequences, were on their way to Taku Harbor.

The boat turned into the protected port and the sun began to warm the deer. One had stood up, Kelly said, and looked revived. The others were still laying down, but awake.

Once the group reached the dock, the first to be pulled from the water hopped onto the dock, looked back, then leapt into the waters of the harbor and swam to shore. He quickly disappeared into the forest. Two others followed suit, after a bit of prodding and assistance from the group.

"The last one was in real trouble," Satre said. "I think he was the biggest of the four. He couldn't get the water off him. I massaged him, he was shaking and was very hypothermic, I think."

Deer, like anything, can get cold. But Woodford said their bodies are designed to handle hypothermic situations.

"They're able to ramp up body heat," he said. "Like in the winter, they'll just ramp up their metabolism. A deer could, however, just become completely exhausted."

Between the waves and the mile or so they were from shore, it's likely exhaustion was the cause.

But the day was wearing on, and the group had obligations. So they loaded the last deer into a dockside wheelbarrow in an attempt to get him to wooded safety.

"But the wheel barrow had a flat," Kelly said. "So we couldn't go far."

The waiting game began again.



COURTESY OF SHARON KELLY

From left: Tom, Anna and Tim Satre help one of the "button" bucks to its feet after they rescued it from Stephens Passage. Four bucks in all were rescued.

Tom Satre stood next to the deer as it revived, warmed and slowly became more alert. Time and time again the deer would try to stand, but its legs would fail. The group would lift up the animal; it would move a few steps and collapse again. With this combination of efforts, the last deer was finally on the trail and standing, on wobbly legs, on its own.

It was then the group said goodbye, took a few last pictures and turned for their home in the city. They didn't see the deer return to the forest, but Satre said the outlook was good and they felt comfortable with the effort they'd put forth.

"It was quite an experience," he said. "I think it made an emotional mark on each of us. I'm a hunter and have taken a lot of flack, but (taking them) just didn't seem very sportsman like."

"I'm still in disbelief that it happened," Kelly said. "... but I now put (the experience) in the 'defining moments of life' category."

Their rescue was rare, but

one that regional residents and officials say is not completely unheard of in Southeast. News stories echo the tale of an Alaska State Trooper who transported a buck to safety near Ketchikan after it approached and tried, unsuccessfully, to climb into his 18-foot patrol vessel.

Perhaps these deer will learn from their experiences. Perhaps not, but Woodford said the ordeal definitely beats drowning.

"Deer seem to bounce back pretty quick, as long as they're not injured in the process" he said, using the times biologists dart animals for tagging as an example.

"They live lives where they could die at any time. Obviously, they learn things from experiences, but (these deer) might have learned a lesson."

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