

The Naturalist - Who Was Georg Wilhelm Steller?

Thursday, 11 July 2013

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/stories-2-mp3/130711.the_naturalist_who_was_steller.mp3{/audio}

The now-extinct Steller's Sea Cow was big. Really big.

You've almost certainly heard of the Steller sea lion and maybe the Steller jay or Steller eider. But do you know anything about the Steller sea cow? Or even Georg Wilhelm Steller himself?

Deb Mignogno of Fort Abercrombie fills in the details for us in during this week's edition of The Naturalist.

— Deb Mignogno, summer naturalist at Ft. Abercrombie State Historical Park.

So who was Steller? Georg Wilhelm Steller, born in 1709, was a botanist, zoologist, physician and explorer. He is noted as being the first European to set foot in what is now Alaska and for describing and documenting some of the unique animal life of the region. He is considered a pioneer of Alaskan natural history.

Russia's Great Northern Expedition was one of the largest organized exploration enterprises in history, and Steller wanted to be involved. The goal of the expedition was to find and map the eastern reaches of Siberia, and to hopefully continue onto the western shores of North America to map them, as well. In 1734, Steller moved to St. Petersburg, Russia, hoping to accompany Captain Commander Vitus Bering on the expedition. In St. Petersburg, initially Steller worked at the Imperial Academy of Sciences.

Luckily for Steller, the Academy needed a third scientist to travel with the expedition as far as the Kamchatka Peninsula. Steller was overjoyed when he was selected to go. In contrast the other scientists of his time, Steller was a naturalist of wild country who did without the usual comforts, traveling light and exploring vast stretches of territory. He scandalized other scientists by refusing to wear a powdered wig.

Once on the Peninsula, Vitus Bering initially refused Seller's request to be included on the voyage to find western North America. While waiting on the Peninsula to make his plea again to Bering, Steller and a student of the Academy described for the first time the life cycle of North Pacific salmon and identified the five species by the names still in use today: humpback, chum, sockeye, silver and king.

Finally, Vitus Bering summoned Steller to join the voyage in search of America serving in the role of scientist and physician. After Vitus Bering's ship, the St. Peter, was separated from its sister ship, St. Paul, in a storm, Vitus Bering continued to sail north and east, expecting to find land soon. Fresh water was getting short, and the crew was growing increasingly restless and irritable. After many days, Steller, observing floating seaweed and land grass as well as observing hair seals and sea otters, species which are normally close to shore, reasoned that land was not far to the north. He urged the officers to steer a northerly course, but his suggestion was treated with contempt. (He was not exactly an expert at getting along with others!)

After considerable time lost, they did sail northeast. They made landfall in Alaska at Kayak Island on July 20 1741. Vitus Bering wanted to stay only long enough to take on fresh water. Steller petitioned Captain Bering to allow more time for land exploration and was granted 10 hours. During this time, as the first non-native to have set foot upon Alaskan soil, Steller became the first European naturalist to describe a number of North American plants and animals, including a jay later named Steller's jay. Recalling a book of Carolinian birds by the English naturalist and artist Mark Catesby, he remembered a colored plate of a blue, crested jay and that crested jays are only found in the Americas. He wrote in his journal that the Kayak Island jay proved beyond a doubt that they were in America.

The expedition had considerable problems returning to Kamchatka. They stopped at one of the Shumagin Islands for water 40 days after leaving Kayak Island, only to collect brackish water which made the crew sick (once again they did not take Steller's advice).

From there, with most of the crew suffering from scurvy and with only 12 members of the crew able to move and the rigging rapidly failing, the expedition shipwrecked on what later became known as Bering Island. Steller nursed the survivors, including Bering, but the aging captain died. Forty six of the original crew of 78 lasted through the northern winter, surviving on the meat of local seals, foxes, otters and a now extinct Pacific manatee called Steller's sea-cow.

Despite the hardships the crew endured, Steller studied the flora, fauna, and topography of the island in great detail...It was there that Steller documented a number of animals, including the Steller's sea lion, Steller's eider, and Steller's sea eagle. Two of his discoveries, the Steller's sea cow and the spectacled cormorant, are now extinct.

Steller died while returning to St. Petersburg. Fortunately, he kept a meticulous journal, which arrived safely back at the Imperial Academy, documenting his many discoveries. His journals were later used by other explorers of the North Pacific, including Captain Cook.

The important achievements of the expedition included the European discovery of Alaska, the Aleutian Islands, the Commander Islands, Bering Island, as well as a detailed

cartographic assessment of the northern and north-eastern coast of Russia and the Kuril Islands.

Check out our web site for all of the wonderful programs we have scheduled for the summer – especially the new Junior Park Ranger program.

I’m Deb Mignogno.