



A JOURNEY WITH PURPOSE: FROM VICTORIA, BC TO THE HEART OF POLYNESIA

by Larissa Clark & Duncan Copeland (s/v Freeranger)

Ocean advocates Duncan Copeland and Larissa Clark are recipients of this year's OCC Conservation Challenge Grant, awarded to their non-profit organisation Free Range Ocean. They run the project from Freeranger, which is currently in Fiji, where they are just over a year into a world voyage with their young children Eden and Skye-Elizabeth. For Larissa, the passage from Punta Mita to Henderson Island, an impressive 3,468 miles, in which she served as First Mate as well as mummy, was her qualifying passage.

In July 2024, our family of four slipped our lines in Victoria, Canada aboard Freeranger, our Beneteau 50. We were loaded with provisions, curiosity and a family mission: to journey with purpose, raising the profile of ocean citizen science along the way. With Eden (then 7, now 9) and Skye-Elizabeth (then 5, now 7) as our crew, we had no illusions that this would be a simple sail from one latitude to another. It would be a voyage of seamanship, schooling, citizen science and – inevitably – surprises.



All aboard for a family photo as the crew visit Vancouver during the early days of their journey



The family joins in a beach seine survey and demonstration by the Raincoast Education Society in Tofino, BC



Dolphins at the helm leaving Canada and sailing south
Photo © Nikkey Dawn



Eden watches the coastline for bears and sea otters during the rounding of Vancouver Island

BEFORE SETTING OFF

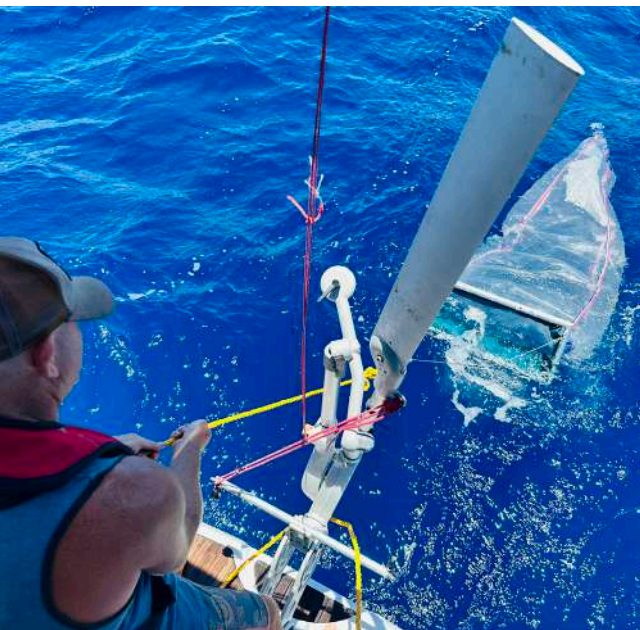
Having spent many years living and working in Europe and Africa, we moved to Vancouver Island in the spring of 2023 to spend time with Duncan's family (including his parents and OCC members Andy and Liza Copeland) and to prepare *Freeranger* for a multi-year voyage. We also wanted our son Eden and daughter Skye to spend a year in the British Columbia (BC) school system before we set off, as BC has an excellent distant education system, which we planned to use as the basis of boat school while we were away.

In parallel, we set up Free Range Ocean, a small not-for-profit organisation. Free Range Ocean brings together the best of our combined 40 years in environmental campaigns, development and communications, and channels them into a personal and professional project designed to positively impact the people and places we visit aboard *Freeranger*. Our focus is on three things:

1. **A Journey with Purpose:** *Contributing to, and enabling other boaters and coastal communities to contribute to, the smorgasbord of ocean citizen science and community projects that urgently need support and volunteers, including the establishment and expansion of the first global citizen science directory dedicated to ocean projects.*
2. **Adventure Science & Storytelling:** *Advancing knowledge and understanding of our global ocean by collaborating with local initiatives, early-career researchers and storytellers on board Freeranger in the countries we visit.*
3. **Outreach and Innovation:** *Using Freeranger as a platform for outreach and innovation, and as a testbed for innovative research-based or green-operational maritime technologies, from the simple solutions to the high-tech.*

THE END GOAL?

To inform, inspire and enable others to have their own positive impact on our ocean with an 'everyone, and every action counts' philosophy.



Many of the citizen science projects the family participates in are full family events with everyone taking part bringing homeschool science to life!

Photo © Nikkey Dawn

Left: A Neuston Net is deployed from Freeranger as part of International SeaKeepers Society project while offshore during their Pacific crossing

NORTHWARD FIRST:

Warming Up in British Columbia

Rather than point the bow south straight away, in July 2024 we set off north, almost circumnavigating Vancouver Island. Desolation Sound's fjords and sun-warmed coves, Campbell River's busy channels, and the wild isolation of the Broughtons gave us a great shakedown though, it has to be said, more for our new engine than for the sails, as little breeze and flat calm seas were the conditions of most of the summer.

As always, however, there is a silver lining and the calm conditions made for incredible wildlife spotting. Daily we spotted whales, sea otters, seals, sea lions and dozens of species of sea birds. Ashore, bald eagles were everywhere, and more than once we sat in the cockpit as black bears picked their way along the shoreline. But perhaps the most incredible of all were the evenings we sat together listening to the sea wolves* howl nearby. These sightings also gave us our opportunity to take part in local citizen science initiatives, as we added them into wildlife sightings apps such as the Ocean Wise Sightings Network Whale Report app.

Rounding Cape Scott, we tasted the Pacific's edge for the first time this voyage before dropping into the whale-rich waters of Clayoquot Sound and the surf-town charm of Tofino, returning to Middle Beach where we'd been married nine years earlier. Our final Canadian stop, Ucluelet, would also be the launch point for our first big offshore leap.

DOWN THE COAST AND INTO THE WEATHER

Early September brought our departure south and, with it, Cape Mendocino at its spirited best: 4-6m swell peaking under a steel sky. 'Character-building' is the polite term. The reward: rare whale sightings, including sei whales, and a blue whale so close it swam under our keel. Landfall in San Francisco was made at 2200, sailing under the glorious lights of Golden Gate Bridge. Generally, we try not to make nighttime arrivals, but it turns out that this is a good time to enter the Bay – there's no fog and no large shipping at this time.

We felt very welcomed in San Francisco. This is truly a sailing city, with dozens of yacht and sailing clubs dotted around the area. We enjoyed several reciprocal docking privileges due to Duncan's membership of the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club, and we managed to catch the end of the local OCC 70th Anniversary event held at Angel Island. We hiked mountain trails lined with giant redwoods and took part in the Sausalito Boat Show.

* Sea wolves are a subspecies of the grey wolf, living on the Pacific Northwest coast.



Freeranger on anchor near Tofino, BC



*Duncan on deck during mixed seas
sailing south to San Fran
Photo © Nikkey Dawn*



Clockwise from top left: Larissa, Eden, Skye and Duncan in San Francisco Bay; Freeranger and her crew sailing south to San Francisco (Photo © Nikkey Dawn); Sailing from Ucluelet to San Fran in big seas around infamous Cape Mendocino (Photo © Nikkey Dawn); Duncan, Larissa, Eden and Skye give cruisers talks and presentations on citizen science along their journey as in this photo in La Cruz Mexico

After a couple of weeks in San Francisco – visiting the wider area, seeing friends and having an unplanned haul out – we set off southwards again. We followed the California curve – San Francisco to Monterey Bay – where the aquarium enthralled the kids almost as much as the thousands of sea lions that had commandeered a public park, sprawling across swings and benches in an unending, barking carpet. Our thanks to Grant and Amelia Howerton (PO Monterey) for their kind welcome.

Catalina Island was a tangle of kelp (literally, as it wrapped our prop again and again). The prospect of going over the side to remove it was rarely met with enthusiasm given that juvenile great whites typically enjoy Southern California's coastline as nursery grounds! Less sharky and more popular was a pitstop in Newport Beach and an obligatory Disney detour for the young crew. By San Diego in mid-October our newly-installed engine had reached a new low, with the third gearbox since June failing – forcing us to cross 1.5 miles of the bay in reverse to a boatyard to the soundtrack of The Star-Spangled Banner drifting from the nearby Navy base . . .

**MEXICO SEA OF CORTEZ AND
PACIFIC COAST**

In early November, we joined the Baja Ha-Ha rally southbound – a convivial fleet of over 100 boats, 30 children among them. For Eden and Skye, it was like finding a floating schoolyard. While the rally was certainly helpful in meeting other boats and assisting with the quite incredible amount of paperwork required to take a boat into Mexico, overall we found that the schedule was too fast, and we'd have preferred to take additional



*Family hammock time
on the dusty shores of Baja Mexico
and a day of turtle spotting*

*One of the incredible marine
mammal encounters was the whales
Photo © Nikkey Dawn*

time to explore more of the incredible Baja peninsula on the Pacific coast. Our amazing wildlife encounters continued as we migrated south with the humpbacks, dodged sleeping turtles and more than once had marlin leaping out of the water around us. These sightings were almost daily shared into relevant citizen science projects for the region.

We peeled off at La Paz, swapping the Pacific rollers for the Sea of Cortez's desert-rimmed anchorages. Isla San Francisco, 41 miles north of La Paz, treated us to Baja's trademark 'northers' whilst, in the opposite direction, the little-known treasure of Isla Isabel treated us to more fabulous wildlife encounters. Alive with fearless and massive seabird colonies (including frigatebirds, boobies and pelicans) that are remarkably unafraid of humans, whale sharks, humpback whales, sea turtles (olive ridley, green, Pacific hawksbill) and thriving coral reefs, Isla Isabel became an instant favourite, a place so clearly deserving of its nickname, 'Galápagos of



*The Freeranger crew contemplate their
passage from the coast in San Diego*

Mexico'. A family snorkel here turned into an unforgettable encounter when 20+ pilot whales glided straight through our path, their shapes ghosting in the blue, and their 'chirps' singing through the water.

From December 2024 to late February 2025, we ranged down to Manzanillo, spending idyllic time in Tenacatita and stopping at Barra de Navidad – famous for its picturesque lagoon and infamous for the tight, sandbar-flanked channel that nearly every visiting skipper seemed to graze.

By this stage we'd already taken part in six different citizen science projects: from photographing whale flukes for ID databases to collecting microplastic samples, logging seabed depths for a global seabed map and sharing sea grass samples for research archives. We hosted several talks for fellow cruisers in yacht clubs and in anchorages aboard *Freeranger* – a mix of salty yarns and practical 'how-to' for contributing data from a boat. Particularly fun was joining the morning cruiser nets on VHF that are not only a great resource and way to meet people in this region, but also gave us the opportunity to share information about our Free Range Ocean Citizen Science Directory, and invite fellow cruisers aboard to take part in projects. And, along with other families, we held some excellent kid science sections that were not only fun but ticked more than a few home school boxes!

PACIFIC CROSSING PREP

In February we tucked into Marina La Cruz on Bahía de Banderas for a month of prep and provisioning, the kids happily absorbed in the much-loved marina kids' club in between their home-schooling lessons. It was also the perfect

place to share our growing Free Range Ocean Citizen Science Directory with the cruising community at large. Several OCC members joined in the 'Journey with Purpose' event we ran in collaboration with PV Sailing in the marina clubhouse to hear about ways to get involved in citizen science at sea. The next day, we had a very enjoyable evening on board *Freeranger* with OCC members present and pending, including Roving Rear Commodores Anne and Michael Hartshorn on *Nimue* who happened to be moored right next door.

*Freeranger hosted an
OCC gathering in La Cruz,
February 2025*

*The family giving a
presentation to show the
citizen science directory and
explain how to get involved*



THE BIG ONE: CROSSING THE PACIFIC

After a very busy few weeks in which every centimetre of the boat and all the supermarkets in La Cruz were covered, we set off in mid-March 2025 on our Pacific crossing to Polynesia. The first part of our route was pretty standard, taking us first to the marine reserve of Isla Socorro, where we dropped the hook for an afternoon swim with some very friendly grey sharks. Then we moved on into the vastness of the Pacific blue. Like other boats crossing from Mexico, we first headed in the general direction of 10/120, 10°N and 120°W, generally considered to be the sweet spot for crossing the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ). In the event, a nice window opened up for us a little earlier than that and we bore south away from the rest of the fleet, who were headed to the Marquesas, for our slightly unusual destination of the Pitcairn Islands, a dream destination for both of us.

The passage was a very mixed bag of conditions. Anyone out in the Pacific this year will attest to the fact that it has not been a normal trade wind year (are there any 'normal' years anymore?). We had calm conditions out from Mexico, lovely sailing to the ITCZ, very squally conditions but barely any calm through that, and then into steady 20+ knot winds from about 10°S through to our eventual landfall at Henderson Island at 24°S. Unfortunately, despite the models consistently showing that we should have had those winds on the beam, they in fact came from a far more southerly direction. *Freeranger* is happy to sail close-hauled – although her crew have mixed feelings about it, particularly in those conditions – and we had some fast days with 198 miles being the best, but my goodness it was wet and lively. Morale was not helped by a couple of leaky hatches – ones that had never leaked before!

There were highlights galore: some good, some challenging, some both! Under a rainbow, in full nautical fancy dress, we appeased Neptune as we crossed into the Southern Hemisphere. His reply was a soaking squall that pushed us through the equator at 11.6 knots, followed by glorious sunshine. Galley disasters became running jokes: a full dozen cracked eggs decorating the saloon after a rogue wave was particularly memorable.

While overall the boat performed superbly, repairs were part of the rhythm. We chafed through a spinnaker halyard and an outhaul – the only 2 lines we had not recently replaced. None was more intense, however, than the six hours spent drilling 12 holes through a 5mm stainless steel plate to replace the bracket for the autopilot's hydraulic ram that had sheared in the small hours. Courtesy of this incident, and a small diesel leak that took two days to trace, Duncan is now intimately familiar with the bottom of the starboard aft locker!

*Pages from Skye and Eden's
Trip Report from the Pacific
Crossing between Mexico
and French Polynesia*

*Mixing science and art
during boat school onboard*





Duncan, Larissa, Eden, Skye and their fantastic voyage crew Emme and PiL fly across the equator at 11.6 knots in full nautical attire en route to Polynesia



Eden investigates curious creatures in our Neuston Net water sample mid-ocean on the Pacific Crossing



The crew get ready for a session towing a neuston net to collect water samples for a study with Dr Rebecca Helm



The family takes a dip mid-Pacific Ocean

Crossing the Pacific also gave us the opportunity to contribute to citizen science projects particularly focused on the high seas. These included: deploying a Neuston Net at slow speeds and recording the plankton samples gathered for a study mapping ocean surface life run by Dr Rebecca Helm and The International SeaKeepers Society (for which we are a Discovery Yacht); and contributing to the Global Ocean Environment Survey (GOES) through documenting the plankton and microplastic samples taken on most days (weather permitting!).

Eden and Skye took it all in their stride, inventing 'Yes Day' (mercifully without too many outrageous requests), staging theatrical performances in Skye's cabin, and running backgammon and Yahtzee championships. School underway was pragmatic: whatever didn't induce queasiness during the final nine days of lively close-hauled sailing was fair game.

LANDFALL IN THE PITCAIRN GROUP

After 22 days and 3,468 nautical miles, sailing right across the tropics and out the other side, we made landfall at Henderson Island. To land after a Pacific crossing at a truly remote and uninhabited island was a privilege. To find somewhere safe to anchor, however, was a challenge.

Our visit was wonderful and heartbreaking. The setting and landscape are incredible, the unique vegetation and birdlife are breathtaking but the plastic pollution, for which the island is notorious, is truly awful and it's everywhere along the shoreline. Some of it had obviously been at sea for a long time, some looked very new. Fishing gear made up a large proportion of it, but we found everything from toys to shoes, plastic bags to bottles.

After two days, changing conditions meant that we had to leave Henderson in something of a hurry as the breakers built and we set course for Pitcairn Island itself, a place both of us had long wanted to visit. The anchorages are awful and the landing, frankly, crazy, but once ashore we have never felt more welcomed,



A happy crew reaches Henderson Island after a 22 day passage from La Cruz, Mexico in April 2025



Freeranger looking for a place to anchor at Henderson Island

or been somewhere more peaceful, than this island and its community. To be able to explore Pitcairn and its history in person was just wonderful; to learn more about this community, their lives, and their pride in their islands and the huge Pitcairn Islands Marine Reserve was humbling. The kids particularly enjoyed their rides around on the islanders' ATVs and meeting Miss T, a Galapagos tortoise brought by a visiting yacht in 1935: a truly once in a lifetime experience.



The infamous landing at Pitcairn Island can easily leave your nerves in tatters but we were happy to successfully make it several times



Clockwise from top left: Eden collecting plastic; Larissa with Brenda Christian, the most delightful immigration officer you'll ever meet; The family explores Pitcairn Island home of the descendants of The Bounty mutineers and visits the lush sites happy to be on land among the trees after the passage from Mexico; In Pitcairn Island by the original anchor of HMS Bounty



ON TO FRENCH POLYNESIA

By Easter, we were in Mangareva, French Polynesia – the landscape a lush green counterpoint to our months of desert coasts and bluewater horizons. Here, the pace shifted. We explored anchorages, traded with locals and continued citizen science efforts – the kids helping observe water clarity and species logs. Starlink meant they could join their Canadian classmates' video calls, answering the inevitable, 'Where are you now?'

The atoll-studded Tuamotus demanded respect. Our entries were timed for best estimates (not always right!) of slack tide, eyes peeled for coral heads. There were sharks everywhere but in the Fakarava UNESCO Biosphere Reserve they were a particular highlight. In the Societies, the scenery turned cinematic: Bora



Rainbows, islands and a family at sea in French Polynesia



Freeranger rafted up alongside two OCC families Tempus and June



Clockwise from top left: Maupihā'a (Maupihāa), also known as Mopelia, is an atoll in the Leeward group (Iles sous le Vent) of the Society Islands; Putting the kids to work as coral spotters as the family voyages between atolls; Enjoying island life in French Polynesia; Eden and Skye demonstrate a citizen science app to other boat kids

Bora's volcanic peaks, Moorea's dolphin-filled passes and Tahiti's urban bustle (and incredible – albeit pricey – provisioning top-ups).

We reconnected with *Sailing Tempus*, OCC members and close friends from our years living in Norway (2019–22). Their daughters, Tiril and Frida, are the same ages as Eden and Skye, and the four kids had previously gone to school together in Norway. They slotted straight back into the easy play and shared adventures that mark a true 'chosen family' afloat, along with OCC friends from British Columbia aboard *June*.

June 2025 in the ocean conservation calendar was a big month. Over in Nice, France, the UN Ocean Conference was in full swing – it's an event we'd likely have been at in person before this new cruising life. For two years now Free Range Ocean has been endorsed by the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (better known as the Ocean Decade) and for the event we were delighted to do a live Instagram event to talk Ocean Citizen Science with the Ocean Decade [#GenOcean](#) initiative, aimed at engaging young



*Clockwise from top left:
The family crew off to snorkel with
manta rays in French Polynesia;
Snorkelling with Grey and Black
Tip sharks in Fakarava Atoll in
the UNESCO biosphere reserve
during World Ocean Week*

(Photo © s/v June);

*Frigate bird chicks and juveniles
nested on Bird Island in
Maupihā'a; The crew take a
walk on Bird Island at their last
atoll stop in Maupihā'a;
Skye loves to paint her underwater
experiences – in this case her first
swim with a manta ray*

people in ocean issues. We probably don't have futures as Instagram influencers, but the engagement, questions and enthusiasm of the participants was inspiring.

THE OCC CONNECTION

Mid-voyage, we were thrilled to learn that we had been awarded the OCC Conservation Challenge Grant – a boost that has enabled us to expand our Free Range Ocean Citizen Science Directory and widen outreach. With this support we've been adding projects to the directory and, increasingly, as word of our efforts spreads, receiving them directly from researchers, sailors and conservationists who are helping us to get them all in one place. We've had some exciting local collaborations recently, including with Conservation International in Samoa in August where we hosted a joint workshop called 'Creative and Connected Citizen Science Dialogue' with

representatives from the national government, university and NGO community to explore the role and opportunity for engaging visitors (cruisers!) in local conservation efforts. Later in the year, in Fiji, we'll collaborate with the Pacific Blue Foundation and Women in Ocean Science on a pilot project to get more local women into diving so they can become ocean guardians in their own communities. We will also make *Freeranger* available for two weeks to support



Pacific Blue Foundation's coral restoration efforts. We've met many wonderful OCC boats along the way, hosted several get-togethers on board, and are planning a webinar with *Shimshal II* in September to share progress and citizen science tips. Just as we'd hoped, the OCC community's advice, encouragement and camaraderie have been as tangible as the trade winds.

*OCC member
families of
Freeranger, Tempus
and June sailed
French Polynesia in
company with friends*

FINAL REFLECTIONS

From the first cold spray off Cape Scott to the balmy lagoons of the Societies, our voyage so far has been a blend of traditional cruising, purposeful science and family life in its raw, rewarding form. We've navigated weather, seasickness and repairs, met rare wildlife, taught our children in the cockpit and on the foredeck, and watched them cross oceans with open eyes and resilient spirits. We've met wonderful people both ashore and afloat. Last and not least, we've seen the start of what we hope will become something useful to many. One day we hope that for most of us afloat, taking part in ocean citizen science will be as much a part of our daily lives as our morning swim, checking the weather or wondering which boat job needs to be tackled next . . .

And we're only just getting started! 🚩