

Baja California & The Sea of Cortez

Naturetrek Tour Report

27 February - 12 March 2007



Blue Whale in the Sea of Cortez by Paul Marshall

Report compiled by Paul Marshall



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Day 1

Tuesday 27 February

UK – San Diego

For most of us it was day of travel. A relatively civilized start at Heathrow was followed by uneventful flights to Los Angeles and on to San Diego. By late evening we had all arrived at Point Loma and the departure point for our adventure.

Day 2

Wednesday 28 February

San Diego

Following a welcome nights sleep everybody was up and about early. The weather was surprisingly cool and overnight there had been some very heavy rain. It was all part of an active weather system passing over the western seaboard. The good news was that we had arrived at the end of it and the long range forecast was looking great.

As we weren't due to board the boat until the evening a day's birdwatching around San Diego with several members of the local Audobon society had been arranged. First stop was just a short walk from the hotel. In Point Loma harbour we were soon watching flocks of Least Sandpipers, Western Grebes and Marbled Godwits. A Belted Kingfisher posed beautifully but several Anna's Hummingbirds were less cooperative.

We returned to the hotel to pick up a few late starters and climbed aboard our coach. We headed out of the city to a San Diego Audobon Society Reserve called Silverwood. This area had been devastated by fire several years ago but the native chaparral was being allowed to regenerate and was doing a great job. A couple of Lesser Goldfinches were singing near the car park – a good start. A walk to the rangers' house provided good views of Acorn Woodpecker, singing Californian Thrasher and Oak Titmouse. A brief shower forced all the birds into hiding and we decided Californian birds weren't used to such cold and wet weather! Eventually the sun came out

and a picnic lunch whilst watching the feeders gave us the opportunity to watch Spotted and California Towhees, White-breasted Nuthatch, Dark-eyed Juncos and White-crowned Sparrows. A Nuttall's Woodpecker (found only in California in the United States) showed well on the return walk to the coach

Next was a quick stop at an 'urban' pond. In typical American style the pond was as big as some British reservoirs. Flocks of Great-tailed Grackles fed noisily around the car park. On the lake was a pair of Wood Duck and several Pied-billed Grebes amongst more familiar wildfowl. A Say's Phoebe showed well in the surrounding vegetation and a pair of Brewer's Blackbirds came to investigate us.

With time pressing on we made our way to the coast and the San Diego River Mouth. The variety and numbers of birds was a bit overwhelming. Amongst the collection of herons, wildfowl, waders, gulls and terns we found Long-billed Curlew, Greater Yellowlegs, Tricolored Heron, Black Skimmer, Slavonian Grebe, Forster's Tern, Buffhead and Blue-winged Teal. Despite the increasingly windy conditions everybody enjoyed great views of most species.

Our final stop of the day was Formosa Slough, yet another Audobon Society reserve amongst a residential area. Amongst many species we had already seen were Killdeer, Black-necked Stilt and a single American Avocet. We returned to Point Loma and had a short wait before we could board The Spirit of Adventure.

Early evening arrived and so did Scott (our naturalist for the holiday). Before long we were all settled on the boat enjoying 'a snack' prepared by Mike's (the captains) wife. Scott talked us through what to expect over the next ten days and this was followed by an entertaining safety talk from Mike. By the times the engines started everyone was eagerly anticipating what lay ahead.

Although it was dark this didn't stop us from making our first wildlife stop. We slowly cruised past some fish pens in the harbour and had excellent views of California Sea lions either hauled out or splashing around the pens. Also present were lots of Black-crowned Night Herons, Great Blue Herons and Brown Pelicans hoping for a free meal.

All that remained for us to do now was head out into the Pacific and sail south into Mexico. Unfortunately the passing storm front had created quite a swell and it was a rather bumpy first night on the boat.

Day 3

Thursday 1 March

Ensenada, Todos Santos Island

Just after dawn we were clearing Ensenada harbour under clear blue skies. There was still a fresh wind and the temperature was a little on the cool side but a combination of the first of Dan's awesome breakfasts, Royal Terns, Heermann's Gulls and our first cetaceans in the form of four Pacific White-sided Dolphins eased everyone into life on the boat the right way. The dolphins showed beautifully as we headed towards Todos Santos Island and even obliged with a short spell of bow-riding.

Once in the lee of the islands the swell wasn't so bad and everybody managed to get onboard the skiffs like they had been doing it for years. Landing is not permitted on the island but cruising the shore in skiffs gave us excellent views of the wildlife. Mixed flocks of American Black and American Oystercatchers flew from rock to

rock in their excitable way. Hauled out on the rocks were many Harbour Seals. Isla de Todos Santos is one of the most southerly places in the world where this species can be seen. Our visit coincided with the pupping season and there were many mother and pup pairs in the area, including some very inquisitive individuals. A sunbathing male Northern Elephant Seal dwarfed its neighbours and the California Sea lions proved as entertaining as always. Careful scrutiny of all cormorants revealed both Brandt's and Pelagic in addition to the usual Double-crested.

Lunchtime and we were back on the boat heading south. Although last night's swell had subdued somewhat it was still a lively ride. Unfortunately the swell made spotting any cetaceans impossible but the birding was good. Small numbers of Black-vented Shearwaters and Cassin's Auklets gave good views. Amongst them we found several Fulmars, Sooty Shearwaters and a single Pomarine Skua. It was however a Black-footed Albatross which stole the show. A juvenile appeared as if from nowhere and spent ten minutes circling the boat giving stunning views.

We were making good time and as darkness fell Dan served up another fantastic 1000+ calories to keep us going through the night!

Day 4

Friday 2 March

San Benitos Island

Within a day everybody had adjusted their body clocks to life on a boat and by 5am most people were up and about. An hour later and everybody was tucking into another gorgeous breakfast – either copious amounts of fresh fruit or some amazing mixture of pancakes, bacon and syrup.

We were in sight of San Benitos Island and before long the anchor was dropped and everybody geared themselves up for another skiff ride to the island. After we had all made it to the island and negotiated our way past the very large male and slightly grumpy male Northern Elephant Seals on the beach we gathered to listen to a talk from Scott. As Scott gave us a history of the island an immature Glaucous-winged Gull flew past and the endemic island race of Savannah Sparrow showed down to a few feet.

We made our way along the footpath to our first Elephant Seal colony. As with the Harbour Seals seen yesterday our visit coincided with the pupping season. Nearly all the females were out to sea feeding leaving the beaches littered with well fattened pups.

Whilst enjoying the sites and sounds (!) of the Elephant Seals we noticed a number of sea lions hauled out on the rocks in the distance. A quick check with a telescope revealed they were Guadalupe Fur Seals but we hoped to get closer views of these later on.

Next we made our way to a second and larger seal colony. Here the group split up with some choosing to remain and soak up life in an Elephant Seal colony whilst the others set off for a walk to the lighthouse. Those who walked to the lighthouse enjoyed a flock of Black Turnstones and numerous Osprey nests as well as the floral blooms. At the Elephant Seal colony a single male loafing in the surf provided most of the entertainment.

After a picnic lunch it was time to return to The Spirit. Some of the crew took the skiffs over to East Island and we followed. Although there was a bit of a swell it wasn't bad enough to prevent us from getting in the skiffs for a close look at the fur seals. These Guadalupe Fur Seals are near endemic species breeding here and on several other islands in the region. We had excellent views of animals both hauled out and in the water. Scott estimated over 200 animals in the area – one of the highest counts he had known.

By mid afternoon we were back onboard and heading south again. Although the swell was becoming less all the time there was still enough to make cetacean spotting very difficult. However everybody now had their 'sea legs' and were enjoying the ride. Seabirds again proved to be order of the afternoon with over 500 Black-vented Shearwaters, 30 Cassin's Auklets, three Grey Phalaropes and two Black-footed Albatross being the highlights.

Day 5 & 6

Saturday 3 & Sunday 4 March

San Ignacio Lagoon

As the sun came up we could see the entrance to San Ignacio Lagoon and it was only a matter of minutes before the first Gray Whale blows were seen. Everyone excitedly gathered on deck as we entered the lagoon. There were whales all around us and some incredibly close to the boat. Mike carefully navigated The Spirit further into the lagoon and dropped anchor.

Overnight the cold northerly wind had dropped completely but in the lagoon a Santa Ana wind had been blowing for several days and was now over 20 knots. This was no problem for The Spirit but it meant using the local pangas more problematic. The whale watching in San Ignacio Lagoon is carefully monitored and limited to twelve small boats skippered by locals.

From The Spirit the whale watching was awesome with a maximum count of over a hundred whales 'visible' at one time. There were cow and calf pairs, individuals breaching and spy-hopping. The Grey Whales come here and to other lagoons along the Pacific coast of Mexico to breed. The sheltered waters are perfect for a cow to raise her calf before taking them on the amazing journey to the Arctic. Unmated males also congregate here looking for females without calves.

By mid morning the first panga trips were out on the water getting up close and personal with Grey Whales. There is something very humbling about looking into the eye of such a magnificent animal. The windy weather made it difficult for these inquisitive creatures to get close to the boat but they tried. On more than one occasion a mother could be seen pushing her calf towards a boat only for the boat to drift away. By the end of the first day there had been mixed success with actually touching a Gray Whale but for those that had actually achieved it then it was a moment never to be forgotten! Why the whales choose to do it nobody knows but they seem to love the attention.

The wind continued to blow all afternoon and prevented anymore panga trips but everybody enjoyed watching the whales from deck. And there was always tomorrow . . .

Tomorrow came and it was even windier! Mike did his best to reassure us all that 'it might get better as the tide turned', that 'it was flat calm out in the ocean' and so on. Mid morning and it was now blowing over 30 knots and there was no chance of getting out in the pangas. However it seemed the whales took pity on us and came to

visit. One particular cow and calf pair plus another very large individual took great pleasure in scratching themselves on the hull of The Spirit. The whales gave great views and nobody could complain at being so close. But the calf wanted more and seemed desperate to play looking up at its admiring crowd and raising its head right out of the water at every opportunity.

We couldn't not oblige so we tied the pangas to the back of The Spirit and loaded them up. Within minutes the whales were along side the pangas and everybody who wanted to get the opportunity to give a Grey Whale a great big scratch and rub actually managed it. There was only slight concern from the guides and crew when the largest whale chose to push the bow of one of the boats out of the water with its head!

During the afternoon the wind dropped slightly allowing us to get out onto the water in the pangas again and amongst the whales for one last time.

In addition to the whales (although they understandably totally stole the show) were a group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins, lots of Surf Scoters, both Pacific and Great Northern Divers, White Ibis, Royal Terns and our first Magnificent Frigatebird to keep us entertained.

Late afternoon on the Sunday and it was time to return to the open ocean. We set off very slowly to make sure we avoided any Grey Whales. The action didn't stop with more breaching and even a brief view of a mating pair and the legendary 'Pink Floyd'. Just before dusk we reached the mouth of the lagoon and the Pacific. As we headed away from the coast the wind became less and less and the swell present on our first few days almost gone. It was a very pleasant night's journey as we continued south towards the tip of Baja California.

Day 7

Monday 5 March

off Magdalena Bay

Dawn arrived and in almost flat calm seas we were treated to a most amazing sunrise. This was quickly followed by our first Blue Whale! Showers were abandoned and breakfasts left half finished – it was only six o'clock – and a Blue Whale had just surfaced close to the boat. An anxious few minutes followed but Mike was on the ball and just off the bow the disturbed water off a surfacing whale could be seen even before we saw the whale. The calm waters and clear light were perfect for watching such an awesome animal. The animal was feeding amongst a ball of krill so Mike was having trouble following it underwater on the sonar but he did a good job and over the next hour we were treated to magical views.

Two Pink-footed Shearwaters gave good views us amongst the now expected Black-vented Shearwaters. We left the Blue Whale to continue feeding and carried on heading south towards Magdalena Bay. Everybody returned to breakfast but we were once again interrupted. This time by over 200 Common Dolphins surrounded the boat. It was going to be one of those days. The dolphins gave superb views as they porpoised to get close to us and then swam along beside us, playing in the wake and bow-riding. By leaning over the bow you could not only watch them under water but hear them.

Next came a seabird feeding frenzy. From some distance we could see frigatebirds actively feeding. As we got closer we could see Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Black-vented Shearwaters all attacking a large school of fish. It was a scene right out of Blue Planet!

There was little chance for a rest before we found a very active Humpback Whale. This individual was obviously trying to attract the attention of another whale. There was plenty of tail-slapping, flipper-flapping and very noisy blows. Whilst underwater you could see the massive white flippers through the clear blue water. This continued for over half an hour but eventually a second individual joined it and there was some interaction involving the animals rolling on their backs and waving flippers before they both disappeared.

By now the weather was warm and the seas were becoming increasingly calm. The day continued as it had started with another Blue Whale and then another. Both showed well but we didn't linger as we hadn't yet made it to 'the best area'!!! Any already late lunch was interrupted by the appearance of two Loggerhead Turtles and Mako Sharks. With Mike's expert handling of the boat we managed to get up close to all of them.

A small whale seen towards the coast caused a slight detour. Fortunately the whale and at least one more surfaced several times and with such good views we were able to see the three ridges on the rostrum diagnostic of Bryde's Whale. Whilst watching them yet another Blue Whale surfaced in the distance.

It was time to continue heading south and this time we managed to make a little distance before some Common Dolphins appeared and spent time playing around the boat. Then a little way off two Humpback Whales surfaced. Judging by the size of this 'pair' we assumed they were an adult and yearling. As it was now late in the afternoon we stayed with the whales and dolphins until sunset. The whales put on a great performance by raising their flukes on almost every dive. And Mike made sure the boat was lined up perfectly every time to get that classic shot into the setting sun.

It was the perfect end to a most amazing day's whale watching.

Day 8

Tuesday 6 March

off Cabo San Lucas, Los Frailes

This morning we woke to views of Cabo San Lucas and our first real signs of civilization since we left Ensenada five days ago. This area is particularly notable for its Humpback Whales and it wasn't long before we had found our first individuals. We slowed to watch the whales and enjoy some bow-riding offshore Bottle-nosed Dolphins but were keen to keep going to an area Mike knew to be more productive. En route we saw a mobula (ray like fish) jumping clear of the water.

By mid morning we were starting to see Humpback Whales in good numbers. For over an hour we followed a mother and calf and two more individuals. We were treated to great views and the calf was in the mood to play with plenty of tail-slapping and a few breaches. In the distance we could see one individual breaching again and again. Even at such a distance it was an impressive sight. Mike decided this whale was worth a closer look. So we left the whales we were watching and made our way towards the breaching individual praying it would carry on doing so. Fortunately it did and we were treated to breathtaking views of this animal breach over forty times often at very close range.

A scan from the bridge revealed a conservative estimate of 30 Humpback Whales in the area. After the excitement of the Humpback encounter everyone tucked into another feast prepared by Dan and then settled

into some form of relaxing. The early part of the afternoon was spent cruising the southeast corner of the Baja California coast and into the Sea of Cortez.

By mid afternoon we had arrived at Los Frailes and an opportunity to drop the anchor and get ashore. First was a chance to go snorkeling. Although it was a warm day a chilly breeze didn't encourage everyone into the water. For those that did go it was very refreshing (!) and we were treated to a selection of brightly coloured reef fish. Those that didn't go snorkeling just took the opportunity to relax on the beach.

After the snorkeling there was just enough daylight for a walk around the vegetation behind the beach. Exotic looking birds came thick and fast and everybody had a tough time keeping up with everything there was to see. Hooded and Scott's Orioles and Black-headed Grosbeaks were the most colourful species. Gila Woodpeckers were certainly the loudest and most entertaining. We also had brief views of the endemic Xantus's Hummingbird, Verdin and MacGillivray's Warbler. Towards dusk the first Lesser Nighthawks were seen and a Cactus Wren showed well before it was time to return to The Spirit.

After dark there was an impressive display of bioluminescence as we headed slowly north into the Sea of Cortez.

Day 9

Wednesday 7 March

San Jose Island, Los Animas, off San Diego Island

Yet another dawn start, gorgeous sunrise and action packed start to the day. We hadn't quite reached San Jose Island yet but as we covered the final few miles we were surrounded by petrels. The majority were Black Storm Petrels but amongst them we picked out over a dozen of the much smaller Least Storm Petrels. We also saw our first Yellow-footed Gulls (a Baja near endemic), a lone Grey Phalarope and several pairs of Craveri's Murrelets.

The appearance of over 500 Common Dolphins encouraged the non-birding members of the group on deck. It was quite amazing to be surrounded by so many dolphins. These sociable animals often come together in large groups at the start and end of a day. With careful scanning it was possible to see some very young animals in the brief moments they were clear of the water. By now the water was absolutely mirror calm and the views both above and below the water were superb.

Once anchored off San Jose Island we were all transported to the shore via skiffs for a walk amongst the cactus. Black-throated Sparrows sang from the tops of bushes and several Verdins showed well. Scott pointed out a Chuckwalla Lizard that had been in the same crack on a cliff every time he had visited. A single Ash-throated Flycatcher and a couple of Costa's Hummingbirds added to the variety. It was still only nine o'clock but it was seriously warm. Most people slowly made their way back to the shore and into the skiffs for more snorkeling whilst others took their time to explore more of the island.

Over the next few hours there was a mixture of snorkeling, skiff rides and even some sunbathing. The snorkeling was superb with crystal clear, warm waters and lots of fish which included King Angelfish, Bumphead Parrotfish, Blue & Gold Snapper, Sergeant Major, Ballonfish, Porkfish and Bluechin Parrotfish. The shoreline skiff rides provided close up views of Sallylightfoot Crabs and cave nesting White-throated Swifts.

We spent the rest of the day looking for cetaceans and seabirds. First we headed to Los Animas. On this small rocky island we were treated to good looks at Brown and Blue-footed Boobies and Magnificent Frigatebirds. We then headed off towards San Diego Island. By now it was seriously hot and there was little breeze. Most people took the opportunity to relax in the shade, read a book or catch up on some sleep.

The perfect weather meant that we had ideal cetacean spotting conditions but we just couldn't find any whales. However over the next few hours we enjoyed 1000s of Common Dolphins, several mobulas and Green Turtles. We had excellent views of our first Red-billed Tropicbird and a single Laughing Gull flew past the boat. Then we found our first *Kogia* sp. and although they were a little distant it was great to see this species. We then found a few closer individuals and these were definitely Dwarf Sperm Whales. During the afternoon we were fortunate enough to see at least three definite and seven probable Dwarf Sperm Whales.

The real excitement however happened mid afternoon when we off the southern end of San Diego Island. Mike spotted three beaked whales about a mile from the boat. Very little is known about beaked whales and they are incredibly difficult to see at sea. With this in mind we were anxious to get good views. Fortunately the whales obliged and as we made our way towards them they surfaced another four times giving reasonable views (excellent views for beaked whales!) and even allowed some photographs to be taken. After a quick check of the books and a discussion about what we had seen we were confident they were Pygmy Beaked Whales. This species was only described to science as recently as the early 1990's and has only been seen alive a handful of times. We were very fortunate.

We saw little else of note during the remaining few hours of daylight. We dropped the anchor just off San Diego Island and we had a fantastically calm evening and dinner. After dark Mike called us out on deck to see the bioluminescence. It was incredibly bright and in the distance we could see dolphins splashing around. We pulled up the anchor and set off towards them. It didn't take long for them to hear the engine and within minutes we had bow-riding dolphins illuminated by bioluminescence. It was truly jaw dropping to see the animals several feet underwater perfectly outlined by a green glow. Yet another magic moment....

Day 10

Thursday 8 March

Santa Catalinas Islands, off Monserrat Island

Just after dawn we arrived at Santa Catalina for another island hike. Walking amongst the Cordon, Giant Barrel and Choya Cactus in the early morning light with the only sound coming from singing Black-throated Sparrows was a special experience. Unfortunately a thorough search for Rattleness Rattlesnake proved fruitless. We did however enjoy good views of Loggerhed Shrike, Ladder-backed Woodpecker and Grey Flycatcher amongst species we had seen on previous islands.

It was another blisteringly hot day and we were soon all ready for a mixture of snorkeling and skiff rides. Late morning and we set off for some more whale watching. More Common Dolphins and lots of mobulas were seen over the next few hours, along with over Craveri's Murrelets and our first Elegant Terns. It wasn't until we were between the mainland and Monserrat Island that we found our first whale of the day.

It was a Blue Whale and we spent the next hour and a half watching it. The area was packed with krill and the whale was lunge feeding at the surface, something not often seen in the middle of the afternoon. More often

than not it would lunge below the surface but occasionally it came to the surface with its mouth wide open. Yet another Blue Planet scene happening right there in front of us! Whilst watching the whale it was obvious we had come across a good feeding area as there were a minimum of six Blue Whales around us. All of them were lunge feeding and we spent the last two hours of light enthralled by this massive feeding frenzy. As it got darker the krill at the surface became denser and the surface lunge feeding became more frequent. Yet again Mike made sure we were in the right position every time and there were opportunities for classic photographs of Blue Whale blows against a setting sun.

We anchored in the immediate area hoping for a repeat performance in the morning and by standing on deck throughout the night you could hear the sounds of blowing Blue Whales.

Day 11

Friday 9 March

off Isla Monserrat, San Jose Channel, Nopolo

By five o'clock the early risers we were watching Blue Whales. Over the next four hours we counted a minimum of twelve Blue Whales. The first few hours we concentrated on watching the lunge feeding and whilst watching the Blues a Fin Whale surfaced in the middle of them. Having been watching Blue Whales so closely the differences were obvious and we had superb views of this lunge feeding individual. As the day warmed up and the krill began to sink we headed south watching Blue Whales as we went.

As we headed south from Monserrat and Santa Catalina Islands the perfect conditions allowed another seven Dwarf Sperm Whales to be seen, including some close enough to photograph. We had close encounters with two Red-billed Tropicbirds resting on the surface of the water. A group of over 300 Common Dolphins were as impressive as ever and close to the mainland we had great views of a Bryde's Whale which surfaced right in front of the boat.

Mid afternoon and there was chance for some snorkeling to cool off before we took the skiffs to shore at Nopolo for a hike. Being on the mainland there was a slightly more diverse selection of birds but not the concentration we were hoping for. Winter rains meant there was plenty of vegetation and as a result birds weren't concentrated as they had been in previous years. Despite this we had great views of Xantus's Hummingbird, Common Ground Dove, Phainopepla, Pacific-slope Flycatcher and just before dusk a Canyon Wren singing from the top of a boulder.

We were welcomed back onboard the boat by a Hawaiian t-shirt wearing crew, complete with margaritas and a prime rib-roast feast. Everyone was in high spirits after such an outstanding trip.

Day 12

Saturday 10 March

Los Islotes, Cerralvo Channel, Muertos Bay

Today was our last full day onboard The Spirit, and of the holiday, and we were determined to make the most of it.

Being a Saturday we made sure we arrived at Los Islotes early before any tourist boats. Skiff rides around the rocky islands gave us an insight to life in a California Sea lion colony. There were plenty of young animals and several bull males patrolling the beaches and barking at us. A check of the cliffs revealed breeding Brown and Blue footed Boobies as well as Brandt's Cormorants.

After everyone had returned from the skiff rides it was time to get in the water with the sealions. About half the group braved the cool water, and the slightly ferocious looking bulls, to swim with the pups. Once we were in the water the pups quickly joined us to investigate what was going on. Being in their world and watching how graceful they are underwater was a magic experience. There was certainly enough to watch with the sea lions zooming around us, a multitude of colourful fish and that big bull barking at us from the shore. We were back on the boat, enjoying freshly baked muffins on our way by the time the first tourist boats arrived.

It was yet another beautiful day as we headed towards the Cerralvo Channel. It wasn't long before we were watching a cow and calf pair of Blue Whale. We enjoyed them for some time but a more distant individual that was fluking on most dives had caught our attention. We set off to get closer and weren't disappointed. This was a massive individual, we estimated about 80 feet long. In the clear, calm water we could see the entire animal - a fantastic experience. With each dive the animal would raise its flukes giving us repeated chances to take that perfect photo or preserve that perfect memory.

After lunch we continued south through the Cerralvo Channel. Apart from the occasional Black Storm Petrel and Dwarf Sperm Whale there was very little to see. After the almost relentless excitement of the last week it seemed eerily quiet but it was a good reminder of just how lucky we had been. Towards the end of the day we were off Muertas Bay and some distant splashing attracted Mike's attention. At first we thought it was dolphins but on closer inspection it proved to be a group of Smooth-tailed Mobulas 'breaching'! It was quite incredible to see them leaping several feet clear of the water and flapping their 'wings' almost like they were trying to fly. We watched the mobulas until the sun had disappeared behind the mainland.

It was then time to head south for Cabo San Lucas where we had to disembark early the next morning.

Day 13

Sunday 11 March

Cabo San Lucas – Chicago – UK

We were less than an hour away from the harbour when dawn broke and there was just enough time to get our last glimpses of Humpback Whales. In the harbour we said good bye to the crew and thanked them profusely for all their hard work and for making us feel so welcome. After some group photos we climbed aboard our water taxis.

The journey to the airport and subsequent flights to Heathrow passed smoothly and Monday morning we arrived home to a pleasantly warm and sunny London.

Species lists

Marine mammals

Humpback Whale *Megaptera noveangliae*

4 (inc. adult and yearling) off Magdalena Bay on 5th March, 20+ off Cabo San Lucas on 6th March (inc. mother and calf, plus breaching individual), 1 distantly off Monserrate Island on 9th March and 4 off Cabo San Lucas on 11th March.

Grey Whale *Eschrichtius robustus*

c150 in San Ignacio lagoon on 3rd and 4th March.

Blue Whale *Balaenoptera musculus*

4 individuals off Magdalena Bay on 5th March, 6+ off Monserrate Island on 8th March (inc. lunge feeding individuals), 12+ between Monserrate Island and San Diego Island on 9th March and 3 (inc. mother and calf) north of Cerralvo Channel on 10th March.

Fin Whale *Balaenoptera physalus*

1 lunge feeding with Blue Whales off Monserrate Island on 9th March.

Bryde's Whale *Balaenoptera edeni*

2+ off Magdalena Bay on 5th March and 1 near Nopolo on 9th March.

Pygmy Beaked Whale *Mesoplodon peruvianus*

3 (male and two females/immatures) off San Diego Island on 7th March.

Kogia sp.

Individuals seen at distance not identified but most if not all thought to be Dwarf Sperm Whale (*Kogia sima*). Those not specifically identified included: 7 between Los Animas and San Diego Island on 7th March, 1 off Monserrate Island on 8th March and 5 north of the Cerralvo Channel on 10th March.

Dwarf Sperm Whale *Kogia sima*

3 between Los Animas and San Diego Island on 7th March, 7 between Monserrate Island and San Diego Island on 9th March and 4 north of the Cerralvo Channel on 10th March.

Common Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*

Up to 20 in San Ignacio Lagoon on 3rd and 4th March, 6 off Cabo San Lucas on 6th March and c20 off Monserrate Island on 9th March.

Common Dolphin *Delphinus* sp.

Both Long-beaked (*Delphinus delphis*) and Short-beaked (*Delphinus capensis*) Common Dolphins recorded but not always recorded accurately. c300 off Magdalena Bay on 5th March, c500 off Isla San Jose and c1000 between Los Animas and San Diego Island on 7th March and c200 off Monserrate Island on 8th March.

Pacific White-sided Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*

4+ seen well between Ensanada and Todos Santos Island on 1st March.

Guadalupe Fur Seal *Arctocephalus townsendi*

c200 around San Benitos Island and East Island on 2nd March.

California Sea Lion *Zalophus californianus*

Good numbers present on Todos Santos Island on 1st March and Los Islotes on 10th March. Small numbers seen at sea on most days in the Sea of Cortez.

Northern Elephant Seal *Mirounga angustirostris*

Small numbers present on Todos Santos Island on 1st March and c150 (inc. several males) on San Benitos Island on 2nd March.

Harbour Seal *Phoca vitulina*

c50 present on Todos Santos Island on 1st March.

Birds

Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer*

Up to 5 in San Ignacio lagoon on 4th March.

Pacific Diver *Gavia pacifica*

2 in San Ignacio Lagoon on 3rd March and 3 next day.

Pied-billed Grebe *Podylimbus podiceps*

Pairs recorded at Point Loma, Lindo Pond, San Diego River Mouth and Formosa Slough on 28th February.

Western Grebe *Aechmophorus occidentalis*

c30 in Point Loma harbour on 28th March.

Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*

2+ at San Diego River Mouth on 28th February.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

Relatively common. Notable counts included c50 at San Diego River Mouth on 28th February, c200 south of Todos Santos Island on 1st March and c400 off Monserrate Island on 8th March.

Black-footed Albatross *Phoebastria nigripes*

3 south of Todos Santos Island (inc. 1 with boat for 10 minutes) on 1st March and 2 south of San Benito Island on 2nd March.

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*

5 south of Todos Santos Island on 1st March.

Pink-footed Shearwater *Puffinus creatopus*

2+ off Magdalena Bay on 5th March.

Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*

4 south of Todos Santos Island on 1st March.

Black-vented Shearwater *Puffinus opisthomelas*

c30 south of Todos Santos Island on 1st March, c500 south of San Benitos Island on 2nd March and c100 off Magdalena Bay on 5th March.

Black Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma melania*

1 off Cabo San Lucas on 6th March, c50 off Isla San Jose and 2 between Los Animas and San Diego Island on 7th March, 2 off Monserrate Island on 8th March and c20 in the Cerralvo Channel on 10th March.

Least Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma microsoma*

c10 off Isla San Jose (feeding with Black Storm Petrels) on 7th March.

Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*

2+ in San Ignacio Lagoon on 3rd and 4th March and c40 off Magdalena Bay on 5th March. Then seen daily in varying numbers, more numerous around rocky islands in the Sea of Cortez.

Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*

Singles recorded between Los Animas and San Diego Island on 7th March and 2 between Monserrate Island and San Diego Island on 9th March.

Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*

Common and recorded most days. Most numerous in the Sea of Cortez where up to c50 seen some days.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*

First seen on 7th March with 3 off Isla San Jose and c30 between Los Animas and San Diego Island. Then seen daily in the Sea of Cortez with c20 at Los Islotes on 10th March.

Blue-footed Booby *Sula nebouxii*

8 off Isla San Jose c40 between Los Animas and San Diego Island on 7th March, c10 between Monserrate Island and San Diego Island on 9th March and 10+ at Los Islotes on 10th March.

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*

Common and recorded in small numbers most days.

Brandt's Cormorant *Phalacrocorax penicillatus*

c12 breeding pairs on Todos Santos Island on 1st March and 8 at Los Islotes on 10th March.

Pelagic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*

4+ nesting pairs on Todos Santos Island on 1st March.

Great Blue Heron *Ardea Herodias*

3 at San Diego River Mouth and 15+ in San Diego Harbour on 28th February. 1 at Nopolo on 9th March.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

3 at San Diego River Mouth and 1 at Formosa Slough on 28th February. Up to 50 seen in San Ignacio Lagoon on 3rd and 4th March.

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*

2 at San Diego River Mouth and Formosa Slough on 28th February. 1 at Nopolo on 9th March.

Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*

Singles at Point Loma, San Diego River Mouth and Formosa Slough on 28th February. 1 in San Ignacio Lagoon on 3rd March and 3 there next day.

Tricoloured Heron *Egretta tricolor*

1 at San Diego River Mouth on 28th February.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

1 at San Diego River Mouth and c20 in San Diego Harbour on 28th February

White Ibis *Eudocimus albus*

Up to 10 in San Ignacio Lagoon on 3rd and 4th March.

Black Brant *Branta bernicla*

Small numbers recorded at Point Loma and San Diego River Mouth on 28th February. Six at San Benitos Island on 2nd March and c150 in San Ignacio Lagoon on 3rd and 4th March.

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*

Pair at Lindo Pond on 28th February.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

4 at Formosa Slough on 28th February.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

4 at San Diego River Mouth and 1 at Formosa Slough on 28th February

Gadwall *Anas strepera***American Wigeon** *Anas Americana*

c50 at San Diego River Mouth and a similar number at Formosa Slough on 28th February

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Up to 12 at Lindo Pond, San Diego River Mouth and Formosa Slough on 28th February.

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*

4 at San Diego River Mouth and 2 at Formosa Slough on 28th February

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*

Up to 8 at San Diego River Mouth and Formosa Slough on 28th February.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*

4 in Point Loma harbour on 28th February.

Surf Scoter *Melanitta perspicillata*

4 in Ensenada Harbour and c100 in San Ignacio Lagoon on 3rd and 4th March.

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*

Up to 10 in Point Loma Harbour, San Diego River Mouth and Formosa Slough on 28th February.

Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*

Two at Lindo Pond, c25 at San Diego River Mouth and c10 at Formosa Slough on 28th February.

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*

Small numbers recorded at Silverwood and over San Ignacio Lagoon. Common on all islands visited in the Sea of Cortez.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*

1 over Silverwood on 28th February, 2 on San Benitos Island on 2nd March and 1 on Isla San Jose on 7th March.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

Single at San Diego River Mouth on 28th February, 6+ nesting pairs on San Benitos Island on 2nd March and 1 over San Ignacio Lagoon on 4th March.

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*

Singles at Silverwood and the San Diego River Mouth on 28th February.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

A single on Todos Santos Island on 1st March, a pair on San Benitos Island on 2nd March, 1 on Isla San Jose on 7th March.

Californian quail *Callipepla californica*

1 at Los Frailes on 6th March.

American Coot *Fulica Americana*

Common at all wetland sites in San Diego.

Snowy Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

c10 at San Diego River Mouth.

American Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus bachmani*

c20 on Todos Santos Island on 1st March.

American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus*

2 amongst American Black Oystercatchers on Todos Santos Island on 1st March and 2 on San Benitos Island on 2nd March.

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*

Two pairs at Formosa Slough on 28th February.

American Avocet *Recurvirostra Americana*

A single at Formosa Slough on 28th February.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

c30 at San Diego River Mouth.

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferous*

20+ at Formosa Slough on 28th February.

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*

1 at the San Diego River Mouth on 28th February.

Willet *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*

Small numbers in the San Diego area on 28th February.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*

Up to two recorded at Point Loma, Lindo Pond and on Isla San Jose on 7th March.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

1+ on East Island on 2nd March.

Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus*

5 at San Diego River Mouth on 28th February .

Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa*

12 at Point Loma and c30 at San Diego River Mouth on 28th February. In San Ignacio Lagoon up to 50 seen on 3rd and 4th March.

Black Turnstone *Arenaria melanocephala*

c30 on San Benitos Island on 2nd March.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

c20 at San Diego River Mouth.

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*

8 at Point Loma and c30 at San Diego River Mouth and 4 at Formosa Slough on 28th February and c10 at Los Frailes on 6th March.

Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*

3 south of San Benitos Island on 2nd March and 1 off Isla San Jose on 7th March. Seven unidentified phalaropes were seen off Magdalena Bay on 5th March.

Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*

2 between Ensenada and Todos Santos Island and 1 south of Todos Santos Island on 1st March, 1 off Cabo San Lucas on 6th March and 1 in the Cerralvo Channel on 10th March.

Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*

1 seen between Ensenada and Todos Santos on 1st March.

Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*

1 in full breeding plumage off San Diego Island on 7th March.

Heermann's Gull *Larus heermanni*

Relatively common in small numbers from Ensenada south into the Sea of Cortez. Up to a dozen individuals recorded all days.

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*

c50 at Lindo Pond on 28th February.

American Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

Small numbers recorded from the boat on 1st, 2nd and 5th March.

California Gull *Larus californicus*

c30 at San Diego River mouth on 28th February and up to 12 recorded on several other dates whilst at sea.

Yellow-footed Gull *Larus livens*

Common in the Sea of Cortez. First seen off Isla San Jose on 7th March and then seen daily in varying numbers.

Western Gull *Larus occidentalis*

Common from San Diego south to Cabo San Lucas.

Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens*

1 immature (prob 2nd winter) on San Benitos Island on 2nd March.

Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*

1 south of Todos Santos Island on 1st March.

Royal Tern *Sterna maxima*

Relatively common from Ensenada south into the Sea of Cortez. Up to 20 recorded all days whilst at sea.

Elegant Tern *Sterna elegans*

6 off Monserrate Island on 8th March and again the next day.

Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*

2 at San Diego River Mouth on 28th February.

Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*

1 at San Diego River Mouth on 28th February.

Craveri's Murrelet *Synthliboramphus craveri*

c6 off Isla San Jose and 8 between Los Animas and San Diego Island on 7th March, c50 off Monserrate Island on 8th March and c20 between Monserrate Island and San Diego Island on 9th March.

Cassins' Auklet *Ptychoramphus aleuticus*

c100 south of Todos Santos Island on 28th February and c30 south of San Benitos Island on 2nd March.

White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica*

c10 at Los Frailes on 6th March, c15 on Santa Catalina on 8th March and c10 at Nopolo on 9th March.

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*

Small numbers in the San Diego area on 28th February.

Common Ground Dove *Columbina passerine*

1 at Nopolo on 9th March.

Lesser Nighthawk *Chordeiles acutipennis*

3 over Los Frailes at dusk on 6th March,

White-throated Swift *Aeronautes saxatalis*

c20 on Isla San Jose (nesting in sea caves) on 7th March, 2 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March and 6 at Nopolo on 9th March.

Anna's Hummingbird *Calypte anna*

2 at Point Loma and 1 at Silverwood on 28th February.

Costa's Hummingbird *Calypte costae*

2 on Isla San Jose on 7th March and 1 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March.

Xantus' Hummingbird *Hylocharis xantusii*

Singles at Los Frailes on 6th March and 2 at Nopolo on 9th March.

Belted Kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon*

1 at Point Loma on 28th February.

Acorn Woodpecker *Melanerpes formicivorus*

2 at Silverwood on 28th February.

Gila Woodpecker *Melanerpes uropygialis*

3 at Los Frailes on 6th March and 8 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March.

Nuttall's Woodpecker *Picoides nuttalli*

1 at Silverwood on 28th February.

Ladder-backed Woodpecker *Picoides scalaris*

4 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March and a pair at Nopolo on 9th March.

Ash-throated Flycatcher *Myiarchus cinerascens*

Pairs on Isla San Jose on 7th March and on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March.

Grey Flycatcher *Empidonax wrightii*

1 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March.

Pacific Slope Flycatcher *Empidonax difficillis*

1 seen and heard at Nopolo on 9th March.

Black Phoebe *Sayornis nigricans*

Pair at Point Loma on 28th February and 1 on Todos Santos Island on 1st March.

Say's Phoebe *Sayornis saya*

Singles at Lindo Pond on 28th February and on Todos Santos Island on 1st March.

Loggerhead Shrike *Lanius ludovicianus*

6 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March.

Western Scrub Jay *Aphelocoma californica*

4 at Silverwood on 28th February.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*

Up to a dozen at most sites around San Diego.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*

c30 at Silverwood on 28th February. Common and very tame on San Benitos Island. 4 at Los Frailes on 6th March, 3 on Isla San Jose on 7th March and 2 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March.

Oak Titmouse *Baeolophus inornatus*

1 at Silverwood on 28th February.

Verdin *Auriparus flaviceps*

2 at Los Frailes on 6th March, 3 on Isla San Jose on 7th March and 4 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March.

White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*

1 at Silverwood on 28th February.

Cactus Wren *Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*

1 at Los Frailes on 6th March.

Canyon Wren *Catherpes mexicanus*

Several singing birds and one seen at Nopolo on 9th March.

California Thrasher *Toxostoma redivivum*

1 in full song at Silverwood on 28th February.

Blue-grey Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea*

Pairs at Los Frailes on 6th March, on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March and at Nopolo on 9th March.

Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*

One or two seen at most sites from San Diego to islands in the Sea of Cortez.

Phainopepla *Phainopepla nitens*

A pair at Nopolo on 9th March.

Orange-crowned Warbler *Vermivora celata*

Singles on Isla San Jose on 7th March and at Nopolo on 9th March.

Yellow-rumped Warbler *Dendroica coronata*

Singles noted at Lindo Pond and San Benitos Island.

MacGillivray's Warbler *Oporornis tolmiei*

1 at Los Frailes on 6th March.

Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*

c20 at Los Frailes on 6th March, 6 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March and 2 at Nopolo on 9th March.

Black-headed Grosbeak *Pheucticus melanocephalus*

8 at Los Frailes on 6th March.

California Towhee *Pipilo crissalis*

2 at Silverwood on 28th February and one at Los Frailes on 6th March.

Spotted Towhee *Pipilo maculatus*

1 at Silverwood on 28th February.

Black-throated Sparrow *Amphispiza bilineata*

c20 on Isla San Jose on 7th March and 12 on Santa Catalina Island on 8th March.

Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis*

The endemic island race 'San Benitos' Savannah Sparrow abundant on the island, with c50 seen on 2nd March.

Dark-eye Junco *Junco hyemalis*

12+ at Silverwood on 28th February.

White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*

2 at Silverwood on 28th February.

Scott's Oriole *Icterus parisorum*

3 at Los Frailes on 6th March.

Hooded Oriole *Icterus cucullatus*

Up to 4 pairs at Los Frailes on 6th March and 6 at Nopolo on 9th March.

Brewer's Blackbird *Euphagus cyanocephalus*

2 at Lindo Pond on 28th February.

Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*

c70 at Lindo Pond on 28th February.

House Finch *Carpodacus mexicanus*

Common in most habitats from San Diego to islands in the Sea of Cortez.

Lesser Goldfinch *Carduelis psaltria*

2 at Silverwood on 28th February and c12 at Nopolo on 9th March.

Other notable species

Short-finned Mako Shark *Isurus oxyrinchus*

2+ off Magdalena Bay on 5th March.

Scalloped Hammerhead Shark *Sphyma lewini*

1 off Cabo San Lucas on 6th March,

Smooth-tailed Mobula *Mobula thurstoni*

c10 off Cabo San Lucas on 6th March and c20 in Muertas Bay on 10th March.

Spine-tailed Mobula *Mobula japonica*

Mobula sp. seen daily in the Sea of Cortez believed to be this species. Identification confirmed on a few individuals.

Loggerhead Turtle *Caretta caretta*

2 off Magdalena Bay on 5th March,

Green Turtle *Chelona mydas*

Up to 6 seen off San Diego Island on 7th March.