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Summary:

This was a truly once in a lifetime, never to be repeated experience. You can spend a lifetime travelling the globe and spend countless hours at sea in search of whales and, if you are lucky, you can have some wonderful encounters with a variety of cetaceans. However, it is very rare that you ever have so many glorious encounters, in such perfect conditions as those we experienced on this trip.

Day 1

Wednesday 24th March

After a long flight from the UK the group finally arrived at Chicago. After clearing customs we all made our way through to the departure gate, which gave everyone a chance to get to know each other and relax before the next flight on to San Diego. Another shorter flight and we arrived safely in San Diego. A short bus trip later and we all were all safely checked into our hotel and eager to have a look around. Some took the opportunity to take a quiet walk around the harbour front just across the road from the hotel, while others took the chance to grab a bite to eat and a beer at Mitchs', a great little fish restaurant/bar, popular with the local fisherman, located right on the quay. After a long day travelling most of us were starting to fade and by 7pm local time we were all keen to get some rest before our early start the next day.

Day 2

Thursday 25th March

We awoke to a bright and sunny day with a light breeze off the sea. Early risers took the chance to take a stroll and do some pre-breakfast birding and to watch the sunrise over the harbour. It was time well spent and most people were rewarded with close views of Spotted Sandpiper, Willet, Brown Pelican and Black-necked Grebe.

After breakfast about half the group, who had opted for some extra rest time, spent a leisurely day exploring the various sights of San Diego at their own pace. While most opted to explore the harbour on foot, Bruce opted to take a boat cruise around the military harbour while Sue, Ian and Chris were lucky enough to be given a rather spontaneous grand tour of the area by a friendly local taxi driver! Everyone seemed to really enjoy their day and they all saw some great wildlife.

The remainder of the group opted for an earlier start and decided to take the optional birding tour around San Diego. We met local biologist David Kimble and some of his friends from the local Audubon Society in the hotel lobby and set out on foot to begin our tour. We started with a stroll around the harbour where we had nice close views of Least and Western Sandpipers standing side by side (a nice comparison for those unfamiliar with the differences between these two similar looking species) as well as nice views of Bar-tailed Godwit and Willet. While we were watching, a male Anna's Hummingbird zipped past us and perched on top of a small bush immediately next to us and proceeded to display to Diana and Sue (both of whom had bright pink fleeces tied round their necks!). This provided us all with a chance to get excellent views of the birds beautiful gorget of iridescent pink feathers and most people managed a photo or two. We continued on a little way and found Song Finch and Lesser Goldfinch, both of which were singing from the gardens of some of the very desirable harbour front houses.

A quick walk back to the hotel and we hopped onto a bus that David had arranged for a trip across town and into mountains high above San Diego to Silverwood, a small nature reserve run by the local Audubon Society. This was 'chaparral' oak scrub habitat, (a familiar sort of habitat to those travellers in the group used to birding in the 'dehesa' habitats of Spain and Portugal) and an excellent place to enjoy our picnic. The bushes were teeming with small passerines and on the short walk up the hill to the picnic area we added Scrub Jays, Grey Gnatcatchers, House Finches, Oak Titmouse, White-fronted Nuthatch, Acorn and Nuttall's Woodpeckers and House Wren to a growing list of birds. But it was a Great Horned Owl sitting on a nest that proved to be real highlight of this short walk.

Our lunch stop at the top of the hill provided us all with a chance to sit and watch the activity around a complex array of bird feeders that surrounded the picnic area and we were pleased to see lots of activity around the hummingbird feeders. Most of the keen photographers in the group took the chance to photograph both Black-chinned and Anna's Hummingbirds as they visited feeders not three feet away from us while others watched spotted and California Towhees, California Ground Squirrels and Golden-mantled Squirrels feeding on a bird table nearby. As we finished our lunch break and headed back down the hill to the coach we were joined by a beautiful Anise Swallowtail butterfly which fluttered over our heads before disappearing off into the chaparral.

We left Silverwood reserve behind and headed back into town for a quick stop at a local duck pond where we had nice views of Killdeer, Wood Ducks, grackles, Brewers Blackbird, Shoveler, Canada Goose, Ruddy Duck and stilt before heading on once again to the estuary. UK birders were quick to spot the flocks of Sanderling and Dunlin feeding amidst Marbled Godwits whilst Little Blue Herons, Double-crested Cormorants fed in the deeper channels and gullies. We were also lucky to see Caspian, Royal, Elegant and Forster's Terns standing side by side on the distant sand bars out in the estuary giving everyone the chance to compare the differences in size and shape of these elegant birds.

From the estuary we headed back towards the hotel leaving enough time to call in on another local nature reserve known locally as the 'slough' where we added American Avocet to our impressive 'first day' bird list. On our return to the hotel we transferred our luggage over to the Searcher, which was now docked alongside the quay opposite the hotel. This gave us a chance to catch up with the remainder of the group and we all shared our stories of the days' events. We spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing in the harbour watching and photographing the numerous pelicans, night herons and sea lions that meandered around the dock scrounging scraps from the fishing boats.

In the evening we all grabbed a bite to eat in one of the harbour-side restaurants before meeting back at the boat for a formal introduction to the Searcher and its crew. As darkness fell and we all settled ourselves into our cabins the Searcher slipped her moorings and cruised out of the harbour, heading south into a gentle Pacific swell.

Day 3

Friday 26th March

Most of us awoke early to the sound of the slowing engines as the Searcher made its first stop, an essential customs stop in Ensenada before we started to head into Mexican waters. A hearty breakfast was prepared for us all (the first of many excellent meals to come) after which many of us went out on deck to see the sun creep slowly above the horizon and watch Surf Scoters and Black necked Grebes swimming around the still waters of the harbour. Once Art and Celia had dealt with the customs officers and paperwork the Searcher cruised slowly out of the pretty little harbour towards the nearby Todos Santos Island. Here the boat took us in close to the island where we were able to spot Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants perched on the rocks and get some nice views of both Peregrine and Osprey as they flew overhead. As we drifted gently past the islands bays and beaches we were able to pick out the dozens of California Sea Lions and Harbour Seals that regularly haul out on this little island. We also spotted a few Elephant Seal 'wieners' (young fully weaned pups still fat from their mothers' milk) hauled out in some of the bays. These were not difficult to spot as, even at a young age, the Elephant Seals completely dwarfed the adult Harbour Seals and California Sea Lions that lay alongside them.

This brief stop set us all up for the long day of relaxed wildlife watching from the deck of the boat as we continued our journey south along the Baja Peninsula. We were joined by a large group of Common Dolphins that played in the swell alongside the boat and entertained us with their antics and bow riding for prolonged periods. Before too long we were all watching some fantastic dolphin activity as a small group of Pacific White-sided Dolphins and a few Bottle-nosed Dolphins also joined in with the fun.

As we continued our journey south, the dolphins disappeared almost as quickly as they had appeared and after a few hours of watching the occasional flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls and Grey Phalaropes we tried a brief spell of chumming in an attempt to draw in a few more bird species. The conditions were far from perfect, with us travelling at speed and a choppy swell on the water, but the thin stream of fish oil and popcorn seemed to do the trick and drew in a beautiful Laysan Albatross (that followed the boat for some time) along with some nice sightings of Northern Fulmar, Sooty, Black vented and Pink footed Shearwaters.

As the light faded and we were slowly tempted off deck by the delicious smell of our dinner being prepared in the galley, we ended an exciting first full day out on the water and, while not everyone had yet found their sea legs, we were all excited about the days yet to come.

Day 4

Saturday 27th March

By 6am most people were up and enjoying breakfast in the galley. Today was our first scheduled trip ashore with the chance to set foot on San Benitos Island. The day started overcast and a moderate swell (created by a storm out in the Pacific) made for a slightly tricky introduction to boarding skiffs. However, with the expert guidance and help from the crew we were all safely loaded up and ready to explore. A quick skiff ride along the cliffs revealed just how unique this tiny remote island was and gave us a chance to get our first glimpse of the small groups of rare Guadalupe Fur Seal jostle for position on the rocks above us. As we slowly drifted along the islands shoreline the skiffs we watched Ospreys diving for fish in the sheltered bays ahead and got nice views of Black Oystercatchers, Ruddy and Black Turnstones on the rocks below the cliffs.

We set ashore on a sheltered beach and before starting our walk around the island we all spent a little time combing through the wonderful items of flotsam and jetsam deposited along the beaches strandline. Dead Trigger Fish, the dried up remains of a Blue Shark, giant abalone shells and the giant inter-vertebral discs (the size of a large dinner plate) of a large whale were just a few of the more interesting items found.

As we set off we were watched by the Ravens and Juvenile Hermann's Gulls that perched on the roofs of the tiny huts of a seemingly abandoned fishing village located just above the beach. As we climbed the slope out of the village we admired the tall stands of Agaves and the tiny flowers of Mammillaria cacti plants and a few of us had nice views of a male Merlin as it shot past in pursuit of a Savannah Sparrow. We followed the path around the island that took us past dozens of sheltered beaches all covered with troops of young Elephant Seals, Guadalupe Fur Seals and the odd California Sea Lion where we all had a great chance to get some really close encounters. A stop at the derelict lighthouse for lunch gave us all a chance to sit down and rest and enjoy the wonderful views before completing the walk round island where we had many more great views of Ospreys at the nest and hundreds more seals. When we returned to the landing beach the skiffs were waiting and it was not long before we were all back on board the Searcher ready to continue our journey south in search of Blue Whales.

As we headed away from the island, the weather had turned choppy once more, making whale watching very difficult. Nevertheless, we all persevered and with lots more murrelets and auklets on the water (the island is an important breeding colony for many of these birds) there was plenty to keep the birdwatchers happy. Pink-footed and Black-vented Shearwaters were also coming closer to the boat in the rough sea and a Black-footed Albatross was also seen by a few watching at the bow. It was Kenny (who was watching from high in the crows nest) who first spotted a spout and, as Art started his patient approach on what was our first large whale sighting of the trip, we all watched eagerly from the bow in hope of our first glimpse. The approach wasn't easy and the choppy sea state made identification of this large rorqual difficult. We eventually identified it as a large Fin Whale but this whale was certainly not playing ball and despite Arts limitless patience, the whale kept its distance and gave us the run around for a couple of hours before we got good enough views to confirm its identification. It was now getting late and sunset was upon us so we left the whale to continue south.

Day 5

Sunday 28th March

We were awake bright and early once more and enjoyed another delicious breakfast on the Searcher (this time Mexican themed). Even after a steady nights sailing, our pursuit of the Fin Whale had left us a little behind schedule and we were slightly late arriving at the entrance to the Laguna San Ignacio, one of the most important breeding areas of the Pacific coasts population of Grey Whales. As we slowly travelled along the coast towards the lagoon entrance we counted flock after flock of Bonaparte's Gulls and a variety of shearwaters as they passed close to the boat, and the keen birders had a chance to test their identification skills on the similar looking Elegant and Royal Terns that are generally present closer to the lagoon. However, having had a tantalising glimpse of the Fin Whale the night before, most people spent the morning watching for whales and dolphins from the bow and the more enthusiastic watchers did spot a solitary Grey Whale and solitary Humpback that gave the boat a wide berth as they headed north back to their feeding grounds.

As the Searcher approached the entrance to San Ignacio Lagoon we spotted several Bottle-nosed Dolphins surfing the waves that run along a shallow sand bar at the entrance to the lagoon and as the Searcher carefully approached the lagoon through the rough water, the dolphins rushed over to the boat and rode tight to the bow as we entered the lagoon. We were also closely shadowed by an adult Grey Whale as it too headed back into the lagoon and those of us ready with our cameras were able to capture lovely pictures of the whales' giant tail flukes as they rose slowly from the water before sending the huge whale down into the green waters of the lagoon.

Once across the bar and into the sheltered waters of the lagoon the Searcher anchored up and we all gathered in the galley for a briefing on our short stay in this magical place. We were met by a small group of pangas operated by local Mexican guides and were taken out in small groups for our first 'up close' introduction to the Grey Whales that live and breed in these magical lagoons. It appeared that the whales were going to break us all in slowly and on our first trip out on the pangas everyone got see some of the behaviour that these whales are famous for, but mostly at a distance. However, one panga was approached by a curious cow and calf and Trish had her birthday wish and opportunity to touch a young whale.

After a couple of hours we returned to the Searcher for lunch but it was not long before we were all back out on deck eager to get back into the pangas once again and this time things were very different. All three groups enjoyed close approaches from curious cows and calves and most of the group had the chance to touch one of these extraordinary whales as they came up to take a closer look at us.

After another brief stop on the Searcher for afternoon refreshments, our last trips of the day made for some bumpy rides. The tide was running fast and the wind had picked up and the surface of the lagoon had become quite choppy. The whales were proving to be quite elusive so the pangas split up and began to search the lagoon. Our group made our way out to the entrance of the lagoon and, despite the very rough conditions; it proved to be the right choice. Within minutes we were surrounded by numerous adults and calves. We were truly penned in by whales spyhopping all around us. The boat could not move forward or back, and as we all sat and watched the enormity of the spectacle around us, a young whale surfaced next to us and proceeded to scratch itself on the bottom of our boat (a rather unnerving moment for all those less confident in the stability of the well constructed pangas)! The calf then proceeded to make its way around the boat persistently rolling, flipper raising and spyhopping in front of everyone, until every person on the boat had stroked its head! A magical experience for all and even the bumpy and wet ride back to the Searcher couldn't remove the smiles from everyone's faces. This had certainly been yet another amazing day on the water!

We arrived back on the Searcher in time to say our farewell to Steve and Nicky (who were to continue their journey down to Cabo San Lucas overland) and enjoyed another fine evening meal aboard the boat and celebrated Trish's birthday. As darkness fell, Art turned off generator and lights and we all listened for whales in the silence of the lagoon and looked at stars under a bright full moon. A fitting end to a truly wonderful day...

Day 6

Monday 29th March

Another early start and the promise of another excellent day in the amazing San Ignacio Lagoon! The weather was clear and bright and the water was flat calm. Another excellent breakfast and we were all ready to get into the pangas for another series of excursions into the lagoons. Conditions and tides were right for us to take an early morning trip to explore the mangroves that skirt the margins of the lagoon and as we waited to board the Pangas we were joined by a magnificent frigatebird that was circling low over the Searcher allowing everyone to take its picture. We also watched as Arctic and Pomarine Skuas bullied the Forsters Terns that were fishing alongside the boat. This certainly made for a good start and everyone expertly mounted the pangas in double time eager to start our day's exploration of some new habitats around the lagoon. Entering the shallow inlets of the mangroves in perfect light meant we had great views of Little Blue Egret, Snowy Egret, Great Egret, Tricoloured Heron, White Ibis, Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night Heron, all sitting in tops of the low mangrove bushes in the morning sun.

Closer to the edge of the mangroves we had brief views of a Mangrove Warbler and heard a Clapper Rail calling from the dense cover of trees. We continued our journey along the mangrove creeks getting excellent views of Reddish Egret, Peregrine Falcon, Marbled and Bar-tailed Godwits, Willets and numerous other birds before we stopped on a small beach to see Coyote footprints and the numerous tiny tracks of Fiddler Crabs and Kangaroo Rats.

We returned to the Searcher for muffins and coffee and it was soon time to get back into the pangas for another Grey Whale 'experience' in the lagoon. The whales did not disappoint. There was much more social activity observed in the whales on this trip with large numbers of adults and calves present in surf at the entrance to the lagoon. Lots of spyhopping and a few friendly encounters all proved to be real crowd pleasers...including a wonderfully touching encounter with a young calf that silenced Mandy's trademark 'whoops' of delight and reduced the mighty Jeff to tears! Such is the power of these truly wonderful creatures.

After lunch some of the group opted to explore one of the deserted pristine beaches on the sheltered side of the lagoon where we marvelled at the myriad of whale bones, giant shells and sand dollars washed up along the strand line. Others took their last chance to spend more time with the Grey Whales that had been such wonderful hosts during our privileged stay in the lagoon.

Day 7

Tuesday 30th March

We started our day at sunrise as the Searcher raised anchor and made her way slowly to the lagoon entrance, and with Bottle-nosed Dolphins and Grey Whales all around the boat, we all said our final fond farewell to the Laguna San Ignacio before we continued our journey south. The early start gave us all a good chance to enjoy the sunrise over the Pacific and look for petrels and shearwaters as we made our way south towards Cabo San Lucas and the entrance into the Sea of Cortez. As we forged our way south we were all kept entertained by groups of Common Dolphins bow riding and leaping through the surf in front of the boat. It did not seem long before a sighting from the bridge sent us off course to investigate. Our search was rewarded with a marvellous close encounter with a Humpback and calf pair. We stayed with them for some time and got the chance to observe some funny views of the Humpback calf chasing and rolling around with a group of dolphins.

After a while we left the pair in peace, and Art set the Searcher back on course - but it was not long before the massive blow of a Blue Whale was sighted a mile or more from the bow. Art started a careful approach and his steady pace and gentle control of the Searcher provided us with multiple close encounters with this truly awesome animal. Indeed the whale was so relaxed with our presence that at one stage this huge animal (easily as big as the Searcher itself) passed immediately under the bow and rolled on its side right next to the boat!! We were certainly racking up the sightings today! After what seemed like a lifetime (but was probably only an hour or so) of watching this huge creature we had to break away and continue our journey. We were distracted momentarily by another smaller rorqual but there was no close encounter this time.

As we started to get into deeper water, concentrated flocks of Sabine's Gulls and Elegant Terns indicated activity ahead and we slowed down for a closer look. We drifted gently past massive patches of krill balled up on the surface and through the clear deep water we noticed numerous balls of bait fish below the surface. The crew fished out a bucket of krill to provide everyone a chance of a closer look and Rob showed everyone an example of some Grey Whale baleen to show how the large whales feed.

Passing through the increasingly dense balls of bait fish and krill we caught a brief glimpse of a Mako Shark and see numerous Green Turtles and Sea Lions sunning themselves at the surface. A lull in activity prompted another attempt at chumming and as we cruised slowly along in the calm waters we lay out another slick of fish oil and popcorn before turning back on ourselves to investigate. A handful of Black Petrels put in a brief show but their interest in the slick was short lived (it would appear that there were tastier treats on the water today).

As we continued we had another brief encounter with a cow and calf Humpback, and we sailed until sunset where some of us got a chance to see the mythical 'green flash'; a phenomenon that had been eluding us since our departure (one for the sceptics). Robs talk on thermo-regulation in diving mammals finished the evening off and we all got an early night.

Day 8

Wednesday 31st March

At day break there was a gentle swell on the ocean as we cruised towards the Gorda banks; the principle calving sites for the Humpbacks in this area and our turning point up into the Gulf of California. The sea was calm and quiet and everyone grabbed the chance of a little lie in and a slightly later breakfast was prepared for 6.30am. But it was not long before the beautiful sunny skies tempted people on to the deck and our search for whales continued once more. California Gulls and the odd Sabine's Gulls entertained the birders but bird activity was generally sparse. Bottlenose and Common Dolphins put in the occasional show and provided welcome entertainment as we searched for larger whales. Soon whales are spotted and Art began his approach. It was a Humpback and calf and they seemed a little illusive so we paused a while to watch their reaction. As we drifted a Hammerhead Shark passed the boat and we spotted two Striped Marlin (each about 100-150lb and 8ft long) 'finning' at the surface.

As we approached the Gorda Banks the Humpback activity picks up and it is not long before the Searcher is surrounded by whales. The only problem is which animals to approach? Art makes a slow approach on a group of five or six Humpbacks. They seem the obvious target, (lots of surface activity) and they appear to offer the best chance of that illusive breach that every photographer on board was secretly (and in some cases not so secretly) wishing for! We were not disappointed. The group of adult Humpbacks was active and frisky (probably posturing males) and more animals were joining in with their antics all the time. Before long we were trailing along with up to 10 Humpbacks watching flipper slaps and synchronised fluking all around the boat. It seemed almost inevitable that a Humpback would breach. We all watched intently at the spectacle around us when sure enough, just as everyone had relaxed their fingers on their shutter buttons and lowered their lenses, one of the animals launches itself into the air right beside the boat!! For those that missed the photo opportunity it didn't matter. Within minutes at least two of the animals in the group put on an extended show of spectacular repeat breaches and lunges that turned the water around the boat white with foam.

As the whale activity eventually subsided and the wind picked up we headed into the Gulf and for a sheltered bay near Los Frailes. However, the windy conditions meant we couldn't stop at the normal snorkel site so Art took us to a more sheltered anchorage off Cabo Pulmo where some people chose to snorkel in the sheltered bay while others went bird watching amidst the weathered granite boulders and dry rocky outcrops along the shoreline. Under the heat of the mid afternoon sun the birding can be very slow but we managed to add several new species to our lists including Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Mockingbird, Sage Thrasher, Cactus Wren, Verdin and Black-throated Sparrow and there were numerous Hermit Crabs and the odd iguana to keep us amused.

All the snorkelling party had great fun too and enjoyed cooling off in the clear water of the bay. The snorkellers all racked up an impressive list of species too with numerous colourful parrotfish, puffers, groupers, angelfish and the ever numerous sergeant fish all seen within just a few feet of the beach. We all returned to the Searcher to get dried off and ready for dinner and the crew busily raised anchor and we pressed onwards on our journey heading north into the Gulf of California.

Day 9

Thursday 1st April

The Searcher set anchor before dawn and we all got up early and had coffee out on deck to watch the sunrise slowly illuminate the beautiful sandstone outcrop of Colorado point on the Isla San Jose. We then shifted anchor to another bay off where we arrived at 6am.

We took a trip ashore, birding before breakfast, and walked along a dry river canyon (arroyo) forged out of beautiful sandstone and festooned with huge cacti. We got lovely views of birds such as Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Gilded Flicker, Turkey Vulture, Northern Cardinal and White-winged and Common Ground Doves, and the valley seemed filled with numerous colourful butterflies such as Monarchs, Queens, Pipevine Swallowtail, Gulf Fritillary, White-striped Longtail and Orange Skipperling. At the end of the trail a few people even spotted several Common Chuckwallas sunning themselves high up on the rocky sides of the canyon.

By mid morning the sunny canyon was starting to heat up and we retreated back to the Searcher for some refreshments before the some of the group took the opportunity to take a refreshing dip in the sheltered bay and the chance for some more snorkelling around the shallow rocky reefs, while others opted to take one of 'Crazy Kenny's Coastal Cruises' along the cliffs and outcrops in search of other wildlife.

By 12 noon we were all back on board and enjoying lunch as the Searcher once more headed out into the deep waters of the gulf in search of whales. In seemingly no time at all we encountered not one but two cow-calf pairs of Blue Whales! Both adults and calves seemed perfectly at ease with the boats presence and we were lucky enough to get what seemed like hours of extraordinarily close encounters with these beautiful and rare leviathans before they effortlessly slipped away into the blue. For me, this was the absolute highlight of some of the best whale watching experiences I have had anywhere in the world.

As the light began to fade over the flat calm waters of the gulf, Art took us into the sheltered waters between the islands of Santa Catalina, Santa Cruz and Monserrat where we encountered a massive pod of feeding Pilot Whales that stayed with us until night fall, and we headed off to set anchor in the shelter of Isla Santa Catalina.

Day 10

Friday 2nd April

Some of the group members made an early start and set ashore on Santa Catalina in search of the islands endemic Rattle-less Rattlesnake. The early start is important for this species because in hot weather the animals warm up quickly and often move off into the shade before mid morning. From the beach we got some nice views of the virtually endemic Yellow-footed Gulls before we headed off into the cactus scrub. While some of us searched the thorny undergrowth for snakes, others spent time admiring the towering Wavy Barrel Cacti and looking at birds and butterflies along the arroyo. It seemed like hours of searching before we eventually found a young rattlesnake moving speedily across a path but it was reluctant to pose for the camera and beat a hasty retreat into the thorny scrub.

By 11.30am the sun was high in the sky and our search for more snakes was proving fruitless. We all took the chance to go snorkelling and cool off while some of the crew took one of the skiffs off around the bay to catch our supper. We all returned to the Searcher to find that the crew had been successful and that would be dining on some fine fresh Grouper and large Yellow-tail that they had managed to catch. We settled down for some lunch and, once refreshed, we once again set sail into the deep waters of the gulf. However, a patch of decidedly squally weather hampered our search and we were forced northwest, through some of the messiest swell we had encountered on the trip, before eventually finding some refuge in the lee of Isla Monserrat. The choppy conditions made spotting even the larger whales difficult but by late afternoon we had tallied up a total of two more Blue Whales, and nine Fin Whales in the area, but the watching was difficult compared to what we had become accustomed to.

As the evening light faded Art was forced once more to seek shelter and, as we headed speedily into a sheltered anchorage off Isla Monserrat, we were joined by a playful group of Common Dolphins that spent a lot of time bow riding and playing in the swell kicked up by the boat.

Day 11

Saturday 3rd April

By morning the high winds had blown themselves out and we set off from our sheltered anchorage off Isla Monserrat to search for whales around Santa Catalina. As we headed into deeper water we were blessed with flat calm seas and conditions were perfect. By 7am we had already spotted several Manta Rays and a large Mako Shark beneath the mill-pond like ocean and the conditions appeared to be improving! None of us were quite sure how good the conditions were until our first approach towards a small rorqual resulted in an indescribable, prolonged encounter with a Minke Whale in gin clear water that provided undoubtedly the best views anyone on board the boat had ever seen! For well over an hour the whale danced around the boat to the tune of machine gun like motor-drives and appeared determined to interact with both the boat and everyone on board. This was indeed a truly unique experience but the day was yet young and it was barely 10am!

As we moved on we were joined by a large group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins and then a huge cow Fin Whale with a young calf approached the boat so closely that it took everyone's breath away (and even the crew braced themselves). This was another truly unique encounter with a species that is normally shy of boats. The clear calm seas provided much better bird watching too and while it was difficult for anyone to take their eyes off the whales we did have some great views of Craveri's Murrelet, Least Shearwater and Eared Grebe reasonably close to the boat.

A vast school of Common Dolphins (probably several thousand!) provided the day's next round of entertainment. Art managed to stay with the dolphins for ages (even while everyone had lunch) and they seemed completely indifferent to our presence. We eventually moved on once more to look for more large whales in the deep water sound between Catalina and the two small islands of Isla Monserrat and Santa Marscial. This proves to be time well spent and within minutes we approach a Brydes Whale for a closer look. This was our fourth large rorqual species of the trip and, while the animal did show the species-typical boat-shy behaviour, we did get some nice views of several different animals before we eventually parted company and headed off for a brief anchor stop at the islets of Las Galeras.

Some took the chance to snorkel off the side of the boat while others looked at birds and sea lions on a skiff ride around the tiny islands which rewarded everyone with some highly vocal encounters with bull California Sea Lions and some lovely views of Brown and Blue-footed Boobies and several frigatebirds too.

We all returned to the boat for a snack and some refreshments and then back out on the flat calm water to see out the remaining light with a pod of Pilot Whales. We all enjoyed a beautiful Sea of Cortez sunset on the back deck of the boat where we were joined by a handsome adult Heermann's that posed for photos as it hitched a ride on the stern gunwale. We ended the day with a barbeque and cold margaritas on the back deck of the Searcher, and as darkness fell we watched bioluminescent fish shooting past the bow and fishing bats flying over the crows nest while Robert conducted an impromptu lecture on the constellations of stars over head. Then, just when we all thought the day could not get any better, we saw a brilliant shooting star trace across the sky. As if any of us had anything left to wish for?

Day 12

Sunday 4th April

Having spent much of the night at anchor just to the north of Nopolo, we awoke to the sound of the raising anchor as the Searcher shifted position to take us closer to the shore. We boarded the skiffs for a pre breakfast walk along the deserted beach and through the mangroves near the isolated fishing village, where we got lovely close views of the endemic Xantus's Hummingbirds as both males and females displayed and caught flies above the short mangrove bushes.

Back on board the Searcher for breakfast and we were soon heading back out to sea once more. Returning to the areas we had covered the previous day, it was not long before we encountered more Brydes and Fin Whales and a young adult Humpback. We accompanied several huge pods of dolphins too and here and there spotted Manta and Mobula Rays leaping clear out of the water! A massive mixed flock of Least and Black Storm Petrels feeding at the surface provided some of the closest encounters we had with these tiny sea birds on the entire trip, and during lunch we are again joined by large school of Common Dolphins as we forged our way towards Los Islotes.

We arrived and, being Easter Sunday, there were lots of people anchored up around the sea lion colonies. We delayed anchor for a while and boarded the skiffs where we were treated to a close up cruise around the beautiful rocks and caves and arches of Los Islotes and Isla Espiritu Santo. When we returned, virtually the whole group was eager to get into the water and snorkel with the sea lions. Good visibility provided perfect conditions to explore and a few of the sea lion pups were quick to enter the water and check us out; as too were a few of the massive bull sea lions. Awesome! There were lots of colourful fish to see too, and everyone agreed it was a great way to draw the trip to a close. As the daylight began to fade and we headed away from the islands we were treated to an extraordinary display of leaping Mobulas. This provided excellent 'sport' for the keen photographers in the group and great fun for everyone on board. Synchronous leaping Mobulas and fits of uncontrollable giggles all round!

But this was not the end...as we headed south once more we were treated to more dolphins and a great evening meal. We finished our last full day on board with all our thanks and fond farewells to the crew and all our new found friends, and we reluctantly packed for our early departure the next morning.

For those that remained on deck, we enjoyed a starry sky and a wonderful warm evening with bioluminescent dolphins riding the bow as we headed back to Cabo.

Day 13

Monday 5th April

Our final day; and we cruised past 'lands end' and into Cabo at first light. We said a final farewell to Art, Celia and the Crew before disembarking the Searcher and boarding our taxis to take us back to the airport. We looked for birds as we passed through the desert scrub habitats en route to the airport, and the taxi driver made a few impromptu stops at some lovely view points to give everyone a chance to catch a few last photos on what we all agree has been a truly unrepeatable experience...

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Fur Seal - male



Laysan Albatross

Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April										
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
1	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		✓		✓	✓						
2	Pacific Diver	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>		✓		✓							
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	✓	✓								✓	
4	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓									
5	Black-footed Albatross	<i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>		✓	✓								
6	Laysan Albatross	<i>Phoebastria immutabilis</i>		✓	✓								
7	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓									
8	Pink-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus creatopus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>		✓	✓								
10	Black-vented Shearwater	<i>Puffinus opisthomelas</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Black Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma melania</i>						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100's
12	Least Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma microsoma</i>								✓		✓	100's
13	Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>					✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Red-billed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>							✓	✓			1
15	Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>									✓	✓	✓
17	Blue-footed Booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓
19	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>		✓		✓		✓					
20	Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax penicillatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
21	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	✓	✓			✓						
22	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓				✓						✓
23	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓						✓
24	Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>	✓				✓						
25	Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>					✓						
26	Reddish Egret	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>					✓						
27	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	✓				✓						✓
28	Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax violacea</i>					✓						
29	White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>					✓						

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April											
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	
30	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓											
31	Black Brant	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓							
32	Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>	✓											
33	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓											
34	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓											
35	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓											
36	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	✓											
37	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>	✓											
38	American Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓											
39	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	✓											
40	Redhead	<i>Aythya Americana</i>	✓											
41	Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>	✓											
42	Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>	✓											
43	Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>		✓		✓	✓							
44	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	✓								✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		
47	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			✓									
48	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓						
49	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>			✓						✓	✓		
50	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓											
51	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	✓											
52	American Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>		✓	✓									
53	American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>			✓	✓								
54	American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>	✓											
55	Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>	✓											
56	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	✓											
57	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>	✓											
58	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	✓											
59	Willet	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>	✓											
60	Wandering Tattler	<i>Heteroscelus incanus</i>			✓									
61	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularia</i>	✓											✓

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April											
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	
62	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus</i>					✓							
63	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>	✓				✓							
64	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>	✓				✓							
65	Long billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>					✓							
66	Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>			✓									
67	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓											
68	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	✓											
69	Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>	✓											
70	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>	✓											
71	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>		30+	✓			✓		✓				
72	Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorairius longicaudus</i>						✓						
73	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>		✓		✓	✓							
74	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>				✓	✓			✓				
75	Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Larus philadelphia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
76	Heermann's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Sabines Gull	<i>Larus sabini</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
78	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	✓			✓	✓							
79	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
80	Yellow-footed Gull	<i>Larus livens</i>								✓	✓	✓		
81	Western Gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
82	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓		✓				✓				
83	Royal Tern	<i>Sterna maxima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	✓											
85	Elegant Tern	<i>Sterna elegans</i>	✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>	✓				✓							
87	Xantus' Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus hypoleucus</i>		✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓
88	Craveri's Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus craveri</i>										✓	✓	✓
89	Cassins' Auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>		✓	✓	✓								
90	White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>								✓		✓	✓	
91	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	✓											
92	Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>								✓			✓	
93	Liliac-headed Parrot	<i>Amazona finschi</i>	✓											

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April											
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	
94	White-throated Swift	<i>Aeronautes saxatalis</i>									✓			✓
95	Black-chinned Hummingbird	<i>Archilocus alexandri</i>	✓											
96	Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>	✓								✓			
97	Costa's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte costae</i>									✓			
98	Xantus' Hummingbird	<i>Hylocharis xantusii</i>											✓	✓
99	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>	✓	✓				✓						
100	Gila Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes uropygialis</i>									✓	✓	✓	
101	Ladder-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides scalaris</i>									✓			
102	Nuttall's Woodpecker	<i>Picoides nuttalli</i>	✓											
103	Acorn Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes formicivorus</i>	✓											
104	Ash-throated Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus cinerascens</i>									✓	✓		
105	Grey Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax wrightii</i>	✓											
106	Shore Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>			✓									
107	Loggerhead shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>								✓		✓		
108	Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>												✓
109	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓											
110	Oak Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus inornatus</i>	✓											
111	Western Scrub Jay	<i>Aphelocoma californica</i>	✓									1		
112	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓										
113	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	✓											
114	Verdin	<i>Auriparus flaviceps</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓		
115	Cactus Wren	<i>Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus</i>								✓				
116	Bewick's Wren	<i>Thryomanes bewickii</i>	✓											
117	Blue-grey Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>									✓			✓
118	Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>								✓		✓		
119	California Thrasher	<i>Toxostomaredivivum</i>	✓											
120	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓											
121	Phainopepla	<i>Phainopepla nitens</i>								✓				✓
122	Orange-crowned Warbler	<i>Vermivora celata</i>	✓											
123	Mangrove Warbler	<i>Dendroica bryanti</i>						✓						
124	Audubon's Warbler	<i>Dendroica auduboni</i>	✓								1			1
125	Black-throated Gray Warbler	<i>Dendroica nigrescens</i>												4

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April											
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	
126	Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>									✓	✓		✓
127	Pyrrhuloxia	<i>Cardinalis sinuatis</i>										✓		✓
128	Green-tailed Towhee	<i>Pipilo chlorurus</i>											1	2
129	California Towhee	<i>Pipilo crissalis</i>	✓											
130	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>	✓											
131	Black-throated Sparrow	<i>Amphispiza bilineata</i>								✓	✓	✓		
132	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	✓		✓									
133	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	✓											
134	White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>	✓											
135	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓											
136	Tricolored Blackbird	<i>Agelaius tricolor</i>	✓											
137	Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>	✓											
138	Great-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus mexicanus</i>	✓											
139	Hooded Oriole	<i>Icterus cucullatus</i>												✓
140	House Finch	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>	✓								✓	✓		
141	Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis psaltria</i>	✓											

Cetaceans

1	Gray Whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>				✓	✓	✓						
2	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>						✓	✓	✓	✓			
3	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>			✓						✓			✓
4	Brydes Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>										✓	✓	
5	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>									✓			
6	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>				✓			✓					✓
7	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>								250+	50+	40+		
8	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Long-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus capensis</i>						✓	✓		1000+	✓	✓	
10	Pacific White-sided Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus obliquidens</i>		✓										
11	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓										
12	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓			✓							
13	California Sealion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	
14	Guadeloupe Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus townsendi</i>			✓									

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April										
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
15	Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>		✓	✓								

Other Species Recorded

Reptiles

Green Turtle *Chelonia mydas*

Lesser Earless Lizard *Holbrookia maculata*

Desert Iguana *Dipsosaurus dorsalis*

Common Chuckwalla *Sauromalus ater*

Common Side-blotched Lizard *Uta stansburiana*

Orange Throated Whiptail *Cnemidophorus hyperythrus*

Baja California 'Rattleless' Rattlesnake *Crotalus enyo*

Butterflies

Mexican Fritillary *Euptoieta hegesia*

Soldier *Danaus eresinus*

Gulf Fritillary *Agraulis vanillae*

Anise Swallowtail *Papilio zelicaon*

Pipevine Swallowtail *Battus philenor*

American Snout *Libytheana carinenta*

Cloudless Sulphur *Phoebis sennae*

Large Orange Sulphur *Phoebis agarithe*

Cabbage White *Pieris rapae*

Great Southern White *Ascia monuste*

West Coast Lady *Vanessa annabella*

Orange Skipperling *Copaeodes aurantiaca*

Monarch *Danaus plexippus*

Queen *Danaus gilippus*

White striped Longtail *Chioides albofasciatus*

Longtail Esmeralda *Urbanus esmeraldus*

Fish

Balloonfish *Diodon holocanthus*

Banded Eel *Myrichthys colubrinus*

Barber Fish *Johnrandallia nigriristris*

Barracuda *Sphyræna lucasana*

Beaubrummel *Eupomacentrus flavilatus*

Blue and Gold Snapper *Lutjanus viridus*

Blue Shark *Prionace glauca*

Bluechin Parrotfish *Scarus ghobban*

Blue-spotted Jawfish *Opistognathus rosenblatti*

Bumphead Damsel *Microspathodon bairdi*

California Flying Fish *Cypselurus californicus*

California Needlefish *Strongylura exilis*

Cortez Angelfish <i>Pomocanthus zonipectus</i>	Cortez Chub <i>Kyphosus elegans</i>	Cortez Damselfish <i>Eupomacentrus rectifraenum</i>
Cortez Rainbow Wrasse <i>Thalassoma lucasanum</i>	Creole Fish <i>Paranthias furcifer</i>	Dorado <i>Coryphaena hippurus</i>
Fine-spotted Jawfish <i>Opistognathus punctatus</i>	Garibaldi Fish <i>Hypsypops rubicundus</i>	Giant Damselfish <i>Microspathadon dorsalis</i>
Giant Hawkfish <i>Cirrhitidae cirrhitus</i>	Golden Grouper <i>Ephinephelus alexandrinus</i>	Hogfish <i>Bodianus diplotaenia</i>
Jack Spp. <i>Euthynnus Spp.</i>	King Angelfish <i>Holocanthus passer</i>	Machete <i>Elops affinis</i>
Mackerel <i>Scomberomorous spp.</i>	Manta Ray <i>Manta birostris</i>	Mexican Goatfish <i>Mulloidichthys dentatus</i>
Moorish Idol <i>Zanclus canescens</i>	Ocean Sunfish <i>Mola mola</i>	Pacific Boxfish <i>Ostracion meleagris</i>
Pacific Sardine <i>Sardinops sagax</i>	Panamic Green Moray <i>Gymnothorax castaneus</i>	Panamic Sergeant Major <i>Abuldefduf troschelli</i>
Reef Cornetfish <i>Fistularia commersonii</i>	Remora <i>Remora remora</i>	Scalloped Hammerhead Shark <i>Sphyrna lewini</i>
Scissortail Damselfish <i>Chromis atrilobata</i>	Scorpionfish <i>Scorpaena guttata</i>	Short-finned Mako Shark <i>Isurus oxyrinchus</i>
Spotted Boxfish <i>Ostracion meleagris</i>	Stoplight Parrotfish <i>Sparisoma viride</i>	Striped Marlin <i>Tetrapturus audax</i>
Wahoo <i>Acanthocybium solandri</i>	Yellowtail <i>Seriola lalandi</i>	Yellowtail Surgeonfish <i>Prionurus punctatus</i>