

Baja California & the Sea of Cortez

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 March - 6 April 2011



Bottle-nosed Dolphins leaping



Gray Whale's eye



Guadalupe Fur Seal



Red-billed Tropicbird

Report and images compiled by Lee Morgan



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Day 1

Thursday 24th March

London to San Diego

The group met at London Heathrow's Terminal 4 in the morning ready for departure and the long day of travel ahead. Uneventful flights and a relatively short transfer stop in Houston made for a relatively straight forward journey and we arrived in San Diego airport tired but in good spirits a little after 10pm.

A short shuttle bus journey to our hotel and we were quickly checked into our rooms and grab the chance of an early night.

Day 2

Friday 25th March

San Diego – Board Searcher

We awoke early to a rather wet and drizzly San Diego morning but by 9am it had started to clear a little and some of the group were itching to get out and explore. About half the group members opted to have a quieter morning and spent their day exploring the sights of San Diego at their own pace. So, while a few people opted to visit San Diego's famous zoo, others wandered leisurely around the town and a sizable group of us set out on foot to do a bit of bird watching around the harbour. For the bird watchers the morning started slowly, hampered by some rather poor weather but we did manage to see plenty of Western Gulls, Black-crowned Night Heron, Snowy Egret, Spotted Sandpiper, a few Black-Necked (Eared) Grebes and a few Buffleheads before we all got soaking wet and returned to the hotel to dry off.

After transferring our luggage to M/V Searcher at about midday most of us took the chance to grab a bite to eat. Mitch's seafood bar seemed to be the place of choice for most of the group, but with clearing skies, a few people were keen to take another chance to go bird watching around the harbour. Our second attempt was a little more successful. Helped by a bit of Californian sunshine and a drop in the cold wind, the flower filled gardens of the harbour front properties were starting to come alive with birds and we quickly added Anna's Hummingbird, Morning Dove, Black Phoebe, Northern Mockingbird, Song and Savannah Sparrows and House finch to our days list. A little further along the harbour and we were also treated to some lovely close views of a small flock of Least Sandpipers with the odd Western Sandpiper in amongst them too.

We all boarded M/V Searcher in the late afternoon where we had our welcome orientation and a chance to meet Captain Art and his crew. With lines away at about 9.00pm, we sailed out into San Diego Harbour. A minor detour via the bait pens at the entrance to the harbour meant we were treated the amazing sights, sounds and smells of dozens of California Sea Lions, Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons and hundreds of Double-crested and Brandts Cormorants all of which haul out around the pens in hope of an easy meal. We continued our journey into the building darkness and headed out of the harbour into a gently rolling Pacific swell.

Day 3

Saturday 26th March

Ensenada – Todos Santo

We awoke to the sound of the slowing engines and most were enjoying a morning coffee and watching the sunrise as we arrived in Ensenada. By 6am we had cleared customs and were on our way once again. Out on deck we spotted dozens of Surf Scoters, the odd Black Necked Grebe, Sea Lions, Harbour Seals and even a small group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins as we made our way slowly out of the harbour and into the bay. At a distance, a few people managed to spot a large flock of White-faced Ibis flying along the coast and even a couple of Pacific Divers that flew past.

It seemed like no time at all (in fact it was within 40 mins) before we were surrounded by a large group of Common Dolphins. The dolphins appeared intent on feeding and were spread out in a line (over an area about nine miles) either side of the boat. They were largely indifferent to our presence amongst them but they stayed around the boat for a short while allowing everyone their first chance to hone their photographic skills and quicken their shutter fingers on such fast moving subjects. (I think everyone managed to end up with a world class collection of the ubiquitous 'splash' photos!)

As we headed onwards we were joined by the usual collection of Western and California Gulls and we spent a little time trying to spot the odd Heermans Gulls that was amongst them, but there was little time for bird watching as we soon encountered another group of Common Dolphins that distracted us with their antics until a large blow was spotted and we started our approach on our first Fin Whale of the trip... and it was still only 7.50 in the morning!

We enjoyed some nice views of our first large whale but it wasn't incredibly approachable so after a while we departed company and made our way towards Isla Todos Santos. We drifted close in past the islands in the running tide, having a closer look at the tuna holding pens, and scanned the beaches and cliffs for wildlife. The cliffs were buzzing with gulls but we could still see a few Brown Pelicans at the nest and there were dozens of Harbour Seals hauled out on the beaches. As we drifted further, we managed to see our first group of young Elephant Seals that despite looking remarkably similar to the surrounding rocks, did occasionally raise their heads to look at us as we passed. As we neared the rocks at the end of the island we scanned the cliffs for Pelagic Cormorant but we had no luck on this occasion. We did however get some wonderful views of Black Oystercatchers and a Peregrine Falcon perched high on the rocks above us.

By 9.20am we had passed Todos Santos and were continuing with our journey south when we encountered yet another large group of about 600+ Short-beaked Common Dolphins. We stayed with the dolphins for a little while before being distracted by 4 Grey Whales that we spotted heading north. Despite taking us several miles off our course, captain Art made a steady approach on the whales and we were rewarded with our first, fantastically close views (the first of many to come) of these amazing animals.

For the rest of the day the whale watching continued much as it had started. Relentless, wonderful sightings of more Fin Whales (at one point we saw at least 20 different animals in the space of ½ hour), Grey Whales and many more Common Dolphins, plus additional sightings of a distant Minke, and a close encounter with 3 Humpback Whales left us wondering what more the trip could throw at us!

With such frenetic cetacean activity it's difficult to believe that we had time to spot any birds. However, during the occasional lull in whale activity, the keen birders in the group did manage to chalk up a few sightings that included Sabines and Bonapartes Gulls, South Polar and Arctic Skuas, Grey Phalarope, Royal Tern, Sooty, Pink-footed and Black-vented Shearwaters, Zantus' Murrelet, Cassins Auklet and a Black-footed Albatross before the light eventually faded.

Day 4

Sunday 27th March

Isla San Benitos

It was a very early start to the day with many people emerging from their cabins at 4am and the day started wonderfully as we enjoyed sunrise, with a cup of coffee, watching Black-footed and Laysan Albatrosses following in the wake of the boat. As we laid Anchor off Isla San Benito we were met by a boisterous group Guadalupe Fur Seals that excitedly porpoised out of the water all around the boat as the crew lowered the skiffs into the water ready for our landing. While we were all very keen to start our day's activities, it was very difficult to drag ourselves away from watching the antics of the curious Fur Seals from the deck of the boat.

The calm conditions made for an easy first introduction to entering the skiffs from the ships ladder and once loaded we set off for a quick skiff ride along cliffs to take a closer view of the Fur Seal rookeries. It has to be said that most of the animals were in the water all around us but we did get some lovely views of the increased numbers of California Sea Lions that had started to occupy the beaches. As we set ashore on the beach in front of the fishing village we had great views of a pair of Osprey at the nest, and as we started our walk up the slope above the beach we also spotted a juvenile Glaucous-winged Gull that was mooching around the edge of the village with a group of Western Gulls.

Our walk around the island was fantastic, a welcome stop on terra firma for those that had been feeling the effects of the rolling pacific swell, and a great chance to get to see some of the islands wonderfully unique desert flora. As we circumnavigated the island on our hike we saw numerous small lizards including the endemic race of the Side-blotched Lizard and an Orange Throated Whiptail. But for most people the highlight of the landing was stopping to get close views of the angelic faces of the plump, newly weaned Elephant Seals that dozed around the strand line of every beach. The rest of the walk provided us with some spectacular scenery, great views of Ospreys, Ravens, Black Turnstones and the unique San Benito race Savannah Sparrow. But our trip ashore did little to interfere with our whale watching. Some people managed to see Humpback Whales from the northern shores of the island and a Bottle-nosed Dolphin was spotted feeding close in to one of the beaches.

By 3.15pm we had completed our walk and said goodbye to the wonderful Isla San Benito. Once back onboard the Searcher we did not have long to wait before the whale watching action started once again. Even as the anchor was being raised there was a call from the bridge that Pacific White-Sided Dolphins had been spotted and within minutes of departing we had a group of 8 riding our bow and we circled around for a while giving everyone some great views of one of the most handsome dolphins in the world! Having spent some time with the dolphins, we continued our journey south once again towards our next destination at San Ignacio. The sea was quite quiet and calm but a late evening sighting of a large Ocean Sunfish, shortly followed by an even larger (but distant) Blue Whale certainly livened things up a bit! We followed the whale until the light began to fade and we departed company....another fantastic end to our days wildlife watching. It had been a truly exhausting day and after a relaxed dinner most people either had an early night or (despite some very valiant attempts to stay awake!) fell asleep to another one of Rob's great talks on Cetacean biology.

Day 5

Monday 28th March

San Ignacio

Having travelled through the night towards our destination, we awoke bright and early as Searcher slowly approached San Ignacio lagoon. We enjoyed the company of another large group of Common Dolphins as we travelled but they were largely unapproachable so we continued on course towards the entrance to the Lagoon. Entering the lagoon was a slow process due to the huge numbers whales that were in the lagoon and the Searchers arrival was heralded by a dozens of whales spy hopping and fluking all around the boat! As Art slowly and skilfully weaved a passage through the whales we were joined by a small group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins that escorted us across the sandbar and into the lagoon. It was a magical first introduction to the reserve and one that far exceeded everyone's expectations.

Once at anchor in the lagoon we were quickly ushered into pangas for our first 'close up' introduction to the whales. An amazing few hours followed with close encounters with numerous different cow and calf pairs, spy hopping, and breaching behaviour was observed and it seemed that everyone had their first chance to touch a whale. It was an exciting first introduction and it seemed that the whales enjoyed it just as much as we did when, on our attempt to return to the Searcher was hampered by whales that physically stopped our boats so that they could continue playing with us. It was a wonderful reminder that our interactions with the whales in this reserve are well and truly on the whales' terms!

After lunch back onboard Searcher it was time to board the pangas once more but first they had to be separated from a Grey Whale cow and calf that had spent the best part of an hour playing with the boats while they were tied up to the back of the boat! We spent the remainder of the afternoon out with the whales again in some of the best conditions anyone had ever seen in the lagoons; wonderfully clear, flat calm water and incredibly active whales and wonderfully playful calves....we could not have hoped for more... Magical!

We returned to the Searcher exhilarated and exhausted from our day on the pangas and during a relaxed dinner we took the chance to share our stories of our own, unique interactions with the whales. After dinner we were still buzzing with excitement so an evening out on deck with the ships generator and lights turned off gave us all a chance to wind down, listening to the whales under a starry sky.

Day 6

Sunday 29th March

San Ignacio

Once again, everyone was up before dawn and after a quick coffee and muffins, we boarded the pangas for an early morning trip around the mangroves. The morning light over the mangroves was spectacular and we had some lovely views of the typical mangrove bird species like White Ibis, Reddish, Snowy and Great Egrets, Black and Yellow-crowned Night-herons, Long-billed Curlew and Willet but we also got some surprisingly good views a few unusual species like Caspian Tern, Northern Harrier and Greater Yellowlegs too. It was a lovely relaxed start to the day but the wind was starting to pick up and the tide was against us so we beat a rapid retreat back to the Searcher for breakfast.

We spent much of the remainder of the day out in the pangas on a rather choppy and windy lagoon spending as much time as possible with the whales. The choppy conditions did little to dampen our spirits. After all, most of us were already soaked to the skin from leaning over the sides of the pangas, stroking whales and by now we were all used to being drenched in the spray from whale blows! It was another amazing afternoon in the lagoon.

For our final trip of the day most of the group opted to set ashore to explore one of the lagoons deserted sandy beaches. We had heard a rumour that a Grey Whale had died of natural causes and had washed up on the beach and a ghoulish fascination (in the thinly veiled guise of 'scientific curiosity') got the better of most of us and we simply had to have a look for it. We set off along the beach admiring the fantastic array of large sea shells and Sand Dollars that littered the pristine beaches strand line and watching the Elegant and Royal Terns fishing in the shallows. We could smell the dead whale long before we could see it and we were surprised to see that the strong pacific surf had deposited the 33ft long male carcass a long way up the beach. We held our noses and moved in for a closer look; giving us the unique opportunity to get the full sense of scale of these immense animals, see the size of the barnacles adhered to the whale's thick skin and to look inside the animal's cavernous mouth for a closer look at its bristly baleen plates. Despite being a rather sad sight, it gave us all another valuable insight into the lives and deaths of these animals that is played out every year around these lagoons.

We returned to the Searcher late in the afternoon and enjoyed what remained of our time. We watched a Grey Whale cow and calf pair happily playing with the pangas tied up at the back of the boat and watched Chef Charles playing with a whale calf that repeatedly raised his head out of the water alongside the boat so that Charles could scrub him with a deck brush! By 6pm it was time to say farewell to San Ignacio and we raised anchor and headed out into the Pacific. Once again we were ushered across the sandbar by a small group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins and as soon as we had left the lagoon we had another surprise encounter with a group of Pacific White-sided Dolphins that followed the boat as we headed south into the night.

Day 7

Monday 30th March

Magdalena Bay

We travelled through the night and awoke early to enjoy some of the morning sun as we continued heading south past Magdalena Bay. The sea was quite quiet with just the occasional Arctic Skua or Magnificent Frigatebird spotted amongst the flurries of Heermann's and Western Gulls that occasionally flew out to investigate us. However, it was not long before our first whale of the day was spotted from the crows nest and our course was diverted to investigate. The whale was moving fairly fast and was not particularly approachable, but we got close enough to confirm that it was a Bryde's Whale before it gave us the slip and we continued on our previous course once more where we encountered a vast group of approximately 2000 Common Dolphins.

Our day had started well and it was getting better. By 8.40am we had already spotted a Humpback Whale and after following this animal for a while we were treated to a particularly playful group of Common Dolphins that raced in towards the boat to start bow riding, and breaching through our wake.

It was an amazing display that provided everyone with some great opportunities to get some really good photos too with people successfully managing to capture images of pregnant females and even tiny calves less than 1/2m long leaping clear out of the water!

By 10am our attentions had been diverted by a very large whale blow than had been spotted some way off in the distance and we eagerly took our stations overlooking the bow as we made a steady approach on the whale. It took us nearly an hour to close the gap on the whale but Arts steady approach was well worth the effort when we were treated to our first really good views of a large Blue Whale that powered through the swell in front of the boat. An awesome sight that many people on the boat had spent most of their lives hoping to see.

After a leisurely lunch we continued our journey, taking us over the shallower waters of Mag Bay. The bird watching was still quiet, bar the continued passing of small groups of Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters and the occasional Grey Phalarope that could be spotted feeding on the water. However, the whale watching remained good with some fantastic close encounters with several Humpbacks including a late afternoon encounter with a cow and a particularly frisky calf that breached repeatedly and made some very close approaches to the boat!

Day 8

Tuesday 31st March

Gorda Banks – Los Frailes

A leisurely start to the day as we rounded Cabo at 7.11am marking the turning point of our journey up into the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California). We sat on deck enjoying the warmth of the morning sun and gazing out at a turquoise ocean. As we entered the shallow waters off the Gorda Banks we spotted a leaping Thresher Sharks and a Long-Tailed Skua but we did not have to wait long before we encountered our first Humpbacks. We started a slow approach on a solitary whale that we had seen fluking regularly in the distance but by the time we had closed in on it, it had been joined by two larger whales and a boisterous bout of chasing, fluking and flipper slapping had ensued that we were able to watch for over an hour at close quarters. We followed the whales for several miles and enjoyed a wonderful display but they had taken us practically all the way back to Cabo before we were distracted by another whale breaching repeatedly in the distance and we altered our course to take a closer look.

The area we were travelling through was filled with Humpback activity and we repeatedly encountered groups of 4 or 5 animals until, eventually, at about 10am we found our 'breacher' and were treated to a full on display of repeat breaching that set jaws dropping and motor-drives whirring. The whale continued to breach for nearly 50 minutes giving everyone a really good chance to get 'that perfect picture' and with so many keen photographers on the boat, it was smiles all round for the rest of the day. But it did not finish there; the same whale continued to oblige us with an excitable bout of flipper slapping that lasted nearly an hour. By mid afternoon we had seen dozens of humpbacks and just about every behaviour and activity that we could have ever hoped to see; including some incredibly close encounters with whales that swam under us and surfaced just metres from the boat!

We anchored at Los Frailes a little after 3pm and watched a group of Mobula Rays leaping in the shallows just off the beach. We set ashore and spent a couple of hours birding around the desert scrub on the margins of the, now abandoned, RV park where we had some incredibly close views of Northern Flicker, Gila, Ladder-backed and Nuttalls Woodpeckers, as well as adding Hooded and Scotts Orioles, Coopers Hawk, Crested Caracara, Verdin, Green-tailed Towhee, Black-headed Grosbeak, Northern Cardinal and numerous other species to a growing list of birds. But it was not long before we had to drag ourselves away and return to Searcher to continue our journey.

We raised anchor at about 6pm leaving Los Frailes behind us but there was still time for some whale watching before the light faded and a final encounter with a Humpback cow with a calf and a glorious Baja sunset finished our day wonderfully.

Day 9

Wednesday 1st April

Punta Colorado - Isla San Jose

After a gentle nights travel we awoke in a mirror-like sea, at anchor off the beautiful Punta Colorado in time to see the sunrise slowly illuminate the wonderful sandstone cliffs. After breakfast, we boarded the skiffs for a cruise around the cliffs and caves to look for birds and other wildlife. Amongst the Brown Pelicans, Brandts and Double-crested Cormorants, we found Wandering Tattlers, Spotted Sandpipers, dozens of the brightly coloured Sally Light-foot Crabs and even a small Myotis Bat (probably a California Myotis). It was a wonderfully relaxing start to our day.

At 9.30am we put ashore on San Jose and took a gentle wander along one of the picturesque arroyos that leads off of the beach. The temperatures were already high (our first real taste of dry desert conditions), providing some great conditions for basking reptiles. We managed to spot the endemic San Jose Whiptail, Western Marbled Whiptail and Chuckwallas as we walked the dusty trails but the bird activity in the searing heat was fairly minimal. Turkey Vultures circled ominously over head and we did get some nice views of Northern Mockingbird, Verdin, Californian Gnatcatcher a Black-throated Sparrow as they skulked in the shade of the desert shrubs. It was a lovely walk but by 11.30am we were very glad to escape the heat of the arroyo. For most of the group, the chance to cool off in the clear, waters around the point was beckoning.

The calm waters and warm sun made for a wonderful first introduction to snorkelling in the area. For those that had never snorkelled before, a gentle introductory session with Rob in the shallow water off the beach, had them turning summersaults underwater and swimming like sea lions in no time at all. We spent a good hour in the crystal clear water swimming through vast shoals of tiny Herrings and marvelling at the myriad of colourful fishes and starfishes that lurked in the rocky reefs beneath the cliffs.

After lunch we weighed anchor and set off once more; heading north to explore the deep water area between Monserrate and Santa Catalina in search of more whales. We had some nice views of Red-Billed Tropicbird as we travelled and by 2.50pm we were enjoying the somewhat unexpected company of a solitary Humpback.

As we continued north, we encountered a large group of approximately 1000 Long-beaked Common Dolphins that kept us company (and kept our motor drives busy) as we travelled but it was Aarons distant sight of a large blow that got us all really excited. It was late afternoon and it took quite some time to close the gap on Aarons whale (because it was nearly 25 miles away when he spotted it!) but it was worth the effort as we spent the dying hours of daylight watching what turned out to be several Fin Whales feeding on krill all around the boat. As the sun slowly set we made our way in to anchor for the evening off Santa Catalina.

Day 10

Thursday 2nd April

Santa Catalina

After an early breakfast, we set ashore on the beautiful island of Santa Catalina and took a hike along the arroyo that extends along the middle of the island. For the keen botanists this was a particular treat. A chance to see some of the islands unique cacti assemblages and an opportunity to photograph the islands wonderfully architectural giant Cardon Cacti and some of the largest Wavy Barrel Cacti in the region. It was a treat for the bird watchers too. We managed to get some more great views of Black-throated Sparrow, Yellow-footed Gull, White-winged Dove and Ash-throated Flycatcher. Unfortunately, our searches for the endemic Rattle-less Rattlesnake proved unsuccessful on this occasion (much to the relief of some people) but we did manage to find the islands endemic race of Spiny and Side-blotched Lizard as well as some lovely plump Chuckwallas.

At 10am most of the group returned to the boat for one of Steve's delicious mid-morning snacks before hurriedly preparing themselves for a another fantastic snorkelling session in the deeper, fish-filled, rocky reefs along the edges of one of Catalinas' wonderfully sheltered bays. For the non-swimmers there was the chance to enjoy one of 'Captain Kennys' Crazy Coastal Cruises' (actually a leisurely and rather sedate cruise around the islands wonderful cliffs and rocky reefs) which turned out to be time well spent when they were joined by a small group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins!

It was a wonderful morning but we were all back on board Searcher by midday; keen to continue another afternoon on the ocean in search of whales. Within an hour we had, once again, encountered another massive group of several thousand Common Dolphins and travelled with them for a while until the distant sighting of a large whale blow distracted our attention and we altered our course to investigate. The excitement grew when it turned out to be another Blue Whale but, sadly, this whale was not playing ball. After a few blows at the surface in front of the boat, the whale gave us the slip and was not seen again. But it was not long before another whale was spotted and we spent the much of the afternoon in the company of dozens of large Fin Whales that seemed to be feeding in the area; an afternoon that rewarded us with some marvellous close encounters with these huge whales.

Later in the afternoon we moved closer in shore, close to Agua Verde, to investigate another huge group of Common Dolphins and spend the remainder of the evening watching the dolphins as the sun set over the wonderful sandstone cliffs.

Day 11

Friday 3rd April

Agua Verde

We awoke, at anchor off the beach at Agua Verde and we started our morning with a trip ashore to explore the desert scrub and palm oasis just beyond the beach. A short walk through the scrub in the morning sun proves to be quite productive with some nice views of Black-tailed Jackrabbit and close views of a singing Cactus Wren, and lots of Phainopepla. But it was in the shade of the huge palms that surrounded the lagoon where we were treated to some lovely views of Lark Sparrow, Lincoln Sparrow and Hooded Orioles as they came down to drink along the muddy lagoon margins. On the way back to the boat we also found newly emerged Pipevine Swallowtail and a Soldier butterflies that obligingly posed for a few photographs.

We returned to the Searcher at about 10am and quickly got our selves ready for a return trip to the beach and another chance to snorkel. The shallow rocky shore around Agua Verde provided some of the best snorkelling conditions I have ever experienced in the area, with crystal clear visibility and a shallow rocky reef filled with colourful starfish, tubeworm meadows, brightly coloured sea slugs and lots of large Stone Scorpionfish that snapped ferociously at the shoals of tiny baitfish that swarmed in the shallows. A few people even managed to find the odd octopus, lurking between the stones. It was a great morning, and with reasonably warm water we were reluctant to get out, even after 1½ hours!

After lunch we weighed anchor and set out to spend a wonderful afternoon in the company of several different Humpbacks and a Fin Whale before eventually finding a large group (several hundred at least) of very active Bottlenose Dolphins. The dolphins included a large number of very dark (almost black) pelagic race animals that are well known for their boisterous antics. They certainly lived up to our expectations when we were treated to an amazing display of aerial acrobatics that lasted over an hour, with dolphins leaping simultaneously all around the boat. Some individuals leaping almost 20ft into the air! We watched the dolphins in awe until about 7pm, when the light began to fade, before making our way to a sheltered anchorage and our chance to enjoy one of Chucks famous Margaritas and a BBQ out on the deck.

Day 12

Saturday 4th April

Nopolo – Los Isolotes

We awoke at anchor just a little way to the north of the tiny sheltered beach at Nopolo before raising anchor and moving closer inshore. After anchoring up once more we board the skiffs for an early morning trip ashore and a walk around the mangroves and arroyo at Nopolo where we are treated to some fantastically close views of both Costas and Xantus' Hummingbirds; a real treat for some of the keen birders in the group. After a nice walk we returned to the Searcher for a relaxed breakfast as we headed slowly out to sea in search of whales. Once again we were lucky enough to encounter Brydes, Fin and Humpback Whales between the occasional groups of dolphins and some spectacular leaping Manta Rays and a large raft of Black Storm-Petrels, and Pink-footed Shearwaters provided some nice views and as we pottered slowly past.

We spent lunchtime in the company of a large group of Common Dolphins that happily rode on the bow or leapt playfully in the wake as we made our way slowly to Los Islotes. We anchored up at Los Islotes a little after 2pm and boarded the skiffs for a cruise around the tiny remote islands. We were able to get some amazingly close views of hundreds of California Sea Lions as they warmed themselves on the rocky outcrops and played in the water all around us. Blue-footed Boobies displayed on the cliffs above us while we passed Brown Pelicans, Brandts and Double-crested Cormorants and Black Turnstones on the rocky outcrops around the islands.

After our skiff rides we prepared ourselves for our final activity of the trip; the chance to snorkel with Sea Lions. For a few, this proved to be a little too daunting a prospect (particularly having seen at close quarters the size of some of the Bull Sea Lions that were in the water around us) and they were happy to forego this opportunity in favour of watching the activities from the comfort of the boat! Nonetheless, for most of the group, beginners and experienced alike, this was the exciting moment we had all been waiting for and we rushed to get ourselves ready. The conditions were improving all the time with crystal clear, calm sea conditions, lots of Sea Lions in the water, densely shoaling fish close into the shore and a wonderful sunny sky. Even as we waited to board the skiffs we were treated to a humpback surfacing just a few metres from the side of the boat! Once in the water we were not disappointed. Everyone was treated to some amazingly close encounters with playful Sea Lion pups (one of which appeared to adopt Bob as a surrogate parent and wouldn't leave him alone), lots of adults too, and even a chance to watch cormorants, Pelicans Blue-footed and Brown Boobies diving for fish...from under the water! It was truly an amazing couple of hours in the water and one that few people will ever forget.

It was late afternoon by the time we left Los Islotes and we headed south into calm seas. But the day still had some last minute treats to give us. Those people still out on deck during the fading daylight managed to catch a rare, passing glimpse of a solitary Dwarf Sperm Whale (that surfaced in front of the boat several times, then disappeared into a dive before we could even slow the boat down to get a better look) and during our evenings journey back towards Cabo we managed to enjoy some amazing bioluminescence. It was a fantastic way to draw our trip to a close.

Day 13

Sunday 5th April

We watched the sunrise off the end of the cape as we slowly made our way into harbour at Cabo San Lucas. We enjoyed a leisurely continental breakfast as the boat refuelled and said our final farewells to the crew. We disembarked the Searcher for the last time a little after 8am and boarded our taxis to Cabo Airport where we began our long journey home.

Day 14

Monday 6th April

Return to the UK

Summary:

Another amazing trip along the magical Baja Peninsula! An extraordinary amount of dolphin activity was encountered throughout the trip and with a good variety of whale sightings too, this was a great trip from start to finish. The high density of Grey Whales in Ignacio lagoon resulted in persistent close encounters with both adults and calves, while nail-bitingly close encounters with Fin Whales, wonderful Humpback activity and several Blue Whale encounters simply added to the magic. Wonderful sea conditions and warm(ish) water, swarming with baitfish and playful Sea Lion pups, also resulted in some of the best snorkelling experiences anyone could ever hope for. Another great trip, shared with excellent company in one of the best places on earth!

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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>				x	x							
2	Red-throated loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>												
3	Pacific Diver	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>		2										
4	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	x	x		x							x	
5	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>												
6	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>												
7	Black-footed Albatross	<i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>		x	x				x					
8	Laysan Albatross	<i>Phoebastria immutabilis</i>			x									
9	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			x									
10	Pink-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus creatopus</i>		x					x					
11	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>		x	x	x			x					
12	Black-vented Shearwater	<i>Puffinus opisthomelas</i>		x	x				x					
13	Black Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma melania</i>		x						x				
14	Least Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma microsoma</i>												
15	Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>				x			x	x	x		x	
16	Red-billed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>								x			x	
17	Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	
18	Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>									x			
19	Blue-footed Booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>								x	x			
20	Masked Booby	<i>Sula dactylatra</i>												
21	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	100's	x	x	x	x				x		x	x
22	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>												
23	Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax penicillatus</i>	x	x		x					x		x	
24	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	x									x	x	x
25	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	x					x						
26	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	x					x						x
27	Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>												
28	Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>						x						
29	Reddish Egret	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>						x						

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April										
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
30	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	x				x						
31	Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax violacea</i>	x		x		x						
32	Green Heron	<i>Butorides virecens</i>	x										
33	White-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis chihi</i>		80+									
34	White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>				x	x						
35	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>											
36	Black Brant	<i>Branta bernicla</i>				x	x						
37	Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>											
38	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>											
39	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>											
40	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>											
41	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>											
42	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>											
43	American Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>											
44	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>											
45	Redhead	<i>Aythya Americana</i>											
46	Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>											
47	Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>	x										
48	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>											
49	Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>	x	x		x	x						x
50	California Quail	<i>Callipepla californica</i>							x				
51	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>				x			x	x	x	x	x
52	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					x						
53	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>			x								
54	Coopers Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>							x				
55	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			12+							x	
56	Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara cheriway</i>							c				
57	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>											
58	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		x	2							x	
59	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>											
60	Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>											

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April										
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
61	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>											
62	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>											
63	American Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>		x									
64	American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>										x	
65	American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>											
66	Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>											
67	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>											
68	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>											
69	Snowy Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>						x					
70	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>											
71	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>						x					
72	Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>											
73	Willet	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>	x					x					
74	Wandering Tattler	<i>Heteroscelus incanus</i>						x		x			
75	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularia</i>	x							x		x	
76	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus</i>										x	
77	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>	x	x				x				x	
78	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>						x					
79	Surfbird	<i>Aphriza virgata</i>											
80	Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>				x						x	
81	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>											
82	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				x	1000's						
83	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>											
84	Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>	x					x					
85	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>	16										
86	Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>											
87	Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>											
88	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>		x					x				
89	Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>								x			
90	South Polar Skua	<i>Stercorarius maccormicki</i>		x									
91	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>							x				

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April										
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
92	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		x		x			x				
93	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>			x								
94	Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Larus philadelphia</i>		x									
95	Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>		x									
96	Heermann's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>	x	x	x	x			x			x	x
97	Laughing Gull	<i>Larus aticilla</i>											
98	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>											
99	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>	x	x									
100	Yellow-footed Gull	<i>Larus livens</i>								x	x		
101	Western Gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>	x	x	x				x	x			
102	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>											
103	Royal Tern	<i>Sterna maxima</i>	x	x				x			x	x	x
104	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>						1					
105	Elegant Tern	<i>Sterna elegans</i>						x					
106	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>											
107	Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>											
108	Xantus' Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus hypoleucus</i>		x									
109	Craveri's Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus craveri</i>											
110	Cassins' Auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>		x	x								
111	Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cyclorhynchus psittacula</i>											
112	White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>	x							x	x		
113	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	x										
114	Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>								x			
115	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	x										
116	Liliac-headed Parrot	<i>Amazona finschi</i>											
117	White-throated Swift	<i>Aeronautes saxatalis</i>											
118	Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>	x										
119	Costa's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte costae</i>								x			
120	Xantus' Hummingbird	<i>Hylocharis xantusii</i>								x			
121	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>	x					x				x	
122	Gilded Flicker	<i>Colaptes chrysoides</i>								x			

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April											
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	
123	Gila Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes uropygialis</i>								x		x	x	
124	Ladder-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides scalaris</i>								x		x		
125	Nuttall's Woodpecker	<i>Picoides nuttalli</i>								x				
126	Acorn Woodpecker	<i>Melanerptes formicivorus</i>												
127	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>												
128	Ash-throated Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus cinerascens</i>								x		x	x	x
129	Grey Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax wrightii</i>											x	
130	Pacific Slope Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax difficillis</i>												
131	Black Phoebe	<i>Sayornis nigricans</i>	x			x							x	x
132	Cassin's Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus vociferans</i>												
133	Shore Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>												
134	Loggerhead shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>												
135	Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>						x						
136	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						x						
137	Bell's Vireo	<i>Vireo bellii</i>												
138	Oak Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus inornatus</i>												
139	Western Scrub Jay	<i>Aphelocoma californica</i>												
140	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				x								
141	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhyncus</i>	x											
142	Verdin	<i>Auriparus flaviceps</i>								x	x	x	x	
143	Cactus Wren	<i>Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus</i>											x	
144	Canyon Wren	<i>Catherpes mexicanus</i>												
145	Bewick's Wren	<i>Thryomanes bewickii</i>												
146	Blue-grey Gnatcatcher	<i>Poliophtila caerulea</i>										x	x	
147	California Gnatcatcher	<i>Poliophtila californica</i>								x	x			
148	Western Bluebird	<i>Sialia mexicana</i>												
149	Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>	x							x	x	x		
150	Grey Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma cinereum</i>								x				
151	California Thrasher	<i>Toxostomaredivivum</i>												
152	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	x											
153	Phainopepla	<i>Phainopepla nitens</i>											x	

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April										
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
154	Orange-crowned Warbler	<i>Vermivora celata</i>											
155	Mangrove Warbler	<i>Dendroica bryanti</i>											
156	Audubon's Warbler	<i>Dendroica auduboni</i>	x										
157	Black-throated Gray Warbler	<i>Dendroica nigrescens</i>											
158	Yellow Warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>								x			
159	Townsend's Warbler	<i>Dendroica townsendi</i>											
160	Northern Waterthrush	<i>Seiurus noveboracensis</i>											
161	Western Tanager	<i>Piranaga ludoviciana</i>											
162	Black-headed Grosbeak	<i>Pheucticus melanocephalus</i>								x			
163	Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>								x	x	x	
164	Pyrrhuloxia	<i>Cardinalis sinuatis</i>											
165	Lazuli Bunting	<i>Passerina amoena</i>											
166	Green-tailed Towhee	<i>Pipilo chlorurus</i>	x							x	x		
167	California Towhee	<i>Pipilo crissalis</i>											
168	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>											
169	Black-throated Sparrow	<i>Amphispiza bilineata</i>								x	x		
170	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	x		x	x							
171	Brewer's Sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>											
172	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	x										
173	Lincoln's Sparrow	<i>Melospiza lincolnii</i>										x	
174	Lark Sparrow	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>										x	
175	White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>	x										
176	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>								x			
177	Oregon Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>										x	
178	Tricolored Blackbird	<i>Agelaius tricolor</i>											
179	Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>											
180	Great-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus mexicanus</i>											
181	Scott's Oriole	<i>Icterus parisorum</i>								x			
182	Hooded Oriole	<i>Icterus cucullatus</i>								x		x	
183	House Finch	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>	x							x			
184	Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis psaltria</i>	x										

	Common name	Scientific name	March/April										
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4

Mammals

1	Gray Whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>		6		100's	100's							
2	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>			1			2			1			
3	Sei Whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>												
4	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>		25+						4	7+	3+		
5	Brydes Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>						1						
6	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>		1										
7	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		5+	1			5	13	1	1	10+	x	
8	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>												
9	Dwarf Sperm Whale	<i>Kogia simus</i>												1
10	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>												
11	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		6+	1	x	6				8+	200+		
12	Long-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus capensis</i>		1000+	x	x		2000+		1000+	1000's			x
13	Pacific White-sided Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus obliquidens</i>			8+		8							
14	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		600+										
15	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>												
16	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		20+										
17	California Sealion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	100's	100's	100's					x				100's
18	Guadalupe Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus townsendi</i>			100's									
19	Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>		40+	100's									
20	Black-tailed Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus californicus</i>								x				
21	California Myotis	<i>Myotis californicus</i>									x			

Other Species

1	Green Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	8	Thresher Shark	<i>Alopias spp.</i>
2	Common Chuckwalla	<i>Sauromalus ater</i>	9	Striped Marlin	<i>Tetrapturus audax</i>
3	Common Sideblotched Lizard	<i>Uta stansburiana</i>	10	Mobula Ray	<i>Mobulus spp.</i>
4	Orange -throated Whiptail Lizard	<i>Cnemidophorus hyperythrus</i>	11	Manta Ray	<i>Manta birostris</i>
5	Western Marbled Whiptail Lizard	<i>Cnemidophorus tigris marmoratus</i>	12	Soldier Butterfly	<i>Danaus eresinus</i>
6	San Jose Whiptail Lizard	<i>Cnemidophorus tigris rubidus</i>	13	Pipeline Swallowtail Butterfly	<i>Battus philenor</i>
7	Ocean Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>			