

Baja California & the Sea of Cortez

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 February - 5 March 2013



Bottle-nosed Dolphin



Common Dolphin



Close -up Rattle Snake encounter



Masked Booby

Report and images compiled by Lee Morgan



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leaders: Lee Morgan Naturetrek Naturalist
 Rob Nawojchik Local Naturalist

M/V Searcher: Captain Art Taylor & Crew

Participants: Paul Cottis
 Catherine Cottis
 Martin Brockett
 Elaine Brockett
 Peter Gregory
 Ruth Gregory
 Bill Hawkins
 Wendy Hawkins
 Colin Raymond
 Pauline Raymond
 Sheila Raymond
 Andy Melnick
 Sean Ashfield
 Carol Ashfield
 Mike Gower
 Kay Walshe
 Lynn Vincent-Barwood
 David Thompson
 Hilary Thompson
 Andrew Leach
 Nic Foster
 Kev Gooding
 Julia Williams
 Nicola Haggett
 Stephen Saunders

Day 1

Thursday 21st February

London to San Diego

The group met at London Heathrow's Terminal 5 in the morning ready for departure. An uneventful flight without delays and we arrived late afternoon in a mild but slightly overcast San Diego.

A short shuttle bus journey to our hotel and we were quickly checked into our rooms. Most of the group took the chance of an early night but a few ventured out to explore the harbour during the last hours of daylight and to enjoy a drink with the locals in one of the nearby bars.

Day 2

Friday 22nd February

San Diego – Boarded Searcher

We awoke early to a sunny San Diego morning and while a few people ventured out for a pre-breakfast walk, by 9am the group were itching to get out and explore. Some of the group opted to have a quieter morning and spent their day exploring the sights of San Diego at their own pace, but most of the group were ready for a day's wildlife watching with some local guides from the San Diego Audubon Society. We started our day with a short walk from the hotel to explore the quieter sides of the harbour were, amongst other things we enjoyed some great views of Western Gulls, Black-crowned Night Herons, Western Grebes, Bufflehead, Willet and Least Sandpipers. In the beautiful gardens along the water front we also found Anna's Hummingbird, Black Phoebe, Song Sparrow, House Finch, Lesser Goldfinch, and Northern Mockingbird as well as getting some amazing views of three Coopers Hawks that were displaying above the rooftops. On the way back to the hotel we also stumbled upon a nice pair of Lilac-crowned Parrots sitting low down in a tree and we stopped for a while to take a few snaps.

By about 11am we boarded a bus that took us across town to the Silverwoods reserve. This gave us a chance to see some of the reserves chaparral habitats and we sat and ate our lunch in the sunshine and watched California and Spotted Towhees, White-breasted Nuthatch, House and Purple Finches and Dark-eyed Juncos and white crowned Sparrows visiting the bird feeders, while Wrentit and Oak Titmouse flitted in the trees above our heads. We had some nice views of Acorn Woodpecker sitting in its usual spot on top of a telegraph pole and witnessed the arrival of the first Violet Green Swallows of the spring. We also had some nice views of California Ground Squirrel too.

After lunch we left Silverwoods and headed back across town to investigate Lindow Lakes where we had White Pelicans, numerous different wildfowl (including a surprise drake Hooded Merganser) as well as Great-tailed Grackles, Brewers, Tricolored and Red-winged Blackbirds, Western Bluebirds, Common Yellowthroat and even a Phainopepla. Andy also managed to spot a couple of Tree Swallows swooping over the far end of one of the lakes too. Lindow Lakes were certainly delivering some great birdwatching and it was almost a shame to leave when we once again boarded the bus and headed on to the San Diego River Estuary.

It was fairly blustery at the estuary but there were plenty of birds to see with flocks of Royal Terns, Double crested Cormorants and a variety of gulls roosting on the estuary mudflats, Great and Snowy Egrets, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwits, Grey (Black Bellied) Plover and Short-billed Dowitchers and both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs feeding in the shallows and numerous ducks, including Lesser Scaup, and Blue-winged Teal. We also had some nice views of Red-tailed Hawk and Osprey before we headed off for our final stop at Famosa Slough where, along with several more duck species, we added some nice views of Killdeer, Cassins Kingbird and Says Phoebe. It rounded off our whirlwind tour of the cities birding hotspots nicely.

We had all boarded M/V Searcher by late afternoon and after one last chance to stroll around the harbour, grab a bite to eat and make one or two last minute purchases, we were all back onboard for our welcome orientation and a chance to meet Captain Art and his crew. With lines away at about 9.30pm, 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 Brandts and Double Crested Cormorants, all of which haul out around the pens in hope of an easy meal. We continued our journey into the increasing darkness and headed out of the harbour into a gentle Pacific swell.

Day 3

Saturday 23rd February

Ensenada – Todos Santo

We awoke to the sound of the slowing engines and after a gentle night's travel some were enjoying a morning coffee and watching the sunrise as we arrived in Ensenada at approximately 6am. Out on deck we spent some time watching the Surf Scoters in the harbour while the paperwork was being organised. The harbour was fairly quiet but Andy managed to find a nice Red Throated Diver and few Great Tailed Grackles flew over too, but by 6.48am we had cleared customs and were on our way once again. Motoring out of the harbour we spotted a few California Sea Lions and started to see some of our first pelagic birds of the trip with the odd flyby of Black Vented Shearwaters, the odd Cassin's Auklet and a single Rhinoceros Auklet too.

The seabird activity increased considerably as we approached Islas Todos Santos and we spent an hour motoring slowly past the rocky shoreline where we got some great views of Harbour Seals and their pups playing in the water as well as Pelagic, Double-crested and Brandts Cormorants, Black and American Oystercatcher, Brown Pelicans, Western Gulls, and Peregrine Falcon. A scan along the shoreline of the island and we saw a single Elephant Seal hauled out and a look along the westernmost rocks provided us with some great views of a group of California Sea Lions as well as a small group of Brown Boobys and a single Masked Booby too (a good record for the island).

It was a great start to our first full day on the water and we spent the remainder of the day motoring slowly south in good conditions towards Islas San Benitos. However, our progress was repeatedly slowed by a series of marine mammal sightings with several groups of northbound Grey Whales that we followed for a while to get a better look. We didn't have to wait too long before we also encountered a large groups of Common Dolphins (one of several groups we encountered during the day) and we enjoyed our first taste of bow-riding dolphins when a group of several hundred Short-beaked Common Dolphins approached the Searcher. Later in the day we were also joined by a group of Long-beaked Common Dolphins too and they played in the wake and on the bow for a short while as we travelled.

By mid afternoon we had seen several groups of Humpback Whales but two in particular allowed us some nice views as they surfaced close to the boat, fluked multiple times and even performed the odd tail lunge too. With all the cetacean activity, any bird watching fell a little by the wayside. Nonetheless, the keen birders in the group did manage some nice bird sightings with adult Heermans Gull, Grey (red) Phalaropes, the odd Pink-footed Shearwater and Northern Fulmar added to the list. We also managed to spot a few glimpses of the bird formerly known as Xantus's Murrelet (now split into Scripps's and Guadalupe Murrelets) but to be honest, the view was not nearly good enough to identify exactly which of the two 'new' species it was (these tiny birds rarely afford more than a fleeting glimpse before disappearing into the waves).

As the light slowly faded we ended our first action packed day on the water with an excellent meal and a talk from Rob on pinniped biology...a great introduction to the day ahead.

Day 4

Sunday 24th February

Isla San Benito (west)

It was an early start to the day with many people up and about by 5am. Despite the calm conditions, a day ashore was eagerly anticipated. The day started wonderfully as we enjoyed a nice sunrise (although it was a little chilly out on deck) as we slowly approached the island of West San Benito. We laid anchor off West San Benito a little after 8am and, after our first introduction to safely boarding the skiffs, we set ashore on the beach and started our days walk around the island. We spotted a few nice adult Heermans Gulls on the water (I still maintain that this is a Gull worth looking at!) and we had some nice views of the islands endemic race of Savannah Sparrows as they pecked around the strand line and flitted between the lobsterpots.

Our walk around the island was fantastic, giving us a great chance to see some of it's wonderfully unique desert flora and get some 'up close' looks at hauled out Elephant Seals (with mature Bulls, a few adult females and lots of recently weaned pups present on most of the beaches), as well as California Sea Lions and even a few Guadalupe Fur Seals. Unfortunately the numbers of these rare marine mammals were down this year and they were not present in their usual haul out sites at all. Nonetheless, we did count a few scattered individuals (perhaps fewer than 20) around the northern and south western coasts of the island and a few individuals found in a narrow cove on the north shore afforded us some closer views and good photo opportunities. In addition to the islands marine mammal colonies, the clear conditions meant we had some spectacular views from on top of the island and we were able to watch Ospreys too. The island would appear to have at least 5 pairs looking to nest this year and they certainly performed well for us.

By 3.15pm we had completed our walk and said goodbye to the wonderful Isla San Benito. We left the island and continued our journey down the peninsula toward San Ignacio. A strengthening breeze made for some decidedly cool conditions at the front of the boat, but those hardy enough to venture forward spotted plenty more seabirds as we continued our journey; with some much better looks at the tiny Cassins Auklets that surfaced close to the boat and fluttering rapidly out of or path before clumsily splashing back into the water. After watching the sun disappear behind a cloud bank above the distant horizon (scuppering our hopes of seeing a 'green flash') we ended our day with another lovely meal and another one of Rob's great talks on Cetacean biology.

Day 5

Monday 25th February

Laguna San Ignacio

Having travelled through the night, we awoke bright and early as Searcher slowly approached San Ignacio lagoon. Entering the lagoons, we enjoyed the company of numerous Grey Whales and a few Bottlenose Dolphins that kept us all out on deck, despite the blustery conditions. We dropped anchor in the observation area of the lagoon a little before 9am but the persistent strong winds across the lagoon were proving to be a little troublesome and the waves in the lagoon were preventing the Panga drivers from getting out to us (not that any of us fancied bobbing around in the waves on a smaller boat than we were already on), and everyone waited patiently for the weather to break.

Fortunately for us, only a short while after anchoring, we had a curious Grey Whale cow and calf approach the Searcher that spent more than an hour scratching themselves on the stern of the boat. The calf even raised its head out of the water a few times to allow us to scrub its nose with a deck brush! There were hundreds of whales around in the viewing area of the lagoon and we enjoyed a fantastic lunch watching the Grey Whales surfacing all around the boat from the comfort of the Searcher.

After lunch the wind had subsided and it was time to get a closer look at these wonderful animals. We all boarded the pangas and ventured out into the lagoon. We had an amazing afternoon enjoying some wonderful close encounters with dozens of cow and calf pairs as well as getting to see a variety of behaviours such as breaching, spy-hopping and fluking. A significant proportion of the group also got their first opportunity of some really close encounters and it was smiles all round as we returned to the Searcher at the end of the afternoon.

After another great evening meal onboard we all ventured out onto the outside deck of the boat where, with the ships generator and lights turned off, we spent the evening gazing up at a wonderful starry sky and listening to the whales surfacing all around the boat. There is certainly no better way to end a day.

Day 6

Tuesday 26th February

San Ignacio

Once again, everyone was up reasonably early and after breakfast we boarded the pangas for the first of 4 trips onto the lagoon during the day. Our trips provided us all with plenty more opportunities to watch and photograph many interesting whale behaviours as well as giving everyone plenty of opportunities to stroke a Grey Whale or two. In addition to our wonderful interactions with the whales, we also enjoyed some amazing views of Bottlenose Dolphins and a variety of birds out on the lagoon too, including Black Brant, Surf Scoter, Great Northern Divers (Common Loon), Royal and Elegant Terns, Pomarine Skua, White Ibis and a wide variety of smaller shorebirds.

For our final trip of the day about half of the group opted to set ashore to explore one of the lagoons deserted sandy beaches where people had plenty of time to photograph the pristine beaches wonderful accumulations of seashells and whale bones. A few of the keen birders in the group also took the opportunity to explore the edges of the mangroves where, along with a nearly full house of herons and egrets that the area has to offer (nearly...), they also got some nice views of Snowy Plover and a good range of other shorebirds too. For the remainder of the group (those how couldn't bear to part with the whales), there was the option of just one last trip out with the Grey Whales and they spent the remainder of the afternoon bobbing around in the company of cows with tiny calves (some only a couple of days old) and some very excitable larger calves too.

The Searcher raised anchor at 4.30pm and we said our farewells to the wonderful Laguna San Ignacio. We motored our way slowly through the breakers at the entrance to the lagoon and as the sun slowly dropped below the distant horizon we continued our journey southwards, on a rolling pacific swell, towards the tip of the Baja Peninsula.

Day 7

Wednesday 27th February

Magdalena Bay

Having travelled through the night, most people awoke early to enjoy yet another glorious sunrise above the now familiar peaks of the desert peninsula. Our day was to be spent travelling offshore along the entrance to Bahia Magdalena and a constant vigil was maintained from the bridge to ensure that no birds or marine mammals were missed as we travelled. Generally speaking the birdwatching was fairly quiet (despite my concerted efforts to draw birds in with fish oil and popcorn). However the morning started with a nice close view of a young Masked Booby sitting on top of a long-line float and a fairly constant passage of Heermans, California, Western and Ring-billed Gulls and the odd Magnificent Frigatebird kept us company as we travelled. We passed the occasional scattered raft of Grey (red) Phalaropes, Black-vented Shearwaters too and we did manage to get some great views of a Red-billed Tropicbird (in perfect plumage) and a few people had some nice views of both South Polar and Pomerine Skua (jaeger) as they flew past.

However, the marine mammal activity more than made for the relatively quiet birding. Some large groups of California Sea Lions made for an interesting first sighting of the day and many people on the boat (who were, by now, more used to observing these animals in a more coastal context) were quite surprised to see these particular mammals feeding so far from shore. They exhibited some wonderful porpoising behaviour too, which is always fun to watch. We also encountered several groups of Long-beaked Common Dolphins (and enjoyed lots of bow-riding behaviour) and saw more than a dozen Humpbacks. While many of the Humpbacks were travelling in the opposite direction to us, we did have a few opportunities to get a closer look at several small groups.

By early afternoon we found our first Fin Whales of the trip, a cow and calf pair. They proved to be a little unsettled at first. They were diving deep, and were proving a little difficult to keep track of. However, our slow and patient approach soon saw them settle down and we were able to get some nice views of them at the surface allowing us to see the distinctive white blaze on their lower right jaw (a key identification feature of this species)

As we continued our journey southwards we also spotted several Ocean Sunfish that were 'finning' at the surface and at least 4 Green Turtles and 1 Loggerhead Turtle too. For many onboard, it was our first views of a huge Blue Whale that really made the day special. We spotted the animal from a great distance and it took some time before we were close enough to get our first good look. However, the animal was relaxed with our presence and had a wonderfully predictable dive pattern, so we watched it for some time. Its prolonged periods at the surface meant we were all able to get a really good look at how the whales' massive, mottled grey body reflected turquoise through the clear water and the whale obliged us even further by showing us its flukes...twice! As daylight slowly diminished we retired to enjoy a wonderful meal and another one of Robs great talks (this time on diving physiology in marine mammals) as we continued our journey southwards into the night.

Day 8

Thursday 28th February

Gorda Banks – Los Frailes

Another early start to the day as we rounded Cabo at approximately 5am marking the turning point of our journey up into the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California).

From first light we were already spotting plenty of marine life and with Frigatebirds and Pelicans attempting to hitch a ride in the rigging and even on the back deck, there was plenty to see from the start. Add to this the sightings of sea turtles, leaping mantas and mobula rays, Long-beaked Common and Bottlenose Dolphins and the day was shaping up nicely. As we travelled further along the bottom of the peninsula we spotted plenty of Humpbacks and we were able to see an amazing range of behaviours from full breaches (often repeatedly), tail-lobbing, peck-slapping, and head lunging. We also spotted some boisterous pursuits too (probably males competing for the attention of females). However, we were treated by an exceptional, close-quarter's display of all these behaviours by a group of three adults and a calf that flapped their flippers and through their tails high into the air while the calf breached repeatedly all around them. It was an amazing spectacle, some of the best the whales in this area have to offer, and we watched for hours before the whales eventually moved off and we continued our journey into the gulf.

The sea state remained relatively calm while we rounded the peninsula and were tucked in close to shore but an increasingly brisk wind from the north (blasting straight down the Gulf) was raising the sea state and it was a lumpy ride onwards until we were safely tucked in behind the protection of the headland at the Cabo Pulmo marine park where we anchored up to spend the remainder of the afternoon ashore at Los Frailes. A little wander around the cactus scrub habitats that surround the rather quirky RV park at Los Frailes proved to be as productive as ever in our search for birds and other wildlife. A surprise Sage Thrasher (that didn't stop around long) at the head of the beach started the trip ashore well and as we investigated the feeders around the parked RV's we amongst other things we spotted our first Xantus' and Costas Hummingbirds along with Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Blue-grey Gnatcatchers, Verdins, and plenty of Hooded Orioles, White-winged Doves, Northern Mockingbirds House Finches and House Sparrows. Exploring further we had some nice views of Turkey Vultures, Northern Caracara, and Peter even spotted a nice bright yellow Baja Rat Snake too, before half of the group started to make their way back to the boat to get themselves ready to go snorkelling.

For those of us that remained ashore, we continued to explore the cactus scrub, adopting more of a 'walk less...see more' approach to our birding and, as the sun began to drop, we were rewarded with some lovely views of Northern Cardinal, Scott's Oriole, California Quail, Common Ground Doves and (a particular treat for the keen photographers in the group) one of the campers made space for us to have a really close look at the hummingbirds that were busily visiting their feeders.

Having spent all afternoon ashore, we returned to the Searcher a little after 5pm and met up with the snorkelers, whose first snorkel had given them a great chance to get familiar with the equipment and enjoy a wonderful variety of colourful rocky reef fish. While we enjoyed our dinner and evenings talk in the shelter of the anchorage, it wasn't long before we had to raise anchor and head out into the night, heading northwards into an impressive ocean swell...

Day 9

Friday 1st March

Isla Espiritu Santo – El Candelero Bay

We woke to the sound of waves still thumping against the bow of the boat. At 9am we dropped into a sheltered anchorage in El Candelero bay on the Island of Espiritu Santo. With high winds continuing to raise the sea state, few of us were in any rush to leave the sheltered comfort of this beautiful anchorage!

After a fortifying breakfast the crew unloaded the skiffs and we all set ashore on the white sand beaches of the beautiful turquoise bay and set about exploring the islands beautiful arroyos and wonderful sandy shores. There were few birds active in the blasting winds but we did manage to spot the odd Verdin and a few Black-throated Sparrows and amidst the scrub at the back of the beach and Andy spotted a lovely Canyon Wren that was calling in the shelter of the arroyo. Lizards, were certainly amidst the highlight of our trip ashore and, along with a nice example of an adult Huntsakers Spiny Lizard, we found a surprisingly indifferent San Lucan Rock Lizard (a very localised endemic species not often seen on these trips) that provided everyone with some excellent photographic opportunities.

After a leisurely lunch back onboard Searcher, we watched as mobulas leapt in the shallows, small rafts of Black-necked Grebes fished around the boat and the odd Green Turtle splashing around at the surface of the sheltered turquoise waters, about half the group opted to go snorkelling around a prominent rock in the middle of the bay. This proved to be amazing and, with fantastic visibility, the group managed to thoroughly explore the rocky reef, finding a wide variety of colourful reef fishes and invertebrates.

For the non-snorkelers there was the chance to catch up on some rest aboard the Searcher or to go on a skiff ride to look for birds and wildlife and a few even opted for another trip ashore to explore a bit more of the island. It was a much needed day of relaxation, and we remained in our sheltered anchorage throughout the remainder of the evening giving us all the chance to enjoy another great evening meal and after dinner talk before retiring to our bunks for the evening.

Day 10

Saturday 2nd March

Isla San Francisco

The Searcher raised anchor a little before 3am and made the short journey to another sheltered anchorage at Isla San Francisco. With the less than optimal sea state for whale watching and the high winds persisting, we spent much of the morning ashore exploring this beautiful island; many taking the time to ascend the highest ridge to take in the spectacular views over the bay. On our way down we looked for birds in the sheltered arroyos and marvelled at the islands wonderful, wind-pruned cactus gardens. Exploring the shoreline, people had the opportunity to get a really close look at a mixed flock of Western and Least Sandpipers that were patrolling the strandline, and a few even got some nice views of American Oystercatcher too. Before lunch there was the chance for another snorkel session and the chance to see more of the amazing marine life of the gulf, including some amazing beds of Cortez Garden Eels that lie in deeper water near the middle of the bay.

After lunch it was time to continue our journey north. By now the wind was backing off a little as we pressed north and made our way slowly up along the San Jose Channel where we managed to spot Common Dolphins, California Sea Lions, Black and Least Storm Petrels and even a few Craveri's Murrelets too. By late afternoon the conditions had started to improve a little and, in the sheltered lee of Isla Santa Cruz we managed to spot a couple of Blue Whales, one of which we watched at close quarters until a glorious sunset and the fading light stopped play. A little before 6pm we anchored off the sheltered southern shore of Santa Cruz where, once again, we enjoyed dinner and our evening presentation away from the ocean swells.

Day 11

Sunday 3rd March

Isla Santa Catalina

The crew raised anchor at 3.10am and we travelled the short distance north to Isla Santa Catalina where we arrived and anchored up at 5.30am. After breakfast we all set ashore for a hike on the island where we spent a couple of hours searching for wildlife amidst the islands wonderful stands of Giant Elephant Cardon and Wavy Barrel Cacti. The island was fairly quiet but as the sun began to rise over the arroyo, the birds became more active and amidst a chorus of White-winged Doves we enjoyed some great views of Loggerhead Shrikes, Ash-throated Flycatchers, Black-throated Sparrows, Mockingbirds and Verdins as well as plenty of the islands' endemic 'Emerald-tailed' Side-blotched Lizards.

We all enjoyed our trip ashore but, with conditions for whale watching improving all the time, we were all keen to get back out on the water. We raised anchor a little before 9.30am and headed west to look for whales in the area between Catalina and Santa Cruz. With the calm seas and clear conditions (more of what is expected of the Sea of Cortez) we did not have to wait too long before we spotted our first Blue Whale of the day.... The whale seemed to be diving deep but with a very predictable dive pattern so we stayed with the whale for a while, affording us some amazingly close views.

After lunch conditions continued to improve and we started to spot more and more marine life as we headed west towards the peninsula; California Sea Lions relaxing at the surface, increasing levels of Black and Least Storm Petrel activity, an unexpected group of 4 Laughing Gulls (a slightly unusual bird to see in this area at this time of year) and a brief glimpse of a Brydes Whale (that exhibited all of the usual boat shy characteristics of this species) were all nice additions to our days watching.

Later in the afternoon a huge flurry of seabirds (which included hundreds of Black-vented Shearwaters, Heermans Gulls, Yellow-footed Gulls, Brown Pelicans, Frigates and even a lone long-tailed Skua alerted us to the presence of a huge group of 500+ Common Dolphins that were in a feeding frenzy, driving baitfish close to the surface. The feeding activity was short lived but the dolphins stayed with us for a while giving us lots of great opportunities to watch them breaching and bow-riding.

As we continued towards the peninsula the sea had become oily flat and we passed through still waters, pink with zooplankton; a real vermillion sea! It was hardly surprising that we spotted at least 8 Blue Whales feeding in the area. We spent our last few hours of daylight watching these whales at close quarters with one distinctive animal in particular (we named 'nickback') exhibiting some amazingly predictable dive behaviour and affording us some great watching opportunities with prolonged periods at the surface and repeated fluking behaviour. It was a great day's whale watching and a much needed reward for our more arduous hours on the water.

We dropped anchor near the peninsula a little before 6pm and enjoyed a relaxed dinner and enjoyed an amazing starlit evening, with bioluminescence around the boat and Big Free-tailed Bats catching moths from around the running lights. We raised anchor at 7.49pm and travelled through the calm, glowing waters to Isla San Jose where we anchored off Punta Colorado.

Day 12

Monday 4th March

Isla San Jose (Punta Colorado)

With the wonderfully calm conditions, many people awoke early enough to enjoy the first rays of the sunrise reflecting off the beautiful sandstone cliffs that surround our anchorage at Punta Colorado. After an early breakfast we set ashore for an early morning walk along the shore and along one of the islands beautiful arroyos. The birdlife in the arroyo was fairly quiet but a huge kettle of Magnificent Frigatebirds rising above the sandstone cliffs gave us all a sense of anticipation about the remainder of our day on the water. We all enjoyed the arroyo and seeing some of the islands wonderful plants and beautiful sandstone rock formations stuffed with amazing fossils. Perhaps the greatest highlight of our walk was a beautiful Speckled Rattlesnake (found by Carol) that was trying to warm itself up amidst the granite boulders. Despite their fearsome reputation, the snake was very cold and only really interested in escaping our gaze. However, with a little gentle persuasion from Lee, the snake sat quite happily in the open allowing most people (even those who thought they were afraid of snakes) a wonderful opportunity to photograph this rarely seen species.

We boarded Searcher once more and began heading south towards Los Islotes. As we travelled we encountered a scattered group of Bottlenose Dolphins that casually investigated the boat and rode the bow for a short while. However, the glassy sea conditions were perfect for spotting cetaceans and we were lucky enough to have several views of the rarely seen Dwarf Sperm Whales. In addition to this we enjoyed more a couple more groups of Common and Bottlenose Dolphins as we travelled 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 midday and boarded the skiffs for a 1 hour 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 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. The conditions were perfect, with calm seas and crystal clear visibility and, for those brave enough to enter the water, we enjoyed over an hour of close encounters with playful Sea Lions, numerous colourful reef fish, giant schools of Threadfin Herring and the chance to watch Brandts Cormorants, Brown Pelicans and Blue-footed and Brown Booby's catching fish underwater. It was almost enough to make us all forget the slightly chilly water and it was with great reluctance that we all eventually left the water and returned to the Searcher to get warmed up.

It was mid afternoon when we left Los Islotes and we headed south into calm seas with Bottlenose Dolphins following and breaching in our wake. But the day still had some last minute treats to give us. As we happened upon a large group of leaping mobula rays that gave everyone their last chance to test their trigger fingers on their cameras before the daylight eventually faded and we began our journey southwards back to Cabo San Lucas. For those reluctant to end the day there was just one last chance to enjoy some amazing bioluminescence off the bow of the boat as we travelled.

Day 13

Tuesday 5th March

Cabo San Jose (estuary)

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 we said our final farewells to the crew. We all disembarked the Searcher for the last time.

However, our later flight meant we had a little time to explore and Captain Art had arranged for our taxis to drop us at the estuary at Cabo San Jose where we walked along the river, making our way to a rendezvous point in town. The birding on the estuary was thick and fast, with pied-billed Grebes, Ruddy Ducks, Redheads, Gadwall and Blue-winged Teal on the river, as well as Great and Cattle Egrets, Black-crowned Night Herons, White-faced Ibis, Belted Kingfisher and Osprey. Amongst numerous other species it also gave us the chance to see a few additional species we might not have seen had we not had this opportunity including White-collared Seedeater whose localised breeding colony around Cabo is slightly anomalous from their normal range.

However, all good things must come to an end (unfortunately) and while this small excursion proved far more preferable to waiting hours in the airport, we did eventually have to make tracks. Leaving ourselves enough time to stop for some refreshments in one of the bars in town, we eventually continued our journey to the airport and onwards home.

Summary:

Another fantastic trip, providing everyone with a real taste of everything that this amazing peninsula and its marine environs has to offer. Numerous Blue Whales, playful Grey Whales and acrobatic Humpbacks and Dolphins galore made for some spectacular viewing opportunities. Add to this the wonderful snorkelling conditions, the rugged beauty of the remote desert islands, some great bird watching and, of course, the great company and crew; this trip continues to deliver everything that any naturalist could every hope for.



Close up with a Gray Whale

Species Lists

Mammals (✓= recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February/March												
			21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2	3	4	5
1	Gray Whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓							
2	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>							1			✓	12+	✓	
3	Bryde's Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>			1								1		
4	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>							2						
5	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			✓				12+	30+				✓	
6	Dwarf Sperm Whale	<i>Kogia simus</i>												✓	
7	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					✓	✓			✓			✓	
8	Long-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus capensis</i>							300+	✓				✓	
9	California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	✓	✓					✓						
10	Big Free-tailed Bat	<i>Tadarida molossa</i>											✓		
11	California Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus beecheyi</i>	✓												
12	White-tailed Antelope Squirrel	<i>Ammospermophilus leucurus</i>									✓				
13	Merriam Kangaroo Rat	<i>Dipodomys merriami</i>									✓				

Birds

1	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>					✓	✓							
2	Red-throated loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			1										
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		✓	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>		✓											✓
5	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>		✓	✓			✓							
6	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓				✓						
7	Pink-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus creatopus</i>			✓				✓				✓		
8	Black-vented Shearwater	<i>Puffinus opisthomelas</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
9	Black Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma melania</i>							✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	

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			21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2	3	4	5	
10	Least Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma microsoma</i>												✓	✓	
11	Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Red-billed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>								✓		2		✓	✓	
13	Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>			✓	✓								✓	✓	
15	Blue-footed Booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>										✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Masked Booby	<i>Sula dactylatra</i>			✓					✓						
17	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓	✓
18	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>			✓											
19	Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax penicillatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>		✓	✓				✓			✓				
21	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓					✓							✓
22	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	✓	✓					✓		✓					
23	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</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-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis chihi</i>														✓
30	White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>					✓	✓								
31	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓												
32	Black Brant	<i>Branta bernicla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓								
33	Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>		✓												
34	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓												✓
35	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		✓												
36	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓												
37	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		✓												

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			21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2	3	4	5
38	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</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	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓											
44	Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>			✓		✓	✓							
45	California Quail	<i>Callipepla californica</i>									✓				
46	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>		✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>													
48	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>		✓								✓	✓		✓
49	Coopers Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>		✓											
50	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		✓		10	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
51	Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara cheriway</i>									✓				
52	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				✓									
53	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓	✓					✓	✓		✓	✓
54	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>													✓
55	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓											✓
56	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>		✓											✓
57	American Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>			✓										
58	American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>			✓							✓			
59	American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>		✓											
60	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				✓	✓	✓							✓
61	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>													
62	Snowy Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>						✓							
63	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>		✓											
64	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>		✓			✓								
65	Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>		✓											

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66	Willet	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>		✓			✓	✓							
67	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularia</i>		✓											✓
68	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus</i>		✓			✓	✓							
69	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>		✓			✓	✓							
70	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>		✓			✓	✓							
71	Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>				✓									
72	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>						✓							
73	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					✓	✓							
74	Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>					✓	✓				✓			
75	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>		✓								✓			✓
76	Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>		✓											
77	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>			✓					✓					
78	Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>								✓					
79	South Polar Skua	<i>Stercorarius maccormicki</i>								✓					
80	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>			✓		✓						✓		
81	Heermann's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Laughing Gull	<i>Larus aticilla</i>											4	✓	
83	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>		✓	✓					✓	✓		✓		✓
84	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
85	Yellow-footed Gull	<i>Larus livens</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	
86	Western Gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
87	Royal Tern	<i>Sterna maxima</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓			✓
88	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>					✓								
89	Elegant Tern	<i>Sterna elegans</i>				✓		✓							
90	Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>		✓	✓										
91	Scripps's Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus scrippsi</i>				✓									
92	Guadalupe Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus hypoleucus</i>			✓	✓									
93	Craveri's Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus craveri</i>										✓	✓	✓	

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94	Cassins' Auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
95	Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cyclorhynchus psittacula</i>			✓										
96	White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>									✓		✓		✓
97	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	✓	✓											✓
98	Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>									✓				✓
99	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓										✓
100	Liliac-headed Parrot	<i>Amazona finschi</i>	✓	✓											
101	White-throated Swift	<i>Aeronautes saxatalis</i>											✓		
102	Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>		✓											
103	Costa's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte costae</i>									✓		✓		
104	Xantus' Hummingbird	<i>Hylocharis xantusii</i>									✓				✓
105	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>			✓										✓
106	Gila Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes uropygialis</i>									✓		✓		✓
107	Ladder-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides scalaris</i>									✓	✓	✓		✓
108	Acorn Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes formicivorus</i>		✓											
109	Ash-throated Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus cinerascens</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	
110	Black Phoebe	<i>Sayornis nigricans</i>		✓											✓
111	Cassin's Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus vociferans</i>		✓											✓
112	Loggerhead shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>											✓		
113	Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>		✓											✓
114	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>													✓
115	Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>		✓											
116	Western Scrub Jay	<i>Apelocoma californica</i>		✓											
117	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
118	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhyncus</i>		✓											
119	Verdin	<i>Auriparus flaviceps</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
120	Cactus Wren	<i>Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus</i>									✓				✓
121	Canyon Wren	<i>Catherpes mexicanus</i>									✓				

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122	Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>		✓											✓
123	Blue-grey Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>									✓				
124	California Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila californica</i>										✓			
125	Western Bluebird	<i>Sialia mexicana</i>		✓											
126	Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>		✓							✓	✓		✓	✓
127	Grey Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma cinereum</i>									✓				
128	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓											✓
129	Phainopepla	<i>Phainopepla nitens</i>		✓											
130	Orange-crowned Warbler	<i>Vermivora celata</i>												✓	✓
131	Audubon's Warbler	<i>Dendroica auduboni</i>		✓											
132	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>													✓
133	Black-headed Grosbeak	<i>Pheucticus melanocephalus</i>									✓				
134	Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>									✓		✓	✓	
135	White-collared Seedeater	<i>Sporophila torqueola</i>													6
136	California Towhee	<i>Pipilo crissalis</i>		✓											
137	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>		✓											
138	Black-throated Sparrow	<i>Amphispiza bilineata</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	
139	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>				✓		✓							
140	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>		✓											
141	White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>		✓											✓
142	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓							✓				✓
143	Oregon Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>		✓											
144	Tricolored Blackbird	<i>Agelaius tricolor</i>		✓											
145	Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>		✓											✓
146	Great-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus mexicanus</i>		✓	✓										
147	Scott's Oriole	<i>Icterus parisorum</i>									✓				
148	Hooded Oriole	<i>Icterus cucullatus</i>									✓				✓
149	Purple Finch	<i>Carpodacus purpureus</i>		✓											✓

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150	House Finch	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>		✓										✓		✓
151	Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis psaltria</i>		✓												

Reptiles

1	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>				1										
2	Green Sea Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>				4	1								1	
3	Common Chuckwalla	<i>Sauromalus ater</i>					1							✓		
4	Side-blotched Lizard	<i>Uta squamata</i>					✓							✓		
5	Baja Rat Snake	<i>Bogertophis rosaliae</i>					1									
6	Speckled Rattlesnake	<i>Crotalus mitchellii</i>													1	

Fish

1	Balloonfish	<i>Diodon holocanthus</i>											✓		✓	
2	Beaubrummel	<i>Eupomacentrus flavilatus</i>					✓						✓		✓	
3	Bluechin Parrotfish	<i>Scarus ghobban</i>					✓								✓	
4	Blue-spotted Jawfish	<i>Opistognathus rosenblatti</i>													✓	
5	Cortez Chub	<i>Kyphosuselegans</i>													✓	
6	Cortez Damselfish	<i>Eupomacentrus rectifraenum</i>					✓								✓	
7	Cortez Rainbow Wrasse	<i>Thalassoma lucasanum</i>											✓		✓	
8	Cortez Garden Eel	<i>Heteroconger digueti</i>											✓			
9	Fine-spotted Jawfish	<i>Opistognathus sp.</i>													✓	
10	Garibaldi Fish	<i>Hypsypops rubicundus</i>													✓	
11	Giant Damselfish	<i>Microspathadon dorsalis</i>					✓						✓		✓	
12	Giant Hawkfish	<i>Cirrhitidae cirrhitus</i>													✓	
13	Hogfish	<i>Bodianus diplotaenia</i>					✓								✓	
14	King Angelfish	<i>Holocanthus passer</i>													✓	
15	Mexican Goatfish	<i>Mulloidichthys dentatus</i>													✓	

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16	Manta Ray (Moghula)	<i>Manta birostris</i>					✓							✓	
17	Needlefish	<i>Strongylura exilis</i>					✓							✓	
18	Ocean Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>				6+									
19	Panamic Sergeant Major	<i>Abuldefduf troschelii</i>					✓								
20	Reef Cornetfish	<i>Fistularia commersonii</i>					✓							✓	
21	Scissortail Damsel	<i>Chromis atrilobata</i>											✓		
22	Yellowtail Surgeonfish	<i>Prionurus punctatus</i>					✓						✓		✓

Butterflies

Pipevine Swallowtail , *Battus philenor*

Checkered White , *Pontia protodice*

Cloudless Sulphur , *Phoebis sennae*

Hammock Skipper , *Polygonus leo*

Zilpa Longtail , *Chioides zilpa*

Silver-banded Hairstreak , *Chlorostymon simaethis*

Anise Swallowtail , *Papilio zelicaon*

Orange Sulphur , *Colias eurytheme*

Southern Dogface, *Colias cesonia*

Orange Skipperling, *Copaeodes aurantiaca*

Gulf Fritillary , *Agraulis vanillae*

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