

Baja California & Sea of Cortez

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 March - 4 April 2013



Humpback breaching



Dolphin reflections



Osprey



Speckled Rattlesnake

Report & images compiled by Lee Morgan



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Day 1

London to San Diego

Saturday 23rd March

The group met at London Heathrow in the morning ready for departure. There was a delay because of snow and ice at Heathrow, then a connecting flight from Dallas, but we eventually arrived in San Diego early in the evening. A short shuttle bus journey to our hotel and we quickly checked into our rooms. After a long day of travel, most of the group took the chance of an early night.

Day 2

Sunday 24th March

San Diego – Board M/VSearcher

We awoke early to a sunny San Diego morning and while a few people ventured out for a pre-breakfast walk, by 9am most of the group were ready to go 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, however some 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 side of the harbour were, amongst other things we enjoyed some great views of Lilac-crowned Parrots, Annas Hummingbirds, Black-necked (eared) Grebe, Willet and Belted Kingfisher. In the beautiful, flower filled gardens along the water front we also spotted Black Phoebe, Song Sparrow, House Finch and Lesser Goldfinch.

By about 11am we headed across town to investigate Lindow Lakes where we had nice views of White Pelicans, numerous different wildfowl, including Wood Duck, Gadwall, Shoveler, and Teal, as well as Killdeer, Great-tailed Grackles, Brewers and Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Yellowthroat, Cassins Kingbird and some amazing views of Nuttals Woodpeckers. The lakes had plenty of bird life so we decided to circumnavigate them and continue birding in that area. We enjoyed nice views of a couple of Tree Swallows investigating nest boxes, Great and Snowy Egrets and Great Blue Herons feeding and nesting in the trees around the margins of the lake as well as getting some nice close views of California Ground Squirrels Spotted Sandpipers and Some nice Double Crested Cormorants in full breeding plumage. Lindow Lakes were certainly delivering some great wildlife watching and it was almost a shame to leave them. Nonetheless we had plenty more to see and we, once again, boarded the bus and headed on to the Silverwoods Nature Reserve for lunch.

Our stop at Silverwoods gave us a chance to see some of the reserves wonderful chaparral habitats and we sat and ate our lunch in the sunshine and watched California and Spotted Towhees, White-breasted Nuthatch, House Finches, Oak Titmouse and White-crowned Sparrows visiting the bird feeders, while Scrub Jays flew between the patches of scrub and Annas and Black-chinned Hummingbirds buzzed around in front of us. After lunch we headed back down through the reserve towards the bus where we had some nice views of Acorn Woodpeckers and Turkey Vultures. We then headed off once more towards the river.

It was fairly blustery at the estuary but there were plenty of birds to see with large flocks of Royal and Elegant Terns, Western, California and Ring-billed Gulls roosting on the estuary mudflats. There were also plenty of Great and Snowy Egrets, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwits, Whimbrel, Short-billed Dowitchers and Lesser Yellowlegs feeding in the shallows and numerous ducks, including Lesser Scaup, and American Wigeon. We also had some nice views of Osprey before we headed off for our final stop at Famosa Slough. Here we enjoyed some nice great views of several more duck species (including Blue-winged Teal and Ruddy Duck), as well as nice views of Killdeer, Black-winged Stilt and Common Yellowthroat. 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 Brandt's and Double Crested 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 gentle Pacific swell.

Day 3

Monday 25th March

Ensenada – Todos Santo

Some people were up very early but most awoke to the sound of the slowing engines. After a wonderfully gentle nights travel, most were able to enjoy their morning coffee and watch the sunrise as we arrived in Ensenada at approximately 6am. Out on deck we spent some time chatting and watching the California Sea Lions splashing in the harbour while the paperwork and our visa documents were being organised. The harbour was actually fairly quiet for birds but we saw some nice Black Skimmers, Western Grebes and Surf Scoters as we entered the harbour and most people were just happy to enjoy the beautiful sunrise over the harbour. We did not have to wait too long in the harbour though and within less than hour we were out to sea once again and enjoying some of our first views of Common Loons, numerous Sea Lions, and even a few Short-beaked Common Dolphins.

The seabird activity increased considerably as we approached Islas Todos Santos with Pelagic, Double-crested and Brandts Cormorants, Black and American Oystercatcher, Brown Pelicans, Western Gulls, and Peregrine Falcon all added to our growing list of bird species in a very short period of time. We also saw a small group of Brown Booby and a single Masked Booby too (a good record for the island). We spent an hour motoring slowly past the rocky shoreline where we got some great views harbour seals and their pups alongside a couple of Northern Elephant Seals and more California Sea Lions. It provided us with a great opportunity to compare the differences in size and body form of these superficially similar pinnipeds.

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 fantastic 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 (probably more than 15 at one point) and we followed a couple 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 also seen several groups of Humpback Whales but two in particular allowed us some nice views as they surfaced close to the boat, while another animal appeared out of nowhere performing a single spectacular breach right in front of the boat. With the non-stop 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. We also managed to spot a few glimpses of Guadalupe Murrelets (formerly known as Xantus's Murrellet). 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

Tuesday 26th March

Isla San Benito (west)

It was an early start to the day with many people up and about by 5am and enjoying a coffee and the start of the sunrise. The day started wonderfully as we enjoyed some lovely views of a couple of Black-footed Albatrosses flying close to the boat. However, a little effort with some fish oil and some popcorn and we soon had about a dozen Black-foots and a gaggle of Western Gulls following the boat. These were joined briefly by two separate Laysan Albatross' but, unfortunately they did not stop around for long and provided us with just a fleeting glimpse. However, we managed to maintain the attention of the Black-foots and gulls for several miles giving everyone a chance to have a great look and snap a few photos.

We laid anchor off west San Benito a little after 8.38am and, after our first introduction to safely boarding the skiffs (conducted under the watchful eye of a few inquisitive Sea Lions), we set ashore on the beach and started our days walk around the island. We spotted a few nice adult and juvenile Heermans Gulls on the water (I still maintain that this is an amazingly beautiful Gull and well 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 high up on the beach. Our circumnavigation of the island was fantastic, giving us a great chance to see some of the wonderfully unique desert flora and get some 'up close' looks at hauled out Elephant Seals (with, a few adult females and lots of yearlings, sub-adults and newly weaned pups present on most of the beaches) and California Sea Lions. We even found good number of Guadalupe Fur Seals too which, given the lack of animals found on the earlier visits to the island, was good news. 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 had plenty of great opportunities to watch the Ospreys too. We even had the chance to get a close up look at a Cassins Auklet.

By 3pm we had completed our walk and were back on board the boat. We said goodbye to the wonderful Isla San Benito and continued our journey down the peninsula toward San Ignacio. However it was not long before we spotted some tall spouts in the distance and we ventured off course to investigate. It was a Blue Whale that was deep diving and staying down for nearly 25 minutes. However, we remained patient and as we watched we spotted more and more spouts on the horizon (mostly about a mile away!) but we counted 9 different Blue Whales feeding in the area. None of the whales performed particularly well for us (their deep dives and unpredictable manoeuvres making it difficult to track them) but it was certainly enough of a taste to keep everyone watching from the bow for a while and no-one was left too disappointed after encountering yet another species (and the first-ever sighting of a Blue Whale for many onboard).

Most people remained out on deck watching where we enjoyed a spectacular sunset and some amazing views of huge rafts of Black-vented Shearwaters. Only the fading light and the tempting call for dinner was enough to lure people inside.

Day 5

Wednesday 27th March

Laguna San Ignacio

Having travelled through the night, we awoke bright and early as Searcher slowly approached San Ignacio Lagoon. The sea had been flat calm all night and we awoke refreshed after a good nights sleep.

Entering the lagoons, we enjoyed the company of a few Grey Whales and several Bottlenose Dolphins that kept us all out on deck, while Capt. Remy and his crew skilfully navigated us safely across the sandbar at the entrance to the lagoon. We dropped anchor in the observation area of the lagoon a little before 8.15am and our pangas arrived to take us out onto the lagoon. There were plenty of whales around in the viewing area of the lagoon and within just 5 minutes of leaving the side of the Searcher we were set upon by boisterous Grey Whale calves, eager to play and interact with us. Fortunately, on our pangas, they had an equally receptive audience and without much encouragement, everyone had their sleeves rolled up and they were up to their elbows in water and whales. It was certainly a spectacular first introduction to these amazing animals and the wonderful Laguna San Ignacio.

After a quick stop back at Searcher for refreshments and snacks we were ready to get out again and, with even better conditions in the lagoon (flat calm and sunny), it was hardly surprising that we had even more spectacular encounters and everyone had plenty of opportunities to get some wonderful photographs (and more than enough opportunity to get up close and personal with the whales again). After lunch our sessions on the pangas were a little more sedate...it seemed that it was definitely 'school time' for the young whales and we watched as the cows actively escorted the young whales away from our pangas. Nonetheless, it gave us some wonderful opportunities to watch some lovely whale behaviours with many whales spy hopping, fluking and generally interacting with each other...rather than with us. It was lovely to see, and a good reminder that the precious interactions we get with these amazing creatures in the lagoon are entirely on the whales' terms.

After an excitable day it was nice to wind down after dinner and we shut down the boat's generator, put all the lights out and quietly enjoyed the wonderful full moon and starry skies and listened to the whales and dolphins blowing around the boat.

Day 6

Thursday 28th March

San Ignacio

Once again, everyone was up reasonably early and after breakfast we boarded the pangas for the first of the day's trips. The perfect tide times meant we had the opportunity to enter the mangroves on a rising tide and, after a leisurely breakfast, we boarded the pangas at about 8am and headed off. The lovely low angle of light illuminated the red mangroves perfectly and we spotted numerous shorebirds such as Long-billed Curlew, Willet and Marbled Godwit as we entered and plenty of Herons, Egrets and White Ibis as we ventured slowly along the narrow mangrove channels. There were also plenty of Mangrove Warblers about too (more than I had ever seen in this particular mangrove) and we enjoyed some nice views of male birds, with their lovely chestnut coloured heads, perched up on the top of the small mangrove trees and singing vociferously.

We returned to the searcher for snacks and then boarded the pangas once again for another trip out with the whales. The lagoon was like a mirror and our trips provided us all with plenty more opportunities to watch and photograph many interesting whale behaviours as well as some crazy levels of 'friendly' whale behaviour. All of our boats enjoyed over 45 minutes of intensive whale interaction. It was certainly a day of firsts on the lagoon.....flat calm conditions, unprecedented friendly activity, and even a whole panga full of people (you all know who you are) singing to the whales (something the whales really seemed to appreciate!). Great fun!

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, whale bones and a few nice 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 and some very excitable calves. It was the perfect end to a perfect stay in the lagoon.

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 gently rolling pacific swell, towards the tip of the Baja Peninsula.

Day 7

Friday 29th March

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 roof, the nest and the bridge to ensure that no birds or marine mammals were missed as we travelled. However, with the perfect air temperatures and sunny skies everyone was able to watch from the bow and the fly bridge comfortably. Generally speaking, the bird watching was fairly quiet with just the odd shearwater, but there were more than enough marine mammals to keep us occupied. The morning started well with a small feeding group of Long-beaked Common Dolphins passing by the boat. They didn't approach the boat and they seemed to be preoccupied with their own business ...but every day that starts with dolphins is a good one. We continued on and it was not long after breakfast that we spotted our first whale and began a steady approach. It was a Blue Whale but, once again, its diving activity was a little erratic so after a few distant views we moved off to investigate several more whales that we spotted that appeared to be more consistent in their behaviour. This turned out to be a very good move... As we started an approach on the second Blue Whale (a really huge animal of about 75 feet+ long) it actually veered toward us and began heading straight for our bow. At just 80 yards from us, it fluked beautifully and went into a dive right under the boat! It was an amazing encounter with a huge animal!!

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, Captain Aaron's 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, several nice views of Green Turtles and some leaping Striped Marlin too. However, our day wasn't over yet and as daylight slowly diminished we spotted our final group of Pilot Whales (actually two groups, one bachelor herd and a large family pod too) and we watched them against an amazing sunset until they all eventually dived and we continued our journey south.

We ended our busy day of ‘travel’ having enjoyed some amazing wildlife viewing and the chance to enjoy yet another magnificent sunset over the Pacific and another wonderful meal on board the boat. Another one of Robs great talks (this time on thermoregulation in marine mammals) as we continued our journey southwards into the night rounded the day off perfectly.

Day 8

Saturday 30th March

Gorda Banks – Los Frailes

Another early start to the day as the Searcher rounded Cabo at 5am. A blazing sunrise got us all out on deck photographing and the mirror like seas made for comfortable motoring. A juvenile Frigatebird kept us company as we travelled but there were surprisingly very few birds active in the area. There were few obvious marine mammals active either, but it was not long before we spotted a few spouts in the distance. By about 1.30pm we had seen almost 40 Humpback Whales (and they were surprisingly concentrated in the vicinity of the Gorda Banks). There were plenty of cow-calf pairs active in the area (including some very tiny calves that may have been only a few days old), and some ‘rowdy groups’ too that treated us to a rather spectacular show of repeated breaches close to the boat. As we travelled we also enjoyed some nice bow-riding from a rather casual group of Bottlenose Dolphins, loads of leaping Mantas and Mobula Rays, more Striped Marlin and green turtles too.

The sea state remained relatively calm until after lunch when a north westerly breeze picked up as we made our way towards Los Frailes. It was the first time we had really felt the boat move. We arrived at Los Frailes at 1.50pm and set ashore for 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 and we enjoyed some good views of Grey Thrashers, Hooded Orioles, Xantus’ and Costas Hummingbirds along with Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Blue-grey Gnatcatchers, Verdins, and plenty of White-winged Doves, Northern Mockingbirds, House Finches and House Sparrows. A few people had some nice views of California Quails too. Our trip ashore also gave us some nice opportunities to take a closer look at the peninsulas wonderful array of cacti and dessert plants.

Having spent a couple of hours ashore, we returned to the Searcher a little after 4pm and got ourselves ready for the first snorkel of the trip. This gave everyone a great chance to get familiar with the equipment and enjoy a wonderful variety of colourful rocky reef fishes (as well as a welcome chance to cool down a little). However, there was still a brisk wind and the when we raised anchor and we had a slightly bumpy ride north as we ate dinner and enjoyed Robs presentation on diving adaptations in marine mammals.

Day 9

Sunday 31st March

Isla San Jose, Punta Colorado

It was an amazing start to the day as we anchored in time to watch the first rays of the sun illuminate the wonderful sandstone cliffs at Punta Colorado. After breakfast, we boarded the skiffs and went ashore for a walk along one of the islands beautiful arroyos. Exploring the cactus scrub alongside the rocky arroyo bad threw up some nice bird sightings including a handsome pair of Phainopepla, Costas Hummingbirds, lots of Verdins and some nice Orange-throated Zebra-tailed Lizards too.

However, perhaps the best find was a beautiful Speckled Rattlesnake (that was found by Phil) found nestling in the centre of the path and we had more than enough opportunities to get a really good look at the animals perfect camouflage against the pale granite boulders.

Despite having amazingly good visibility and lovely warm water, the vast numbers of Jellyfish that had concentrated in the bay meant it would have been fool hardy to snorkel so, after an extended stop ashore, we returned to the boat, raised anchor and headed straight out for some whale watching. Shortly after leaving our anchorage, we encountered at least three different Blue Whales that were feeding close to the shore. At least one of the animals was fluking regularly and we stayed to watch it for a while. There were a few scattered Bottlenose Dolphins in the area too and plenty of Mantas. We saw several Mantas ‘finning’ at the surface and lots jumping clean out of the water. We continued to explore the area and after lunch we encountered more Bottlenose Dolphins (a few of which came in close to the boat and spent some time bow-riding), a raucous bull Sea Lion that followed us around for a while and few good looks more whales including a Humpback, two Fin Whales and another Blue Whale.

By late afternoon, we had started to forge our way north in search of more when a few more sightings of small groups of commons and Bottlenose Dolphins eventually culminate in an amazing feeding frenzy of more than 2000 Long-beaked Common Dolphins, thousands of Black-vented, Pink-footed and Sooty Shearwaters, Brown Pelicans, Arctic (Parasitic), Pomarine, Long-tailed and South Polar Skuas (Jaegers), Frigatebirds, and Gulls all frantically massed around giant balls of baitfish. It was an amazing spectacle and immensely difficult to take in the enormity of everything that was going on around us. We watched from the midst of the mêlée for nearly 2 hours surrounded by birds, thousands of dolphins and an amazing sunset.

As the light faded we headed in towards Isla Santa Catalina where we anchored for the night and set up a light over the side of the boat that drew in large shoals of Green Jacks, young Yellowtail and a few flying fish too.

Day 10

Monday 1st April

Isla Santa Catalina

We woke at anchor off Catalina and set ashore early for an extended stay ashore (once again, the jellyfish swarms were inhibiting our chance to snorkel). We spent some time exploring the islands wonderful arroyos filled with Giant Elephant Cardon and Giant Barrel Cacti. We found numerous Emerald-Tailed Lizards, Desert Iguanas and the odd Chuckwalla, plus several of Baja Peninsulas endemic Catalina “Rattleless” Rattlesnake so it was an excellent morning for the reptile enthusiasts. We found some good birds too with, amongst other things, some good views of Northern Cardinal, Loggerhead Shrike, Peregrine and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers.

Returning to the Searcher for some much needed refreshment, we then set off on skiffs to investigate some nearby Common Dolphin activity that we could see just off shore. As we slowly motored out in the tiny boats we could never have imagined what we would end up seeing. Thousands of dolphins (possibly 4000+) spread out over about a square mile of ocean had brought together tonnes of baitfish into another massive bait ball and, once again everyone was along to join the feast and we were in the midst of it all (this time in much smaller boats that placed us even closer to the action).

The water all around us shimmered with tiny fish and squadrons of dolphins drove them into tight balls under the hulls of our tiny skiffs before surging through the fish and stunning them with their tails. Hundreds of pelicans were diving all around us and surfacing with so many fish in their throat pouches that they could barely swallow them fast enough to avoid the greedy gulls and frigates from snatching the fish that were hanging from the edges of their beaks. We could hear the sounds of the dolphin's echo-location and vocalisation resonating through the aluminium hulls of the boat and we even witnessed (at extraordinarily close range) a female dolphin struggling to get a newly born calf to breathe. We watched for what seemed like an eternity as the tiny calf floundered at the surface and struggled to remain upright in the water. It was a touching scene as the mother persistently tried to correct the calves position in the water and repeatedly rammed the tiny calf in the sternum to keep it breathing and it was a great relief to us all when, just as we all thought that it was all over for the tiny dolphin, the mother gave the calf just one last thump and we watched as the calf corrected itself in the water and swam off alongside mum! To witness this piece of animal behaviour amidst such a spectacular flurry of wildlife activity was possibly the most stunning (and harrowing) wildlife events I could ever hope to see. We all left the event, dumbstruck by the experience and all feeling unbelievably privileged. I do not expect to see anything approaching it again in my lifetime...

We eventually returned to Searcher for lunch and raised anchor and set off to look for whales. It was hardly surprising that within 30 minutes we encountered more Common Dolphins followed by two large groups of several hundred Bottlenose Dolphins too. The Bottlenose Dolphins were supercharged and they entertained us with an extended display of high energy behaviours and some spectacular breaching activity. Away from the bait balls, there were very few birds around we did manage to finally get brief views of a Red-billed Tropicbird and a solitary Laughing Gull too. Despite an entire afternoon of intense dolphin activity, the area was quiet for large whales so we eventually headed in early to anchor off Agua Verde where a few people took the chance to have a refreshing dip off the boat as the sun slowly set over the hills around us.

Day 11

Agua Verde

Tuesday 2nd April

We awoke at anchor off Agua Verde and after breakfast we went ashore for some leisurely birding. There were plenty of birds active and we enjoyed some nice views of Lark and White-crowned Sparrows, Phainopepla, California Quail, as well many of the usual suspects. A few people opted to wander off alone in order to spend some time photographing birds and they had some nice views of Black-headed Grosbeak and Western Tanager too. There were some nice shore birds around too and along with American Oystercatchers, Spotted Sandpipers, Great and Snowy Egrets, and a few people had some nice views of Wandering Tattler too.

By 10am we were all back onboard and ready to go snorkelling along the shallow bay near our anchorage. The visibility wasn't at its best but it gave us all some more opportunities to see more of the wonderful diversity of rocky reef fish species as well as providing some people with some nice views of a large Octopus and some sizable Scorpionfish too. Non-snorkelers in the group had the chance to enjoy a great skiff ride around 'Solitary Rock' and had some nice views of Peregrine and Red-tailed Hawk as well a numerous Brandts Cormorants, Brown Pelicans and Gulls.

At 11.40am we raised anchor and ventured out for another afternoon of searching for marine mammals and seabirds and, shortly after lunch we encountered our first group of Long-beaked Common Dolphins. It was a sizable group of about 1000+ animals (although, by this stage, our senses had been slightly numbed to the enormity of such things by our previous encounters) and they energetically played around the boat. There were two Humpbacks and a few California Sea Lions amongst them too and it was difficult to know what to watch for a while.

The afternoon was relatively quiet (given the wildlife sightings we had become accustomed to) and people took the opportunity to relax in the sunshine while a constant vigil was maintained by the team on the roof. At 1.30pm we had a brief sighting of a Dwarf Sperm Whale logging at the surface but it went into a dive before we could get a really good look at it. Nonetheless, everyone enjoyed the chance to relax for a while and the perfect conditions meant that we had some spectacular sightings of several Striped Marlin, a couple of small Hammerhead Sharks and lovely Mantas too. We finally caught up with a pair of Red-billed Tropicbirds and managed to get a good look at them sitting on the water.

At a little after 6pm we anchored alongside Isla San Jose and enjoyed a wonderful barbecue and Margaritas on the back deck as the sun went down. It was an amazing end to a relaxing day.

Day 12

Wednesday 3rd April

San Jose Mangroves- Los Islotes

The day started with a beautiful sunrise... We boarded the skiffs for a pre-breakfast ride to the mangroves but unfortunately the low water and rapid tidal flow out of the mangrove channels meant that we couldn't enter the mangroves properly so we set ashore close by and explored the mangroves alongside the beach. It was a lucky escape. The mangroves were teeming with unprecedented numbers of biting midges and any prolonged stop, even on the beach, became quite uncomfortable. While this was enough to drive some people back to the boat early, a few of us ventured on and endured the midges to get some great looks at some stunning male Mangrove Warblers as well as finding numerous shells and bones along the pristine beach.

At 8am we raised anchor and headed south towards Los Islotes in search of more marine life. It was a relatively quiet journey but we spotted a single group of about 300 Common Dolphins and a smaller group of Bottlenose that played around the boat for a while. We dropped anchor at Los Islotes at about 10am and we all loaded up for a skiff ride around the island and its wonderful bird and Sea Lion colonies. There were plenty of Blue-footed and Brown Booby's on the cliffs and people enjoyed some nice views of the Blue-footed Booby's comical courtship behaviour, as well as some great opportunities to watch them actively diving for fish. There were also plenty of Sea Lions around too and we watched at close range while mothers nursed young and young bulls jostled and jostled for the best spots to haul out. There were plenty of playful pups in the water too and the warm, crystal clear waters were looking increasingly inviting to many of the keen snorkelers.

Having returned to the Searcher after a wonderful skiff ride, we all hurriedly donned our snorkelling gear, ready for our chance to swim with the Sea Lions. The conditions were perfect and we all enjoyed over an hour in the crystal clear water surrounded by curious and playful Sea Lions and a myriad of colourful reef fish. Despite everything we had seen on our trip...this experience was a real highlight for many and it was with some reluctance that we eventually had to get out of the water.

After lunch, the Searcher raised anchor and we began our long journey back towards Cabo. However, not long after leaving Los Islotes, we encountered two Blue Whales that we couldn't help investigating and, after a careful approach, one of the animals obliged us with a great look at its flukes. Shortly after this we happened upon a massive shoal of Mobula Rays that treated us to a magnificent display leaping and splashing that rivalled much of what we had seen from the dolphins.

As we continued our journey south, the pace was more sedate and everyone had a chance to relax and enjoy the ride and it wasn't until just before dinner that we were treated to another show from a group of Long-beaked Common Dolphins that can in to bow ride and to play in the wake of the boat. At our final dinner together onboard the boat we all shared our stories and highlights from the trip before making our way out onto the bow to enjoy a fantastic display of bioluminescence under a beautiful starry sky. It was the perfect way to draw our voyage to a close.

Day 13

Thursday 4th 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 and everyone was starting to feel a little low. The grim reality that our wonderful journey would soon end started to creep into everyone's psyche. However, our spirits were buoyed by another wonderful start to the day, and we enjoyed a leisurely continental breakfast as the boat refuelled and we said our final farewells to the crew and disembarked the Searcher for the last time.

Our later flight time meant we had a little time to explore and Captain Aaron 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. It was a pleasant wind-down at the end of our trip and a little birding on the estuary and a cold beer in the shade of one of the bars in town certainly beat a prolonged wait at the airport. It also gave us a chance to see Cactus Wrens, Pied-billed Grebes, Ruddy Ducks, Redheads, Gadwall and Blue-winged Teal , Great Egrets, Black-crowned Night Herons, White-faced Ibis, Belted Kingfisher and Osprey as well as a small King Snake and a Spiny-tailed Iguana.

However, all good things must come to an end and we eventually met up with our taxi's; continuing our journey to the airport and onwards home. This was yet another amazing trip to this wonderful part of the globe. With perfect weather conditions we were treated to playful Grey Whales and curious Sea Lions, Fluking Blue Whale encounters that left us speechless, and a repeated bonanza of Dolphin activity to rival any of natures great wildlife events...this trip was nothing short of perfect.

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Blue Whale's tail



Mangrove Warbler

Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

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

	Common name	Scientific name	April/May												
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
27	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		✓				✓						✓	
28	Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</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>		✓											
38	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>		✓									✓		
39	American Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓									✓		
40	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>		✓									✓		
41	Redhead	<i>Aythya Americana</i>											✓		
42	Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>		✓									✓		
43	Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>		✓											
44	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>							✓						
45	Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>			✓			✓							
46	California Quail	<i>Callipepla californica</i>	h										✓		
47	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>		✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>		✓		✓				✓	✓	✓			
49	Coopers Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>		✓											
50	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		✓		✓							✓	✓	
51	Crested Caracara	<i>Caracara cheriway</i>												✓	
52	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>													
53	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓	✓						✓	✓	✓		
54	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓										✓	
55	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>		✓									✓		

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			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
56	American Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>			✓	✓						✓				
57	American Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>			✓							✓	✓	✓		
58	Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>		✓												
59	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>							✓							
60	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>		✓						✓						
61	Snowy Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>							✓							
62	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>		✓												✓
63	Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>		✓												
64	Willet	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>		✓				✓	✓							
65	Wandering Tattler	<i>Heteroscelus incanus</i>														✓
66	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularia</i>		✓									✓	✓	✓	
67	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus</i>		✓					✓							✓
68	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>		✓				✓	✓							✓
69	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>		✓					✓							
70	Surfbird	<i>Aphriza virgata</i>						✓								
71	Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>			✓	✓										
72	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓				✓	✓							
73	Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>						✓	✓							✓
74	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>		✓												✓
75	Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>		✓												
76	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalopus fulicarius</i>			100's				✓	✓						
77	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</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	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>					✓					✓				
82	Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Larus philadelphia</i>			100's	✓			✓							
83	Sabines Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>			100's					✓						✓
84	Heermann's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	April/May												
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
85	Laughing Gull	<i>Larus atricilla</i>									✓			✓	
86	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>		✓	✓									✓	
87	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>		✓	✓										
88	Yellow-footed Gull	<i>Larus livens</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	
89	Western Gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						✓
90	Royal Tern	<i>Sterna maxima</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
91	Elegant Tern	<i>Sterna elegans</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
92	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>				✓	✓								
93	Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>			✓										
94	Scripp's Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus scrippsi</i>			✓						✓				
95	Guadalupe Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus hypoleucus</i>			✓						✓				
96	Craveri's Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus craveri</i>										✓			
97	Cassins' Auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>			✓	✓		✓							
98	Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cyclorhynchus psittacula</i>			✓			✓							
99	White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>		✓									✓	✓	✓
101	Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>									✓		✓	✓	✓
102	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓											✓
103	Liliac-headed Parrot	<i>Amazona finschi</i>		✓											
104	White-throated Swift	<i>Aeronautes saxatalis</i>												✓	
105	Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>			✓										
106	Costa's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte costae</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Xantus' Hummingbird	<i>Hylocharis xantusii</i>									✓			✓	
108	Black-chinned Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus alexandri</i>		✓											
109	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle alycon</i>		✓				✓							✓
110	Gila Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes uropygialis</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
111	Ladder-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides scalaris</i>											✓		
112	Nuttall's Woodpecker	<i>Picoides nuttalli</i>		✓											
113	Acorn Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes formicivorus</i>		✓											

	Common name	Scientific name	April/May												
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
114	Ash-throated Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus cinerascens</i>								✓		✓			
115	Black Phoebe	<i>Sayornis nigricans</i>		✓											✓
116	Cassin's Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus vociferans</i>		✓											
117	Loggerhead shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>										✓			
118	Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>													
119	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>													✓
120	Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>		✓											
121	Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>		✓											
122	Oak Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus inornatus</i>		✓											
123	Western Scrub Jay	<i>Aphelocoma californica</i>		✓											
124	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		✓						✓			
125	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>		✓											
126	Verdin	<i>Auriparus flaviceps</i>										✓	✓	✓	
127	Bushtit	<i>Psaltriparus minimus</i>		✓											
128	Cactus Wren	<i>Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus</i>											✓	✓	
129	Blue-grey Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila caerulea</i>										✓	✓		
130	California Gnatcatcher	<i>Polioptila californica</i>								✓	✓				
131	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>		✓											
132	Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>		✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
133	Grey Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma cinereum</i>								✓					
134	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓											✓
135	Phainopepla	<i>Phainopepla nitens</i>									✓		✓		
136	Mangrove Warbler	<i>Dendroica bryanti</i>							✓						✓
137	Audubon's Warbler	<i>Dendroica auduboni</i>		✓											
138	Wilsons Warbler	<i>Wilsonia pusilla</i>													✓
139	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>		✓											✓
140	Western Tanager	<i>Piranga ludoviciana</i>											✓		
141	Black-headed Grosbeak	<i>Pheucticus melanocephalus</i>		✓											✓
142	Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>										✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	April/May													
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
143	California Towhee	<i>Pipilo crissalis</i>		✓												
144	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>		✓								✓				
145	Black-throated Sparrow	<i>Amphispiza bilineata</i>									✓		✓			
146	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>					✓		✓							
147	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>		✓												
148	Lark Sparrow	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>											✓			
149	White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>		✓									✓		✓	
150	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓											✓	
151	Redwing Blackbird	<i>Agelaius tricolor</i>		✓												
152	Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>		✓												
153	Great-tailed Grackle	<i>Quiscalus mexicanus</i>		✓												
154	Hooded Oriole	<i>Icterus cucullatus</i>								✓				✓		
155	House Finch	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>		✓						✓	✓	✓		✓		
156	Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis psaltria</i>		✓						✓	✓			✓		

Mammals

1	Gray Whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>		8+		✓	✓									
2	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>			9				4		5			✓		
3	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>		9+							2					
4	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		18+	✓	✓		✓	35	1			2			
5	Dwarf Sperm Whale	<i>Kogia simus</i>											2			
6	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>							400+							
7	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	600+			✓	
8	Long-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus capensis</i>				✓			✓		2000+	1000+	1000+	✓		
9	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	✓	800+												
10	Pacific White-sided Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus obliquidens</i>				✓										
11	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓												
12	California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>		✓	✓											

	Common name	Scientific name	April/May													
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
14	Guadalupe Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus townsendi</i>				200+										
15	Big Freetailed Bat	<i>Tadarida molossa</i>										✓		✓		
16	California Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus beecheyi</i>		✓												

Reptiles

1	Green Sea Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
2	Desert Iguana	<i>Dipsosaurus dorsalis</i>												✓		
3	Common Chuckwalla	<i>Sauromalus ater</i>										✓	✓			
4	Zebra-tailed Lizard	<i>Callisaurus draconoides</i>									✓			✓		
5	Western Fence Lizard	<i>Sceloporus occidentalis</i>		✓												
6	Hunsaker's Spiny Lizard	<i>Sceloporus hunsakeri</i>											✓			
7	Side-blotched Lizard	<i>Uta stansburiana</i>					✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		
8	Orange-throated Whip Tail	<i>Cnemidophorus sp.</i>										✓		✓	✓	
9	San Lucan Rock Lizard	<i>Petrosaurus thalassinus</i>									✓					
10	Baja Spiny-tailed Iguana	<i>Ctenosaura hemilopha</i>													✓	
11	Speckled Rattlesnake	<i>Crotalus mitchellii</i>										✓				
12	Baja (Rattleless) Rattlesnake	<i>Crotalus enyo</i>											✓			

Fish

1	Balloonfish	<i>Diodon holocanthus</i>										✓	✓		✓	✓	
2	Barber Fish	<i>Johnrandallia nigripectoralis</i>									✓					✓	
3	Beaubrummel	<i>Eupomacentrus flavidatus</i>									✓			✓	✓		
4	Bluechin Parrotfish	<i>Scarus ghobban</i>									✓				✓		
5	Blue-spotted Jawfish	<i>Opistognathus rosenblatti</i>													✓		
6	California Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus californicus</i>											✓	✓	✓		
7	Cortez Angelfish	<i>Pomacanthus zonipectus</i>									✓				✓		
8	Cortez Chub	<i>Kyphosuselegans</i>									✓	✓			✓		
9	Cortez Damselfish	<i>Eupomacentrus rectifraenum</i>									✓				✓		
10	Cortez Rainbow Wrasse	<i>Thalassoma lucasanum</i>									✓			✓	✓		

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			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
11	Fine-spotted Jawfish	<i>Opistognathus</i> sp.													✓	
12	Giant Damselfish	<i>Microspathadon dorsalis</i>									✓				✓	
13	Giant Hawkfish	<i>Cirrhitidae cirrhitus</i>													✓	
14	Hammerhead Shark	<i>Sphyrna mokarran</i>									✓					
15	Hogfish	<i>Bodianus diploaenia</i>													✓	
16	King Angelfish	<i>Holocanthus passer</i>									✓				✓	
17	Mexican Goatfish	<i>Mulloidichthys dentatus</i>									✓				✓	
18	Manta Ray (Moghula)	<i>Manta birostris</i>									✓			✓	✓	
19	Ocean Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>								1						
20	Panamic Green Moray	<i>Gymnothorax castaneus</i>									✓					
21	Panamic Sergeant Major	<i>Abuldefduf troschelii</i>													✓	
22	Remora (Suckerfish)	<i>Remora remora</i>													✓	
23	Reef Cornetfish	<i>Fistularia commersonii</i>									✓				✓	
24	Scalloped Hammerhead Shark	<i>Sphyrna lewini</i>									✓		✓	✓		
25	Scissortail Damselfish	<i>Chromis atrilobata</i>									✓				✓	
26	Scorpionfish	<i>Scorpaena guttata</i>												✓	✓	
27	Spotted Boxfish	<i>Ostracion meleagris</i>													✓	
28	Striped Marlin	<i>Tetrapturus audax</i>									✓					
29	Yellowtail Surgeonfish	<i>Prionurus punctatus</i>													✓	

Butterflies

Pipevine Swallowtail , *Battus Philenor*Orange Sulphur , *Colias eurytheme*Gulf Fritillary , *Agraulis vanillae*Anise Swallowtail , *Papilio zelicaon*Cloudless Sulphur , *Phoebis sennae*Silver-banded Hairstreak , *Chlorostrymon simaethis*Checkered White , *Pontia protodice*Orange Skipperling, *Copaeodes aurantiaca*