

# Whales & Dolphins of Monterey Bay

Naturetrek Tour Report

9-16 September 2006

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Images and report compiled by Peter Dunn



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## Day 1

### Saturday 9th September

After a gruelling journey the group arrived at SF international airport to be met by Peter. However Betty's luggage did not arrive with the flight which delayed our departure somewhat. Once all the paperwork was completed we settled back for our 2 hour drive to the hotel Seabreeze in Pacific Beach for a well deserved sleep following a day of travelling.

## Day 2

### Sunday 10th September

While the rest of the group explored the immediate area of the hotel, finding Yellow and Townsend Warblers in the local cemetery, Peter and Betty went to the local supermarket to replace some items from Betty's missing case and supplies for lunch. We re-grouped at 10am and drove down to the Marina where we found a number of species to add to the list. A Grey (Red) Phalarope fed with the numerous Red-necked Phalaropes, while in the harbour areas single Pigeon Guillemot, female Harlequin Duck and two Belted Kingfishers mingled with the numerous Brown Pelicans and Brant's Cormorants. We then slowly made our way around the Monterey headland stopping at various pull-ins to watch the wildlife and have our picnic lunch. Amongst the many cormorants and pelicans we found Willets, Black Turnstones, whilst amongst the kelp we had good views of sea otters resting on their backs. We later headed out around 17 mile drive where a productive sandy beach attracted many Sanderling, with which we found Hudsonian Curlew (Whimbrel), Semi-palmated Plover, Killdeer, two Western Sandpipers, a Least Sandpiper and a locally scarce Baird's Sandpiper. We completed the day with visits to the famous Pebble Beach golf course, the well photographed 'lone cypress' and a final sea watch producing a number of Arctic Skuas, Sooty Shearwaters and a Rhinoceros Auklet.

We dined at a local diner before retiring back at our inn, looking forward to our first whale watch in the morning, Oh and Betty's bag had arrived!

## Day 3

### Monday 11th September

Our first day whale watching found us down on Fisherman's Wharf at 8.30 eating our breakfast of bagels, fruit juice and muffins. We headed out on the Sea Wolf II towards the fog. About half an hour out we found our first whales, Humpbacks feeding on the edge of the fog. Sooty Shearwaters and California Sea Lions were in attendance waiting for the whales to drive fish to the surface. We soon lost the whales in the fog so we headed west towards the edge of the canyon. On route three members of the group were lucky enough to see a Black-footed Albatross as it passed close to the boat and into the sun, and a number of Pink-footed Shearwaters preceded the boat. As the fog cleared three Risso's Dolphins loafed close to the boat allowing good photo opportunities. We turned back east towards the coast and came across some more Humpbacks which surfaced close to the boat and the attending seabirds attracted both Pomarine and Arctic Skuas. The skipper spotted some breaching Humpbacks back out to sea so we headed in their direction. As we closed in we witnessed some excellent 'tail-slapping' close to the boat. It was time to head back to harbour for lunch, on route we saw a Rhinoceros Auklet on the sea and the fog clear to hot sunshine.

After lunch, some of the group opted to go back out on the boat to photograph the whales while others explored Fisherman's Warf. We regrouped at 5pm as the fog rolled back in and after a brief visit to the headland

at Lover's Point where we only saw Black Turnstones and a distant sea otter, we returned to our hotel stopping briefly to photograph Black-tailed Deer.

We dined at the Fishwife restaurant that evening, sampling some of the areas specialities.

## Day 4

## Tuesday 12th September

We had an appointment with the scientists at the Big Sur Ornithological Lab this morning so we left the hotel at 7am to arrived in time for the first 'net round' at 8am. We were met by Nellie and Karen who gave short presentations on the work of BSOL before allowing the group to visit the net sites. During the morning we saw a number of species 'in the hand' including the similar Song and Lincoln Sparrows, gaudy Wilson's and Yellow Warblers and both Warbling and Hutton's Vireo. Birds seen in the area included Wrentit, Bushtit, California Quail, Cooper's Hawk, Stella's Jay and California Towhee. Following an al fresco brunch, Nellie told us about the reintroduction scheme for the California Condor with a tip on where to see them. We said our farewells at midday and headed south along highway 1 through the Big Sur and arrived at the site locally known as 7 pines to look for the condor. To our amazement we came across seven sitting on the rock face, very close! There were at least 3 adults with the group and all were wing and radio tagged and we met the researcher who was following them.

Heady from our success with the condors we headed south for the 60 mile drive to an Elephant Seal beach near San Simeon. We were not disappointed with many young/females present and at least three huge males. It was mid afternoon when we started the drive back to Monterey, stopping for refreshments at Ragged Point and also near Bixby Bridge where we watched at least seven humpbacks feeding offshore.

The end of an excellent day was back at Carrews diner for steak, shrimps or chicken.

## Day 5

## Wednesday 13th September

Our second whale watch trip of the holiday and all but Frank boarded the boat on Fisherman's Quay. Frank decided to explore the town and sample an American breakfast! We headed out on flat calm seas under cloudy skies but these soon turned to slightly choppy waters as the winds and tide changed. Sooty Shearwaters constantly streamed past the boat and occasional Rhinoceros Auklets popped up amongst the Guillemots. Our first whale was again a Humpback feeding with its entourage of Californian Sea lions. We stayed with this individual for some time, picking up some 'spooned' Pomarine Skuas and a Forster's Tern on the way. Captain Richard then headed out to the shelf edge to look for albatrosses for us but all we found were large numbers of Pink-footed Shearwaters and new for all, some nice Buller's Shearwaters with their black/white and grey upper wings. We had further sightings of Humpbacks while weaving back and forth over the canyon and a few Harbour Porpoises with the ever present Sooty Shearwaters around the boat. We headed back towards Monterey in the cool cloudy weather which changed to warm sunshine as we reached the harbour.

After lunch of locally made sandwiches, crisps fruit and cookies we headed inland along Carmel Valley Road in rising temperatures. It proved to be too hot for the target species (Yellow-billed Magpies) but we did get good views of Western Bluebirds, American Kestrel, Wild Turkeys and a White-breasted Nuthatch found by Philip.

The temperature was beginning to tell on the group so we headed back to foggy Monterey to relax and enjoying another excellent meal at the Fishwife restaurant.

## Day 6

## Thursday 14 September

Today we planned to visit the coastal marshes around Moss Landing and Elkhorn Slough, so after a leisurely breakfast we headed north at 9am. Our first stop was at Zmudowski National Beach where there is a freshwater lagoon behind the sand dunes. As we approached through the strawberry fields, finches, blackbirds and warblers scattered from the weed fringed verges. Amongst the Song Sparrows and Lesser Goldfinches we found up to five Bobolinks, a scarce bird in California and a new county bird for a local birder we showed them to! A graceful White-tailed Kite hovered close by and both Double-crested Cormorants and Pied-billed Grebes fed on the lake. The reed fringes held Black-crowned Night-heron and hundreds of Pacific Tree Frogs which dropped from the reeds like rain as we passed.

We left this excellent site and arrived at Jetty Road, Moss Landing. The edges of the marsh held numerous waders, mainly Western and Least Sandpipers, with Hudsonian Whimbrel, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwits and Willets in similar numbers. Another White-tailed Kite preened in dead tree and Elegant Terns outnumbered Forster's Terns over the water. Closer to the estuary mouth we found over 20 sea otters loafing in the water and affording great photographic opportunities. A quick visit to the beach produced four Snowy Plovers before we adjourned to Phil's Snack Bar in Moss Landing for lunch. A small pool near to the lunch spot held five Black-necked Stilts, our only Greater Yellowlegs and roosting Snowy Egrets and Black-crowned Night-herons.

We then turned down Dolan Road to visit Moonglow Dairy, a working farm which allows access for birders to some excellent wader pits. Large numbers of Least and Western Sandpipers fed on the muddy fringes and many Red-necked Phalaropes were spinning in the water. We found single Spotted, Solitary and another Baird's Sandpipers with these birds and two Pectoral Sandpipers. On the far pit we found more Stilts and a White-faced Ibis, very similar to Glossy Ibis. The afternoon light was beginning to fade so we made a brief visit to Kirby Road landing bordering Elkhorn Slough where there more large numbers of Red-necked Phalaropes and a few Ring-billed Gulls before we headed back south to Pacific Grove.

We dined at Carreus again that evening and retired to bed ready for our last whale watch of the holiday.

## Day 7

## Friday 15th September

Our final day in Monterey and we spent the morning whale watching. The fog had gone and it was sunny but the wind had strengthened from the south and the sea was choppy with a moderate swell. Sooty, Pink-footed and Buller's Shearwaters were sighted and we saw our only Northern Fulmar. After a short while we found our first of five Humpbacks, one of which came up right alongside the boat giving excellent views. The trip was cut short because of the strengthening wind and we were back on shore by 12.30pm. After a pleasant lunch in a local café (Frank's local diner where he was well known for his breakfast appetite!), the group walked along Cannery Row, which used to be the centre of the sardine industry and now a series of gift shops and restaurants. We finished our afternoon with a visit to the headland where we found three Black Oystercatchers and a short walk in the cemetery where there were Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Yellow Warblers and many Anna's Hummingbirds.

That night we had a 'slap-up' meal at the Fishwife restaurant before retiring to prepare for our journey home.

## Day 8

## Saturday 16th September

We were packed and on the road to San Francisco by 7am and arrived at the airport at 9.20am. We said our goodbyes to John and Shirley who were staying on for a few days to site see around San Francisco and we were soon on our first leg of our flight home via Detroit. Both flights arrived well on time and on Sunday morning it was time to go our separate ways with great memories of Humpback Whales, Californian Condors and 115 species of American west coast birds.

## Species lists

### Birds

Common name	September 2006					
	10	11	12	13	14	15
Great Northern Diver	1					
Pied-billed Grebe				1	10	1
Black-footed Albatross		1				
Fulmar						1
Buller's Shearwater				C		1
Pink-footed Shearwater		C		C		3
Sooty Shearwater	6	C		A		A
Brandt's Cormorant	A	A	A		C	A
Double-crested Cormorant					C	
Pelagic Cormorant	C	C			1	C
Brown Pelican	A	C	C	C	A	A
Snowy Egret					8	
Great Blue Heron	1	1	1		10	
Great White Egret	2				10	1
Black-crowned Night-heron					6	
White-faced Ibis					1	
Canada Goose	1			8	5	
Mallard	6		1	1	10	
Harlequin Duck	1					1
Turkey Vulture	4			C	C	
Californian Condor			8			
White-tailed Kite					2	
American Harrier			1			
Sharp-shinned Hawk			1			
Cooper's Hawk			2			
Red-shouldered Hawk				1	1	
Red-tailed Hawk			3	4	6	
Osprey			1			
American Kestrel				2		
Peregrine Falcon			1			
Wild Turkey				14		
California Quail			C			
American Coot	2	2			10	1
Black Oystercatcher	1					3
Black-necked Stilt					10	
Grey Plover	3				2	
Semipalmated Plover	2		1		8	
Killdeer	3	1	1		15	
Snowy Plover					4	
Marbled Godwit	2				C	
Hudsonian Curlew	2		1		6	
Long-billed Curlew			1		4	
Greater Yellowlegs					1	
Solitary Sandpiper					1	
Spotted Sandpiper					1	
Willet	C				C	
Turnstone	4				1	1
Black Turnstone	10	2		1		
Knot		2				

Common name	September 2006					
	10	11	12	13	14	15
Sanderling	C		C	5		5
Western Sandpiper	2				C	
Least Sandpiper	1				C	
Baird's Sandpiper	1				1	
Pectoral Sandpiper					2	
Red-necked Phalarope	C	C		C	A	C
Grey Phalarope	1			2		3
Pomarine Skua		2		6		1
Arctic Skua	6	6		2		2
Heermann's Gull	C	C	C	C	C	C
Ring-billed Gull					8	
California Gull	1	6	C			C
Western Gull	A	A	A	A	A	A
Elegant Tern	C	C	C	C	C	C
Forster's Tern				1	C	
Guillemot	3	C		C	6	C
Pigeon Guillemot	1	1		1	1	3
Rhinoceros Auklet	1	1		12		3
Feral Pigeon	C	C			C	C
Collared Dove					1	
Mourning Dove			1	1	1	2
Anna's Hummingbird	2	8	2	2	10	10
Belted Kingfisher	2		1			
Acorn Woodpecker	2		2	4	2	2
Nuttall's Woodpecker			1(heard)			
Red-shafted Flicker			1			
Black Phoebe	1		3		10	2
Sand Martin					1	
Barn Swallow	C	C	6	C	C	4
Cliff Swallow					1	
Western Marsh Wren					2	
Bewick's Wren			1			
Northern Mockingbird			1		1	
California Thrasher			1			
Western Bluebird				4		
Swainson's Thrush			1			
Wrentit			1			
Bushtit			6		6	1
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	1		2			2
Oak Titmouse				1		
White-breasted Nuthatch				1		
Brown Creeper						1
Steller's Jay			5	1		
Scrub Jay	C	C	C	C	C	C
American Crow	A	A	A	A	A	A
Starling	C	C	C	C	C	C
House Sparrow	C	C	C		C	
Hutton's Vireo			1	1		
Warbling Vireo			1			
Lesser Goldfinch					8	
House Finch				1	2	
Yellow Warbler	1		2		4	3
Townsend's Warbler	1	1				1

	September 2006					
Common name	10	11	12	13	14	15
Wilson's Warbler			2			
Song Sparrow			3		C	
Lincoln's Sparrow			3			
White-crowned Sparrow	2				5	2
Golden-crowned Sparrow			1			
Dark-eyed Junco	6					
Spotted Towhee			2			
California Towhee			2	3		
Red-winged Blackbird			5		C	
Tricolored Blackbird					6	
Brewer's Blackbird	C	A	A	A	A	C
Bobolink					5	

## Mammals

	September 2006					
Common name	10	11	112	13	14	15
Californian Ground Squirrel	C	C	C	C		C
Black-tailed Deer (mule Deer)	C	C	3			C
Brown Rat	1					
Rabbit sp.				3+		
Californian Seal Lion	C	C		C	C	C
Harbour (Common) Seal	C	C		C	C	C
Northern Elephant Seal			25+			
Sea Otter	8	8+		10	20+	6
Humpback Whale		12	7	4+		5
Risso's Dolphin		3				
Harbour Porpoise				2		1

## Other species

	September 2006					
Common name	10	11	112	13	14	15
Pacific Tree Frog					C	
Monarch Butterfly				1		
Painted Lady						5+
Ocean Sunfish				1		