Whales & Dolphins of Monterey Bay

Naturetrek Tour Report

30th August – 6th September 2023



Long-beaked Common Dolphin



Sea Otter



Humpback Whale



Humpback Whale

Tour report and images by Marcus John



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Tour participants: Marcus John and Tim Melling (leaders) with six Naturetrek clients

Day 1 Wednesday 30th August

After a smooth flight from London Heathrow to San Francisco, we met up in the arrivals lounge, transferred to our hire cars and headed south to Carmel Valley. Heavy traffic slowed our journey, but several bird species kept us entertained, including Turkey Vultures and Red-tailed Hawks. Upon our arrival at the Contenta Inn, we enjoyed a cold buffet dinner, after which Marcus and Tim gave us a brief introduction to the tour. We headed off to our comfortable bedrooms with a sense of excitement about the wildlife that awaited us!

Day 2

Thursday 31st August

Monterey Bay - Monterey Peninsula

After an excellent breakfast, we drove through Carmel Valley, into Monterey and parked by Fisherman's Wharf. We stopped to admire dozens of California Sea Lions, which were loafing right next to the wharf; the sights, sounds and smells are truly memorable! We walked out onto the wharf itself and on to Discovery Whalewatch, where after the safety briefing, we boarded the Pacifica with skipper Danny and headed out into Monterey Bay. However, before we left the marina, we paused to watch a male Sea Otter close to the boat and had great views of a Belted Kingfisher perched on the mast of a nearby yacht.

It was a cool, cloudy day with a moderate breeze and a noticeable swell, which grew in strength as we motored on. We soon began to see Common Murres and a few tiny Red-necked Phalaropes feeding on the water, whilst Sooty Shearwaters flew low across the waves. Our skipper spotted some dolphins in the distance and soon they were all around us; the crew estimated at least 3,000 Long-beaked Common Dolphins! They swam alongside the boat, riding the bow wave and occasionally leaping clear of the water. It was an amazing encounter with a species that is not, in fact, a common sight in Northern California.

We continued to head west into deeper waters in search of whales and soon saw the tell-tale splash of a Humpback Whale breaching in the distance. We headed over and for the next 45 minutes we stayed with the whale as it lingered at the surface, slapping its flippers and repeatedly breaching. It remained close to us, at one point approaching within just a few metres of the boat. What a way to start our week of whale watching!

At around 1pm, we returned to Fisherman's Wharf and went to the Abolonetti restaurant for a delicious seafood lunch. Then we drove out to Monterey Peninsula for a walk between the John Denver memorial and Point Piños. We had excellent views of several wader species: Black Oystercatcher, Black Turnstone, Whimbrel, Killdeer, Surfbird and Wandering Tattler. The peninsula is a well-known birding hotspot and near Crespi Pond, Tim found a superb male Common Yellowthroat and then a Yellow-rumped Warbler - a great way to complete a memorable day.

Day 3

Friday 1st September

Monterey Bay - Carmel Valley

Today we spent the whole day out in Monterey Bay with both morning and afternoon boat trips. The weather was dull but calm, with flat light, as we set out - ideal conditions for scanning the ocean in search of cetaceans! We headed west and as we entered deeper water, a significant swell began to build. Numbers of seabirds rapidly increased and in addition to the usual Western Gulls and Brandt's Cormorants, we began to see lots of Sooty Shearwaters and Red-necked Phalaropes. Even better, several Ashy Storm-Petrels flew past, one of which came within twenty metres, so that we could see the pale bars on the upper wings.

As we turned towards the north-west, we motored through a large pod of Long-beaked Common Dolphins. They swam all around the boat and once again rode the bow wave, frequently leaping clear of the water. Reluctantly, we left the dolphins behind to seek out larger cetaceans and sure enough, we soon found a group of feeding Humpback Whales, numbering ten in total. We spent the next 30 minutes close to these whales, a wonderful experience!

On our afternoon trip, we headed north along the coast to the deep-water canyon that lies just off Moss Landing. Here we again found a large group of Humpback Whales; incredibly, this time we counted 15 individuals! Views were even better than in the morning, with whales surfacing within thirty metres of the boat - close enough for us to smell their breath! As we returned to Monterey, we again met up with the pod of Common Dolphins, many of whom swam over to join us.

Before dinner, some of us drove up Carmel Valley to Tassajara junction. We saw several new bird species, but the undoubted highlight was a Great Horned Owl, which was perched up in a roadside telegraph pole - a great way to finish the day.

Day 4

Saturday 2nd September

Carmel Valley - Moss Landing

We started our day with a drive up the Carmel Valley to Tassajara junction, stopping briefly on the way when we re-found the Great Horned Owl, sat in a tree near where we had seen it the previous evening. At the junction, we had great views of the master tree of a group of Acorn Woodpeckers and also saw a White-breasted Nuthatch in the same tree. Another new species for the tour was Lark Sparrow, several of which fed near the road.

We arrived at North Jetty Road mid-morning and enjoyed great views of a range of waders including Black-necked Stilt, Semipalmated Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Western Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper and Long-billed Dowitcher. Sea Otters swam near the shore on the rising water, and both Elegant and Caspian Terns were roosting quite close to the road. We walked up onto the dunes to scan the beach, where we found hundreds of Sanderlings and Marbled Godwits, the latter running in tight formation as the waves flowed and receded.

Our next stop was Zmudowski Beach, where we found Wrentit. Normally an elusive species, we enjoyed close and prolonged views of this unusual warbler. After a time, we headed back to Moss Landing for lunch at Phil's Snack

Shack. Whilst eating our excellent sandwiches and burgers, we enjoyed photographing a very tame Red-necked Phalarope, which swam just metres from the shore.

Our destination for the afternoon was the Moonglow Dairy, where we were able to walk right down to the edge of Elkhorn Slough, a large body of water that is a National Estuarine Research Reserve. Here we found more waders, including our first Spotted Sandpiper. More Sea Otters were feeding out in the water and hundreds of Brown Pelicans were sitting along the shore and flying overhead. The abundance of wildlife is a testament to the high level of environmental protection that this site enjoys.

Back around the nearby cattle feedlots, we saw big flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds, numbering in the hundreds. Among them, we found both Bronze-headed Cowbirds and Tri-coloured Blackbirds. Careful scanning revealed an American Goldfinch, along with three juvenile Red-tailed Hawks. As we drove back out, dozens of California Ground Squirrels scurried around the fence posts by the road.

Day 5

Sunday 3rd September

Monterey Bay - Highway 1 (Big Sur) - Carmel Valley

The weather was calm and clear as we set out from Fisherman's Wharf and after seeing two close Sea Otters, we headed over to the moored yachts to get close views of an immature Red-footed Booby that sat out in full view. This is a very unusual sight in Monterey, and we felt lucky to have seen it so well, especially as it is a mega-rarity in Europe!

As we headed out west into the open sea, we encountered a small pod of Common Dolphins, which briefly approached the boat before heading off north. Soon after this, we found a first Humpback Whale, but as it soon dived and did not reappear for some ten minutes, the skipper decided to try further out into the Pacific Ocean.

Despite the calm conditions, there were plenty of seabirds including several hundred Red-necked Phalaropes and Sooty Shearwaters. At least twenty Ashy Storm-Petrels were a real highlight, but better still was a close Blackfooted Albatross, which sat on the sea some twenty metres from us!

Having found no more whales, we headed north, back to the deep waters off Moss Landing, and once again we found a large group of Humpbacks feeding in this area. We spent the next 45 minutes in the company of at least six whales, including a large female known as Ripcurl (due to the shape of her pectoral fin). Eventually, it was time to return across the bay, though we enjoyed another close encounter with a pod of Common Dolphins on the way back to Monterey.

In the early afternoon, we drove south on Route 1 to visit Andrew Molera State Park. However, the holiday weekend traffic was so bad that we stopped to eat our sandwiches by one of the iconic bridges of this famous road, before returning to the hotel. On the plus side, this gave us time to walk around the grassland, copses and well-vegetated gardens of Carmel Valley village. A Red-shouldered Hawk sat up in a nearby tree; other interesting species included American Goldfinch, Oak Titmouse and Nuttall's Woodpecker. We had great views of a Western Ladder Lizard and butterflies included Common Buckeye and California Sister.

Day 6

Monday 4th September

San Simeon - Ragged Point - Sand Dollar Beach

Today we set off after breakfast to visit the Northern Elephant Seal colony at San Simeon, which lies some 100 miles south of Monterey. Due to a landslide, we could not drive south on Route 1, so we had to leave the coast, head inland and drive down Route 101, before heading west to join the coast road south of San Simeon.

The sun was shining when we arrived, which made the coastal scenery even more spectacular. Around twenty Elephant Seals were hauled out on the narrow beach, resting up before the high tide. After watching them for a few minutes, we continued walking along the coastal path, enjoying the panoramic views. Hundreds of Brown Pelicans were cruising along the rocky shore and several Sea Otters were feeding in the kelp.

When we walked back to the seal beach, the tide had come in and was lapping over the Elephant Seals, causing them to shuffle around and look for new resting places. This, in turn, led to some aggressive sparring between the younger males, bellowing and fighting for several minutes - a fascinating insight into the social life of this most unusual mammal. These males can grow up to five metres in length and weigh over three metric tons. When they leave the safety of the beach, they migrate northwards to their coastal feeding grounds, from Washington to Alaska. The females, on the other hand, head into open ocean, and forage in the north-eastern Pacific, as far west as Hawaii. All of them have to avoid the Great White Sharks that linger offshore, not to mention Orca!

We continued north on Route One, almost as far as the landslide, before stopping for lunch at the Sand Dollar Beach car park. As we ate our sandwiches, Ian spied a large raptor flying very low overhead and it turned out to be a California Condor! We thought it would fly away but it perched at the top of one of the tall pines that flanked the car park. We enjoyed prolonged views before it took flight and soared away across the mountain slopes above the road. It had been an incredibly close encounter with the rarest and largest bird in North America.

We drove back down Route One and saw several new birds including American Kestrel, Northern Harrier, White-throated Swift and Violet-green Swallow. Several groups of Mule Deer and dozens of California Ground Squirrels helped to pass the time on our long drive back to the Carmel Valley.

Day 7

Tuesday 5th September

Monterey Bay - Monterey Peninsula

Our last trip out with Discovery Whale Watch proved to be truly memorable. We began by heading out west and into the deeper waters of the Pacific Ocean. Seabirds included several Rhinoceros Auklets and our first Cassin's Auklet. Whilst the latter species is dark grey and rather nondescript, Rhinoceros Auklets have a distinctive stout orange bill with pale vertical protrusions at the base. On seeing these birds, other passengers were somewhat bemused when Tim and Marcus called out, "Rhino"! As we entered deeper waters a Black-footed Albatross flew past and then to our surprise, alighted on the water very close to the boat. We had ample time to admire it and take photos before it took to the wing again.

Next, we came across a pod of Risso's Dolphins, easily identified from their long and erect dorsal fins and pale grey colour - the result of scarring from squid, their main prey, and jousting amongst themselves. Their rather languid movements were in stark contrast to the Common Dolphins which we encountered soon afterwards! Dozens of these surrounded the boat, riding the bow wave and frequently breaching clear of the water. It was an unusual opportunity to compare the two species side by side.

We had a brief encounter with a Humpback Whale but when it stayed below the water for over seven minutes, the skipper decided to look around the deep waters off Moss Landing. Here we had more luck; a number of Humpbacks were feeding in a loose group and soon we were surrounded! Whales surfaced very close to the boat and one in particular was attracted to an area of kelp. It stayed at the surface, wrapping the kelp around its flippers and indulging in "spy-hopping" behaviour. We spent around half an hour watching this whale at close quarters - what a privilege!

Some of us spent the afternoon visiting the world-famous Monterey Aquarium, whilst the rest of the group went for a walk around Monterey Peninsula. The highlight here was a Wandering Tattler, which we were able to photograph at point-blank range - a great way to round off our wildlife watching in Monterey.

Our last evening was spent in the Trailhead Cafe, where we had a delicious meal and celebrated such a successful tour in this special part of California. There were so many highlights, but the close encounters with so many Humpback Whales were unforgettable!

Day 8

Wednesday 6th September

Thanks to a mid-afternoon flight, we had plenty of time for breakfast and to pack our belongings in readiness for the journey home. The traffic was much lighter than on our drive down, and we arrived at San Francisco airport in good time. We said our goodbyes and enjoyed a pleasantly uneventful flight back home to London.

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Species lists

Mammals

		August/September 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
Virginia Opossum	Didelphis virginiana						1		
European Rabbit - I	Oryctolagus cuniculus				1				
California Ground Squirrel	Spermophilus beecheyi	1	√	2	√	4	√	√	
Coyote	Canis latrans						1		3
Sea Otter	Enhydra lutris		20	5	10	10	√	20	
Californian Sea Lion	Zalophus californianus		√	✓		√	✓	√	
Northern Elephant Seal	Mirounga angustirostris						✓		
Harbour Seal	Phoca vitulina		1	20	30	30	1	30	
Long-beaked Common Dolphin	Delphinus capensis		5000	1000		200		50	
Risso's Dolphin	Grampus griseus							15	
Killer Whale	Orcinus orca		1						
Harbour Porpoise	Phocoena phocoena			4					
Humpback Whale	Megaptera novaeangliae		1	20		15	1	8	
Mule Deer	Odocoileus hemionus		6		2	2	✓		2

Birds (H = Heard only)

I = Introduced; E = Endemic		August/September 2023								
Common name Scientific name		30 31		1	2	3	4	5	6	
Canada Goose	Branta canadensis		✓	√	√			√	✓	
Gadwall	Mareca strepera				1					
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos			1	√	1				
Pintail	Anas acuta				5					
Surf Scoter	Melanitta perspicillata				2	5				
California Quail	Callipepla californica			10	5	1	2			
Wild Turkey - I	Meleagris gallopavo			√	√	✓	20		50	
Common Loon	Gavia immer					1				
Black-footed Albatross	Phoebastria nigripes		1			1		6		
Ashy Storm Petrel	Oceanodroma homochroa		2	12		20		10		
Black Storm Petrel	Oceanodroma melania		1					2		
Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis		1	1		2				
Sooty Shearwater	Ardenna grisea		✓	√		✓		✓		
Pink-footed Shearwater	Ardenna creatopus		20	2		2		20		
Pied-billed Grebe	Podilymbus podiceps		1		1					
Clark's Grebe	Aechmophorus clarkii				1					
Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax				1					
Great Blue Heron	Ardea herodias			2	5	1	1		1	
Great Egret	Ardea alba			2	20		1		1	
Snowy Egret	Egretta thula				30					
Brown Pelican	Pelecanus occidentalis		✓	√	√	✓	√	√	✓	
Red-footed Booby	Sula sula			1		1				
Brandt's Cormorant	Phalacrocorax penicillatus		√	√	√	√	√	√		
Pelagic Cormorant	Phalacrocorax pelagicus		2	2		1		20		
Double-crested Cormorant	Phalacrocorax auritus		2	5	√	✓		√		
Turkey Vulture	Cathartes aura		√							

I = Introduced; E = Endemic		August/September 2023 30 31 1 2 3 4 5 6							
Common name	Scientific name	30	31	1	2	3		5	6
California Condor	Gymnogyps californianus						1		
Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus					2	4		
Cooper's Hawk	Accipiter cooperii					1			1
Northern Harrier	Circus hudsonius						1		
Red-shouldered Hawk	Buteo lineatus	1		1	2	3	1		3
Red-tailed Hawk	Buteo jamaicensis	2	1		5	5	12	4	√
Black Oystercatcher	Haematopus bachmani		10					4	
Black-necked Stilt	Himantopus mexicanus				30				
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola		30		40				
Semipalmated Plover	Charadrius semipalmatus				50			1	
Killdeer	Charadrius vociferus		1		5			8	
Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus		6		20			20	
Long-billed Curlew	Numenius americanus				30				
Marbled Godwit	Limosa fedoa				50				
Black Turnstone	Arenaria melanocephala		20				√	20	
Surfbird	Calidris virgata		2					1	
Sanderling	Calidris alba				500				
Least Sandpiper	Calidris minutilla				100				
Western Sandpiper	Calidris mauri				50				
Long-billed Dowitcher	Limnodromus scolopaceus				5				
Red-necked Phalarope	Phalaropus lobatus		50	100	100	200		50	
Red Phalarope	Phalaropus fulicarius		1	1					
Spotted Sandpiper	Actitis macularius				1				
Wandering Tattler	Tringa incana		1					1	
Willet	Tringa semipalmata				√				
Sabine's Gull	Xema sabini					2			
Heermann's Gull	Larus heermanni		5	100	100	100		100	
Ring-billed Gull	Larus delawarensis				1				
California Gull	Larus californicus		2	10	20	10		10	
Western Gull	Larus occidentalis		√	√	√	√	√	√	_
Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia			1	20	•	•		
Elegant Tern	Thalasseus elegans			10	70	2		30	
Royal Tern	Thalasseus maximus			5					
Arctic Tern	Sterna paradisaea		2			1			
Forster's Tern	Sterna forsteri			1					
Parasitic Jaeger	Stercorarius parasiticus			3		2		1	
Common Murre	Uria aalge		√	√		√		√	
Pigeon Guillemot	Cepphus columba		_	2		•		-	
Cassin's Auklet	Ptychoramphus aleuticus							1	
Rhinoceros Auklet	Cerorhinca monocerata		10	5		5		20	
Rock Dove - I	Columba livia		√	√	√	√		√	
Band-tailed Pigeon	Patagioenas fasciata	3	3	-		12	12	5	3
Eurasian Collared Dove - I	Streptopelia decaocto	3		5	√	√	√	5	5
Mourning Dove	Zenaida macroura	2	2	10	20	10	20	5	5
Great Horned Owl	Bubo virginiensis			1	1				
White-throated Swift	Aeronautes saxatilis						30		
Anna's Hummingbird	Calypte anna		20	20	20	20	30	20	20
Belted Kingfisher	Megaceryle alcyon		1	<u> </u>				1	1
Acorn Woodpecker	Melanerpes formicivorus	6		10	20	20	√	· √	

I = Introduced; E = Endemic				Augu	tember	er 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
Nuttall's Woodpecker - E	Dryobates nuttallii				2	1			1
Northern Flicker	Colaptes auratus								1
American Kestrel	Falco sparverius						4		
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus		1				2		
Black Phoebe	Sayornis nigricans		3		2	1	3	2	
Steller's Jay	Cyanocitta stelleri	5		4	4		4		
California Scrub Jay	Aphelocoma californica	2	3	20	20	20	20	10	10
American Crow	Corvus brachyrhynchos		√	✓	✓	√	√	√	√
Northern Raven	Corvus corax	1				2	20		
Oak Titmouse	Baeolophus inornatus				1	1	1		1
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	Poecile rufescens		1		1	1			2
Violet-green Swallow	Tachycineta thalassina						1		
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	Stelgidopteryx serripennis		3	5					
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica		5	20	20	10	30	10	
American Cliff Swallow	Petrochelidon pyrrhonota			10			2		
American Bushtit	Psaltriparus minimus		1	20	20	20	20	20	20
Wrentit	Chamaea fasciata				2		h		
Bewick's Wren	Thryomanes bewickii				1	1	2	1	
White-breasted Nuthatch	•				3		1		2
Common Starling - I	Sturnus vulgaris	√		√	√	1	√	√	√
Western Bluebird	Sialia mexicana		2	12		2	3	5	8
American Robin	Turdus migratorius								1
House Finch	Haemorhous mexicanus		2	10	20	10	30	20	10
Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra						1		2
American Goldfinch	Spinus tristis				1				
Lesser Goldfinch	Spinus psaltria					2			2
Lawrence's Goldfinch	Spinus lawrencei				1				
Pine Siskin	Spinus pinus				1				
Common Yellowthroat	Geothlypis trichas		2						
American Yellow Warbler	Setophaga aestiva						1		
Audubon's Warbler	Setophaga auduboni		1						
Townsend's Warbler	Setophaga townsendi							1	
Wilson's Warbler	Cardellina pusilla								1
Tricolored Blackbird	Agelaius tricolor				10				
Red-winged Blackbird	Agelaius phoeniceus	20			√		√		
Brown-headed Cowbird	Molothrus ater				√		•		
Brewer's Blackbird	Euphagus cyanocephalus		10	10	√	10	20	10	
Song Sparrow	Melospiza melodia		1	1	1		1	1	
White-crowned Sparrow	Zonotrichia leucophrys		1		5		1	1	
Dark-eyed Junco	Junco hyemalis		1	3	5	5	8	4	
Lark Sparrow	Chondestes grammacus				5				
California Towhee	Melozone crissalis			4	4		2	2	2
Western Tanager	Piranga ludoviciana								3

Others

Common name	Scientific name						
Butterflies							
Western Pygmy-blue	Brephidium exilis						
Gray Hairstreak	Strymon melinus						
Pine White	Neophasia menapia						
Cabbage White	Pieris rapae						
Sachem	Atalopedes campestris						
Mournful Duskywing	Erynnis tristis						
Fiery Skipper	Hylephila phyleus						
Umber Skipper	Poanes melane						
Sandhill Skipper	Polites sabuleti						
Monarch	Danaus plexippus						
Common Buckeye	Junonia coenia						
Lorquin's Admiral	Limenitis lorquini						
Mylitta Crescent	Phyciodes mylitta						
West Coast Lady	Vanessa annabella						
Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta						
Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui						
American Painted Lady	Vanessa virginiensis						
Black Swallowtail	Papilio polyxenes						
Western Tiger Swallowtail	Papilio rutulus						
Odonata							
Vivid Dancer	Argia vivida						
Pacific Forktail	Ischnura cervula						
Western Forktail	Ischnura perparva						
Common Green Darner	Anax junius						
Blue-eyed Darner	Rhionaeschna multicolor						
Cardinal Meadowhawk	Sympetrum illotum						
Others							
Honey Bee	Apis mellifera						
White-lined Sphinx	Hyles lineata						
Western Fence Lizard - N	Sceloporus occidentalis						
Pacific Tree Frog Pseudacris regilla							