

Whales & Dolphins of Monterey Bay

Naturetrek Tour Report

27th August – 4th September 2025



Humpback Whale by Marcus John



Humpback Whale by James Walsh



Sea Otter by Marcus John



Bobcat by James Walsh

Tour report by Marcus John



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Marcus John and Will Crombie (leaders) with ten Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Wednesday 27th August

London – San Francisco Airport – Carmel Valley

After a smooth flight from Heathrow for most of us, we all met up in the arrivals hall at San Francisco International and headed off on the monorail to pick up our rental vehicles. Once aboard, we set off on the long drive down to the Carmel Valley, a journey of over three hours in late afternoon traffic. On the way, we saw several Turkey Vultures and Red-tailed Hawks.

Once we had all checked in to our large and comfortable rooms, it was time for a cold buffet in the dining room and an introduction from Marcus and Will, the two leaders for our week in Monterey. Everyone then headed off to bed, with excitement mounting for our first whalewatching trip.

Day 2

Thursday 28th August

Monterey Bay – Pacific Grove coast

Many of us were up early and headed out for a birding walk across the old Carmel Valley airfield, a short walk from our hotel. Although they are common in central California, it was great to get good views of local specialities like California Scrub Jay and Western Bluebird. After a hot breakfast and plenty of coffee, we drove down through Carmel Valley and into Monterey. It was with a real sense of anticipation that we walked along Fisherman's Wharf for the first time, to meet the friendly staff at Discovery Whale Watch. The weather was very warm and sunny with light winds, meaning great visibility for finding whales! After a short introductory talk and safety briefing from the local guide, we boarded the *Chubasco* and set off on our first boat trip.

As we headed out of the harbour, we had our first encounter with California Sea Lions congregating on the wooden jetties and along the breakwater, where hundreds of Brandt's Cormorants joined them. Before we left the harbour, we had our first views of Sea Otters as they floated serenely on their backs in the sheltered water. Two Harbour Seals seemed inconspicuous in comparison to the noisy Sea Lions.

As we headed out into open waters, we soon encountered small groups of Sooty Shearwaters. The local guide called out "blow!" and we were soon watching our first Humpback Whales. They surfaced quite close to the boat and we were able to pick out cow-calf pairs among the loose aggregations that are such a feature of Monterey Bay. Over the next three hours, we saw approximately thirty Humpbacks, some surfacing so close to the boat that you could hear the blow as they exhaled. What a fantastic start to our whalewatching adventure!

After a delicious lunch at the Abalonetti Restaurant, we went for a leisurely walk along the beautiful coastline of Pacific Grove. Here we found a range of shorebirds, including Black Oystercatcher, Killdeer and Hudsonian Whimbrel. We also had our first encounters with California Ground Squirrels, which appeared from among the rocks and mats of Hottentot Fig as soon as any food was on offer!

Day 3

Friday 29th August

Monterey Bay (all day)

Most of us took another walk along the airfield before breakfast, and saw several new birds including White-tailed Kite, Red-shouldered Hawk and Nuttall's Woodpecker.

Today was a full day at sea, with both morning and afternoon boat trips. We set off at 9.00am on board the *Pacifica*, with skipper Danny Frank. The weather was cooler and cloudy, but with only light winds. We had not gone far when we encountered a small pod of Risso's Dolphins. As is usual for this species, they were swimming slowly together at the surface, affording excellent views. Their rather lugubrious progress belies their true nature, for these are dynamic hunters of squid and octopus; they can stay underwater for up to thirty minutes and chase their prey down to depths of 600 metres. Their tall dorsal fins can lead to confusion with Killer Whales, but adult Risso's are usually light grey or even whitish in coloration, and heavily scarred.

We were soon out in very deep water, over the wider part of the undersea canyon, and were excited to spot our first Black-footed Albatross, a huge seabird with a distinctive stiff-winged flight action and dark chocolate-brown plumage. We saw a total of twenty Humpback Whales during the morning; most were actively feeding and spending only a limited amount of time at the surface.

For our afternoon trip, we were back on board the *Chubasco* and this time, we saw two Harbour Porpoises as we cleared the harbour. We went north into the heart of Monterey Bay, where the deep-water canyon narrows towards Moss Landing. This area is often teeming with Humpbacks, and so it proved today: we had excellent views of several whales as they socialised at the surface. We watched as they rose up with their heads clear of the water, before slamming down to make an enormous splash; this behaviour is known as chin-slapping. Other individuals were pushing their tails and lower bodies out of the water, before noisily splashing back down again, a behaviour called tail-lobbing. It was quite the spectacle, with lots of photographic opportunities!

This evening we visited a local restaurant called the Running Iron, where we enjoyed typical country cooking in a very welcoming and lively atmosphere.

Day 4

Saturday 30th August

Big Sur coast

Some of us rose early this morning to head much further up the valley into the ranch lands that are so typical of rural California. Open grassland with scattered oak trees provides perfect grazing for cattle, and good wildlife habitat. We stopped to scan the fields around Tassajara Junction and had wonderful views of a range of raptors: Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and American Kestrel. A brief American Barn Owl was an excellent find.

Our caterer, Jerome, likes to provide a different breakfast every day, and today we enjoyed cinnamon toast, fruit and yogurt. Soon it was time to board our vehicles and head off for a drive south along Route One, better known as the Big Sur Highway. This is often cited as the most scenic route in the USA, and it is certainly the most famous

stretch of road on the west coast. Hugging the rocky coastline, it crosses over a sequence of gravity-defying bridges that span a series of deep gorges. As we headed south, we enjoyed panoramic views out across the Pacific Ocean. We stopped to take photographs at the iconic Bixby Bridge, which has featured in several films. We drove as far as the Big Sur River, where the coniferous forest includes many iconic Coastal Redwoods.

We spent the afternoon at Andrew Molera State Park, a beautiful area with a diversity of wildlife. We strolled down the mile-long path to the wide beach, where the kelp-beds held several Sea Otters. The tide was very high, which limited walking, but we didn't need to go far to find some new birds for the trip. Highlights were a distinctive Surf Scoter (seen well through the scope), alongside three Red-throated Loons (or divers, as we would call them at home). On the walk back to the entrance we enjoyed close views of two pretty Wilson's Warblers, a Wrentit and a flock of Chestnut-backed Chickadees. After eating our sandwiches at the shady picnic tables, it was time to head back along the Big Sur Highway and to the hotel for some downtime before dinner.

Day 5

Sunday 31st August

Carmel Valley – Soledad – Monterey – Monterey Bay

Our pre-breakfast walk took us to Dampierre Park, where we walked around the little league baseball ground to the riverine woodland that stretches along the valley floor. A family group of Acorn Woodpeckers showed well, and two Northern Flickers were also present. Better still, we had close views of several Steller's Jays, which is such a characterful bird. As we drove out, we stopped to admire a covey of California Quails, so familiar from the early Disney cartoons.

Our destination this morning was Pinnacles National Park, but we only got as far as the town of Soledad, just beyond which we found the access road closed due to a forest fire. We were able to consult with the firefighters and were told that the fire was under control, but the road would not be reopened for several hours. We had no choice but to head back to the hotel and then into Monterey, where we visited El Estero Park to eat our sandwiches and to go for a walk around the shallow lake. Among the commoner species were a family of Pygmy Nuthatches, and we saw our first Red-winged Blackbirds. On the lake itself were both American Coots and Pied-billed Grebes.

This afternoon we were going out on a different boat, the *Sea Wolf*. The sky was blue and the sea calm as we followed a similar routine to previous trips. We saw both Harbour Seals and Sea Otters on our way out of the harbour. We also enjoyed watching a flock of Hudsonian Whimbrels and several Elegant Terns. However, excitement rose when we suddenly changed direction: a Humpback Whale had been seen breaching in the distance. There is never any guarantee that such behaviour will persist, but before too long, we had amazing views of a prolonged bout of extraordinary social behaviour, including multiple full breaches: this is what we had come to see! It was amazing to be so close to these huge animals as they launched themselves out of the water, twisting in mid-air before crashing back into the ocean: one of the great wildlife spectacles! That everyone managed to get excellent photographs was a real bonus.

Day 6

Monday 1st September

Año Nuevo State Park – Moss Landing/Elkhorn Slough

Another pre-breakfast walk in Dampierre Park was a nice way to start the day. We had more good views of Dark-eyed Junco, Savannah Sparrow, Song Sparrow, as well as both California and Spotted Towhees.

Our destination today was Año Nuevo State Park, home to the largest colony of Northern Elephant Seals in California. It was quite a long drive, but with little traffic we made good time and arrived as planned mid-morning. It was a long walk to the beaches where the seals haul out, but it was very scenic and we stopped frequently to look for birds. White-crowned Sparrows were quite common, and we found our first American Yellow Warblers and a Violet-green Swallow.

From the elevated coastal viewpoints, we had good views of mainly immature young seals, though there were a couple of bigger males among them. Northern Elephant Seals are the largest true seals in the northern hemisphere; males can exceed four metres in length and weigh over four tonnes. Their name comes from the large proboscis of the male, which can be inflated and used to make the roaring calls that are part of their famously belligerent breeding display. They can dive to 750 metres and stay underwater for up to thirty minutes. They also have one of the longest migrations of any mammal, of up to 20,000 kilometres!

Having enjoyed a bit of “sparring” between young males, we returned to our vehicles and drove off to have lunch at a trendy roadside bar in Santa Cruz, where a “pop-up” pizza oven provided a deliciously different lunch! Then it was time to drive back south, to visit the famous birding location of Moss Landing.

It was cool and foggy as we parked between the beach and the brackish lagoon that forms the outer section of Elkhorn Slough. The tide was high, and there were thousands of roosting birds for us to enjoy. Among the twelve species of wader present were hundreds of Western and Least Sandpipers, many Marbled Godwits and Semipalmated Plovers, several Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Curlews, Short-billed Dowitchers and a single Snowy Plover (this last being a real speciality of the area). We also found our first California Gulls and Double-crested Cormorants. Photographers greatly appreciated close views of a pair of White-tailed Kites that were hunting over the saltmarsh, sometimes flying close overhead!

Day 7

Tuesday 2nd September

Monterey Bay – Monterey Aquarium/ Point Lobos State Park

This morning was our last boat trip from Fisherman’s Wharf, this time aboard the *Kabuna*. Although our focus was always on cetaceans, the seabirds of Monterey are justifiably famous too. Western Gulls, Brown Pelicans, Pink-footed and Sooty Shearwaters were the most obvious species, the last often occurring in their hundreds. Today we also saw two Red-necked Phalaropes; Monterey naturalists believe that this tiny wader has a particular affinity with Blue Whales. We watched Elegant and Arctic Terns, and a Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua), a piratical species which forces other birds to disgorge their food, which they then catch and eat in mid-air! Another unusual bird seen on today’s trip was the Rhinoceros Auklet, which sports a vertical “horn” at the base of its bill.

It was a breezy morning, but we didn't let that put us off: as they say on Fisherman's Wharf, "wind's up, whales up!". And sure enough, we had more close encounters with Humpbacks, totalling an incredible thirty animals by the end of the morning. It was a fitting end to a memorable week of fantastic whalewatching.

In the afternoon, a few people opted to visit the world-famous Monterey Aquarium, while the rest of us went for a walk at Point Lobos State Park. We enjoyed a relaxing stroll around the picturesque coastline, finding more Sea Otters, and shorebirds like Black Oystercatcher and Black Turnstone.

Our last evening was spent eating dinner at the Trailside Café, where despite the lacklustre service, we enjoyed excellent food, beer and the best of company. The highlights of the tour were discussed, but it was impossible to see beyond the day that we witnessed those breaching Humpback Whales!

Day 8

Wednesday 3rd September

Carmel Valley – San Francisco Airport

Before breakfast, a few of us went for a final drive above the valley, and we were richly rewarded when Will found a Bobcat! We watched it hunting for over half an hour, which even gave Marcus time to return to the hotel and pick up the others. Although somewhat distant, it remained almost constantly in view, enabling us to watch it through the scope. What an extraordinary way to round off our tour!

Having dropped two clients off at Monterey Airport, we set off on the long drive back north. Clear roads and good weather meant that we arrived in San Francisco with plenty of time to spare. We filled up with fuel and had time for a snack at the gas station before heading into the airport. We said our goodbyes here, as some were flying home, while others were extending their holiday to see the sights of San Francisco.

It had been a wonderful week, made even better by being in such convivial company. The undoubted highlights had been the amazing views of so many Humpback Whales, but we had also seen a variety of other mammals, including the iconic Sea Otter and the elusive Bobcat. We had enjoyed a diversity of birds, including fifteen species of wader and amazing views of the enigmatic White-tailed Kite. The wonderful coastal and mountain scenery had also contributed to a tour that will live long in the memory.

Day 9

Thursday 4th September

Return home

We arrived safely home in the UK.

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Species lists

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	August-September 2025							
		27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3
Creeping Vole	<i>Microtus oregoni</i>				2				
California Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus beecheyi</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Mexican Free-tailed Bat	<i>Tadarida brasiliensis</i>					✓			
Hawaiian Hoary Bat	<i>Lasiurus cinereus</i>				✓	✓			
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>			6					
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			2					
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		30	20		10		30	
Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>		4		2	1	2		
Bobcat	<i>Lynx rufus</i>							1	
California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>						45		
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		2		1	2	2	3	
Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>		7	3	1	5		12	

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	August-September 2025							
		27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3
I= introduced									
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		15	10		14	20		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓		✓	✓		
Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>				1				
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>							1	
California Quail	<i>Callipepla californica</i>				40	20			
Wild Turkey - I	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>			15	10			6	
American Black Swift	<i>Cypseloides niger</i>				3				
Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Band-tailed Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas fasciata</i>					✓	✓		
Eurasian Collared Dove - I	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓		
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaidura macroura</i>				✓	✓			
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>					3	1		
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>			2		5		1	
Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>		3				2	1	
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>						8		
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>		1			1	2		
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>						10		
Snowy Plover	<i>Anarhynchus nivosus</i>						1		
Hudsonian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>		1	1		22	10		
Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>						6		
Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>						✓		
Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>						8		
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>			25		6	6	2	
Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>						✓		
Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>		1	1			4	1	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>						15		
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>						✓		
Pectoral Sandpiper	<i>Calidris melanotos</i>								
Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>						✓		

I= introduced		August-September 2025							
Common name	Scientific name	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3
Semipalmated Sandpiper	<i>Calidris pusilla</i>						✓		
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>			2				2	
Elegant Tern	<i>Thalasseus elegans</i>		1	5		6	25	3	
Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>					3			
Heermann's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Western Gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>						5	1	
Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>			2				1	
Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>		3	20				4	
Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cephus columba</i>		2			1			
Common Murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Red-throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				3				
Black-footed Albatross	<i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>			1					
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	
Pink-footed Shearwater	<i>Ardenna creatopus</i>			3		3		20	
Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Urile penicillatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritum</i>						2		
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>						6	1	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			1			20	1	
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>		1	1	2	2	1	1	
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-tailed Kite	<i>Elanus leucurus</i>			1		1	3		
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>				2	1			
Red-shouldered Hawk	<i>Buteo lineatus</i>			1	1	1		1	
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
American Barn Owl	<i>Tyto furcata</i>				1				
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megasceryle alcyon</i>			1				1	
Acorn Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes formicivorus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Nuttall's Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates nuttallii</i>			2					
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>					2			
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>				4		1		
Black Phoebe	<i>Sayornis nigricans</i>		1		1		1	1	
Hutton's Vireo	<i>Vireo huttoni</i>			1					
Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>					8			
California Scrub Jay	<i>Aphelocoma californica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>						✓		
Oak Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus inornatus</i>					1			
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	<i>Poecile rufescens</i>				✓	✓	✓		
Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>						1		
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
American Bushtit	<i>Psaltiriparus minimus</i>			30		10	10		
Wrentit	<i>Chamaea fasciata</i>			H	1	2	H		
Bewick's Wren	<i>Thryomanes bewickii</i>		1			1			
Northern House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>				1				
Pygmy Nuthatch	<i>Sitta pygmaea</i>					3			
California Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma redivivum</i>		2						
Common Starling - I	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Bluebird	<i>Sialia mexicana</i>		8	6					
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>		1						

I= introduced		August-September 2025							
Common name	Scientific name	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3
House Sparrow - I	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				✓	✓			
House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>		8	2					
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>		2	2		4	2		
White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>		4				10	1	
Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>						1		
Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>				4	1	2		
California Towhee	<i>Melospiza crissalis</i>		1	1	2	4			
Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>				1		1		
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>		✓	✓		✓			
Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>			✓	✓				
Orange-crowned Warbler	<i>Leiothlypis celata</i>				2	1			
American Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga aestiva</i>						2		
Wilson's Warbler	<i>Cardellina pusilla</i>				2				

Reptiles

Common name	Scientific name
Western Fence Lizard - N	<i>Sceloporus occidentalis</i>
California Garter Snake	<i>Thamnophis sirtalis infernalis</i>

Fishes

Common name	Scientific name
Salmon Shark	<i>Lamna ditropis</i>
Ocean Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name
Western Tiger Swallowtail	<i>Papilio rutulus</i>
Orange Sulphur	<i>Colias eurytheme</i>
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>
Lorquin's Admiral	<i>Limenitis lorquini</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
American Lady	<i>Vanessa virginiensis</i>

Dragonflies

Common name	Scientific name
Common Green Darner	<i>Anax junius</i>
Blue-eyed Darner	<i>Rhionaeschna multicolor</i>
Cardinal Meadowhawk	<i>Sympetrum illotum</i>