

Whales & Dolphins of Monterey Bay

Naturetrek Tour Report

3rd – 11th September 2025



Humpback Whale



Humpback Whale



Killer Whale



Sea Otter

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 (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Wednesday 3rd September

London – San Francisco Airport – Carmel Valley

After the smooth flight from Heathrow landed on time, we all met up in the arrivals hall at San Francisco International and headed to the vehicle conveniently situated in a nearby parking lot. 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 American Crows. At the hotel, we were surprised when a White-tailed Kite flew over.

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 introductory talk from Marcus. Everyone then headed off to bed, with excitement mounting for our first whalewatching trip.

Day 2

Thursday 4th September

Monterey Bay – Pacific Grove coast

Many of us were up early and went out for a birding walk along Chapparal Road, just a short drive from our hotel. Among other common species, we had our first look at Red-shouldered Hawk and a flock of the aptly-named Chestnut-backed Chickadees.

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 Whalewatch. The weather was rather foggy, with light winds, not unusual for this time of year in Monterey. After a short introductory talk and safety briefing from the local guide, we boarded the *Pacifica* and set off on our first boat trip.

As we headed out of the harbour, we had our first encounter with the California Sea Lions congregated on the wooden jetties and along the breakwater, alongside hundreds of Brandt's Cormorants. Western and Heerman's Gulls wheeled above the boat, as squadrons of Brown Pelicans flew low above the waves.

As we headed out into open waters, we encountered small groups of Sooty Shearwaters, and it was not long before we found our first Humpback Whale, soon followed by several more. The whales often surfaced very close to the boat, and we were able to pick out cow/calf pairs among the loose feeding aggregations that are such a feature of Monterey Bay. Over the next three hours, we saw approximately twenty Humpbacks, some of which surfaced so close to the boat that we were looking down at their blow-holes! We also came across a pod of about twenty Risso's Dolphins, which are resident in the bay, and which afforded us excellent views as they swam slowly at the surface. Once back on Fisherman's Wharf, we had amazing views of a female Sea Otter with a cub, swimming close in to the jetty.

After a superb lunch at the Abalonetti Restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf, we went for a leisurely walk along the beautiful coastline of Pacific Grove. Mule Deer were feeding on the golf course when we arrived, and as we started our walk, we had our first encounters with California Ground Squirrels. They instantly appeared from among the mats of Hottentot Fig as soon as they suspected any food was on offer! We enjoyed watching another Sea Otter as it swam around a rocky bay, diving for crabs.

Day 3

Friday 5th September

Monterey Bay (all day)

Most of us took a walk along the old Carmel airfield before breakfast, and saw several birds including Nuttall's Woodpecker, House Finch and a small flock of Band-tailed Pigeons.

Today was a full day at sea, with both morning and afternoon boat trips. We set off at 9.00am on board the *Chubasco*, with local naturalist Isaiah. The weather was cool and cloudy, with a moderate breeze. We sailed past the usual California Sea Lions at the harbour mouth, and were soon in among the Humpback Whales once again. We joined a feeding group and had prolonged views as they socialised together, with regular tail-throws, where they raised their tail flukes and lower bodies clear of the surface, before slapping them back down with great vigour! Two whales also indulged in "pec slapping", where the pectoral fins are waved up vertically before being noisily whipped down onto the surface of the water. Humpback Whale fins can be five metres long, the longest of any cetacean. It is these pectoral fins that give them their Latin name of *Megaptera novaeangliae*, literally translated as "large wings of New England". Before we returned to Monterey for a brief lunch break, a Black-footed Albatross flew past, and we saw a bonus Blue Shark!

The afternoon saw us back out on the *Chubasco*, but this time with Maddie as our naturalist. The wind had risen, and the sea was choppy, making it much harder to find whales. However, we did see more Humpbacks, and even had a full breach as we turned to head back in. Birds included Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters, Elegant Terns, and several diminutive Red-necked Phalaropes.

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 6th September

Big Sur coast

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. It was rather misty and very quiet, but we could hear a calling Red-shouldered Hawk. As we walked back towards our vehicle, we came across a flock of busy Bushtits (quite reminiscent of Long-tailed Tits), two beautiful male California Quails, Acorn Woodpeckers, Dark-eyed Juncos and a Spotted Towhee.

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 which span a series of deep gorges. As we headed south, we enjoyed panoramic views out across the Pacific Ocean.

Our first stop was at the beach at Pfeiffer State Park, a stunningly beautiful location. The sun was shining as the rollers crashed onto the sandy beach, burst onto the rocks and through a natural rock arch. Several Wrentits showed well by the parking lot, and a Black Phoebe was flying around the rocky outcrops. When we walked back to the car, we also saw Chestnut-backed Chickadees and a smart Northern House Wren. As we drove out, a warden advised us to visit Seal Beach viewpoint. So, we drove a few minutes south and were soon enjoying the spectacular views of the precipitous cliffs and the brilliant blue sea far below. It was a great view, but we were simply amazed when we realised that a cow/calf pair of Humpbacks was swimming at the surface, close inshore and directly below us! We stood transfixed as they swam past, clearly visible in the clear water, periodically surfacing to blow: it was an awe-inspiring encounter.

We were making an early return to our hotel, planning some downtime before a late afternoon drive, when a raptor caught our attention. We pulled over to enjoy great views of a pair of Golden Eagles as they soared along the Carmel Valley.

We drove up the valley from our hotel in the late afternoon sunshine. As we entered the ranch lands, we saw a superb Coyote walking up a grassy slope and into tree cover, just as Marcus had predicted we might! Up at Tassajara Junction, we found a good range of smaller birds, including Northern Flicker, Western Bluebird and Chipping Sparrow. On the drive back down the valley, we had to stop to watch a family of five White-tailed Kites hovering above the grasslands, in golden evening sunlight.

Day 5

Sunday 7th September

Carmel Valley – Pinnacles National Park – Monterey Bay

Our destination this morning was Pinnacles National Park, where we hoped to find the rare California Condor. We drove through the town of Soledad and through a blackened landscape, where a forest fire had prevented the previous group from entering the park. Thankfully, the damage was not severe and covered a relatively small area, but it was a reminder of the increasing fire risk in the area due to climate change.

It was already getting hot when we set out to walk along the Prewett Point Trail, an easy and flat path that offered panoramic views of the main rock formation. We saw dozens of Turkey Vultures, as well as a Red-tailed Hawk and an American Kestrel, but alas no California Condors. We also added Common Raven and Oak Titmouse to the bird list. Pinnacles is a stunning landscape, so we were glad to have spent the morning there, despite missing out on the condors.

We returned to our hotel, before heading back to Fisherman's Wharf for an afternoon boat trip with Monterey Bay Whalewatch. Once we were aboard, they told us that there had been an exceptional sighting way off in the outer bay, and it was going to take about an hour to get to the location. There was no guarantee that whatever it was would still be there, and they didn't want to "jinx" the possibility, so we were left unaware of our quarry!

When we arrived in the right area, we could see other boats through the fog that had built up around us. Soon a massive dorsal fin came into view, and we knew that we had found a pod of Killer Whales. We spent the next forty minutes following them as they hunted California Sea Lions. There was a huge adult male, a large female, several sub-adults and two calves: seven animals in total. On several occasions, they all surfaced together and we had wonderful views as the fog lifted. At other times, they all disappeared beneath the waves and swam determinedly in the same direction; a splash at the surface indicated that they had killed a sea lion, and this was followed by a frenzy of activity as they surfaced one after the other. Our skipper had to work hard to keep up with them as they pursued another sea lion: it was exhilarating to follow them as they hunted their prey! It was an extraordinary wildlife experience, and one which none of us will ever forget.

Day 6

Monday 8th September

Año Nuevo State Park – Moss Landing

Most joined Marcus on a drive back up the valley to Tassajara Junction before breakfast. It was a beautiful morning, and we found a good range of birds including flocks of Western Bluebirds and House Finches.

Today we visited Año Nuevo State Park, which is 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 in mid-morning. It is a long walk to the beaches where the seals haul out, but it is very scenic and we stopped frequently to look for birds. We saw our first Barn Swallows (the same species as back home, but rufous below), Bewick's Wren, White-breasted Nuthatch and Brewer's Blackbird.

From the elevated coastal viewpoint, we had good views of about three dozen Elephant Seals, including one or two larger males. 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 down to 750m and stay underwater for up to thirty minutes. They also have one of the longest migrations of any mammal, up to 20,000km!

We stopped on our way back to Carmel Valley to spend two hours at the famous birding hotspot of Moss Landing. It was high tide, and the shores of Elkhorn Slough were crammed with roosting birds. We saw a total of eleven species of wader, including Black-necked Stilt, Semipalmated Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Least and Western Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitcher, Willet and Greater Yellowlegs. On the open water were a Clark's Grebe and two Double-crested Cormorants, and we saw our only Snowy Egret of the week. We all agreed that being in close proximity to such an abundance of birds was a very special experience.

Day 7

Tuesday 9th September

Monterey Bay – Big Sur – Pacific Grove

Our last pre-breakfast walk was back at Dampierre Park, and we were not disappointed. The best birds were two Sharp-shinned Hawks, the American cousin of our Sparrowhawk. We also saw a range of other birds, including characterful Steller's Jays and two pretty Chestnut-backed Chickadees.

Our final boat trip with Discovery was aboard the *Kabuna* with naturalist Isaiah. Once again, we had great views of Humpbacks, though a total of five was quite low by our standards! Perhaps more impressive was a big pod of approximately a hundred Risso's Dolphins. We spent a long time getting close views of this special cetacean. As is usual for this species, they were swimming slowly together, but this surface behaviour 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 600m. Their tall dorsal fins can lead to confusion with Killer Whales, but adult Risso's fins are usually light grey or even whitish in coloration, and are heavily scarred.

A little later, we spotted a large dorsal fin, which Isaiah was confident belonged to a Great White Shark; he estimated it to be about four metres in length. Sadly, we missed out on a Leatherback Turtle that had been seen close by, but spotting the dorsal and tail fins of a Blue Shark was some compensation.

In the afternoon, those who chose not to visit the Monterey Aquarium joined Marcus on walks along the Big Sur and Pacific Grove coastal paths. We saw more special birds, including our first Black Turnstones, our second Black Oystercatcher, and an obliging Northern Flicker.

Our final evening was spent eating dinner at the Trailside Café, where we enjoyed excellent food, beer and wine in a relaxing atmosphere. We discussed the highlights of a memorable tour, and found it hard to choose between our amazing Orca encounter and the mother/calf pair of Humpbacks which had passed so close to the Big Sur shoreline!

Day 8

Wednesday 10th September

Carmel Valley – San Francisco

As our flights home were not until the afternoon, we had plenty of time to enjoy a leisurely breakfast before the long drive back to the airport. Clear roads and good weather meant that we arrived in San Francisco with plenty of time to spare.

It had been a wonderful week, made even more memorable by being in such excellent company! There had been so many highlights, from the amazing views of dozens of Humpback Whales to the hunting pod of Orcas. The wonderful coastal and mountain scenery also contributed to a tour that surpassed everyone's expectations.

Day 9

Thursday 11th September

Return to the UK

We arrived home after a long flight, and a fantastic holiday.

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Species lists

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	September 2025							
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Black-tailed Jack Rabbit	<i>Lepus Californicus</i>							1	
Western Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus griseus</i>	1	1		1	1			
California Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus beecheyi</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		20					100	
Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>					7			
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>							2	
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		20	15	2			5	
Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>		4		20		2	4	
Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>				1				
California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>						36		
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		1				22		

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	September 2025							
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>							1	
Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>						10		
California Quail	<i>Callipepla californica</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	
Wild Turkey - I	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>		✓		✓		✓		
Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Band-tailed Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas fasciata</i>			12	6			1	
Eurasian Collared Dove - I	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaidura macroura</i>	1	2		2	2	2		
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>						1	1	
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>					3	2		
Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>						1		
Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>		2					1	
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>						6		
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						12		
Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>						8		
Hudsonian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>		1				2		
Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>						4		
Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>						✓		
Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>						5		
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		4	10		4		12	
Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>						✓		
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>						2		
Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>							3	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>						✓		
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>						✓		
Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>						✓		
Elegant Tern	<i>Thalasseus elegans</i>			2		4		2	
Heermann's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	

Common name	Scientific name	September 2025							
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>						1		
Western Gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>						2		
Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>							3	
Cassin's Auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>							1	
Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cephus columba</i>		1					2	
Common Murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	
Black-footed Albatross	<i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>			2		1			
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardena grisea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Pink-footed Shearwater	<i>Ardena creatopus</i>		10	30		10		20	
Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Urile penicillatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritum</i>						2		
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>						1		
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		1		2	1	8	1	
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>		1	1			3	1	
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White-tailed Kite	<i>Elanus leucurus</i>	1			5		2		
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				2				
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>							2	
Red-shouldered Hawk	<i>Buteo lineatus</i>		1	1	2		1	1	
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>				1	1	1	1	1
Acorn Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes formicivorus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Nuttall's Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates nuttallii</i>			2	H			1	
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>				1			1	
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>				1	1			
Black Phoebe	<i>Sayornis nigricans</i>		1		1		1		
Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>		2		8		1	6	
California Scrub Jay	<i>Aphelocoma californica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>					2	4		
Oak Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus inornatus</i>					2			
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	<i>Poecile rufescens</i>		2		6			2	
Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>				3				
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						✓	✓	
American Bushtit	<i>Psaltirparus minimus</i>				✓		✓		
Wrentit	<i>Chamaea fasciata</i>				3		H		
Bewick's Wren	<i>Thryomanes bewickii</i>		1	H	1		1		
Northern House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>				1				
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>						1		
Common Starling - I	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Western Bluebird	<i>Sialia mexicana</i>			10	10		15		
House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>	2		2	8	6	6		
Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Spinus psaltria</i>			6					
Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>				4				
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>				✓				
White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>						✓		
Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>				1			3	
California Towhee	<i>Melozone crissalis</i>		2	3	4		4	2	
Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>				1			1	
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>						✓		
Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>		2	1		12	1		

Reptiles

Common name	Scientific name
Side-blotched Lizard	<i>Uta stansburiana</i>
Western Fence Lizard	<i>Sceloporus occidentalis</i>
California Garter Snake	<i>Thamnophis sirtalis</i> ssp. <i>infernalis</i>

Fishes

Common name	Scientific name
Blue Shark	<i>Prionace glauca</i>
Great White Shark	<i>Carcharodon carcharias</i>

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name
Anise Swallowtail	<i>Papilio zelicaon</i>
Western Tiger Swallowtail	<i>Papilio rutulus</i>
Sandhill Skipper	<i>Polites sabuleti</i>
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>
California Sister	<i>Adelpha californica</i>
Lorquin's Admiral	<i>Limenitis lorquini</i>
Mylitta Crescent	<i>Phyciodes mylitta</i>
American Lady	<i>Vanessa virginiensis</i>

Damselflies & dragonflies

Common name	Scientific name
Vivid Dancer	<i>Argia vivida</i>
Tule Bluet	<i>Enallagma carunculatum</i>
Pacific Forktail	<i>Ischnura cervula</i>
Blue-eyed Darner	<i>Rhionaeschna multicolor</i>
Striped Meadowhawk	<i>Sympetrum pallipes</i>
Blue Dasher	<i>Pachydiplax longipennis</i>
Flame Skimmer	<i>Libellula saturata</i>
Black Saddlebags	<i>Tamea lacerata</i>

Other insects

Common name	Scientific name
Honey Bee	<i>Apis mellifera</i>
a carpenter bee	<i>Xylocopa</i> sp.