

# Baja Whales & Wildlife

## Searcher Natural History Tours

May 2008



Seeing pelagic birds like the black-footed albatross usually requires a long-distance trip.

### Winging it aboard *Searcher*

By W. Terry Hunefeld [Editor's note: Terry Hunefeld retired in April, 2007 as CEO of a national training company. He birds every day—as much as possible at sea—and is our liaison with the pelagic birding community. You'll meet Terry on our pelagic trips.]

Surrounded by the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean, land was nowhere in sight. A speck moved on the horizon. It grew larger and became ... a dark-rumped petrel. It approached, flew directly to the boat, took a look at us and looped back the way it had come after everyone aboard had a good look at this mega-rarity—one of only a handful of sightings of dark-rumped (Hawaiian) petrel off the coast of California

We were on a quest for rare seabirds aboard the *Searcher*, exploring seldom-birded regions near the edge of the continental shelf. Here deep ocean currents push nutrient-rich water up. Fast-growing phytoplankton, microscopic plants, become food for zooplankton, which in turn become food for fish and other marine life. In the end, the fish and marine life attracts birds and marine mammals by the thousands. Fisherman have known for years that this is where the action is—these life-zones where nutrient-rich water is forced up. So the seamounts, ridges, domes, banks and valleys are well charted on the continental shelf. Finding birds, especially exotic seabirds, involves spending time at these life-zones at the right time of year, under the right conditions.

While several life-zones are within striking distance of a day trip, much of the day is spent in travel, limiting birding time before having to turn around and head back home. Some of our most productive birding areas in Southern California lie

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A TRADITION OF  
QUALITY ECOTOURISM  
TO BAJA CALIFORNIA

For more than 25 years, the *Searcher* has conducted natural history expeditions to Baja California's coastal waters and islands. We are one of only a few U.S. businesses with special permission from the Mexican government to operate natural history cruises into Mexican ecological preserves and national parks.

#### OUR MISSION:

"To observe marine animals in their natural environment, and to share that experience with our passengers."

#### Searcher Natural History Tours

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# Ask the Naturalist...



Photo by Frank Balthis

## Ian Rowlands answers—

When is a good time to see pilot whales off the coast of Baja California?

Short-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*) are commonly spotted close to shore, especially in the spring, when they may be gathering to feed on squid. They travel and feed in groups that can include as many as several hundred animals.

A pilot whale's thick, bulbous head and nearly all-black color make it easy to distinguish from the killer whales and other dolphins that we also see off the coast of Baja. Males reach about 5 m (about 15 feet); females are slightly smaller.



Photo by Jeroen Dam

Like other toothed whales, a pilot whale breathes through a single blowhole.

## ANIMAL PROFILE

by Paul Jones

There are great opportunities to see Baja endemic birds during our 12-day natural history tours. Two we commonly see are the Xantus' hummingbird and the gray thrasher. On the global scale, both the Xantus' hummingbird and the gray thrasher are rare indeed. Their limited distribution alone makes them an exciting find among the land birds seen in southern Baja.

### Xantus' hummingbird

Xantus' hummingbird is a beautiful endemic bird of the Cape Region of Baja, with a black and white superciliary stripe on an emerald green body. On *Searcher* trips, we find them at Los Frailes, where they are regulars among the cactus and flowering plants near the beach. On our early February, trip we found one on a nest.



Photo by Jeroen Dam



Photo by Jeroen Dam

### Gray Thrasher

Less is known about the gray thrasher, a relative of other thrashers and the much more common mockingbird. Plain gray-brown above with a streaky breast, thrashers skulk in the undergrowth where they forage in leaf litter for insects and small animals. We find them at Los Frailes, Bahia Agua Verde, and other stops on the peninsula. They lay three eggs per nest, often in cactus just a few feet off the ground. Typically, these thrashers are known for their loud and often beautiful songs, but I have never heard the gray thrasher sing—something to look forward to on a future *Searcher* trip.



Photo by  
Todd McGrath

Photo by T.A. Blackman

Top—Cook's petrel  
Bottom—Northern fulmar

**Winging it** —Continued from page 1

eight hours or more off shore. To have the time to study and enjoy the birds they attract, we need to spend two to four days out there in the land of the albatross and pterodromas.

The secret to finding rarities and mega-rarities is to be out there, chumming, looking, and ready. Expert spotters/leaders and a crew that understands how and why birding is different than fishing greatly increase the odds of finding great birds. The only regularly scheduled, live-aboard birding expedition on the west coast has been the *Searcher* five-day expedition sailing from San Diego. *Searcher* was selected by experienced pelagic birders Don DesJardin and Walter Wehtje because it's large, steady, spacious and spotlessly clean. Equipped with excellent sleeping accommodations, four bathrooms, hot showers and delicious meals, *Searcher* makes for a fun and comfortable adventure.

The species-seen list after only five years of *Searcher* deep-water expeditions is nothing short of mind-boggling\*. Yet, still awaiting discovery are other mega-rarities like Stejneger's Petrel, wedge-tailed shearwater, great-winged petrel, short-tailed and light-mantled albatross. It's just a matter of time. *Searcher* has only been seabirding since 2003. A rarity or mega-rarity is found on every trip; it's just that nobody can predict which one.



We just completed four successful tours to Baja California. Each one was special, with good weather, amazing wildlife, and passengers who appreciated this amazing place. The gray whales continued to charm everyone, and we were in awe of the numerous blue whales we found both on the Pacific and in the Sea of Cortez.

After more than 25 years of operating natural history tours to Baja, including San Ignacio Lagoon and the Sea of Cortez, I am especially intrigued when I see something new. This year we saw a larger number of gray whales offshore Cabo San Lucas than I have ever seen. Usually the furthest south gray whales gather in large numbers is in the breeding lagoon, Bahia Magdalena. If we do see a few gray whales farther south, they are not in large groups—nor are they found with other whales.

This year on the Gorda Banks area (where we expect to see lots of humpback whales), we encountered a group of three gray whales and two humpbacks. The humpbacks were very active at the surface—powerful lobtailing, flipper-flapping, and breaching. About 10 miles away, we found a different group of four gray whales with a humpback that was exhibiting the same behaviors.

No matter what I see, I know Baja California is a premier destination for whales and wildlife. We're privileged to share it with you. We hope you can join us in 2009 or 2010!

*Chris Taylor*



Photo by Jeroen Dam

We expect to see humpbacks breach, but it was unexpected to see them alongside gray whales.



Laguna San Ignacio part of Mexico's Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which provides international attention, concern, and protection to its gray whales, dolphins, fishes, birds, and other wildlife. Its pristine state is testimony to Mexico's efforts to preserve and protect the gray whales and their environment. A large area of the lagoon is protected from boat traffic during the gray whale season; here the whales can choose to be away from boats and people. But the huge lagoon also includes an observation area where *Searcher* anchors and where we can board *pangas* for a closer look.



Top—No one knows why gray whales seek out attention from humans at Laguna San Ignacio.

Below—Captain Art Taylor (second from right) has been working with Kuyima cooperative for more than 10 years. The Kuyima *pangueros* are experts in whalewatching inside Laguna San Ignacio.



## Laguna San Ignacio

It's Baja California's "friendly" whales that first attract many of the people who come here from across the globe. Eastern Pacific gray whales migrate to Laguna San Ignacio for mating and calving. Thousands of them gather between late January and mid-April. We're honored to be granted permits from Mexico to share this remarkable place with our guests, and we make the legendary lagoon-nursery our home for two days on every *Searcher* Natural History Tour.

Due to circumstances no one seems to completely understand, gray whales here—and only here with any regularity—approach our *pangas* (small fishing boats) and choose to interact with humans. Some whales, adults and calves alike, allow us to touch them on the face and back, and actually appear to seek out this attention from people.

We've been working with local *pangueros* (fishermen) of Laguna San Ignacio's Kuyima co-operative for more than 10 years. We call these men and their families our friends, and are proud to engage them during the whalewatching season (when they refrain from fishing so as not to interfere with the whales). Their knowledge of the whales and the lagoon is vast.

# Searcher Natural History Tours 2008–2009 Schedule

## 12 days in Baja: San Diego to Cabo San Lucas

Feb 7–18, 2009

~~Feb 22–Mar 5, 2009~~ FULL

~~Mar 9–20, 2009~~ FULL

~~Mar 24–Apr 4, 2009~~ FULL

April 8–19 (special price: \$3,295)

Magnificent gray whales, frolicking dolphins, and vast numbers of seabirds welcome you to Baja. Explore the offshore islands of Islas Todos Santos and Islas San Benito looking for harbor seals, sea lions, elephant seals, and nesting birds. Hikes reward you with breathtaking vistas and glimpses of rare plant life. In Laguna San Ignacio, pangas bring us eye-to-eye with gray whales.

You'll have time to explore pristine beaches and mangroves before we move south to spend more time at sea with gray whales and watch blue whales, common dolphins, and frigatebirds. Offshore Cabo San Lucas, we'll look for the acrobatic humpback whales of Gorda Banks.

Explore some of the most beautiful islands and beaches of the Sea of Cortez and snorkel among brilliant



Photo by Frank S. Balthis



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

reef fishes and California sea lions. We'll search for blue, fin and sperm whales as well as bottlenose and common dolphins and sea lions. Explore and photograph Baja's beaches, tide pools, islands plants, and bird life. Passengers board the *Searcher* in San Diego and fly home from Cabo San Lucas. \$3,450

## Offshore Birding Adventure

June 2–6, 2008

September 1–5, 2008

This pelagic birding adventure is the only way to see some of our most elusive seabirds! We take you to the Cortez Bank and the 1,000-fathom curve near the offshore U.S./Mexico border in search of Cook's petrel, red-billed and red-tailed tropicbirds, Laysan and black-footed albatross, and other seabirds such as gulls, terns, and shearwaters. \$975

Land extension, September 5–7

Stay in San Diego after the September tour for a guided land birding trip.

[www.zbirdtours.com/socal\\_sep.htm](http://www.zbirdtours.com/socal_sep.htm)



Photo by Frank S. Balthis