

# Baja Whales & Wildlife

## Searcher Natural History Tours

OCTOBER 2008



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

A gray whale mother and calf linger in San Ignacio Lagoon.

### April in Baja

Snorkeling in warm water, encountering blue whales at peak numbers, watching older gray whale calves with their mothers getting ready for the real world, enjoying sunny days and warm nights —must be April in Baja California's Sea of Cortez! We're excited to extend our season further into April starting with our 2009 whalewatching season and beyond. The traditional early-season tours in February and March are wonderful, but April is amazing too.

Many gray whale mothers keep their newborn calves in the protected inner reaches of Laguna San Ignacio. Later in the season, as calves grow, the cow-calf pairs venture to the outer areas of the lagoon, preparing for their northbound journey to Arctic feeding grounds. Many linger while the calves grow and gain a blubber layer. Perhaps because the older calves are more independent, we often see interactive and curious mother and calf behaviors in April—fascinating and often entertaining.

Blue and humpback whales migrate into Baja's waters for spring. April is prime-time for blue whales in Baja, and we often encounter them offshore Magdalena Bay in the Pacific and in the southern Sea of Cortez. We're always in awe when we see a mother and calf.

Humpback whales are abundant, and their behaviors are dramatic. Males challenge one another for mating with a female; "escort whales" appear to travel with females; the males sing (which we can hear with our on-board hydrophone); and there's lots of breaching and lobtailing by the adults and the rambunctious calves.

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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...



**Peter Gaede answers—**

*What kinds of birds breed on the islands of Baja California?*



Baja's islands are critical breeding habitat for certain birds. For example, consider the combined total area of just the three San Benito Islands—one square mile—where an estimated two million birds nest. A dozen species of birds breed on the San Benito Islands, including Xantus's murrelet, Cassin's auklet, Black-vented shearwater, Black storm-petrel, Osprey, and Savannah sparrow.

No ordinary Savannah Sparrow, this island population is resident (doesn't migrate) and utilizes a completely different habitat type than its peninsular and mainland relatives—dry desert instead of saltmarsh. This San Benito Island subspecies is unique enough that it may be given its

own species status in the future.

Ospreys are another island bird we often see. They generally form life-time pair bonds, and they often use the same nest year after year. Each year the pair adds sticks to the nest of the previous year. Osprey nests are tall structures protruding high above cliff crevices.

Both adults contribute to raising their young. The female incubates the eggs and cares for the chicks, and the male provides food. (A unique raptor, the Osprey is adapted for catching and transporting its favorite meal: fish.) As the nestlings grow, both parents take on hunting responsibilities.



Photo by Peter Gaede

(Above) Experts continue to study the taxonomy of the island's Savannah sparrow.

(Below) We check in on this pair of Osprey when we visit the San Benito Islands.



Photo by Frank S. Ballhis

## ANIMAL PROFILE



Photo by Frank S. Ballhis

### Elephant seal

*Mirounga angustirostris*

Elephant seals spend most of their lives at sea, coming ashore only during the breeding season. We see them on Islas San Benito off the coast of Baja California. Immense males—weighing as much as 5,000 lb. and as long as 16 ft.—are the first to arrive, and they battle violently for control of the beach. Mature females, pregnant from the previous year, arrive next, and within a few days each gives birth to a single pup.

Although mothers nurse their pups for less than a month, their rich milk (55% fat) helps the pups grow from only about 75 lb. at birth to more than 300 lb. When her pup is about four weeks old, a female mates with the male who has been guarding his “harem” of females.

After mating several times, she is ready to depart, and she deserts her pup for ocean feeding grounds. She won't return to the beach again until next winter. For the next four months, a fertilized embryo floats in her uterus before implanting and beginning to develop, ensuring that pups will be born at the same time next year.

A pup, still not capable of swimming, lives off its thick blubber later until after its first molt. We call these pups “weaners.” Gradually weaners get close to and then enter the water, quickly learning to swim and dive. By late spring, they too are ready to leave the beach, and they—like their parents—will spend the rest of the year at sea.

## Where do we go?



Views of the Sea of Cortez and the Baja peninsula are spectacular from any vantage point on Isla Santa Catalina.



## Isla Santa Catalina

Isla Santa Catalina's striking and colorful desert geology is the backdrop for shrub-lined trails through tall cactus forests. Osprey and peregrine falcons perch high on sheer sandstone-and-rock cliffs. This uninhabited island is home to some unusual sights: rattlesnakes, odd-looking shrubs, wavy barrel cactus, giant cardon, and the quiet of a desert canyon in the Sea of Cortez.

Early-morning or late-afternoon walks on the island find us admiring and photographing the enormous variety of plants while listening for the calls of birds such as white-winged doves, Gila woodpeckers, verdin, black-throated sparrows, ash-throated flycatchers, and ravens. Northern cardinals and hummingbirds fly nearby. And you can be sure that we're hoping to catch a glimpse of the island's reptiles, including lizards, iguanas, and the endemic emerald-tailed lizard—a *Searcher* passenger favorite.

Later, our skiff hug the island's shoreline and brings us to nesting birds and coves of calm, blue-green water. A peek underwater with mask and snorkel reveals sea stars, urchins, crabs, and brightly colored reef fishes.



## April in Baja

—Continued from cover

In April, we expect warmer water temperatures that make for a pleasant snorkel among tropical reef fishes and perhaps sea lions. Snorkeling opportunities along our tour include Cabo Pulmo's coral reef, Bahia Agua Verde, and islands in the Sea of Cortez such as Islas Santa Catalina, Los Islotes, and San Jose.



Photo by Frank S. Ballthis

In April we find Baja's year-round resident whales such as this sperm whale. We also see pilot, killer, and Bryde's whales and common, bottlenose, Pacific white-sided and Risso's dolphins in good numbers.



Photo by Frank S. Ballthis

After winter's rains, the Baja California desert comes alive in April with blooming cactus, agave, and unusual wildflowers.



Photo by Kike Calvo

A Baja sunset is a great way to end an April day of wildlife-watching.

## From the Wheelhouse

By Owner/Operator Art Taylor

2009 will mark my 29th year operating a vessel within Mexico's national parks and marine reserves in Baja California under permit from the Mexican government. I'm continually grateful for Mexico's vision as they protect gray whales and their calving lagoons, migratory bird habitats and wetlands; the coral reefs of Cabo Pulmo; and the unique islands in the Pacific and the Sea of Cortez. These areas are home to breeding seals and sea lions, nesting birds, endemic plants, and more. They also receive international attention as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The requirements for obtaining permits to visit these places have changed over the years. Mexico's National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP) administers the permit program. Because we visit multiple Mexican reserves during our 12-day *Searcher* Natural History Tours, we must purchase a "Pasaporte de la Conservación" (Conservation Passport) for each visitor. So—your trip helps support public education, habitat preservation, and responsible use for tourist activities. We include the fees for the Passports in the cost of our tours. Each Passport includes details about all the wildlife reserves in Mexico, a map, and a commemorative medallion. It is valid for a year and can be used for entrance into any of the other Mexican wildlife preserves.

I've seen Mexico's conservation programs work over the last 29 years, and very little has changed with wildlife viewing in Baja California from my perspective. I feel confident that our grandchildren and their children will be able to experience and appreciate the same wildlife wonders in Baja California as we do today.

*Art Taylor*



Photo by Frank S. Ballthis



Photo by Frank S. Ballthis

# Searcher Natural History Tours 2009–2010 Schedule

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

### 2009 Trips

Feb 7–18, 2009	\$3,450
<del>Feb 22–Mar 5, 2009</del>	<del>FULL</del>
<del>Mar 9–20, 2009</del>	<del>FULL</del>
<del>Mar 24–Apr 4, 2009</del>	<del>FULL</del>
April 8–19	\$3,295

### 2010 Trips

Mar 9–20, 2010	\$3,595
Mar 25–April 5, 2010	\$3,595
April 9–20, 2010	\$3,450



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

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



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

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 reef fishes and California sea lions. We'll search for blue, fin and sperms 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.



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

## Offshore Birding Adventure

April 30–May 4, 2009

September 7–11, 2009

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. \$1,015



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2009-2010 Tour Schedule inside...

- ◆ whalewatching
- ◆ birding

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See the best of Baja  
aboard the *Searcher*!

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