

# Baja Whales & Wildlife

## Searcher Natural History Tours

APRIL 2010



Photo by Steve Lamb

In Laguna San Ignacio, "friendly" gray whales approach our skiffs. For them, the lagoon is the end of a long journey.

## Gray whales greet *Searcher* passengers

by Paul Jones, *Searcher* naturalist

Gray whales of the eastern Pacific Ocean have the longest migration of any large population of mammals<sup>1</sup>—longer than caribou, wildebeest or elephants. In fact, most of them travel over 5,000 miles from their summer feeding grounds in the Beaufort, Chukchi, and Bering Seas to the lagoons of Baja, Mexico, where they give birth to their calves and mate. (Some form summer feeding aggregations in waters farther north.)

The whales stay near the coast on their route from Alaska, passing the west coast of North America at about 4–5 knots (6–7 mph). Spearheading the trip south are near-term females. Close behind are other adult females (in estrus) and males, followed by juveniles of both sexes.

Until the mid-1980s, the peak southbound migration was the first week of January in the San Francisco area. Since 2000, that has shifted to January 22<sup>2</sup>. Researchers speculate that the delay is because grays move farther north and travel longer distances to find food, which has become scarcer. At any rate, gray whales seem well adapted to these changing conditions and have faced them in the past. Sea level was 350 feet lower than today only 18,000 years ago.

—Continued inside on page 4

### 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...



Scientific illustrator, birder, and Searcher naturalist, Peter Gaede answers—

## Do you encounter Albatross off the coast of Baja?

Just twelve miles south of Todos Santos Island along the northwest coast of Baja, someone shouted, “Albatross—six o’clock!” A flurry of activity on board ensued, as everyone made their way to the stern. Gliding effortlessly low over the water and up the wake towards us was a Black-footed Albatross. With a wingspan over 6 ft, there’s no mistaking this majestic bird as it announces its presence on the horizon. Perfectly adapted for long-distance travel, this seabird spends most of its life on the wing, searching for food on the open ocean.

To see an albatross dynamic soaring—maneuvering and using

the wind and sea to effortlessly soar with wings extended—is truly a remarkable experience.

The productive waters in northern Baja where upwelling occurs are attractive feeding areas, and when ideal conditions are present, concentrations of albatross and other seabirds often can be found. As testament to this, our albatross total during that single day in February 2010 included 17 Black-footed and 5 Laysan.

Although the Black-footed is more frequently encountered here than is the Laysan, its worldwide numbers are much lower, with some estimating ten times fewer total individuals. The range of both species are similar, covering the entire North Pacific with large breeding colonies on the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (primarily Midway Atoll and Laysan Island). Both species have been subject to a number of threats both past and present: feather harvesting, egg collecting, and drift nets (historic); and longline fishing and ingestion of floating plastics (current). In addition, pressures at breeding sites

include limited areas of suitable habitat and introduced mammals. Recent studies, however, have shown that the Laysan Albatross is slowly increasing in numbers—re-colonizing historic nesting sites and expanding to new islands including several off Mexico.

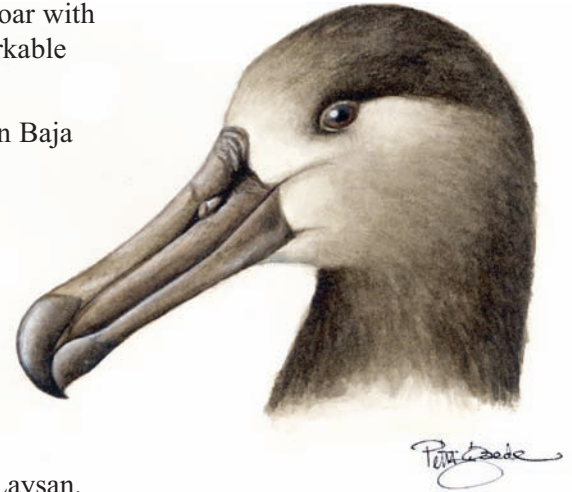


Photo by Todd McGrath

Top—Black-footed Albatross. Right—Laysan Albatross. Both photos were taken aboard the *Searcher*.

Encounters with albatrosses on *Searcher* Natural History trips in Baja are always exciting.

One of the advantages of traveling offshore by boat is that we have the opportunity to experience these highly pelagic birds up-close in their world, something not possible from shore.



Photo by Peter Gaede

## BOOK REVIEW

*National Audubon Society Guide to Marine Mammals of the World*, Randall R. Reeves, Brent S. Stewart, Phillip J. Clapham, and James A. Powell, Alfred A Knopf, Inc., New York, 2002 (ISBN 0-375-41141-0)

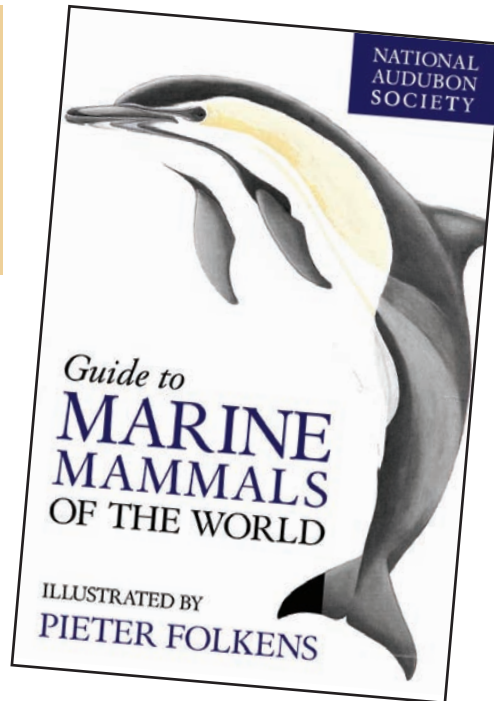
By Rob Nawojchik, *Searcher* naturalist

When the *Searcher* is in Baja California, a modest library occupies two shelves in the main salon. Often, following a hike or a whale watching session, the salon is abuzz with activity as volumes are pulled from the shelves and pages flipped open, as species are identified and life history information is shared.

Many of the books are devoted to marine mammals. Some focus on one species, or one geographic area, and these are definitely worth a look. But time and time again, when searching for answers to a wide variety of questions about the marine mammals we see on our trips, I pick up one book: the *National Audubon Society Guide to Marine Mammals of the World*. In fact, I use this book extensively at home before the trip when preparing my evening lectures.

It's much more than a field guide, although it functions well in species identification. Every species of marine mammal is allotted several pages that include photographs and sections on general description, range and habitat, behavior, reproduction, food and foraging, status and conservation, and other topics.

The illustrations of Pieter Folkens make the guide especially valuable. As *Searcher* passengers can attest, marine mammals are particularly difficult to photograph, and it's rare to capture the entire animal out of the water, especially in a way that



illuminates all diagnostic features. Folkens' illustrations depict key characteristics, and with the photographs, range maps, and other information in each section, allow for reliable identifications.

Four prominent marine mammalogists have provided readable and informative text. Despite being published in 2002 (almost a decade ago), I still find the Guide to be accurate and relatively current—a tribute to the authors for providing the best available knowledge.

Books can be expensive, especially those richly illustrated with photos, illustrations, and maps. This Guide is modestly priced (I paid US \$26.95 for my copy) and provides a lot of book (527 pages and tons of information). If you're on a limited budget or have limited shelf space and are agonizing over which one marine mammal book to buy, you certainly can't go wrong with this one. Like me, you'll find yourself referring to it over and over again.



## Carrot-Ginger Soup

- 2 T vegetable oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 celery stalk, chopped
- 2 small red potatoes
- 1½ lb. carrots
- 1 T fresh ginger
- 1 tsp garlic
- pinch nutmeg
- pinch allspice
- pinch cayenne
- 3 pieces star anise
- ½ cup white wine
- 4 cups chicken stock
- 1/4 cup whipping cream
- salt and pepper (to taste)

Peel and chop potatoes and carrots. Peel and mince ginger and garlic. Saute onions, celery and carrots in vegetable oil until onions turn transparent. Add garlic and ginger and cook until vegetables begin to stick to pan. Deglaze with white wine. Add nutmeg, allspice, cayenne, chicken stock, potatoes and star anise. Simmer for 1 hour.

Discard anise, then puree. Strain, add cream, and season with salt and pepper to taste. —*Chef Charles*





## Gray Whales Continued from cover

In the Eemian interglacial period, the Arctic was ice-free for thousands of years, followed by another 100,000-year ice age<sup>3</sup>. Grays will surely manage in the climate changes to come.

A later migration gives *Searcher* passengers a chance to see traveling whales on the first few trips of the season. We start looking for grays the first day after leaving Islas Todos Santos, and frequently we see them up close. Many more are waiting for us in Laguna San Ignacio, spyhopping, breaching, mating—and of course, exhibiting the remarkable, world-famous friendly whale behavior.

In spring, the first whales to leave the lagoons are the newly pregnant females, followed once again by adult males and juveniles of both sexes. Cows and calves stay until mid-April before winding their way northward, staying close to shore and investigating river mouths, bays, and harbors. Some experts think this keeps them out of reach of killer whales and teaches their offspring the migratory route for future trips they will have to take on their own.

<sup>1</sup> Some humpbacks migrate over 5,100 miles from Costa Rican waters to Antarctica. Northern elephant seals migrate more than 13,000 miles in a year, but they do it in two trips: they travel from Baja to the Gulf of Alaska and then return in the late spring or summer, only to make the trip a second time for mating season.

<sup>2</sup> Dave Rugh, *Eastern North Pacific gray whale population and migration timing shifts*, Abstract, *Gray whales and climate change: sentinels of the North Pacific/Arctic Ecosystems*, ACS Conference, Nov 17, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Folkiens, *A Brief Look at Cenozoic Climate Swings*. Abstract, *Gray whales and climate change: sentinels of the North Pacific/Arctic Ecosystems*, ACS Conference, Nov 17, 2008

## From the Wheelhouse

By Owner/Operator Art Taylor

Every trip to Laguna San Ignacio is memorable. On a recent trip, a highlight was a whale that spent a few hours near the *Searcher*, rubbing on our anchor line. The amazing thing is that we recognized this particular whale. It was the same whale that the lagoon skiff drivers we partner with named *Kuyima*, after their cooperative—and that was 18 years ago. *Kuyima*'s white head and a bump on its lower left jaw make it easy to identify, and it displayed the same behavior it did 18 years ago, hanging out and rubbing on the anchor lines of the *Searcher* and other boats in the lagoon. Seeing the same whale doing the same thing so many years later was pretty special. It was especially meaningful because we had Josele Varela Galván, president of the *Kuyima* cooperative, aboard the *Searcher* that day. It had to be fate.

In Spanish, *Kuyima* means “light in the darkness.” And after dark, we were treated to an amazing, biological display of light in the darkness. In the ocean at times, microscopic plankton glow in the dark when disturbed. This phenomenon is known as bioluminescence, and it occurs in other organisms also. (It's the same reaction that causes fireflies to glow.) At night, when this special whale with the white head came to the surface, its splashes lit up and sparkled, making it whiter still.

We considered it *milagro* (miracle) and a sign from God. Seeing *Kuyima* reminded me again of just how special this lagoon—and all of Baja—is, and what a remarkable place it is to visit. I hope you'll join us in 2011 to make your own extraordinary memories.

Art Taylor





# Searcher Natural History Tours 2010–2011 Schedule

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

Jan 23–Feb 3, 2011

Feb 7–18, 2011 **TRIP FULL**

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. Walks 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 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.



Photo by Rik and Sally Walton



Our apologies to photographer Sheema Sherman, who should have been credited for this photo above when it appeared in our October 2009 newsletter.

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. \$3,750

## 13 days in Baja Apr 8–20, 2011

A longer itinerary that emphasizes seabirds along with the whales and other wildlife. Sponsored by Bird Quest: [www.birdquest.co.uk](http://www.birdquest.co.uk)

## Memorial Day Wildlife Weekend

May 29-31, 2010

Join us to look for migrating blue whales, dolphins and pelagic seabirds as well as other marine mammals and birds. \$395

## Offshore Birding Adventure

Sept 6-10, 2010

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. \$1,075



Photo by Frank S. Balthis