

Baja Whales & Wildlife

Searcher Natural History Tours

MAY 2003



Mangrove excursions bring ecotourists close to fascinating wildlife.

On Searcher Tours to Baja, passengers set the pace

What's so special about *Searcher* Natural History Tours? Sure, the whales are spectacular, the birding remarkable, the hikes memorable, and the environment magnificent. But the *Searcher* offers passengers something more.

"I've taken many trips," one passenger told us, "but this was definitely the trip of a lifetime. The interaction between passengers and crew went a long way to create such a family atmosphere."

The captain and crew of the *Searcher* make sure that each passenger makes the most of his or her trip. Whalewatching from the *Searcher* and from smaller skiffs, snorkeling, birdwatching, hiking, photography, and beachcombing are some of the active pursuits.

But there's also time for relaxing on deck while the sun sets behind the peninsula. For reading about Baja while the islands go by out the window. For watching the scenery change every day. And for getting to know crew and fellow passengers who share your interests.

Captain Art Taylor is especially attuned to the needs of seniors and less active passengers. "Not everyone has to climb the highest peak to enjoy themselves,"

A TRADITION OF
QUALITY ECOTOURISM
TO BAJA CALIFORNIA

For nearly 20 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."

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Ask the Naturalist...

Celia Condit answers:

What plant life can I find on the islands of Baja?

Cardón (*Pachycereus pringlei*) is massive cactus that we see on the Baja California peninsula and on several islands. Some cardón live for hundreds of years. An old specimen may weigh as much as ten tons and has erect branches that can reach 15 meters (about 49 feet). Cardón are pollinated by bats. They provide food and refuge for a variety of birds.

On some islands in the Sea of Cortez we see a type of barrel cactus that we call the “wavy” barrel cactus because of its shape. On some islands, these tall (up to 4 meters, or 12 feet) cactus dominate the landscape.

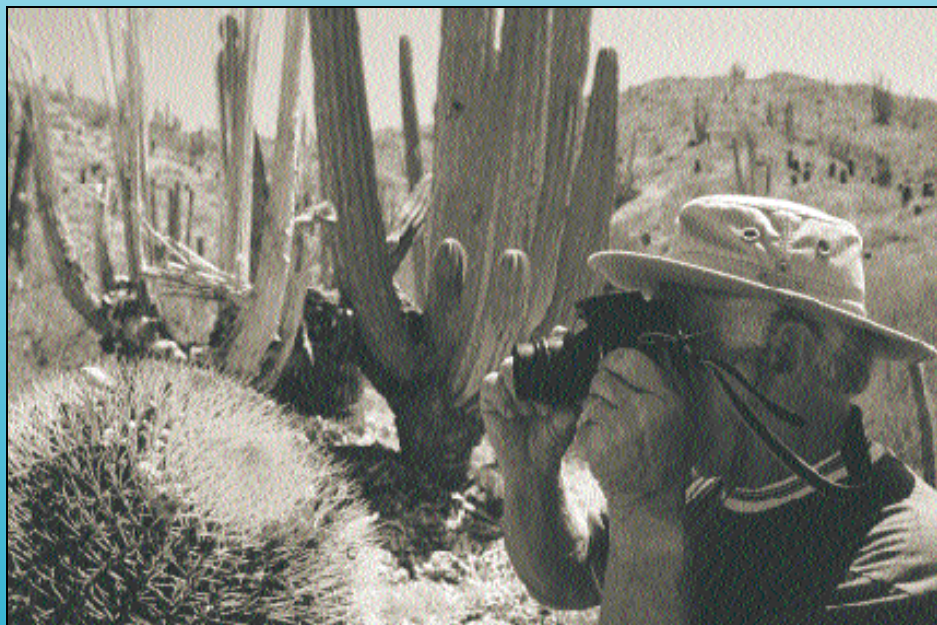
About 20 species of agave grow in Baja. Its large gray-green leaves grow in a rosette, and a tall flowering spike bears numerous yellow flowers. Ravens on Isla San Benito sometimes have “yellow” bills from sipping the nectar of agaves.



(Top) The fragrant white blossoms of the cardón attract birds by day and bats by night.

(Center) Agave soaks up the Baja sunshine.

(Below) A *Searcher* passenger find a photo opportunity on a Baja Island. (Foreground: wavy barrel cactus. Background: cardón)



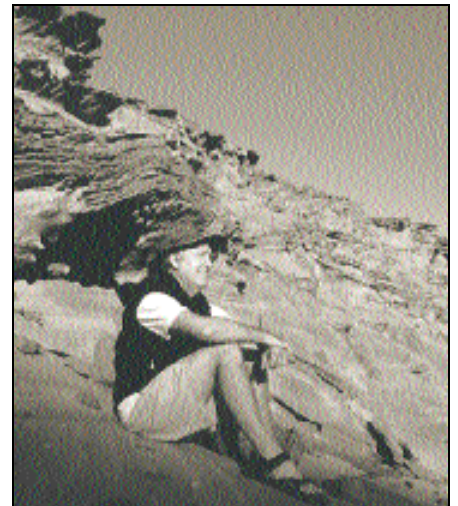
Passengers set pace

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said Taylor. “We offer alternative activities to a hike or snorkel. We may take a skiff ride to see nesting birds or shallow reefs, or we may stay aboard for more whalewatching.”

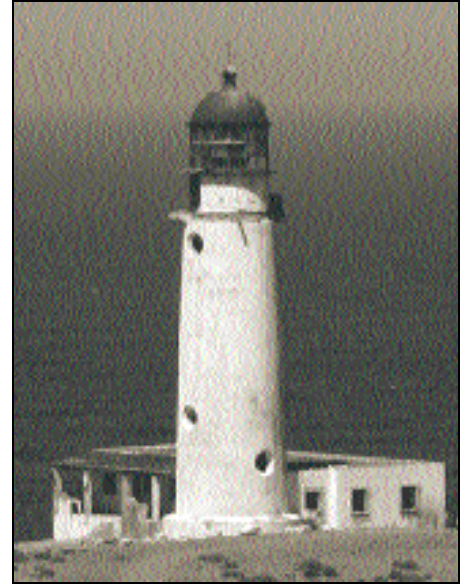
One age-70-plus passenger who has enjoyed no less than five Baja trips on the *Searcher* says, “I’ll never become blasé in seeing these magnificent gray whale mothers and their calves, and I never cease to wonder at their friendliness towards us. I loved the opportunities to explore San Ignacio’s salt marshes. There’s a special wildness there that draws one to them again and again.”

It’s a trip for families, couples, and singles, who eventually begin to feel like part of a family.



A *Searcher* passenger finds time to relax on a Baja island.

Searcher chefs prepare healthy and naturally low-fat meals that highlight fresh vegetables, meats, and fruits—nothing pre-packaged or fried. Local fresh fish or shellfish is often a choice. And we’ll gladly tailor meals to meet special diets.



Searcher passengers love Islas San Benito. Here's why.

Islas San Benito is a group of three islands. Searcher Natural History Tours take passengers to the east island and the west island.

We explore the east island by skiff, motoring around kelp beds. Below us, the water is so clear we can see bright orange garibaldi fish, sea stars and urchins in the shallower areas. Along the shore, we get close to nesting shorebirds. Guadalupe fur seals inhabit this island. Their thick fur and long foreflippers distinguish them from the California sea lions that are also plentiful here. Both species pose atop rocks and along the shore. Cameras click.

Our skiff driver carefully steers us into some sea caves. We take our time here, allowing our eyes to adjust to this fascinating habitat, where swifts roost in the walls and more sea lions lounge on the rocks.

Exiting the caves, we meet a group of active sea lions, probably last year's pups. They're curious about us and follow our skiff the way puppies chase a car. They jump in the air, play with each other, and pop up beside us for quick, eye-to-eye stares.

We go ashore and stretch our legs on West San Benito. It's elephant seal

breeding season, and we hike along rocky coves teeming with hauled-out elephant seals, mostly "weaners." (Females nurse their pups for a few weeks and then leave abruptly. The left-behind "weaner" pups are fat with blubber, an energy source that will last until they're able to leave the beach and find food on their own.) Huge elephant-nosed male seals patrol the water just offshore, protecting their territories from each other.

Our path takes us past windswept cliffs with tall rock outcroppings—and osprey nests. We stop to watch parent birds arrive "home" with fish for their chicks before we hike up a switchback trail to the Island's lighthouse.

While some hikers relax and drink in the immense blue ocean and crashing surf, more energetic hikers walk up the more-than-one-hundred stairs in the working lighthouse. (The

lighthouse keeper walks this path every night to turn on the lens.) The lighthouse lens is magnificent, as is the even more expansive view of the island from here.

We end our hike at "bottlenose cove," where bottlenose dolphins swim and chase fish in the shallows. Back aboard the *Searcher*, we say goodbye to San Benito in the late afternoon and head toward the blow of a blue whale.



(Clockwise from top left) Elephant seals rest on the beach. The San Benito lighthouse beckons. Today, the Fresnel lens of the San Benito lighthouse is made of prisms that reflect the rays of an incandescent bulb. The original light source was a lamp fueled by sperm oil or lard.

**ANIMAL
PROFILE**blue whale
Balaenoptera musculus

Stretching to at least 26 m (85 ft.), it's the largest animal ever to have lived—nearly as long as the *Searcher*! Remarkably, these giants eat almost exclusively krill, tiny shrimplike plankton. An adult blue whale can consume as much as 8 tons of krill in a day. Krill are most plentiful in cold waters, and most blue whales travel long distances from cold-water feeding grounds to warm-water wintering grounds.

Blue whales can be found in all oceans. We sight them along the Pacific coast in summer, but the best blue-whale watching is springtime in the Sea of Cortez, where they feed on the abundant krill.

While they usually travel alone or in pairs, they tend to cluster in areas where they find food, and we are able to witness some amazing whale behavior.

On a recent Natural History Tour aboard the *Searcher*, Frank Balthis photographed blue whales lunge-feeding. (See photo below.) This blue whale opened its lower jaw and gulped huge mouthfuls of krill-rich sea water. Parallel, longitudinal grooves called ventral pleats expand, accordion-fashion, to hold this humongous mouthful. A blue whale uses its tongue to force the water out through its baleen. Krill is trapped inside and swallowed with a giant swipe of the garage-door-sized tongue.

Searcher Natural History Tours schedules trips to the Sea of Cortez to coincide with the blue, fin, sperm, pilot, and beaked whales that gather there in spring to feed in nutrient-rich waters.



Letter from
Searcher
Owner/Operator
Art Taylor



I spend a lot of time on the ocean, and I've learned to pay attention to the animals that greet me at sea, especially seabirds. During my career I've seen many species of seabirds. They're important because the presence of seabirds often signals other life, such as fish and feeding whales and dolphins.

During two specially arranged five-day seabird trips this past April, dedicated birders were pleased to find 40 different species of ocean-going birds. Some touch land only for breeding, so to see them and add them to a U.S. sightings list, an extended boat trip is a must.

On one of these trips the species we saw included albatrosses, shearwaters, fulmars, murrelets, red-billed tropicbirds, Murphy's petrel, Laysan albatross, Xantus' murrelet, and black storm petrel. Plus, we spotted 13 species of mammals including blue whales, killer whales, Dall's porpoise, and northern right whale dolphins.

If this piques your interest, contact our office about our September 2003 three-day birding trip. And yes, we'll be repeating the five-day trips again in April 2004.

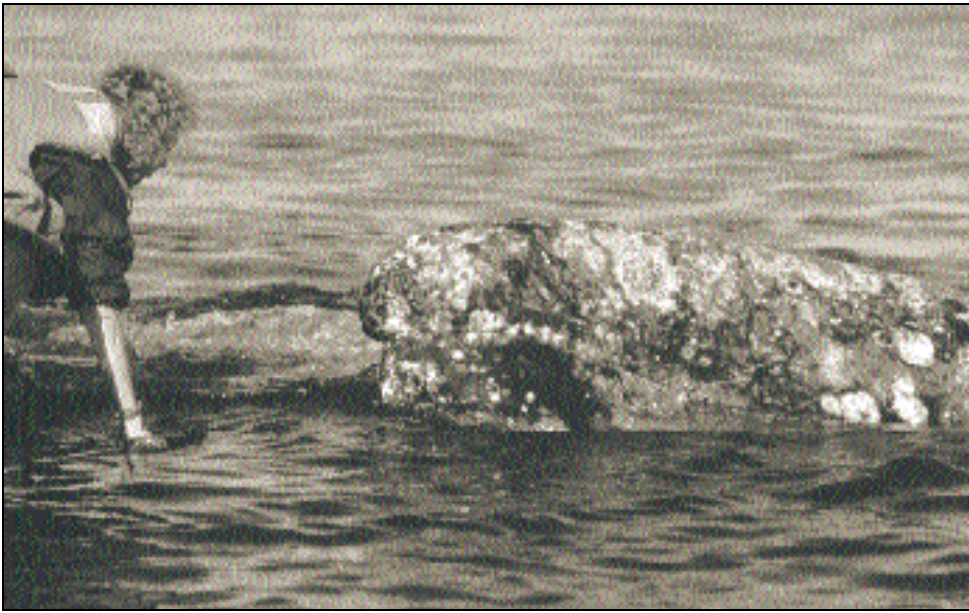
Why not get on our mailing list?

Art Taylor

PHOTOS: Underwater photo
page 5 (center image) by
KiKeCalvo.com. All other photos
by Frank S. Balthis.



Searcher Natural History Tours 2004 Schedule



beaches of the Sea of Cortez and snorkel among brilliant 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, island plants, and bird life.

Please note: Trip 1 includes three days in Laguna San Ignacio.

Trips 2-4 include two days in Laguna San Ignacio and an extra day in the Sea of Cortez. Passengers board the *Searcher* in San Diego and fly home from Cabo San Lucas. \$2,895

12 days in Baja:
San Diego to Cabo San Lucas

February 12-23 (Thurs-Mon)

February 27-March 9 (Fri-Tues)

March 16-27 (Tues-Sat)

March 31-April 11 (Wed-Sun)

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. We'll explore some of the most beautiful islands and



Offshore Birding Adventure

September 4-7, 2003
(Thursday-Sunday)

This pelagic birding adventure takes 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. \$525

