

Baja Whales & Wildlife

Searcher Natural History Tours

APRIL 2005



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

The *Searcher* lies at anchor in the Sea of Cortez while passengers explore island wildlife.

35 Years Aboard the *Searcher*

On May 24, 1970, the Bill and Ingrid Poole family proudly launched “the largest sportfisher on the West Coast.” Originally christened the *Cape Polaris*, it was the first of a new breed of luxury boats, and as the champagne bottle shattered against her hull, sportfishing changed forever.

Other fishing boats of the day operated seasonally, waiting for summer (and fish) to appear off San Diego. But the *Cape Polaris* was a boat equipped to go to the fish—wherever they lurked. Her fuel and bait capacity made it possible to take anglers to Cabo San Lucas and environs for tuna, sailfish, grouper, and yellowtail.

It was Ingrid Poole who designed the boat’s plush and private accommodations and comfortable restrooms with enclosed hot-water showers. The dining salon would have drapes, a color scheme, and air-conditioning. The cook would serve delicious meals from her double-ovens and the atmosphere would attract all anglers—male and female.

On the maiden voyage, Bill Poole departed with 30 passengers and headed south for Alijos Rocks, some of the finest fishing grounds around even by today’s standards. It turns out Poole had to head for home a day early—because the 15-ton fish hold was filled to the brim with nearly 700 fish, including some weighing more than 50 pounds each. They docked at Fisherman’s Landing, where media and anglers awaited the weigh-in.

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A TRADITION OF
QUALITY ECOTOURISM
TO BAJA CALIFORNIA

For more than 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.”

Searcher Natural History Tours

Celia Condit and Art Taylor

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Ask the Naturalist...

**Patti Schick answers —
Why are Guadalupe fur seals endangered? Will I see them in Baja?**



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

In recent years, you can take a *Searcher* skiff-ride around Islas San Benito and you'll see dark brown, eared seals that look and sound quite different from California sea lions. They're Guadalupe fur seals (*Arctocephalus townsendi*)—among the rarest of the fur seals.

This species was heavily hunted in the 1800s and thought to be extinct by the early 20th century. However, in 1949 a solitary male was spotted at San Miguel Island, off the coast of California. A few years later, a small colony was discovered at Guadalupe Island. While their historic range is unknown, their current distribution is growing, and they are sometimes seen as far north as the California Channel Islands.

The population has grown to more than 7,000 individuals. With the current level of protection, we're hopeful that the species will one day fully recover: Mexican law protects Guadalupe fur seals. The U.S. Endangered Species Act lists them as threatened. CITES lists them in Appendix I (endangered animals), and the IUCN classifies them as "vulnerable."

Guadalupe fur seals typically inhabit rocky areas at the base of cliffs and even sea caves. This preference for inaccessible habitats may be responsible for the survival of a tiny population of fur seals from which the current population stemmed. Look for them on your next trip to Baja with *Searcher* Natural History Tours.

This Guadalupe fur seal pup was rescued and rehabilitated at SeaWorld San Diego.
(Photo © Sea World, Inc.)



What's cookin'? We're glad you asked!

NEW! *Searcher* Chef Randy Fickes has compiled his most delicious recipes, and



we're publishing his collection so that you can re-create some of his culinary masterpieces in your own kitchen. The recipes have been rewritten to smaller portions for use at home. What you'll find are recipes for the foods that passengers most rave about on board the *Searcher*.



Now you can cook like a chef with the recipes in *Offshore Delights*. The book includes

professional color photos taken on the *Searcher* while we traveled both inshore and offshore in Mexico and into the Sea of Cortez in search of whales, sea lions, birds, fish and more.

Most meals prepared on board the *Searcher* are based on good old comfort-style cooking and please even the most discriminating tastes in regard to seasoning, ease of preparation and appearance. To order, call us at 619-226-2403 or email us at searcher@bajawhale.com

Bon appetit!

All photos by Frank S. Balthis



35 years

—Continued from page 1

“Now sleek powerful, luxurious, self-contained sportfishers make it possible to fish year-round,” wrote LA Herald-Examiner staffer Jim Brezina.

But the *Cape Polaris* was destined for more than fishing. News spread about the presence of gray whale nurseries in Baja California and how they were accessible by boat. The *Cape Polaris* obtained permits to carry passengers—at first mostly scientists and students—to Baja.



Photo by Jim Niemiec

Huge albacore like this one are one reason anglers praise the *Searcher*.



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

The *Searcher* is home-away-from-home to ecotourists in Mexico's Baja California, where they board small skiffs called pangas to get close to whales and wildlife.

In certain Baja lagoons, gray whales would approach small boats and allow—even seek out—people to touch them. Such whales were termed the “friendly” whales.

The *Cape Polaris* name was changed to *Searcher* in 1975, and Captain Art Taylor was aboard as a crew member starting in 1978. He was among the

first to experience the “friendlies” of Baja, and the *Searcher* is the longest-running operator of Baja natural history cruises out of San Diego. Today one lagoon, Scammons, is closed to large boats, but the *Searcher* continues to visit San Ignacio Lagoon, another incredible Baja lagoon known for its friendly gray whales.

Captain Art Taylor has owned and operated *Searcher* since 1984. Throughout the late spring, summer and fall, he takes anglers out to some of the best fishing off California and Mexico. But in winter and early spring, you’ll find the *Searcher* in some of Baja’s most pristine wildlife areas.

“As owners of the *Searcher*, Celia and I have the unique opportunity to share this amazing part of the world with others,” said Captain Art. “It’s what we love to do.”

Searcher passengers pose for a group photo at Land’s End in Cabo San Lucas. After 12 days together exploring Baja’s incredible whales and wildlife, fellow passengers and crew start to feel like family.



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

**ANIMAL
PROFILE**

sea stars

Class Asteroidea

Once we reach the Sea of Cortez, many passengers don mask and snorkel and venture underwater to take advantage of warmer waters and an amazing variety of colorful fishes and invertebrates. Even passengers who resist this urge get to investigate creatures we discover... the circulating sea water in the Searcher's bait tanks makes a fine temporary "tide pool."

Just about everyone knows a sea star when they see one, and those we find delight us with their variety of colors and shapes.

Typically, a sea star has five arms, which radiate around the central disk. But the Gulf sunstars (*Heliaster* spp.) are many-armed stars. *H. kubiniji* has 19 to 15 arms, and *H. microbrachius* has 30 to 40. We see these huge (2-ft. or 60 cm in diameter) stars on reefs and on sand bottoms.

A favorite of ours is the chocolate chip sea star (*Nidorellia armata*), which looks only slightly less delicious than it sounds. A fat, cream-colored central disk and short arms are studded with black or dark-brown spots, giving it the appearance of a fresh-from-the-oven cookie.

All sea stars move with a curious system of tube feet that work on a water-pressure system. Water bulging into a tube foot elongates the foot. Sea stars have suction disks at the tips of the feet, which hold them tight when they're rocked by ocean swells.



Photo by
Frank S. Balthis

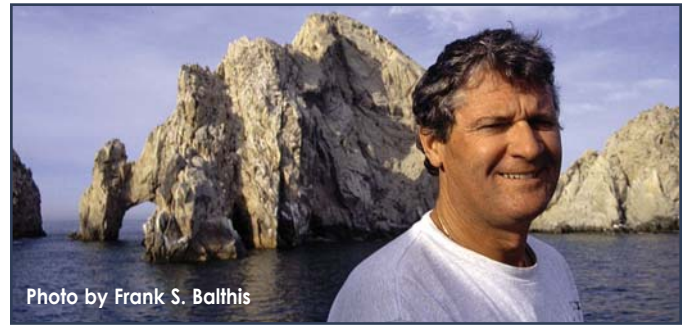


Photo by Frank S. Balthis



**Letter from
Searcher
Owner/Operator
Art Taylor**

As those of you who've traveled with us already know, the rich wildlife areas of Baja California that we get to explore are amazing and unique. Having an expert naturalist on board greatly enhances our ability to enjoy and understand the incredible wildlife we experience.

Celia and I made a commitment to help prepare the next generation of Baja naturalists by mentoring some young naturalists new to Baja. We selected capable educators and interpreters who had specialized in other locales but who—up to now—hadn't had much Baja experience.

Last year Andrea Siatowski, Beth Horvath, Patti Schick and Michelle Berman joined our tours. They got to know the terrain, the native species, and our itinerary, including some of the more out-of-the way spots for wildlife—like the red cliffs of Punta Colorado, the unbelievable birding at Bahia Agua Verde, the growing rookery of Guadalupe fur seals at San Benito, and the unique plant life on Islas San Jose and Santa Catalina. They observed and learned from more seasoned Baja naturalist and the *Searcher* crew.

This year we hired Michelle Berman and Patti Schick (our featured naturalist in this issue, page 2) as full naturalists. They worked alongside veteran naturalists Paul Jones and Frank Balthis—identifying whales, dolphins, sea lions and birds; accompanying guests on the trails and in the skiffs; and presenting evening talks. We're pleased and proud to have these "youngsters" aboard, working to carry on our tradition of professional interpretation in such a capable and friendly way.

Art Taylor

Searcher Natural History Tours 2005–2006 Schedule



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. \$3,125

12 days in Baja: San Diego to Cabo San Lucas

February 9–20, 2006

February 24–March 7, 2006

March 11–22, 2006

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 beaches of the



Offshore Birding Adventure

April 13–17, 2005

September 5–9, 2005

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. Trips depart Wednesdays and return Sundays. \$750





www.bajawhale.com

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2005—2006
Tour Schedule
inside...

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Baja Whales & Wildlife

Searcher Natural History Tours



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

Close enough?

- ◆ Go eye-to-eye with “friendly” gray whales in breeding lagoons of Baja California, Mexico.



Frank S. Balthis

- ◆ Cruise with the whales, dolphins, seals, and birds of Baja California's Pacific coast and Sea of Cortez.
- ◆ Hike islands of the Pacific and the Sea of Cortez and explore pristine beaches, tide pools, and mangroves.
- ◆ Snorkel among brilliant reef fish, rays, and sea turtles.
- ◆ You'll see the best of Baja aboard the *Searcher!*

www.bajawhale.com

Email searcher@bajawhale.com or call us at (619) 226-2403.