

Baja Whales & Wildlife

Searcher Natural History Tours

SEPTEMBER 2005



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

Humpback whales are known for their acrobatics and fluke displays.

The humpbacks of Gorda Banks

We wonder if the tourists who sun, shop, and party in bustling Cabo San Lucas realize what a spectacular wildlife sight lies just offshore. Five miles from the famous Land's End rocks at the tip of the Baja peninsula is Gorda Banks, where we spend a glorious day entertained by humpback whales on our natural history tours in February and March.

Gorda Banks consists of two seamounts. The area is always rich in marine life: schooling fish, sea turtles, birds, dolphins and whales. Each winter and spring, humpback whales from central California migrate here to court and breed, and to give birth.

The displays of these acrobatic humpbacks are a spectacular sight. The activity level is always high, and the breathing blows at the surface are frequent and noisy. Lobtailing (slapping the tail flukes loudly on the water), breaching (jumping out and landing back in the water with an enormous splash), and flipper-flapping (slapping the pectoral flippers on the water) are common. At times, males challenge each other for access to females by charging one another, and see them surface with bloodied scrapes on their heads.

Everyone's favorite camera shot is a baby humpback breach, and we often see them breach many times in a row. Why? Part of the wonder in this is that we just

—Continued inside on page 3

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

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Ask the Naturalist...

Some of my favorites include the coralvine (which I try to grow in my yard at home) and the island poppy.

Coralvine (*pictured below*) is nicknamed “Mexican bougainvillea.” It’s striking to see these bright pink blossoms sprawling over a giant cardon cactus.

The island poppy (*pictured at right*) is native to Islas San Benito. It’s similar to the California state flower, the orange blooming poppy.

Keep in mind that plant-watching in Baja is also phenomenal in dry years, as many of these endemic and native species are adapted for surviving periods of drought.

Islas San Benito’s endemic island mallow is a good example. We see these flowers in profusion after a heavy rainy season. And in dry years, the plant may appear to be bare of leaves—but it still flowers.

Check out the photos on this page for more fabulous Baja flowers, captured on film by one of our favorite photographers, Frank Balthis. Or join us on a trip in 2006, and see them all for yourself.



Pink blooming coralvine can be quite showy on Sea of Cortez islands.



The island poppy is native to Islas San Benito.



The *tronador* produces inflated, paper-like fruit. When the fruit dries, seeds inside rattle in the wind.

All photos this page by Frank S. Balthis



Many species of the mallow family are found in Baja California. (*Top right*) Islas San Benito’s endemic island mallow flowers rain or shine. (*Above*) A flower of the *algodón* or cotton mallow.



One of Baja’s many lovely lupines.



Photo by Alain Verstraete

Searcher passenger honored with wildlife photography award

Join us congratulating Alain Verstraete of Gent, Belgium, whose photo of a jumping mobula (*at left*) won at a wildlife photography festival in France. Alain shot this photo as mobula rays surprised us on the last evening of our trip.

The photography festival takes place in November. To know more, go to www.festiphoto-montier.org

Humpbacks – *continued from page 1*

don't know. (Maybe the breach makes a loud sound that other members of the social group hear or feel? Maybe it's a way to attract attention or express aggression? Or maybe it's just in their nature to jump....)

A most fascinating element of a day at Gorda Banks is the "singing" male humpbacks. If conditions are right, we lower an underwater microphone to hear the courting whales sing. When the sound plays through the *Searcher's* speakers—which are all around the deck, inside the salon and in each room—it's like being immersed in the whales' world.

A sharp-eyed tourist might see a distant breaching humpback from a beachfront hotel balcony in town. At Gorda Banks, that whale could be jumping for joy or showing off for the females... no doubt like some of the tourists ashore in Cabo San Lucas.



Photo by Celia Condit



Photo by Peter Yiangou

Humpbacks, the most acrobatic of whales, are a whale-watcher's delight.

(Top right) A humpback whale's white "wings" (actually pectoral flippers) helps us locate a whale as it swims just below the water's surface.

(Bottom right) During the breeding season, a male humpback charges another male.

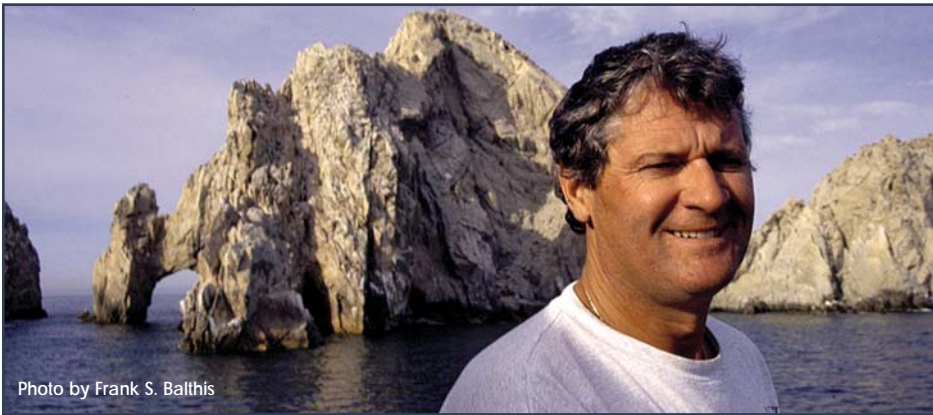


Photo by Frank S. Ballhis



Letter from *Searcher* Owner/Operator Art Taylor

We can almost count on seeing humpbacks each trip we make to Baja California. Certain other sightings in Southern California and in

Baja can be unexpected and wonderful surprises. Our most recent “special sightings” include rarely seen pygmy beaked whales (on our 12-day whale-watching tours to Baja) and Cook’s and Murphy’s petrels (on our five-day pelagic birding trips).

We found a group of about five beaked whales in the Sea of Cortez last February and again in March. Beaked whales are seldom seen by even the most experienced whale-watchers. (We have been fortunate in the past to see Cuvier’s and Baird’s beaked whales on our trips.) *Searcher* Naturalist Paul Jones, Captain Kevin Ward and I agreed these whales were different from other, more common, species and identified them as pygmy beaked whales (*Mesoplodon peruvianus*).

They appeared heavier than a bottlenose dolphin and were dark gray to black. When they surfaced, their behavior suggested that it was from a deeper dive. We observed four to six breaths (without any visible “blow”) each time they surfaced.

Cook’s petrels are elusive birds that breed on a few islands off New Zealand and make the long flight across the Pacific to feed in warm summer waters offshore California. Most scientists consider them rare any closer than 200 miles offshore, which has limited birders’ attempts to see them. Similarly, Murphy’s petrels breed on a few small islands in the South Pacific. Unknown along our coast before 1980, they can be seen off the California coast in the spring—if you happen to be offshore far enough to encounter them.

Until now it was mostly fishermen who observed Cook’s and Murphy’s petrels. (During offshore fishing trips this summer we saw Cook’s petrels feeding on the same baitfish that albacore tuna were eating.) But birders Don DesJardin and Walter Wehtje convinced us to offer five-day pelagic trips targeting pelagic birds, and now we can offer you access to these rare species.

I know I’m blessed by these sightings, which few people in the world ever get to see. We hope to share all this with you in 2006!

ANIMAL PROFILE

pygmy beaked whale

Mesoplodon peruvianus

One of the most recently discovered and smallest of the beaked whales, the pygmy beaked whale is known only from a few specimens washed ashore and several sightings from the eastern tropical Pacific off Peru and Chile, and in the Sea of Cortez.

Maximum length is about 3.9 meters (about 12.9 ft.). It has a moderately long beak and a low triangular dorsal fin about two-thirds down the back. Its teeth (along with the face and mouth, impossible to see at sea) are very small and egg-shaped.



Photo by Todd McGrath

Now birders may add the Murphy’s petrel to their list.

Searcher Natural History Tours 2005–2006 Schedule



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

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, 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



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

Offshore Birding Adventure

April 26–30, 2006

September 4–8, 2006

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. \$850



Photo by Frank S. Balthis



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2005—2006
Tour Schedule
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Close enough?

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



- ◆ 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

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