

# Baja Whales & Wildlife

## Searcher Natural History Tours

APRIL 2006



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

Searcher Natural History Tours is one of only a few U.S. businesses with permission from Mexico to operate cruises into ecological parks and preserves of the Sea of Cortez.

### The Sea of Cortez honored with designation as one of the world's unique wonders

In its continuing efforts to conserve and protect cultural and natural heritage, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared the Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California (also known as Sea of Cortez) in Baja California, Mexico, a World Heritage Site.

UNESCO's World Heritage Sites are diverse and unique wonders, such as the Great Wall of China, Australia's Great Barrier Reef, the Galápagos Islands, the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, wildlife preserves in East Africa, the Taj Mahal, Indonesia's tropical rain forests, and the Grand Canyon in the US. Baja California's Islands and Protected Areas of the Gulf of California is the newest addition to that impressive list.

UNESCO reports that the Islands of the Gulf of California contain "striking natural beauty in a dramatic setting formed by rugged islands with high cliffs and sandy beaches, which contrast with the brilliant reflection from the desert and the surrounding turquoise waters." The investigators were amazed at the diversity and abundance of bird and marine life, determining that the area "constitutes a unique eco-region of high priority for biodiversity conservation."

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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

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Photo by Frank S. Balthis

## Ask the Naturalist...



Frank Balthis answers —

**How can I tell the difference between a seal and a sea lion?**

Along the shores and islands of Baja California, Mexico, we get close to California sea lions (left), Guadalupe fur seals (not shown), and elephant seals (below).

We see both seals and sea lions on trips with *Searcher* Natural History Tours, and it's fairly easy to tell the difference between the two.

Even when an animal shows only its head above the surface of the water, a glimpse at the animal's ears will tell you whether it's a seal or a sea lion. Sea lions have small, pointed ear flaps; seals don't. In fact, the only sign of a seal's ear is a small opening on each side of the head.

We visit Baja in the late winter, when elephant seals gather on the beach to breed after giving birth. But sea lions also haul out on land to rest and bask in the sun, and we see them, too.

Sea lions are able to navigate steep, rocky shores. A sea lion rotates its flippers underneath its body and clambers about on all four flippers. On land, a sea lion is agile and maneuverable.

Unlike a sea lion, a seal can't walk on all fours because its hind flippers don't rotate under the body. We find elephant seals on sandy beaches and in pebbly coves, where they're able to swim up onto shore and move about



Photo by Geoff Harwood

on their bellies. Surprisingly fast, on land elephant seals move by undulating on their bellies or "bouncing" along, their pectoral flippers held out sideways and their hind flippers trailing behind them.

If you get a close look at the animals' pectoral flippers, you'll see that a sea lion's are long and winglike. In contrast, a seal's pectoral flippers are short, with five distinct claws.

We are always sure to keep a safe distance from wild animals. The

elephant seals on Islas San Benito do not invite a close inspection! But the sea lions at Islas Los Islotes approach snorkelers playfully.

It's these kind of experiences that help passengers come away with a real understanding of the fascinating habits of and differences between seals and sea lions. By the end of a 12-day Baja trip aboard the *Searcher*, passengers are able to very easily tell the difference.





Photo by Patti Schick

Nesting white-throated swifts and colorful Sally lightfoot crabs lead us to fascinating sea caves on Isla San Jose in the Sea of Cortez.

## Sea of Cortez

Continued from page 1—

The UNESCO site in the Sea of Cortez is home to 695 plant species—more than any other marine or island property on the World Heritage List. It is home to 891 species of fish (90% of which are endemic), 39% of the world’s total number of marine mammal species, and one third of the world’s marine whale and dolphin species.

That diversity, beauty, and abundant marine life is not news to naturalists, scientists, and ecotourists. For more than 20 years, outfitters such as San Diego’s *Searcher* Natural History Tours have been permitted by the Mexican government to take passengers into the Sea of Cortez for snorkeling with colorful reef fish and sea lions; whalewatching for blue, fin, humpback, sperm, pilot, gray, and killer whales; and birdwatching at protected islands, in an effort to educate the public about the wildlife treasures found there. *Searcher* Natural History Tours has three trips scheduled for 2007. See page 5 for dates.



Photo by Geoff Harwood



Photo by Geoff Harwood

The Sea of Cortez is home to wonders large (humpback whale) and small (cactus spines).

## Boat terms

**bow** — the front, pointy end of the boat.

**galley** — the kitchen on a boat.

**head** — the restrooms on a boat.

**port** — (facing the bow) the left side of the boat.

**starboard** — (facing the bow) the right side of the boat.

**stern** — the back of the boat.

## Which would you eat?



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

Do chocolate chip sea stars really taste good? Do they emit an enticing aroma while they’re baking? Or is that only true of Lurch’s chocolate chip cookies? For the answers to these questions—and for some incredibly delicious recipes—check out *Offshore Delights*, a new cookbook by our own Chef Randy Fickes. The cookbook features full-color photos of Baja whales and wildlife. Order yours online: just \$20 at [bajawhale.com](http://bajawhale.com).

## Where do we go?



Original watercolors by Kathy Huber, created in Baja California, Mexico while aboard the *Searcher*.



## ANIMAL PROFILE

### emerald-tailed lizard *Uta squamata*



On Isla Santa Catalina in the Sea of Cortez lives an endemic species of lizard, one with a startling, malachite-green tail. Also known as the Santa Catalina side-blotched lizard, this small reptile (57 mm, not including the tail) has completely charmed *Searcher* passengers.

Hiking the rocky coastal hillsides of Isla Santa Catalina, we send emerald-tailed lizards scurrying. We also see them basking on sun-drenched rocks and resting in the cooler sand of arroyos. They often are found in pairs, especially in the spring when they are breeding.

Experts note that these lizards have been known to eat fruits and seeds of local cactuses. They probably also eat a variety of insects.



# Searcher Natural History Tours 2006–2007 Schedule

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

February 8–19, 2007

February 23–March 6, 2007

March 10–21, 2007

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.



Photo by Frank S. Balthis



Photo by Geoff Harwood

We'll 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 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. \$3,275



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

## Offshore Birding Adventure

September 4–8, 2006

April 2007 (CALL FOR INFORMATION)

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



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2006 2007  
Tour Schedule  
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## Baja Whales & Wildlife

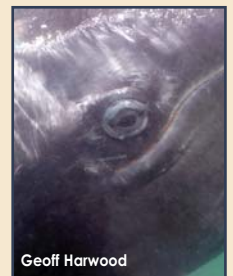
Searcher Natural History Tours



Photo by Geoff Harwood

### Close enough?

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



Geoff Harwood

- ◆ 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](http://www.bajawhale.com)

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