



Message from Searcher Owner/Operator Art Taylor



Below, top photo— Searcher Captain Kevin Ward takes a turn as lookout for whales and wildlife.

Below, middle and lower photos— The Searcher crew transports passengers to remote areas accessible only by skiff.

A valuable asset to any business is its employees, and it's no different in our case. Celia and I are proud of our crew—captains, deckhands, skiff drivers, and cooks alike. They truly love what they do, and they do a great job making our passengers feel at home.

It might sound like a cushy job—sailing away to Baja's remote islands and marine parks, diving with great white sharks, helping people haul in tuna and yellowtail, finding a special seabird for a birder, and generally living the sailor's dream. But the job is hard. There are long hours, sometimes difficult conditions, monotonous boat and engine maintenance, baking bread in rocking seas, weeks away from home, and then there's cleaning the heads (bathrooms) several times a day.

One important task for the crew on natural history tours is... looking. They take turns keeping watch on the horizon for any distant whale's blow, a flutter of wings, a disturbance of fish at the surface, a splash of dolphins, or anything that might warrant a closer look. With their trained eyes and powerful binoculars, they can find wildlife and give enough warning for passengers to grab a camera or binocs and get on deck. After all, our passengers are on vacation and might want to get some reading or napping time in, knowing that we're always on watch and won't let them miss anything.

Sometimes those "lookers" get overlooked, but they add immensely to the trip. We received a letter from a recent passenger and *Searcher* friend, Darbi Macy:

"The crew is so hardworking and dedicated that the trip was made nearly seamless by their constant efforts. The two or three that sat tirelessly on the top of the boat looking for marine life added a great deal to the trip. I think without them and Art keeping vigilant watch, we would have missed about a third of the amazing stuff we got to see."

Thank you for noticing, Darbi!



Photo by Harold Buchanan



Photo by Jean Parfitt



Photo by Harold Buchanan

Seabirds

Continued from page 1—

adventures on this expedition. Along the way we'll also visit a diverse array of seabird and marine mammal habitats—the continental shelf, deep ocean basins, offshore banks, and waters near seabird-nesting islands. We will stop to chum for birds along the way or to investigate pods of dolphins or whales.

Our route will take us past Isla Coronado and Islas San Benito, home to many species of breeding seabirds including Craveri's Murrelets, Xantus's Murrelets (both the nominate and Scripps's



Photo by Don Des Jardin



Photo by Don Des Jardin

Above—Birders scan for rarities aboard a *Searcher* pelagic trip. *Searcher's* ample observation deck and padded benches make for a comfortable trip.

Below—For an avid birder, spotting a Pink-footed shearwater is a real thrill.



Photo by Todd McGrath

Red-billed tropicbirds breed on Alijos Rocks.

subspecies), Black Storm-Petrels, Least Storm-Petrels, Leach's Storm-Petrels, Cassin's Auklets, and Black-vented Shearwaters. April is an excellent transition month, so we can expect both wintering and breeding birds, as well as numerous migrants.

The area is renowned for its abundance of marine life. The planned route will provide ample opportunities for encounters with many species of baleen and toothed whales, dolphins, marine turtles, sharks, and fishes.

One day will be spent specifically in very deep water. We'll search for Black-footed Albatrosses, Laysan Albatrosses, Cook's Petrels, Leach's Storm-Petrels, and Red-billed Tropicbirds. Though Murphy's Petrels have not been recorded off Baja, this is the perfect time to look for them. Xantus's and Craveri's Murrelets are on our target list.

For two days, we'll focus our efforts on the banks offshore Magdalena Bay and Cabo San Lucas. We'll chum seabirds to the boat over Lusitania and Morgan Banks, with the peninsula as a scenic backdrop. Blue-footed Boobies could be a new species for the trip here. We'll examine the Pink-footed and Sooty Shearwaters to spot any Wedge-tailed Shearwaters.

We'll watch for Least Storm-Petrels and perhaps even Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrels to fly in to our chum slick over Finger, Golden Gate, and Jamie Banks, about 30 miles offshore, area is famous for its blue whales. This day is probably our best chance to spot the very rare Townsend's Shearwater.

An 8-day pelagic birding trip will be offered aboard *Searcher* April 13–20, 2007. Cost is \$1995 per person. For a detailed itinerary and a list of species you're likely to see, visit —www.bajawhale.com/birdingtrips.html



Photo by Todd McGrath

**ANIMAL
PROFILE****tarantula hawk wasp***Pepsis spp.*

Most *Searcher* Natural History Tour passengers long to spend time with Baja's humongous blue whales, soaring seabirds, curious gray whales, leaping pods of dolphins, darling elephant seal pups, and the rainbow of reef inhabitants seen while snorkeling in the southern Sea of Cortez.

But shore walks on islands or in desert arroyos yield an amazing variety of discoveries for any ecotourist. The flowering desert plants, sunning lizards, nesting hummingbirds and woodpeckers, and colorful sandstone and other geologic formations are a photographer's dream. One creature you might not expect to encounter on a marine-life cruise is this tarantula hawk wasp, often seen on Isla San Jose and other remote islands in the Sea of Cortez.

Its name comes from an amazing habit—it hunts tarantulas as food and habitat for its larvae. A female tarantula hawk wasp locates tarantulas, mostly by smell, even seeking them in their burrows. She captures (check out the hooks on the legs of the one pictured here), stings, and paralyzes the spider. Then she drag the spider into her nest. She lays a single egg on the spider's body and buries the nest. When the wasp larva hatches, it feeds on the juices of the still-living spider. As the larva matures, it feeds on the spider's body and the spider eventually dies. The vital organs are the last to be eaten, so that the spider stays fresh. The adult wasp emerges from the nest to continue the remarkable life cycle.

Other than tarantula juice and body parts, tarantula hawk wasps feed on nectar from flowers and fruit. We often see them "nectaring" on milkweed flowers and other desert shrub flowers.



Photo by Jean Parfitt

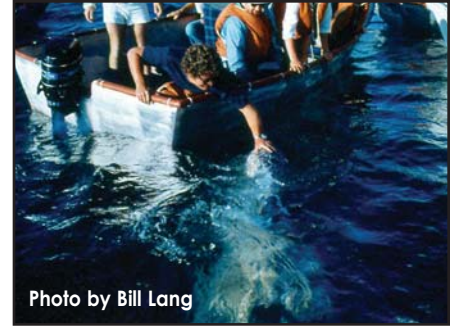


Photo by Bill Lang

Searcher owner, Captain Art Taylor, has been getting close to gray whales since the late 1970s, when this photo was taken.

Ask the Naturalist...

Paul Jones answers —

Why do some gray whales in Baja allow people to touch them? What does it feel like to touch a whale?

No one knows why gray whales come so close as to let us touch them and their newborn calves. It's one of the greater mysteries in the natural world. No other wild mammal—or other large vertebrate—brings its offspring close enough to people for physical contact. It's awe inspiring. No matter how often I go back to San Ignacio, I'm filled with the same sense of wonder and exuberance.

A gray whale feels like tons of solid rubbery wonder, punctuated by large, sharpish shells of barnacles and patches of gritty little whale lice. It's taut, like a wetsuit on solid muscle. At the same time, it's smooth and resilient. Should you be lucky enough to touch a follicle, it feels hairy—invoking its mammalian ancestry. To me, gray whales feel like all those wondrous, wet, and wild things.

Join Paul Jones on the February 8–19, 2007 tour.

Searcher Natural History Tours 2006–2007 Schedule

12 days in Baja: San Diego to Cabo San Lucas

February 8–19, 2007

FULL ~~February 23–March 6, 2007~~

March 10–21, 2007

**JUST
ADDED** March 25–April 5, 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 Camille Buchanan



Photo by Harold Buchanan

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 Camille Buchanan

Offshore Birding Adventures

The only way to see some of the world's most elusive seabirds!

April 13–20, 2007

See cover story for more information about this eight-day trip.

September 3–7, 2007

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. \$950



Photo by Frank S. Ballhis

Baja Whales & Wildlife

SEARCHER Natural History Tours



Geoff Harwood

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

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

SEARCHER
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Baja Whales & Wildlife

Searcher Natural History Tours

SEPTEMBER 2006



Photo by Don Des Jardin

Birders expect to see Laysan albatross on Searcher's April pelagic birding trip.

Searching for Baja's Seabirds

by Greg Gillson

Greg will be one of three birding leaders on an exciting 8-day birding trip in April 2007.

Alijos Rocks are 480 miles south of San Diego and 180 miles west of Baja California Sur, Mexico. The remote group of rugged rocks is the peak of an oceanic volcano that rises 33 m (100 ft.) above the ocean's surface. Located at the convergence of the cooler California current and the warmer tropical Pacific waters, Alijos Rocks provides a significant square kilometer of seabird habitat in the midst of one of the world's most productive and diverse locations. Scientists have documented the birds of Alijos Rocks on only a few brief visits. Nonetheless, the resulting list of seabirds observed in this area makes up an eclectic group.

During spring, Masked Boobies, Sooty Terns, and Red-billed Tropicbirds breed on Alijos Rocks. In addition, Laysan Albatrosses, Black-vented Shearwaters, Leach's Storm-Petrels, and Nazca Boobies are suspected breeders. Magnificent Frigatebirds are regularly encountered. Southern hemisphere-breeding Cook's Petrels were noted by every visitor to these rocks throughout the season.

The Searcher's unique 8-day pelagic birding trip begins in San Diego and ends in Cabo San Lucas. Exploring the seabirds of Alijos Rocks is only one of the birding

—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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