

Baja Whales & Wildlife

Searcher Natural History Tours

MARCH 2007



Photos by Jean and Anthony Parfitt

An enormous wavy barrel cactus dwarfs a *Searcher* passenger in search of photos. To his right and left, cardon cactuses soar to heights of 60 ft. (18 m). In some areas, the giant cactus can be so numerous that they appear as a forest.

Land Giants of Baja California, Mexico

After a morning observing and photographing some giants of the sea, *Searcher* Natural History passengers also cruise among some giants on land.

Cardon cactus (*Pachycereus pringlei*) are often confused with the famous saguaro cactus of the southwest U.S., but cardon is an entirely different species—in fact, it's not found anywhere in the U.S. Cardon live throughout the desert regions of the Baja California peninsula and on many of the offshore islands in the Sea of Cortez.

At 10 tons and 60 ft. (18 m) tall, a cardon is a giant in the plant world. Scientists estimate these immense cactuses can live and grow for more than 200 years. Their massive branches grow upward, producing a distinctive candleabra shape. Each branch is made up of 11-17 long ribs and is covered by clusters of gray spines. The dried ribs of the tall columnar branches of this cactus are commonly used for constructing houses, fences and corrals in Baja California.

—continued inside on page 2

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...

Rob Nawojchik answers—

In the Sea of Cortez, we saw big groups of birds diving and dolphins jumping, all in the same spot. What was happening underwater?



Photo by Frank Balthis

A feast was happening! It sounds like you were witnessing a feeding event. We see this kind of behavior when there is a large amount of food such as baitfish, krill, or squid—all schooling critters—congregated in one spot. In fact, these prey species may have aggregated because they too were feeding, possibly on plankton.

Maybe the dolphins found the concentrated food source first and were moving quickly through the surface, scooping up the food and churning up the water. Then perhaps the surface commotion drew in the birds. We sometimes see pelicans, brown and blue-footed boobies, gulls, terns, frigatebirds, and shearwaters, all hovering over one area, and diving or picking food off the surface.

Large baleen whales, such as fin, blue, or humpback, can also move in and gulp large mouthfuls of the stuff. Sometimes we see the birds picking up the fish as they jump OUT of the mouth of a whale!

These mixed-species feeding aggregations that we observe in the Sea of Cortez alert us to the high biological productivity of this body of water, fueled by the upwelling of nutrients from the depths below. Often each animal is so intent on feeding, that we can idle nearby and just watch, photograph, and listen to the “lip-smacking.” It’s hard to tell how a feeding event gets started, but everyone gets fed well in the Sea of Cortez!



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

ANIMAL PROFILE

Blue-footed booby

Sula nebouxii



Photo by Harold Buchanan

Boobies are specialized feeders and their plunging, head-first dives are spectacular to watch. Spotting fish beneath the surface, they dive vertically at high speed, folding their long, pointed wings just before they plunge into the water.

Bright blue feet are what attract the most attention to this species of booby. They are part of an elaborate mating ritual. A male raises one blue foot in the air, then the other, as he struts in front of a female. Both the male and the female stretch their necks and point their bills to the sky. The male spreads his wings and whistles. The female may tuck her head under her wing.

The blue-footed booby is just under three feet tall and its wingspan is about five feet. These delightful birds are solitary at sea but nest in groups on rocky islands, such as Los Islotes in the Sea of Cortez.

GIANTS

continued from cover page—

White cardon flowers are quite showy as they bloom right out of the cardon rib. Bats, insects and birds visit the flowers to sip nectar and gather pollen. Blooms give way to fuzzy fruit, which the early inhabitants of Baja ate, along with the seeds.

We see holes in the cardon, where owls and other cavity-nesting birds have set up house. Hawks wedge their larger nests between arms of the cardon.

Another giant, *Ferocactus diguetii* is a cylindrical cactus that reaches 12 ft. (3.7 m) tall and 3 ft. (1 m) in diameter. We refer to it as wavy barrel cactus. It grows on select islands in the Sea of Cortez. Therefore, it is an island endemic, meaning that it's found only on a few of Baja's islands—and nowhere else in the world.

Searcher passengers get an up-close view of these giants.

The noticeable wave in the growth pattern of the ribs is due to expansion and shrinkage during periods of high and low rainfall. On this species, the spines are quite noticeable and sturdy. *Searcher* passengers get an up-close view of these giants and take some impressive photographs on Isla Santa Catalina.



Photos by Jean and Anthony Parfitt



Photos by Jean and Anthony Parfitt



Photo by Rik Walton

(Top and left) Wavy barrel cactus grows only on a few Baja islands. At 12 ft. (3.7 m) tall, it towers over a *Searcher* passenger.

(Far left) The white fragrant blossoms of the cardon cactus attract pollinators—and photographers.

Where do we go?



But it's the underwater antics of the sea lions that charm us when we don our snorkel gear. The youngsters are bold and curious, occasionally tugging on a flipper or swimming circles around us. Eye-to eye with them in their world, we see how graceful and adapted they are for living in the sea. Many passengers put this experience near the top of their list after 12 awesome days of wildlife experiences. Don't miss it!

Check out our Whalewatcher's Blog

Daily entries highlight the activities on our 2007 tours. See how each day offers a new opportunity for a wildlife surprise in Baja California. Plus, we've posted just a few of the wonderful photos we get from our passengers after their tour. Follow this link to get there:

<http://www.bajawhale.com/whaleblog.asp>



Photo by
Harold Buchanan



Photo by Jean and Anthony Parfitt

At Los Islotes we see feisty Sally lightfoot crabs (top). Plus, we snorkel among playful California sea lions (bottom).

Islas Los Islotes

No wonder the two tiny islets in the Sea of Cortez, just north of Isla Espiritu Santo, are often overlooked on maps. They are in fact not much more than large rocks that peek above the calm surface. But these islets, called Los Islotes ("the isolated ones") are a favorite stop for *Searcher* Natural History Tour passengers. Their isolation provides a protected place for wildlife to flourish.

Prime bird habitat; the islands are topped with a frosting of white guano (bird droppings). The rocky cliffs are nesting perches for blue-footed and brown boobies, yellow-footed gulls, and a variety of shorebirds and herons. These fish-eaters find plenty of food in the surrounding waters while they are building nests, tending eggs, and raising young chicks.

On a scenic skiff ride around the islands, we see fluffy booby chicks, bright red Sally lightfoot crabs, and lots of loud and lively California sea lions hauled out onto the rocks to rest and roar. Passengers get some great photos of the sea lions jumping out of the water and chasing each other.

Searcher Natural History Tours 2007–2008 Schedule

12 days in Baja: San Diego to Cabo San Lucas

February 6–17, 2008

February 21–March 3, 2008

March 24–April 4, 2008

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
Sally Walton

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 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. \$3295

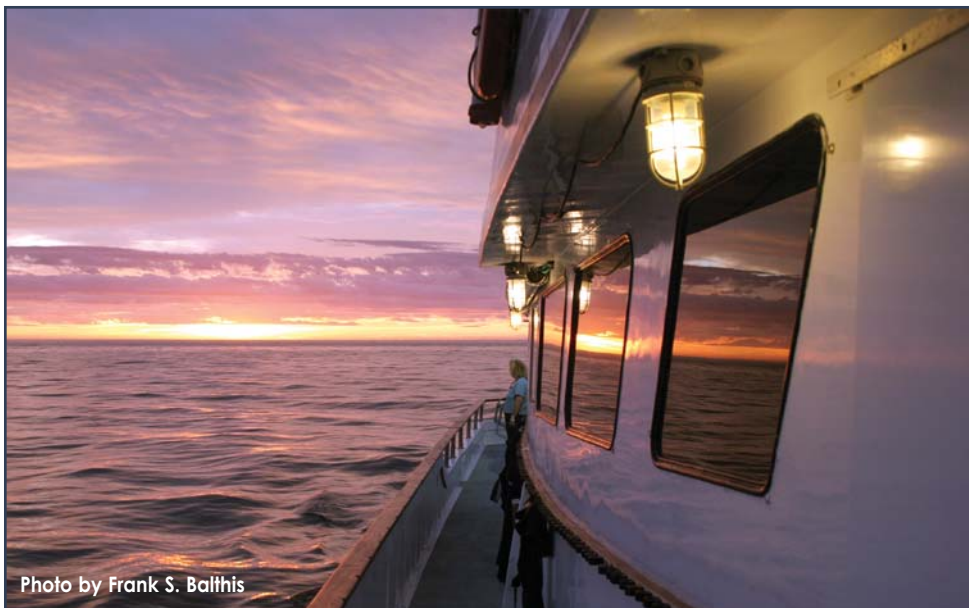


Photo by Frank S. Balthis

Offshore Birding Adventure

September 3–7, 2007

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. \$950



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2007-2008 Tour
Schedule
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Baja Whales & Wildlife

Searcher Natural History Tours



Photo by Sally Walton

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

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