

# Baja Whales & Wildlife

## Searcher Natural History Tours

APRIL 2009



Photo by Jan Burnell

An orca's characteristic color pattern is evident in this photo of an orca just under water, taken from the *Searcher*. See more orca photos inside on page 2.

### Orca sighting aboard the *Searcher*

*Bahia Agua Verde—February 16, 2009:* Sometimes weather drives sailors into port; other times, it beckons them out to sea. After an early-morning walk, the glassy waters of the Gulf of California were calling to us. Captain Art decided to forgo an afternoon snorkel because the weather was perfect for whalewatching. We weighed anchor and headed out into deep water to look for whales.

We were richly rewarded for that decision, as it wasn't long before the cry of "orca" rang out. It was the first time in five years or so that we have spotted the whales on one of our Baja trips. We encountered a group of 13—three males, two calves and the rest females. What a show!

Orcas (also known as killer whales, *Orcinus orca*) are the largest of the dolphin family of toothed whales. They are best known for their status as the ocean's top predator, and have been known to eat fish, seabirds, and other marine mammals including giant baleen whales.

Our incredible, up-close views and the time we spent with the orcas was truly remarkable. Bow riding and closely following the boat, the whales were spectacular. A highlight was watching a cow-calf pair bow ride, seemingly close enough to touch. We stayed with the pod for more than two hours, and we could have stayed longer, but they were heading north and we needed to turn south.

Later in the afternoon, we spotted blue whales and the elusive dwarf sperm whales (*Kogia simus*), as well as brown- and blue-footed boobies. We ended the day with a margarita party and dinner, bioluminescence and star gazing. What a day!

*adapted from the field notes of naturalist Paul Jones*

A TRADITION OF QUALITY  
ECOTOURISM  
TO BAJA CALIFORNIA

For more than 25 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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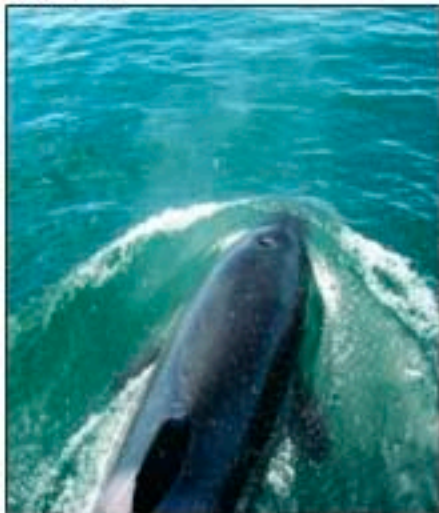
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Killer whale photos by Jan Burnett

**Orcas!** — We spent several hours observing a pod of orcas off Bahia Agua Verde on our February 7-18 trip. Experts identify individual whales by the size and shape of the whale's dorsal fin.



## ANIMAL PROFILE

### Fin whale

*Balaenoptera physalus*

*February 9, 2009, at sea* Prior to our arrival at the San Benitos Islands we encountered a large aggregation of fin whales (12-15) which included several juveniles. It was an excellent and unusual sighting: groups of this many fin whales are not often encountered off the West Coast of Baja, or even in the Sea of Cortez.

These finbacks were easy-going and allowed us to get quite close. They even approached us for some close "fly-bys." Fin whales feed primarily on small schooling fishes, and we

watched the whales search for food. We were treated to a quite a show watching them lunge feed.

We spotted spouts from other large whales but didn't have time to approach all of them to obtain positive identifications. Many, if not all, were likely more fin whales.



Photo by Frank S. Balthis

*adapted from the field notes of naturalist Paul Jones.*



### Almond- and Sage-Crusted Salmon with Red Pepper Coulis

four 5- to 6-oz salmon fillets  
1 cup toasted almond  
1/4 cup fresh sage  
olive oil  
salt and pepper

#### Red Pepper Coulis

3 red peppers, seeded  
1/2 cup yellow onion  
1/2 cup white wine  
1/2 tsp cumin  
1/4 tsp curry powder  
1 T butter

Preheat oven to 350°. Toast almonds until light brown, then cool. In food processor, pulse toasted almonds and sage to coarse crumbs. Add salt and pepper.

Brush salmon fillets with olive oil and coat with almond-sage crumbs. Cook at 350 ° until the juices run clear (about 15-20 minutes).

Dice onions and peppers. Saute in a medium saucepan with butter about 1 minute. Add wine, cumin and curry powder. Cook until soft and liquids are released. Puree mixture in food processor, then strain through a fine sieve.

To serve, place salmon on top of a small puddle of warm coulis. Garnish with chopped green onions and serve with rice and seasonal veggies.



—Chef Charles

## Baja School Friends

This spring the *Searcher* made a special delivery to the whale lagoons: supplies for the local schools, donated by Baja School Friends (BSF).

The goal of the BSF organization is to provide supplies, equipment and support to the schools of Laguna village in Baja California's San Ignacio Lagoon, Mexico. BSF is comprised of more than 80 members from all over the country. Through their generosity the program has been successful at providing school children with items from the basics like pencils, pens, chalk, paper and glue to microscopes and other lab equipment, and even jump ropes, bats, balls and more playground equipment.

It all started in 2001, when long-time whale watchers Claudette and Dick White traveled to San Ignacio Lagoon in search of gray whales. The Whites met the children of the village and fell in love with them. A trip to the

village school revealed that the schools had no electricity, no running water, and minimal school and playground supplies. Back at home, the Whites began collecting school supplies and playground equipment to send to the village. However, the remote setting does not lend itself to easy delivery. Organizations like Baja Expeditions, Inc., and the *Searcher* help by delivering the supplies to the village.

The White's project grew to become Baja School Friends. The school and the kids have grown as well. Some of the students who were in elementary school when supplies were first sent are now enrolled in universities. One is studying ecotourism, which will ultimately benefit the village and others like it. In 2001, the schools went only to the sixth grade; further education required them to move to another town. Today, through the efforts of BSF and others, the school goes through the ninth grade.



Baja School Friends donates classroom supplies like paints and markers.

Hopefully, in the near future there will be high school graduates from a Laguna high school.

In creating BSF, the Whites combined their love of whales, kids, and education toward a single effort. BSF has no salaried employees, no dues, and other than minor administrative and mailing costs, all funding goes to supplies and improvement of the school facilities. For more information you can contact BSF at [Bajaschoolfriends@sbcglobal.net](mailto:Bajaschoolfriends@sbcglobal.net)



Donations of supplies are transferred to panga drivers in Laguna San Ignacio.



Laguna village classrooms benefit from school supplies donated by Baja School Friends.

## Ask the Naturalist...



Where do you see Guadalupe fur seals?

Marc Webber answers

Photo by Ildare Szcepaniak

Guadalupe fur seals (*Arctocephalus townsendi*) were heavily hunted in

the 19th century. Experts thought they were extinct, but individuals were sighted again in 1926. An expedition confirmed the species' survival by finding animals breeding on Isla Guadalupe (off central Baja California) 1954. The species has been making a comeback ever since. The most recent population estimate comes from 1993: approximately 7,400 animals, believed to be increasing at a rate of almost 14% per year.

In 1997 a team of researchers found a breeding colony of Guadalupe fur seals on East San Benito Island. This year we noted more fur seals hauled out near the landing cove on West San Benito Island than we've seen in years past. We hope this is another positive sign of the ongoing recovery of this species.

With strong protection from both Mexico and the United States, the Guadalupe fur seal may yet reoccupy their former range, which includes colonies in the California Channel Islands and possibly the Farallon Islands off San Francisco. The recent surprising discovery of Guadalupe fur seal remains in Native American middens as far north as Washington State suggests that we still



Photo by Marc Webber

Two subadult Guadalupe fur seals spar near the water's edge.



By Owner/  
Operator  
Art Taylor



After 20 years of our beloved gray whale T-shirt design, we asked science illustrator and Searcher naturalist Peter Gaede to produce a new design for our 2009 tours.

We asked for a lot. Include a gray whale cow with a calf, a bird species, a blooming cactus, a pinniped ... and oh yeah —don't forget that lots of guests come to Baja just to see blue whales. And for some people, seeing dolphins leaping and bowriding makes their trip special. And on top of it all, make it look like an ocean adventure.

Though the order was tall, Peter delivered a carefully created design. He asked experts for input on his blue whale size and shape and color. And were the gray whale barnacles showing enough? Baby elephant seals are popular in photographs, but snorkeling with sea lions at Islas Los Islotes is high on the list for many Searcher Natural History Tours participants. And you know you've entered Baja's pelagic bird realm at the first glimpse of a frigatebird. Narrowing down the animals that went into the design was tough. He produced a species-rich design with the nautical compass rose as the background. We love it! We've printed it on the mailing panel of this newsletter.

We're trying something new with styles as well. We offer a pullover hooded sweatshirt and ladies' styles in long- and short-sleeved tees. Men can also choose a long- or short-sleeved T-shirt.

Let us know if you like to buy a T-shirt or sweatshirt and we'll get one in the mail to you. OR join us on a 2010 adventure and buy one in person —and get the chance to see all the species in the design.

# Searcher Natural History Tours 2009–2010 Schedule

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

Feb 7–18, 2010 \$3,595

FULL Mar 9–20, 2010 \$3,595

Mar 25–April 5, 2010 \$3,595

April 9–20, 2010 \$3,450

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 John Janovy

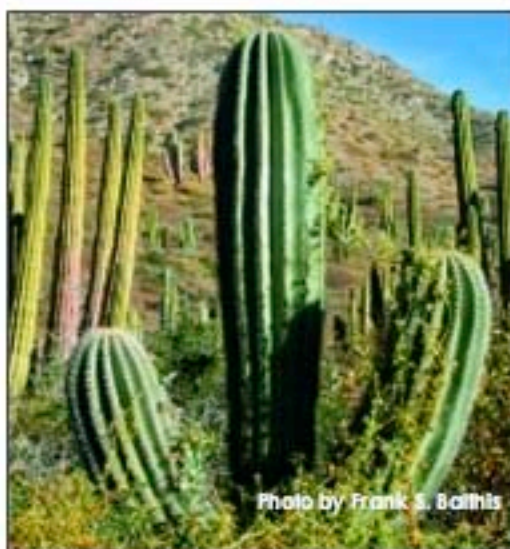


Photo by Frank S. Bathis

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.



Photo by Frank S. Bathis

## Offshore Birding Adventure September 7–11, 2009

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. \$1,015