

## **TRIP REPORT**

**22 FEBRUARY – 5 MARCH 2011**

**NATURALISTS: ROB NAWOJCHIK AND LEE MORGAN**

22 FEBRUARY 2011, TUESDAY

Passengers embarked in the late afternoon and early evening. A briefing was held at 7:00PM, at which time Captain Art Taylor and Celia Condit reviewed important information for the trip, including safety information. Naturalists Rob Nawojchik and Lee Morgan were introduced to the group. At 9:09PM, the Searcher left the dock and headed south. The sea and wind were calm.

23 FEBRUARY 2011, WEDNESDAY

The Searcher cleared Customs in Ensenada from 6:00AM to 6:37AM. While in Ensenada harbor, several species of coastal/sea birds were observed. After leaving Ensenada harbor, the Searcher motored past Islas Todos Santos, where several species of pinnipeds and birds were seen from the boat. One northern elephant seal group was observed, including one bull and a few females. About 20 harbor seals were seen, along with at least one California sea lion. One mother-pup harbor seal nursing pair was seen on the beach, while most of the harbor seals were in the water. Bird highlights included black oystercatchers, western gulls, breeding brown pelicans (with chicks on the nests), pelagic and double-crested cormorants, and a peregrine falcon pair.

The rest of the day was spent motoring toward Islas San Benitos. We had barely left Todos Santos when we saw a fin whale, which provided some very close looks. At 9:30AM the Searcher was boarded and inspected by a Mexican Navy patrol. Afterwards, around 10:40AM, we encountered a very large group (perhaps as many as a thousand) of long-beaked common dolphins. The Searcher spent some time with this group, as many of the dolphins chose to bow-ride or surf the wake. At 11:30AM two groups of northbound gray whales were seen. The Searcher followed one group of four whales for awhile; some of the whales showed their flukes as they made their way north. Later in the afternoon, around 4:30PM, a group of about 10-20 common dolphins briefly came into the bow wave before swimming off. The final marine mammal sighting of the day was a single fin whale at 6:00PM. Many seabirds were seen during the day, including a large group of northern fulmars.

After dinner, the evening presentation by Rob Nawojchik included a preview of San Benitos, as well as an overview of marine mammals in general and pinniped biology in particular. The sea and wind had increased a bit during a day, resulting in scattered whitecaps, but overall the ride was still smooth.

24 FEBRUARY 2011, THURSDAY

The Searcher dropped anchor at West San Benito Island at 7:42AM. From 8:15 to 9:00AM West San Benito was explored by skiff along the rocky shore. Large expansive kelp beds (the most extensive of the trip) spread out along the coast. Large numbers of Guadalupe fur seals (perhaps 200) were seen hugging the rocky outcrops on shore and in playful groups in the water. Various seabirds were also observed, along with a peregrine falcon and ospreys.

From 9AM to 3PM, the group made a circumnavigational hike around West San Benito. Along the way, observations were made of hauled out elephant seals and Guadalupe fur seals in those coves that lay along the hiking route. Although it was past the peak of mating season, quite a few adult bull seals were seen. Some females were still nursing their pups, while large numbers of weaners (recently-weaned pups) were present. All told, perhaps as many as 500 or more elephant seals were seen. The large number of animals reinforces the importance of the San Benito Islands as an elephant seal breeding site.

In addition to the Guadalupe fur seals seen from the skiffs, more fur seals were observed from the hiking trail along the southern coast of the island. The number of fur seals utilizing West San Benito has increased dramatically in recent years, a good sign for this endangered species. In addition to the marine mammals, the hikers noted the diverse, and sometimes endemic, terrestrial fauna and flora. Various birds were seen, including several nesting pairs of ospreys.

At 3:17PM the Searcher left Islas San Benitos and headed south for Laguna San Ignacio. Various species of seabirds were observed during the remaining daylight hours. At 4:15PM we briefly encountered a small group (~3-5) of common dolphins. A single fin whale was observed for a short period of time at 4:30PM. The increased winds and seas that had built during the day made cetacean observations difficult during the late afternoon. The after-dinner presentation by Rob Nawojchik included a brief preview of San Ignacio, followed by a discussion of cetacean diversity and gray whale biology.

25 FEBRUARY 2011, FRIDAY

As the Searcher approached the entrance to Laguna San Ignacio at 6:30AM, a large active group of several hundred long-beaked common dolphins was seen, along with many seabirds, in what may have been a feeding event. A gray whale was also spotted outside the entrance to the lagoon. The Searcher entered Laguna San Ignacio at 8:00AM and dropped anchor within the Observation Area at 8:57AM. During the transit into the lagoon, many gray whales were observed, including some who breached, spyhopped, or showed their flukes. Several bottlenose dolphins were also seen. During the two-day stay in the lagoon, local pangas were utilized for viewing the gray whales up-close. Two panga rides

were conducted this day: 9:10 to 11:12AM and 12:50 to 3:33PM. Several “friendly” gray whales were seen, including one adult who repeatedly swam beneath each of the pangas. Other observations included bottlenose dolphins and various seabirds and shorebirds. Following dinner, the ship’s lights and generator were switched off, affording a quiet experience of the lagoon and night sky. Passenger Dave Eagle provided a discussion of astronomy while we looked at the stars and planets.

## 26 FEBRUARY 2011, SATURDAY

The Searcher continued its visit to Laguna San Ignacio. An early-morning pre-breakfast panga ride was made to the mangrove area, during which many bird species were seen, including several species of herons/egrets and shorebirds. Following breakfast, three panga rides were made during the day to look for gray whales. Large numbers of whales were in the lagoon, including one especially friendly single adult (the same one from the previous day!) who repeatedly visited the various pangas in the observation zone. Lots of mother/calf pairs were seen, some with very young calves. Many whales were seen spyhopping and breaching, and some reproductive activity (e.g., males chasing females) was observed.

The final activity in the lagoon for some passengers was a beach walk along the western shoreline of the observation zone. The mangrove area adjacent to the beach provided some interesting bird sightings, while the beach had many seashells and sand dollars.

The Searcher weighed anchor at 4:24PM and, after negotiating the breakers and sand bars protecting the entrance to the lagoon, finally exited Laguna San Ignacio around 5:20PM. The boat headed south, making way for Cabo San Lucas and the entrance to the Gulf of California. The after-dinner program included a short briefing of the next day’s activities by Rob Nawojchik, followed by a presentation on identification characteristics by Lee Morgan.

## 27 FEBRUARY 2011, SUNDAY

This was a day of travel, with the Searcher continuing its transit between Laguna San Ignacio and Cabo San Lucas. During the daylight hours, a constant vigil was maintained for marine mammals and seabirds. Several species of marine mammals were sighted and, occasionally, closely observed: groups of long-beaked common dolphins (some bowriding), a cow-calf pair of gray whales, a California sea lion swimming offshore, and several blue whales (close to the boat at times). A green sea turtle and ocean sunfish were also seen. The after-dinner presentation by Rob Nawojchik included a briefing about the next day’s activities at Gorda Bank and Los Frailes, as well as a program on the thermoregulatory adaptations of marine mammals.

28 FEBRUARY 2011, MONDAY

At approximately 4:30AM the Searcher rounded Cabo San Lucas and entered the Gulf of California. During breakfast, a hydrophone was deployed and several singing humpback whales were heard. The rest of the morning was spent whale-watching in the vicinity of the Gorda Banks. Moderate wind and seas made whale-watching more difficult than earlier in the trip. Nevertheless, over two dozen humpback whales were seen, including several cow-calf pairs (some breaching repeatedly), a rowdy group of several males pursuing a female, and some whales exhibiting flipper-slapping, lob-tailing, and tail fluking behaviors. Also seen were groups of bottlenose dolphins, several green sea turtles, and some jumping manta rays.

The Searcher arrived at Los Frailes / Cabo Pulmo Marine Park at 1:59PM, our first landfall in the Gulf of California. The passengers went ashore from 2:20 to 5:13PM, during which time many species of birds and plants were seen. Because of strong offshore winds and seas, the Searcher remained at anchor during dinner. The anchor was raised at 7:23PM and the Searcher headed north into very strong winds and seas. Because of the poor weather, the after-dinner presentation was canceled.

1 MARCH 2011, TUESDAY

The Searcher arrived at El Cardonal, Isla Espiritu Santo at 8:01AM and remained anchored there until 1:16PM. From 8:28 to 11:59AM the group took a hike across along the hiking trail that crosses from the bay side to the ocean side of the island, followed by a skiff ride along the bay's margin. Numerous bird and plant species were seen, as well as various geological features.

Upon leaving Isla Espiritu Santo, the rest of the day was spent in transit to Tombabichi, arriving at 8:44PM. Along the way, a constant vigil was maintained for cetaceans and seabirds. Cetacean highlights included two fin whales that were observed for about two hours, a very large group of bottlenose dolphins, and several California sea lions that were mixed in with the dolphin group.

The after-dinner presentation by Rob Nawojchik included a briefing on tomorrow's visit to Tombabichi and the upcoming afternoon's whale-watching activities, and a presentation on Diving Physiology of Marine Mammals.

2 MARCH 2011, WEDNESDAY

The Searcher remained anchored off Tombabichi until 9:58AM. A hike was conducted between 6:46 and 9:37AM, during which we explored along the mangrove lagoon and through the adjacent desert areas. Many species of birds and plants were seen.

The rest of the day was spent whale-watching between Tombabichi and Isla Santa Catalina. Two blue whales were observed for over two hours, at times quite closely. A very large, tightly-packed active group of long-beaked common dolphins swam about the Searcher for about 15 minutes before moving off. Several Bryde's whales were seen, including one who was lunge-feeding. Large patches of both krill and baitfish were seen in the area in which the Bryde's whale was feeding.

The Searcher dropped anchor off Isla Santa Catalina at 7:15PM. The evening program by Rob Nawojchik included a briefing covering the next two days of the trip, as well as a presentation on the Evolution of Marine Mammals.

### 3 MARCH 2011, THURSDAY

The Searcher remained anchored at Isla Santa Catalina until 1:01PM. From 6:55 to 10:10AM we explored ashore, following an arroyo towards the interior of the island. The hike proved productive for viewing many species of birds and plants. In particular, the most dramatic examples of the trip of certain cactus species were seen. From 10:38 to 11:27AM some passengers snorkeled along the dramatic rocky coastline of Santa Catalina. Many species of reef fishes were observed. Other passengers remained ashore until about 11:45AM.

After leaving Isla Santa Catalina, the Searcher traveled west and south in search of cetaceans. During the afternoon at least three blue whales and two sperm whales were seen. We were afforded excellent views of the blue whales, but the sperm whales proved elusive. Various seabirds were seen, including a couple of pairs of Craveri's murrelets. There was no evening program, but good views of bioluminescence and the night-sky stars were seen after dinner as we traveled south. At 9:52PM the Searcher anchored off the south end of Isla San Jose.

### 4 MARCH 2011, TUESDAY

The Searcher was anchored overnight at the south end of Isla San Jose. From 6:58 to 9:23AM the nearby mangrove area was explored by skiff. Many species of birds were observed, as well as other species associated with this important ecosystem. The Searcher left the anchorage at 9:44AM and headed south. At 10:13AM a group of over 100 bottlenose dolphins was encountered, some of whom came in towards the boat to bow ride. Later, between 11:19AM and lunch, three blue whales were seen.

The Searcher visited Los Islotes from 12:30 to 3:16PM, during which time a one-hour skiff ride was provided, followed by a snorkeling activity along the sea lion colony. The passengers experienced great views of seabirds and sea lions from the skiffs. Several playful and curious sea lions entertained the snorkelers. Upon raising the anchor, the Searcher headed south. Around 5:00PM, a group

of at least six blue whales was seen. The whales seemingly surrounded the Searcher while the sun set. The Searcher continued south throughout the night.

5 MARCH 2011, SATURDAY

The Searcher traveled through the early morning hours to Cabo San Lucas, where the passengers disembarked.