

## **TRIP REPORT**

**23 JANUARY – 3 FEBRUARY 2011**

**NATURALISTS: ROB NAWOJCHIK AND TOM JEFFERSON**

**23 JANUARY 2011, SUNDAY**

Passengers embarked in the late afternoon and early evening. A briefing was held at 8:00PM, at which time Captain Art Taylor and Celia Condit reviewed important information for the trip, including safety information. Naturalists Rob Nawojchik and Tom Jefferson were introduced to the group. At 9:43PM, the Searcher left the dock and headed south. The sea and wind were calm.

**24 JANUARY 2011, MONDAY**

The Searcher cleared Customs in Ensenada from 6:00AM to 6:38AM. While in Ensenada harbor, several species of coastal/sea birds were observed. Upon leaving Ensenada harbor, the Searcher was greeted by a herd of over 500 long-beaked common dolphins. The Searcher then 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 beach-master bull, about eight females, and at least five young pups. About 30 harbor seals were seen, but no sea lions. Bird highlights included oystercatchers, western gulls, breeding brown pelicans, cormorants, and a peregrine falcon.

The rest of the day was spent motoring toward Islas San Benitos. Along the way, about ten southbound migrating gray whales were seen. Later, a group of almost 100 Risso's dolphins was seen. During the late morning, we entered an area teeming with fin whales and Cassin's auklets; over 25 fin whales were seen. Following lunch, the Searcher encountered a large group (perhaps over 2,000) of long-beaked common dolphins, some of which were bow-riding the boat. During the late afternoon, two separate groups, each in the hundreds, of short-beaked common dolphins surrounded the Searcher, with some dolphins bow-riding. Other notable observations included several species of seabirds. 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 continued to be calm.

**25 JANUARY 2011, TUESDAY**

While approaching the San Benito Islands, the Searcher encountered a group of over 100 short-finned pilot whales, along with about a dozen bottlenose dolphins, some of whom chose to bow-ride. After observing these animals, we dropped anchor at West San Benito at 8:51AM. From 9:20AM to 9:55AM, 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 (over 300) were seen hugging the rocky outcrops on shore and in playful groups in the water. Various seabirds were also observed.

From 10AM 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. Each elephant seal group was overseen by a beach master bull, and included large numbers of females and still-nursing pups, along with handfuls of recently-weaned pups ("weaners"). Few challengers to the beach masters were seen, and only one fight was observed (an in-water battle between two bulls). All told, perhaps as many as 800 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 nesting pairs of ospreys.

At 3:35PM 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 4:20PM we encountered a very large group (perhaps over 1,000 animals) of long-beaked common dolphins. The after-dinner presentation included a brief preview of San Ignacio by Rob Nawojchik, a discussion of gray whale biology by Tom Jefferson, and an overview of the Laguna San Ignacio Ecosystem Science Program by Steven Swartz. The sea and wind continued to be calm.

26 JANUARY 2011, WEDNESDAY

As the Searcher approached the entrance to Laguna San Ignacio, a group of about a dozen Pacific white-sided dolphins approached, with some animals bow-riding. A group of common dolphins was seen in the distance. The Searcher entered Laguna San Ignacio at 8:15AM and dropped anchor within the Observation Area at 8:45AM. During the transit into the lagoon, several gray whales were observed, including one who breached repeatedly, along with bottlenose dolphins. During the two-day stay in the lagoon, local pangas were utilized for viewing the gray whales up-close. Three panga rides were conducted this day: 9:30 to 11:45AM, 12:45 to 2:25PM, and 2:50 to 4:15PM. Several "friendly" gray whale mother/calf pairs were encountered. Other observations include bottlenose dolphins, a green sea turtle, 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; dolphins and whales could be heard breathing about the boat.

#### 27 JANUARY 2011, THURSDAY

The Searcher continued its visit to Laguna San Ignacio. Three panga rides were made during the day, during which some friendly mother/calf gray whales were encountered. Other whales were seen spyhopping. Bottlenose dolphins were commonly seen, along with a green sea turtle.

The final activity in the lagoon was a beach walk along the western shoreline of the observation zone. The mangrove area adjacent to the beach provided some interesting bird sightings.

The Searcher weighed anchor at 4:00PM and, after negotiating the breakers and sand bars protecting the entrance to the lagoon, finally exited Laguna San Ignacio around 4:30PM. The boat headed south, making way for Cabo San Lucas and the entrance to the Gulf of California. The after-dinner program by Rob Nawojchik included a short briefing of the next day's activities, followed by a presentation on Thermoregulatory Adaptations in Marine Mammals.

#### 28 JANUARY 2011, FRIDAY

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 bottlenose dolphins (some bowriding), perhaps as many as ten humpback whales, and a spectacular fluking blue whale. A green sea turtle and pelagic red crabs were also seen. The after-dinner presentation included a briefing by Rob Nawojchik about the next day's activities in the Gulf of California, as well as a program by Tom Jefferson on the environmental threats to marine mammals.

#### 29 JANUARY 2011, SATURDAY

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, groups of bottlenose dolphins were seen, some false killer whales were seen in the distance, and several mantas and tunas were seen jumping. Also, up to a dozen humpback whales were observed, either singly or in pairs, performing various behaviors, including, breaching, flipper slapping, and tail fluking.

The Searcher arrived at Los Frailes / Cabo Pulmo Marine Park at 1:14PM, our

first landfall in the Gulf of California. The passengers went ashore from 1:30 to 3:05PM, during which time many species of birds and plants were seen. The passengers then snorkeled along Cabo Pulmo from 3:20 to 4:20PM, encountering many species of reef fishes. The Searcher left Cabo Pulmo at 4:35PM and headed north, encountering a few jumping Mobula rays along the way. The after-dinner presentation included a briefing by Rob Nawojchik on tomorrow's visit to Isla San Jose, some comments about humpback whale song by Tom Jefferson, and a presentation on Diving Physiology by Rob Nawojchik.

### 30 JANUARY 2011, SUNDAY

The Searcher arrived at Isla San Jose at 5:01AM and remained anchored off Punta Colorado until 12:15PM. From 7:00 to 8:15AM the group took a skiff ride along the island's shoreline, noting geological features, bird species, and marine life. From 8:30 to 10:40AM the group made a hike up an arroyo, again noting the unique natural features of Isla San Jose. The remainder of the morning (11:00 to 11:50AM) was spent snorkeling beneath the cliff of Punta Colorado. Many species of reef fishes were observed.

Upon leaving Isla San Jose, the rest of the day was spent in transit to Isla Santa Catalina, arriving at 8:30PM. Along the way, a constant vigil was maintained for cetaceans and seabirds. Cetacean highlights included groups of bottlenose dolphins, a Bryde's whale cow-calf pair (with the calf breaching several times!), a blue whale in the distance, a fleeting view of a *Kogia* sp. (pygmy or dwarf sperm whale), a large group (500 or more?) of active long-beaked common dolphins, a couple of groups of short-finned pilot whales (one group passing very close to the Searcher), and a large single bull sperm whale (who dived and surface-rested through a couple of cycles while we watched and listened to him on the hydrophone).

The after-dinner presentation included a briefing by Rob Nawojchik on tomorrow's visit to Isla Santa Catalina, and a presentation on the vaquita by Tom Jefferson.

### 31 JANUARY 2011, MONDAY

The Searcher remained anchored off Isla Santa Catalina until 12:40PM. A hike was conducted between 6:55 and 9:16AM during which the hikers followed 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 9:45 to 10:20AM, some passengers snorkeled along the dramatic rocky coastline of Santa Catalina. Many species of reef fishes were observed. Other passengers explored the coastline by skiff.

After leaving Isla Santa Catalina, the Searcher traveled west in search of

cetaceans. However, strong northerly winds and seas limited viewing opportunities and inhibited the Searcher from heading north. The Searcher headed south to run with the seas and provide a smoother ride. Along the way, a few cetacean species were observed, including a cow-calf fin whale pair, some common dolphins, and a group of 15-20 short-finned pilot whales. The after-dinner program by Rob Nawojchik included a preview of the next couple of days and a presentation on the evolution of marine mammals.

## 1 FEBRUARY 2011, TUESDAY

The Searcher was anchored overnight at the south end of Isla San Jose. From 6:20 to 8:10AM 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 9:11AM and moved to nearby Isla San Francisco (accompanied by several bow-riding bottlenose dolphins), dropping anchor at 9:52AM. A two-hour shore excursion was arranged, during which passengers walked along the beach or hiked the southern cliff. A few passengers elected to snorkel the bay, during which time they observed garden eels and a sea turtle. The Searcher left Isla San Francisco at 12:40PM and headed out south, due to the ongoing northerly winds and seas.

The Searcher visited Los Islotes from 2:27 to 5:02PM, during which time a one-hour skiff 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 young sea lions entertained the snorkelers. The Searcher then moved the anchorage from 5:26 to 6:58PM to the calm waters of Ensenada Grande for dinner. After dinner, the Searcher headed south during the evening.

## 2 FEBRUARY 2011, WEDNESDAY

The Searcher continued its passage south towards the Gorda Banks. Along the way, a very large scattered group of perhaps 1,000 short-beaked common dolphins was seen around 6:15AM. Other species seen during the morning were perhaps a dozen humpback whales singly or in small groups (including one group of five that swam very near the Searcher several times), some short-finned pilot whales, and a single sei whale (a rarely seen species in the Gulf).

Because of very strong northerly winds and seas, the Searcher headed to Los Frailes / Cabo Pulmo to find some protection from the wind; we dropped anchor at 1:30PM and stayed at the anchorage until midnight. During the Los Frailes visit, most passengers spent about two hours ashore bird-watching and exploring. Some of the hikers were rewarded with a look at the Baja-endemic Xantus' hummingbird, along with other noteworthy species.

The evening program following the farewell dinner was an opportunity for the

passengers to recount their favorite moment of the trip. While the responses varied (e.g., touching a gray whale, seeing a blue whale, etc.), virtually all of them were contingent on the continued health of the Baja California marine ecosystem. Without the ongoing protection of Baja's marine environment, there would be no close encounters with and sightings of whales, dolphins, seabirds, pinnipeds, and reef fishes.

3 FEBRUARY 2011, THURSDAY

After leaving Los Frailes around midnight, the Searcher traveled through the early morning hours to Cabo San Lucas, where the passengers disembarked.