



**WildWings**

## **WildWings (WildOceans)**

### **Baja California & The Sea of Cortez 2014**

**Trip Report by leaders David Wimpfheimer and Scot Anderson**

#### **Day 1 (Wednesday 26th March)**

##### **Pacific Coast - San Diego**

Almost half the group arrived from the United Kingdom the previous evening and after long flights were happy to arrive in San Diego. By 7:00 this morning a group joined David for a full day birding in the varied habitats of San Diego and adjacent cities. Our first birds included Allen's Hummingbird and Townsend's Warbler. Mission Trails Park chaparral and riparian zones displayed Wrentit, California Thrasher and Gnatcatcher while Nuttall's Woodpecker, Orange-crowned Warbler and House Wren kept the photographers happy.

Hundreds of Marbled Godwits, Willets, Dunlin, Western and Least Sandpipers fed on mudflats near the south end of San Diego Bay. A Gull-billed Tern was an especially good find picked out by some of our keen-eyed group. Only a few hundred meters north of the Mexican border a Roadrunner ran across the road in front of the van, giving us tantalizing views. At the Bird and Butterfly Garden, Victoria picked out a Black and White Warbler. Almost one hundred species were observed during the outing.

With much anticipation we boarded the *Spirit of Adventure* in the evening. After stowing our gear we enjoyed the dinner buffet and met fellow travelers. David and Scot Anderson gave us an orientation and outlined aspects of the journey. In a briefing Captain Brian Evans explained the

safety features of the boat. Shortly after leaving the dock we motored by the bait tanks where dozens of California Sea Lions barked at each other. Great Blue and Black-crowned Night Herons intently tried to feed from the tanks. The lights of Tijuana twinkled in the distance as the boat picked up speed and ventured into the open ocean. We went to sleep full of excitement for the forthcoming adventure.

## **Day 2 (Thursday 27th March)**

### **Todos Santos Island - Pacific Coast**

After a bumpy night at sea we cleared customs in Ensenada at 5:30 am and headed out towards Todos Santos Island. Despite the swell Captain Brian maneuvered the *Spirit* close to steep lichen-encrusted cliffs at the southern end of these islands, first described by Cabrillo in 1542. Here we enjoyed views of three species of cormorant. David informed us that the Pelagic Cormorant is at the southern edge of its range. The high, shrieking whistles of Black Oystercatchers carried across the water to us. Just as we were leaving the island Mark picked out a small wader on a guano covered rock. It was a Surfbird, one of the *rockpipers* that frequent the rocky shore.

The birders in the group started seeing Black-vented Shearwaters flying by the boat. They are the most numerous *tubenose* in the area as they nest on nearby islands along this coast. The larger, Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters, we saw were thousands of miles from their breeding zones in the southern hemisphere.

We had seen a few dolphins, but Brian motored the boat over to a group of Common Dolphin that seemed to grow in size as we approached. We picked out many small juveniles jumping and swimming with their mothers. David and Scot explained that there are two species of Common Dolphin. The animals we were seeing, the Short-beaked Common Dolphin, have a smaller beak and tend to stay in deeper water offshore. Our digital photographs allowed us to see great images and their distinctive field marks that are challenging to see as they swim by. In addition to having a longer beak, the Long-beaked Common Dolphin is mostly found in shallower water. About five hundred animals were in the group.

Further south we encountered another group of Short-beaked Common Dolphin. There were *only* about two hundred in this group, but some of us were able to get better photographs. Many birds hovered overhead and dove down on the small fish being chased by the dolphins. Among them were about forty Elegant Terns, a handsome bird that mostly breeds on Isla Raza at the northern end of the Sea of Cortez. Soon there was another, much larger bird for us to enjoy, a Black-footed Albatross.

We've now learned that when the boat slows it usually means wildlife has been spotted. Now the boat stopped for a massive patch of krill floating on the surface. There were at least twenty of these patches. Scot lowered a bucket and scooped some up. Up close in a small tank we could appreciate these small shrimp and marveled that there really must have been millions in the water. Of course the large baleen whales have to ingest tons of these a day to survive.

After a delicious lentil soup and salad lunch some of us rested, but others continued scanning for wildlife. The sight of several blows was a reward for their efforts. These were bushy or heart shaped blows helping to identify them as Gray Whales. These iconic animals were headed north,

with many thousands of miles still ahead on their journey to feeding zones in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. We watched them slowly swimming and surfacing, their bodies distinctively covered with patches of barnacles. After raising their flukes they sounded and dived deeper. With the knowledge that we would see more, the boat continued south.

The wind had picked up creating many white caps. It was harder to pick out wildlife, but soon a voice went out, "albatross dead ahead." Even though it was far away this large seabird flew directly at us and gave us a clear view of its white body and dark wings, a Laysan Albatross.

Captain Brian and the crew had been monitoring several blows in the distance. Suddenly we saw a whale breaching once and a second time in that direction. Many of us thought it was a Humpback, but we later realized it must have been a Fin Whale. The blows were "finner" type whales, one of the *Balaenopteridae*, which includes Minke, Bryde's, Sei, Fin and Blue, all of which have a fin on the back. Based on size, color pattern and shape of the dorsal fin it was determined that these large cetaceans were Fin Whales. The diagnostic white lower right-hand jaw and the characteristic chevron pattern on the back that we saw were distinctive.

Brian followed these animals, the second largest in the world, for over an hour. Many were going up swell, giving us, especially those standing on the bow a wild ride. However, there were marvelous, dramatic views of the animals surfacing blowing and rolling in the big waves. Rainbows of spray or whale breath created a particularly dramatic image. Towards the end of our encounter with the Fin Whales, we found two Humpbacks and followed them. They also were going up swell and staying at the surface for a long time. Finally, they turned to the east where we saw them in better light and then they fluked and sounded.

Dinner brought our day to an end. Our journals were full of entries and Scot and David reminded us that this was a very good day indeed. The sun dropped into a cloudless Pacific sky, signaling the end to the first of many special days.

### **Day 3 (Friday 28 March)**

#### **San Benitos Island - Pacific Coast**

Just before dawn it was barely light enough to see, but we were able to pick out a Black-footed Albatross flying close by the *Spirit* arcing over the choppy sea. As we headed to San Benitos Island the group enjoyed a delicious breakfast of eggs Benedict. Captain Brian spotted a large whale northeast of the rocky island. After getting closer we could see the long grey body of our first Blue Whale! Initially, its behavior was very erratic, surfacing quickly; changing speeds while going up to eight knots. Brian was just about to leave the whale and not to pursue it more, when it when it settled down and we followed it down swell. Lucky for us this whale continued down swell in the lee of the island. In the calmer sea state we could see the huge whale reflecting the blue color of the sky through the water. Although the Blue Whale is actually grey, this beautiful blue color seen through the water is what they're named for. There were some strange black spots under the dorsal fin, which turned out to be a Remora. This unusual fish can hitch a ride by attaching to the whale via a modified dorsal fin, which acts like a suction cup. We ended the sighting with a spectacular "rain-blow" in the early morning light, before running west to the island

Shortly after 9:00 am we landed at the western most of the San Benitos Islands. These small jagged landforms have been isolated from the Baja peninsula for tens of thousands of years, long enough for several endemic species to evolve. The average annual rainfall here is only four inches and judging from the dry conditions it appears that even that meager amount did not occur this winter. There are six endemic plants that are found only on this island and we saw three of them; the San Benitos Mallow, Tarweed and a small *Mammalaria* cactus.

The island is riddled with seabird burrows; Cassin's Auklet and Guadalupe Murrelet are the main occupants. The primary reason the nesting sea birds are nocturnal is to avoid predation by large and aggressive Western Gulls.

After an orientation our group walked to the south side and observed numerous Northern Elephant Seals. Many of the seals were here to molt, but there were still quite a few recently weaned animals that are affectionately called weaners. All the large adults were hundreds of miles away on long feeding migrations since the breeding season is over.

At the northern side of the island there were more seals. Many of us enjoyed sitting quietly only a few feet from these pinnipeds and experiencing their different behaviors; sneezing, crawling, scratching and peering back at us with large, expressive, black eyes.

We walked further along the rocky shore and were thrilled to find several dozen Guadalupe Fur Seals. David and Scot explained that these endangered pinnipeds, which had been hunted for their extremely fine fur, have only been seen at these islands in the last few years. They continually wrestled with each other while climbing about the rocky ledges.

A few American Oystercatchers and several Black Turnstones probed along the rocky shore while Osprey and a couple of Peregrine Falcons soared overhead.

In the past few years conservation organizations have been eliminating these Pacific coast islands of exotic pests like rabbits, donkeys and rodents. In the twenty years that David and Scot have been visiting San Benitos they have seen an increase in the number of nesting seabirds since this process began. This year the wildlife agencies are eliminating rodents by broadcasting rodent poison. They built a large aviary to house some of the endemic San Benitos Sparrows to ensure the survival of this subspecies. Our naturalists also noted that they were seeing many fewer sparrows and not even a Common Raven this year. This eradication is a difficult process in the short term, but most authorities believe a good thing in the long term.

Not long after leaving the island a few of our sharp-eyed crew picked out several blows to the south, the spouts of Blue Whales. A few eluded us, but we were able to stay with a pair for some time, one of which was our *friend* from the morning. We could clearly see the different color pattern between the two whales; the second whale had more mottling on its side.

Just as the afternoon was getting late, one of the Blue Whales raised its massive fluke out of the water and dove. Fortunately, it repeated this uncommon behavior and many photographs were taken.

It was time to continue to the south and tomorrow's destination, San Ignacio Lagoon. We headed past Cedros and Natividad islands. The latter is an important breeding site for Black-vented Shearwater and we watched hundreds flying by until sunset.

#### **Day 4 (Saturday, 29 March)**

##### **Pacific Coast – San Ignacio Lagoon**

The wind had died considerably overnight affording most of us a good night's sleep. The calm glassy sea allowed us to enjoy breakfast while the *Spirit* approached San Ignacio Lagoon. Many Surf Scoters dotted the water and both Pomarine and Arctic Skuas flew by. After turning east towards the mouth of the lagoon we started to see Gray Whales. They were all cow-calf pairs as the other whales have already headed north. Captain Brian expertly guided the *Spirit* through the narrow, unmarked channel

We soon anchored near Rocky Point and drivers, Jonas; Anastacio and Alejandro arrived in their pangas (skiffs). Although the breeze was decreasing, as it often does here in the mid-morning, we still dressed in our rain jackets and pants as protection against the spray and we were warned whale breath! After setting forth in the small boats it wasn't long before we saw several Gray Whale calves coming close very close. To be so close to these playful cetaceans was an incredible thrill. Occasionally their mothers would come close to our boats, but the pattern was that the two to three-month old calves were bolder and amazingly came close enough that we could touch them! It is impossible to know what these whales were thinking or *feeling*, but we all wondered if they were enjoying us, as much as the other way around.

At lunch we shared stories of touching whales, looking into their eyes and being so close to a species that was once hunted in this same lagoon. A complete turn around from calling these whales "Devilfish" to "Friendlies". We all looked at the screens of our digital cameras, excitedly reliving these extraordinary experiences.

After lunch we went out for more whale watching in the pangas. It was a little bouncy, but we still enjoyed remarkable experiences with these creatures. By late afternoon most of us had our fill of rolling in the boats, being doused by whale breath, touching these gentle giants and being surrounded by so many whales, dolphins and birds.

The panga drivers left us in the late afternoon leaving us plenty of time to recount our experiences, photograph whales near the *Spirit* and toast our amazing day. The setting sun backlit the blows of many whales enhancing the already dramatic scene. There were plenty of stories and memories to share over a delicious salmon dinner.

#### **Day 5 (Sunday, 30th March)**

##### **San Ignacio Lagoon – Pacific Ocean**

We had a peaceful night on the anchor, a nice break from the constant roll of the Pacific Ocean swell. It was cold and windy, a typical morning in the lagoon. As the sun rose we could see many whales blowing and surfacing near the *Spirit of Adventure*. After our panga drivers arrived and had their breakfast, we got in the skiffs, crossed the choppy lagoon and headed into the mangroves.

The mangroves here are at the northern end of their tropical distribution. Red Mangroves serve as a nursery for many fish, shellfish and of course a variety of birds that roost, nest and feed in this productive habitat. We had excellent views of Mangrove Warblers as they sang and darted in and out of the branches. White Ibis, Reddish, Snowy and Great Egrets fed in the salt marsh ecosystem. Additionally Great Blue, Little Blue, Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night Herons perched or waded in the shallows. At the high tide peak, dozens of waders roosted at the edge of the channel as we rode by. Many photographs were taken of Marbled Godwit and Willet. A Belted Kingfisher flew by and landed on a mangrove branch. Overhead we saw Osprey, Caspian Tern and Red-Breasted Mergansers on the wing.

After a break on the *Spirit* for tea and *fresh* blueberry muffins, we headed out for more whale watching from the pangas. The wind had calmed down and air warmed up as we set out looking for some friendly whales. All three skiffs had great encounters with many friendly mothers and calf. It is truly amazing to think of the trust and grace at which these Gray Whales interact with us. After more than an hour of incredible tactile experiences with these cetaceans it was time for lunch again.

At 13:45 the group headed back out looking for more whales. We ran all the way down near the mouth of the lagoon just east of Sand Island. Once there, we could see the adult (mother) whales lying on their sides with their flukes partially out of the water. One could see sand being stirred up, as the whales dug along the bottom with their huge mouths. The young calves came up with sand streaming from their mouths as well. This was feeding behavior, which was quite uncommon to see. Whether they were actually finding food was unknown. Were the mothers teaching their young how to grub on the bottom (the main way they feed in the north), or were they just getting hungry? We only see this behavior late in the season just before they leave and head north for the summer.

After a short break, we headed out for our last panga ride in the lagoon. The wind came up and although it was choppy, it was still a joy to be in the company of so many wonderful creatures. We scrambled up the ladder out of the bouncing boats, took off our waterproofs, dried off and shared stories of a great day in the lagoon.

At 17:00 we said good-bye to our skiff drivers, thanking them for their expertise and care in sharing this incredibly unique place. Most of us watched excitedly as the *Spirit* negotiated the shallow passageway from the lagoon. A large flock of Brown Pelicans, Brandt's Cormorants and Royal Terns roosted on the beach to the south. After we passed the breaking waves and returned to the deeper ocean water the boat turned away from the swells and set a southerly course.

## **Day 6 (Monday 31st March)**

### **Pacific Coast – Off Magdalena Bay**

The sea was relatively calm as the sun rose above a cloudless sky. The *Spirit* was traveling southward off Punta Lazaro, just north of the entrance to Magdalena Bay. By 7:00 am most of us had finished breakfast, but some of the keener birders had already been on the bow for quite some time. Their efforts were rewarded with sightings of both Black and Least Storm Petrels. These tiny relatives of the larger tubenoses nest locally on islands or small rocky headlands.

After heading to deeper water we felt the boat turning back towards the east. It wasn't long before we saw the reason why, a herd of dolphins. As we approached we discovered that this was not just any group of dolphins. In fact, it was the largest Captain Brian and our naturalists had ever seen! One estimate was 1,500-2,000 animals, although there were possibly twice that many. Counting these surging animals accurately as they swam and jumped all around us was really impossible. After looking at the photographs that were taken it was determined that they were Long-beaked Common Dolphins.

As if the show of dolphins was not enough dozens of Elegant Terns screeched overhead and dove into the waters around us. Several large marauding Magnificent Frigatebirds harassed them. A few skuas, pelicans and one Sabine's Gull were observed as well.

Several distant blows were seen and we then got a look at the curved dorsal fin of one of the whales. David and Scot informed us that this was a "finner" whale. Fin, Sei and Bryde's Whales can all look similar from a distance. After the whale surfaced again we were able to eliminate the first two and then positively identify these as Bryde's Whales by seeing the longitudinal ridges that extend forward from the blowholes. We enjoyed many exceptionally good views of these whales as Brian expertly maneuvered the boat.

In the excitement of the dolphins and whales we also saw several sea turtles. After turning the boat around we got a very good view of one. It had a very high curved carapace and a speckled light head and whitish throat, all good field marks for Loggerhead Sea Turtle. By the end of day we had seen at least five of them.

In the calm waters the birders saw eight or ten groups of Pink-footed Shearwater, totaling over three hundred birds, an unusually large number and the most that David had seen in one place on any Baja trip.

In the afternoon we headed way offshore in hopes of productive oceanic zones. Other than several distant Humpback Whales and a few phalaropes the marine life was proving to be elusive. Brian slowed the boat to allow us to see some Pelagic Red Crabs floating on the surface. The crew scooped up a few dozen in a bucket so that we could see these lobster-like crustaceans better in a tank. Many of us enjoyed photographing them.

One more treat awaited us as the boat turned for a group of dolphins. We turned into the moderate swell to watch as these acrobatic and wonderfully energetic animals leaped off the waves and jumped quite high. Scot and David had determined that these cetaceans, the Short-beaked Common Dolphin are found in deeper, more oceanic waters than the Long-beaked. We could clearly see their paler color and a shorter beak.

## **Day 7 (Monday 1st April)**

### **Sea of Cortez – Los Frailes**

This morning marked the end of the first half of the trip and the start of our visit to the Sea of Cortez. In warm desert air the *Spirit* was cruising on calm seas south of the cape over a rich habitat, the Gorda Bank. Dan's *huevos rancheros*, tasty, but spicy eggs, chilies, cheese and tortillas was

another tradition that most of us enjoyed. We spotted a Striped Marlin resting on the surface off the bow in the early morning light.

The crew found a pair of Humpbacks in an area that is famous for them. Captain Brian expertly positioned the *Spirit* so that the whales were very close just off the bow. One was a female; their bodies are smooth, relatively unmarked when compared to the males, which are scarred and covered with scratches from other males that spar while competing for females. The female kept her distance and would occasionally “lobtail,” a dramatic behavior that throws the back half of the whale out of the water with a huge splash! The male kept swimming towards the boat, under the bow and stayed right with us, until it would move out and blow. The warm sea was very clear and our group amazingly could see the whole whale through the water. These were rare and incredible views of this massive animal with its long pectoral flippers looking like wings as he moved under the bow. We enjoyed this incredible encounter for over two and a half hours.

Additional Humpback Whales were seen at some distance. We looked at a group of three for a while, but they were going the wrong way (back to Cabo), so we let them go. Scot got out the hydrophone, an underwater microphone, so we could listen for the whales’ eerie songs. At first we heard only the crackle of the water, then the generator noise and in the distance the moaning sound of the Humpbacks’ song. This was whale watching at a *higher* level.

We continued looking for more whales on our way to our afternoon anchorage. A group of seabirds including Black Storm Petrels and Pink-footed Shearwaters were seen over a slick. On closer inspection, we found a school of Coronetfish that was being eaten by a pair of California Sea Lions. The small school of long dark brown fish swam directly under the bow looking for a place to hide. The sea lions rip the fish in half leaving the heads floating about, which the birds had been foraging on. Some Triggerfish came up to feed as well and two Wahoo, a type of tuna, were seen swimming by quickly.

At 13:00, we had good views of a Red-billed Tropicbird sitting on the water. These seabirds are especially stunning in flight, displaying their long central tail feathers and intricate barred pattern on their wings. Still traveling to our anchorage, we found two more Humpbacks. The sea was now glassy and clear blue. As the whales rose to surface and blew we could see their entire bodies through the water, their pectoral fins glowing a beautiful “azul,” blue in Spanish.

By early afternoon we arrived at Los Frailes, a granitic headland jutting into the Sea of Cortez. Scot took a group snorkeling near the rocks while David led the other group swimming and snorkeling off the beach. The water was quite warm, seventy-six degrees Fahrenheit, and the air quite a bit warmer. Cooling off and getting wet felt great. The snorkelers saw Blue Parrotfish, Sergeant Major, Moorish Idol, New Guinea Fowl Puffer and King Angel.

By 16:00 it had cooled off as we headed into the lush desert for a birding walk. Gray Thrasher, one of Baja’s endemic species, was seen well, singing from a mesquite branch. Many other birds were observed including Cactus Wren, Gila Woodpecker, Northern Cardinal, Hooded and Scott’s Oriole. We also had our first introduction to the diverse plant life of the region including Cardon, Organ Pipe and Old Man Cactus. By 18:30 the crew had raised and stored the skiffs and we headed north with a wonderfully calm sea state.

## Day 8 (Wednesday 2nd April)

### San Jose Island – Sea of Cortez

In a region of the Sea of Cortez that can have some strong northerly winds and unpleasant, bumpy seas we had just the opposite, calm seas that allowed us to cruise all the way up the southern end of San Jose Island. A clear horizon to the east even allowed a few to see and photograph the green flash at sunrise, although there was some grumbling from the doubters

After breakfast the first of the days many wildlife encounters began. Brian slowed the *Spirit* to allow us to see the “fins” of many Smooth-tailed Mobula swimming slowly by. This species of *manta ray* shows white undersides, which contrast with the dorsal blue/black tops. Soon these cartilaginous fish started to jump out of the water, landing with a comical “plop.” Scot and David explained that we have seen this unique behavior before, but other than for social reasons it is not clear why they jump so much. We stopped here for half an hour to witness this unique spectacle; many photographs and video were taken.

Punta Colorado, our destination, soon came into view. The pink and tan colored sedimentary rock here has been eroded into a stunningly dramatic pattern of cliffs and turrets. We were about to explore the eastern side of San Jose Island. Just above the surging waves there were lots of Sally Lightfoot Crabs running from the boat as we stepped ashore. Even though the sun had just come up it was warming up quickly. A spectacular rocky ledge dotted with fossil scallops and other shells was our landing site. Our shore excursion began with a stop just above the wave-splashed shore where a fossilized sea turtle bones have been exposed. The naturalists explained that these sedimentary layers are about five to ten million years old.

As we walked up a twisting stream bed David pointed out Palo Blanco, Torote, Senita, Organ Pipe Cactus and other Baja plants. We had very good views of Black-throated Sparrow, Verdin, Ash-throated Flycatcher, House Finch and a pair of Gray Thrasher, the latter are not usually seen on this island. Three Peregrine Falcons careened overhead. Soon the warming air brought lizards into activity. We saw Side-blotched, Zebra-tailed and the very colorful Western Whiptail. Some were very lucky and saw the large, fat, Chuckwalla. Earlier, we found fossil whalebones and barnacles. This was proof that whales have been in the Sea of Cortez since its origins five million years ago.

After getting back to the *Spirit* the snorkelers donned their gear and plunged into the warm 72-degree water. Many colorful reef fish were seen in abundance; King Angelfish, Rainbow Wrasse, Mexican Goatfish, Balloonfish, Giant Damselfish, Blue, Gold and Yellow Snappers. Blue Gorgonians festooned the rock wall with lots of colorful marine algae as well. Others took skiff rides along the picturesque coast and were pleased to see many White-throated Swifts zooming in and out of a cave.

As we sat down to our chili and salad lunch the crew pulled the anchor and we headed northwest. Our meals were hardly begun when Brian's voice on the PA informed us that a group of Bottlenose Dolphins was being seen in the distance and we would get closer. Several minutes later his voice came over the PA in a more excited state. “There are Killer Whales moving closer to the dolphins.” Needless to say the main cabin emptied very quickly. Soon we saw five cetaceans with much taller dorsal fins than the dolphins. Scot and Brian shouted out that these Killer Whales were trying to

sneak up on the dolphins. Soon that strategy failed and the dolphins escaped with fast, leaping jumps.

The Orcas swam now more in our direction. We had amazing views of them surfacing in front of the boat and then a few of them swam under the bow! These were all females, although the smallest animal that stayed with the largest whale, presumably its mother, could have been a young male.

For almost two hours we stayed with these animals, the largest member of the dolphin family. They divided into a group of three and the “mother and young one.” Our naturalists informed us they were lucky to see them as they are only seen on about half of the Baja trips.

While we were observing the Killer Whales someone yelled out “Is that a turtle out there?” We all looked and first we saw a huge flattened back or carapace and then a mammoth head sticking out of the water. David and Scot were really excited; as this was the first time they had seen a Leatherback Sea Turtle on a Baja trip.

A small rocky island, Las Animas, was not far and warranted an inspection. The birders amongst us were especially glad we did as the dramatic rocky spires here and guano-covered bluffs were covered with several hundred frigatebirds, Brown and Blue-footed Boobies. It was wonderful to have comparisons of the two latter species.

Our path then took us back toward the mainland part of Baja north of Isla San Jose. In the late afternoon blows of whales are back lit here and can be seen for miles. However, despite looking hard, the crew could not see any. Finally, after a quiet period, a distinctive low angled blow was seen. Brian’s voice came over the PA, “We’ve seen a toothed whale and it appears to be a Sperm Whale.”

Most of us on the bow soon did see the diagnostic blow and humped back of a young male Sperm Whale. Our excitement at finding this elusive creature was soon tempered as one of the crew yelled out that there was a large amount of gill netting entangling the cetacean. Indeed it moved with labored motions at the surface and never raised its tail. After a few minutes the whale sunk down and then reappeared after some time.

There was much debate about the condition of this animal and if we, more precisely the crew of the *Spirit* could do anything to remove the netting. We watched the animal surface several times and it became clear to many of us that with so much netting wrapped around it this whale would not be able to feed and was likely doomed.

A decision was made and the crew made a valiant, physically exhausting effort to remove the netting from the whale’s tail and fluke. They attached a grappling hook and were able to cut much of the netting and rope free of the whale. The whale definitely was more active after this process than when we first saw it. While the crew love to fish, their knowledge and dedication to saving and protecting all creatures in the marine ecosystem was clearly on display here.

Encountering the whale was a stark reminder of the tremendously negative impact of debris in the ocean environment, even in this remote location. After dinner we headed to Santa Catalina Island to anchor for the night, bringing the end to another spectacular day.

### **Day 9 (Thursday 3rd April)**

#### **Santa Catalina Island - Sea of Cortez - Tampabichi**

The *Spirit* rode gently on the anchor at Santa Catalina and all enjoyed a calm sleep. After breakfast we headed ashore to explore one of the most dramatic desert landscapes in the gulf. The tall multi-branching Cardon and the endemic Giant Barrel Cactus are displayed here in a wonderful landscape. Northern Cardinal, Black-throated Sparrow, Loggerhead Shrike and Ladder-backed Woodpecker were just some of the birds that perched on these spiny plants.

We found seven Santa Catalina Island Rattlesnakes, an endemic species found nowhere else in the world. With no large animals on the island, over time, the species has lost its rattles and the aggressive behavior of its relatives. By the time we walked back down the arroyo the sand had warmed enough to energize numerous lizards that scurried ahead of us. Most colorful was the endemic, wonderfully turquoise, Santa Catalina Side-blotched. Several Baja Spiny Lizards were seen as well. David mentioned that we saw many more of the much larger and faster Desert Iguana than usual.

After our desert walk many of the group enjoyed a snorkel along the rocky shore. We had beautiful clear water and saw lots of anemones, urchins and sea stars attached to the rocks. Large fish such as Bump Head Parrotfish, Mexican Goatfish, Grey Bar Grunts and Yellow-Tailed Surgeonfish were seen swimming over the bottom. Skiff rides along the rocky shoreline gave us great views of Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Spotted Sandpipers and an American Oystercatcher.

A strong northerly wind created a rough run west across the channel to the mainland of Baja just south of Isla Montserrat. Here we turned to the south affording us a much smoother ride as we continued searching for whales and dolphins. Other than a few of the latter this stretch of the gulf was not very productive. However, there were hundreds of storm petrels flying buoyantly over the surface and a highflying tropicbird.

By late afternoon a decision was made to explore the small fishing community of Tampabichi. Everyone enjoyed walking the wide, sandy beach that was bordered by a habitat of desert plants. The birders especially enjoyed a mangrove-fringed wetland where Reddish Egret, Yellow-crowned Night Heron and several waders foraged while Violet-green Swallows flew overhead. Some of us made a longer walk to the "town," where a curious damaged stone building rumored to have been a hotel stood. A modern, small school was nearby while Hooded Orioles and White-crowned Sparrows perched in the trees.

At sunset we walked back to the skiffs and some of the group made a great discovery, three Wilson's Plovers. This species, more common in the Gulf of Mexico, is near the northern end of its range. As we all enjoyed fine views of this wader there were two other plovers nearby, Semipalmated and Snowy. This plover "bonanza" and the palette of orange, purple and pink colors that stretched across the sky were a wonderful conclusion to a rewarding day.

## **Day 10 (Friday 4th April)**

### **San Jose Island - Los Islotes – Sea of Cortez**

A few stars remained in the pale blue sky as we left the anchorage before dawn. Long dramatic clouds stretched from San Jose Island in the east above us to the Baja peninsula behind us. They were especially dramatic as the sun now rose.

Just as breakfast was over we saw our first group of dolphins milling about. We didn't "play" with them too much and continued south in the San Jose channel. The next group of dolphins we found was definitely more playful.

These Bottlenose Dolphins were of the Offshore variety. They were in shallow water just west of San Jose; so shallow that one could see the sandy bottom below the *Spirit*. Brian motored the boat back and forth several times affording us very special views of these small cetaceans swimming calmly just a few feet below our bow. A couple of times he sped up and a few of the dolphins jumped off the stern wake, but mostly these animals swam more slowly at the surface.

Brian motored over to the next group of dolphins that were discovered. They were a group of Long-beaked Common Dolphin that were swimming north. David remarked that they were cruising steadily almost as if they were on a mission. Scot prophetically agreed, "Maybe they know about food somewhere."

Watching the dolphins porpoise out of the water would have been good enough, but suddenly they began chasing fish and it wasn't long before this frenzy attracted a mass of birds. The dolphins were pursuing and eating Half Beak or *Ballyhoo*. The feeding frenzy that began to unfold in front of us was truly awesome. For the next forty minutes we watched the dolphins zooming and surging through the water often turning on their sides or upside down. They were forcing the fish against the surface, a technique that we've seen large rorqual whales employing as they feed on krill.

Gulls and frigatebirds were the first to capitalize on the fleeing fish, but it wasn't long before boobies, terns and especially pelicans joined in. Almost a hundred pelicans circled around, bombed into the water, occasionally coming up with a fish, often attacked by frigatebirds. The latter cannot land on water and in terms of their wings span (about two meters) to weight ratio are the largest birds in the world. Dozens of Magnificent Frigatebirds circled overhead and opportunistically grabbed fish out of other birds' bills or off the water. We were thrilled to see several dogfights; frigatebirds chasing each other, dropping the fish and another grabbing it in mid air or off the surface. Captain Brian backed the boat away, exposing the Halfbeaks to more predation and the whole frenzy started up again.

Finally we had to continue south. Many of us were tired from shooting hundreds of photographs in an attempt to capture it all. Simply to watch it all was a bit exhausting.

We continued towards our destination, Los Islotes, the islet at the north end of Espiritu Santo Island. Just before lunch a whale blow was seen in the distance. Most of us gathered at the bow or above to

see a Bryde's Whale surface several times in the clear water. It was great to really reinforce the identification of this species in our mind that we had seen off Magdalena Bay earlier in the trip.

The volcanic rock spires of Los Isolotes are certainly one of the most picturesque sites that we visit in the Sea of Cortez. Although boobies and frigatebirds are exceptionally close here, the large groups of California Sea Lions are the main attraction. Many of us soon had *really* close views of these playful pinnipeds after donning swim and snorkeling gear. Some of these animals clearly enjoyed swimming up to us, blowing bubbles and acting as excited to see us as the other way around. Besides the sea lions there were thousands of bright blue and yellow Sergeant Majors swimming only inches from our facemasks. Large groups of Creolefish and King Angelfish were wonderful as well. Most of the group enjoyed skiff rides around these dramatic rocks and took many photographs of the seals and birds

While the *Spirit* headed south, west of Cerralvo Island, we watched another group of Common Dolphins jump and swim by the boat, but we continued south searching for larger cetaceans. PJ and other crewmembers surprised us, serving us delicious margaritas. Another full day and more of Baja's wonders awaited us, but this was a great opportunity to toast so many friends and the wonders we were all fortunate to have experienced. We anchored just south of the granitic headlands at Los Frailes (the Monks).

### **Day 11 (Saturday 5th April)** **Los Frailes - Sea of Cortez**

At dawn the sky was overcast with rainsqualls in the distance. This was actually a blessing as most of the group headed out in the early morning light for a bird walk and we didn't want the desert to get too warm. We were trying to see one of the endemic birds that was missed on our previous visit. It wasn't easy, it hardly ever is, but luck was in our favor and we had great views of a Xantus Hummingbird, perching and busy at a feeder set out by the local campers. Some of us walked about for three hours savoring a tremendous variety of birds. Three Crested Caracara was an especially large number. These strange birds are a type of falcon, but feed on carrion like a vulture. Many of the birds were familiar to us by now including Cactus Wren, Gila Woodpecker, Northern Cardinal, Hooded and Scott's Oriole. However, our longer walk was enhanced with Gilded Flicker, Gray Vireo, Pyrrhuloxia and a Roadrunner. The latter was an especially satisfying find.

Some folks went back to the *Spirit* early so they could go snorkeling. The water temperature was 24 degrees C and was extremely clear with forty to fifty foot visibility. One could see large schools of Mexican Goatfish, Blue Parrotfish and loads of Sergeant Majors. As the snorkelers returned, the last of the birders also arrived and the anchor was soon lifted. We set out to look for whales immediately.

There was a northwest wind and the birders quickly spotted some shearwaters in the distance wheeling above the waves. They were Pink-footed Shearwaters, but there were some frigatebirds and a Pomarine Skua flew by as well. We tried to get good views of several Stripped Marlin and a small group of Bottlenose Dolphins that jumped in our stern wake.

Continuing south we found a pair Humpbacks although they were not doing much and Brian thought we could do better if we kept going. At 14:00 Brian said we should listen with the

hydrophone, and sure enough they were singing, moaning fairly loudly. Just then a pair of whales popped up to the southwest so we went to have a look. Both Humpback Whales were large males, all scratched up. One came close right alongside the *Spirit* and the other kept its distance. The “shy” one breached two times, once while everyone was quietly watching, amazing! The closer whale was just below the surface gliding down the swell as we rolled with it. It rolled on its back a few times and slapped its large pectoral fin on the surface almost in a territorial way. Incredibly, Brian kept us close to these whales for three and a half hours and we covered eighteen miles as they led us in towards the Cape and the sunset. That was whale watching *Spirit of Adventure* style and seemed a dramatic end to an incredible tour.

Fittingly we enjoyed a huge dinner for our last night and it was Lynne’s birthday to celebrate. A debriefing meeting after dinner was a reality check that tomorrow would bring our unique adventure to an end. Some of us went to bed with mixed emotions, happy to be returning home, but sad that our wondrous trip would be coming to an end.

### **Day 12 (Sunday 6th April)**

#### **Cabo San Lucas**

At sunrise we slowly cruised just east of the dramatic granitic spires that mark the tip of the wonderfully rich Baja peninsula. Good-byes are hard and many of us hoped we would be seeing the hard working crew of the *Spirit* and our naturalists again. Our visit to Cabo San Lucas was brief and soon we were on our way to the airport. Some of us made a visit to the freshwater marsh in San Jose del Cabo where we saw many birds including the endemic Belding’s Yellowthroat. David and Scot bid us farewell, expressing that it was both a pleasure and an honor to share so many special places and wildlife with the Wild Wings group. We knew that soon we would be on flights home, however the memories of so many whales, birds and other animals will linger on for a long, long time.

#### **Species List**

### CETACEANS

Gray Whale

Bryde’s Whale

Blue Whale

Fin Whale

Humpback Whale

Sperm Whale

Orca (Killer Whale)

Short-beaked Common Dolphin

Long-beaked Common Dolphin

Bottlenose Dolphin (inshore form)

Bottlenose Dolphin (offshore form)

## PINNIPEDS

Harbour Seal  
California Sealion  
Northern Elephant Seal  
Guadalupe Fur Seal

## BIRDS

Pacific Diver (Pacific Loon)  
Great Northern Diver (Common Loon)  
Red-throated Diver  
Pied-billed Grebe  
Slavonian Grebe  
Black-necked (or Eared) Grebe  
Western Grebe  
Laysan Albatross  
Black-footed Albatross  
Northern Fulmar  
Pink-footed Shearwater  
Sooty Shearwater  
Black-vented Shearwater  
(NB: Townsend's Shearwater has also been seen in past years, a now critically endangered species)  
Black Storm Petrel  
Least Storm Petrel  
Red-billed Tropicbird  
Blue-footed Booby  
Brown Booby  
American White Pelican  
Brown Pelican  
Brandt's Cormorant  
Double-crested Cormorant  
Pelagic Cormorant  
Magnificent Frigatebird  
Great Blue Heron  
Great Egret  
Snowy Egret  
Little Blue Heron

Tricoloured Heron  
Reddish Egret  
Green Heron  
Black-crowned Night Heron  
Yellow-crowned Night Heron  
White Ibis  
White-faced Ibis  
Turkey Vulture  
Black Brant  
Wood Duck  
Gadwall  
American Wigeon  
Mallard  
Green-winged Teal  
Blue-winged Teal  
Cinamon Teal  
Hooded Merganser  
Northern Shoveler  
Northern Pintail  
Ring-necked Duck  
Greater Scaup  
Surf Scoter  
Bufflehead  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Ruddy Duck  
Osprey  
Northern Harrier  
Cooper's Hawk  
Red-shouldered Hawk  
Red-tailed Hawk  
Northern (Crested) Caracara  
American Kestrel  
Merlin  
Peregrine  
California Quail  
Clapper Rail  
American Coot  
Common Gallinule  
Grey (or Black-bellied) Plover  
Snowy Plover

Wilson's Plover  
Semi-palmated Plover  
Killdeer  
American Oystercatcher  
American Black Oystercatcher  
American Avocet  
Greater Yellowlegs  
Willet  
Spotted Sandpiper  
Whimbrel  
Long-billed Curlew  
Marbled Godwit  
Black Turnstone  
Surfbird  
Sanderling  
Western Sandpiper  
Least Sandpiper  
Dunlin  
Short-billed Dowitcher  
Red-necked Phalarope  
Grey (or Red) Phalarope  
Pomarine Skua (or Jaeger)  
Arctic Skua (or Parasitic Jaeger)  
Bonaparte's Gull  
Heermann's Gull  
Frankin's Gull  
Ring-billed Gull  
California Gull  
American Herring Gull  
Yellow-footed Gull  
Western Gull  
Sabine's Gull  
Caspian Tern  
Royal Tern  
Elegant Tern  
Common Tern  
Gull-billed Tern  
Scripp's Murrelet  
Craveri's Murrelet  
Cassin's Auklet

Rock Pigeon  
White-winged Dove  
Mourning Dove  
Common Ground Dove  
Greater Roadrunner  
Lesser Nighthawk  
White-throated Swift  
Xantus' (Black-fronted) Hummingbird  
Anna's Hummingbird  
Costa's Hummingbird  
Allen's Hummingbird  
Belted Kingfisher  
Acorn Woodpecker  
Gila Woodpecker  
Ladder-backed Woodpecker  
Nuttall's Woodpecker  
Downy Woodpecker  
Northern Flicker  
Gilded Flicker  
Gray Flycatcher  
Black Phoebe  
Say's Phoebe  
Ash-throated Flycatcher  
Western Kingbird  
Loggerhead Shrike  
Gray Vireo  
Hutton's Vireo  
Western Scrub Jay  
American Crow  
Common Raven  
Tree Swallow  
Northern Rough-winged Swallow  
Cliff Swallow  
Barn Swallow  
Verdin  
Bushtit  
Wrentit  
Cactus Wren  
Rock Wren  
Bewick's Wren

House Wren  
Marsh Wren  
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher  
California Gnatcatcher  
Western Bluebird  
Northern Mockingbird  
Gray Thrasher  
California Thrasher  
Magpie Jay  
European Starling  
American Pipit  
Phainopepla  
Orange-crowned Warbler  
Mangrove (Yellow) Warbler  
Yellow-rumped Warbler (Aubudon's)  
Black-thoated Gray Warbler  
Townsend's Warbler  
Common Yellowthroat  
Belding's Yellowthroat  
Wilson's Warbler  
Black & White Warbler  
Yellow-breasted Chat  
Western Tanager  
Green-tailed Towhee  
Spotted Towhee  
California Towhee  
Lark Sparrow  
Black-throated Sparrow  
Savannah Sparrow  
Song Sparrow  
White-crowned Sparrow  
Northern Cardinal  
Pyrrhuloxia  
Lazuli Bunting  
Rufous-eared Sparrow  
Black-headed Grosbeak  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Brewer's Blackbird  
Great-tailed Grackle  
Brown-headed Cowbird

Hooded Oriole  
Bullock's Oriole  
Scott's Oriole  
House Finch  
American Goldfinch  
Lesser Goldfinch  
House Sparrow

## OTHER MAMMALS

Black-tailed Jack Rabbit  
California Ground Squirrel  
White-tailed Antelope Squirrel

## REPTILES

Pacific Ridley Turtle  
Loggerhead Turtle  
Leatherback Turtle  
Desert Iguana  
Common Chuckwalla  
Zebra-tailed Lizard  
Baja Spiny Lizard  
Santa Catalina Side-blotched Lizard  
Side-blotched Lizard  
Western Whiptail  
Catalina Rattlesnake

## INVERTEBRATES

Humboldt Squid  
Pelagic Red Crab  
Sally Lightfoot Crab  
Krill

## SHARKS, RAYS and FISH

Scalloped Hammerhead Shark  
Shortfin Mako Shark

Remora sp (Suckerfish)  
Striped Marlin  
Flying Fish sp  
Garibaldi Fish  
Coronet Fish  
Wahoo  
Spiny-tailed Mobula  
Smooth-tailed Mobula  
Mackerel  
Half Beaks or Ballyhoo  
Top Smelt  
Coral Hawkfish  
Panamic Fanged Blenny  
Mexican Goatfish  
Yellow Snapper  
Blue Gold Striped Snapper  
Barred Pargo  
Cortez Chub  
Barberfish  
King Angelfish  
Cortez Angelfish  
Panamic Sergeant Major  
Scissortail Damsel fish  
Giant Damsel fish  
Brown Chromis  
Mullet  
Rainbow Wrasse  
Mexican Hogfish  
Bumphead Parrotfish  
Bicolour Parrotfish  
Azure Parrotfish  
Moorish Idol  
Convict Surgeonfish  
Purple Surgeonfish  
Yellow Tailed Surgeonfish  
Yellow Bellied Triggerfish  
Guineafowl Puffer

Our next departure is 25<sup>th</sup> March – 7 April 2015

**[www.wildwings.co.uk](http://www.wildwings.co.uk)**