



Wild Oceans Baja California & The Sea of Cortez 2017

Trip Report by leaders David Wimpfheimer and Scot Anderson

Day 1 Sunday 26th March San Diego -Pacific Coast

Almost half the group joined David Wimpfheimer for a birding tour in the varied habitats of San Diego. A brief stop before breakfast gave us very good views of Allen's Hummingbird, Hooded Oriole and other species. Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal were some of the water birds at Famosa Slough along with Whimbrel and Willet.

Mission Trails Park has wonderful chaparral and Riparian habitats. We saw the near endemic California Thrasher and Wrentit as well as Nuttall's Woodpecker and a stunning White-tailed Kite that circle close above the group. Santee Lakes was a great lunch spot, but also provided close views of Great-tailed Grackle, Wood and Ring-necked Ducks. Two tidal areas were habitat for more waders, brant and hundreds of terns. It was especially helpful to compare Elegant and Royal Terns at close range. They were quite a sight as dozens flew about screeching, then landing and displaying to each other. In total we found 96 species.

With much anticipation we boarded the *Spirit of Adventure* in the evening. After unpacking our gear we enjoyed the dinner buffet and met fellow travelers. Scot Anderson and David gave us an orientation and outlined aspects of the journey. Later Captain Brian Evens explained the safety features of the boat and gave us a briefing. Shortly after leaving the dock we motored by the bait tanks where many California Sea Lions were barking 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 ocean. We went to sleep full of anticipation for the forthcoming adventure.

Day 2 Monday 27th March

Todos Santos Island - Pacific Coast

Calm sea conditions allowed the entire group to have a restful night's sleep. Most everyone was still in bed as we cleared customs, left Ensenada harbor and headed towards Todos Santos Island. We enjoyed our first breakfast on the *Spirit* and arrived just after daybreak. The distinctive whistling call of a Black Oystercatcher was a welcoming sound for most of the group. On the cliffs there were many Brant's Cormorants building nests and displaying courtship behaviors. All three cormorant species were seen: a Pelagic sitting on the water and some Double-crested flying about. The island was covered with *Coreopsis* in full bloom with their showy yellow flowers. Two Peregrine Falcons sitting on top of a rocky pinnacle seemed to stand guard over the other birds. Surfbird is a species we don't see very often, so we were very pleased to see six sitting on a rock at the south end of the island.

Not long after leaving the island a group of Short-beaked Common Dolphins was seen. We stayed with them for a while as they swam off the bow and around the boat. A few Royal Terns and Bonaparte's Gulls flew by us as well. Just as the group of dolphins left us we spotted our first whale sightings so we headed that way. There were four adult Gray Whales headed north into the swell and soon we were enjoying very good views of them. The group was thrilled with views of these unique whales, but they were traveling the wrong direction for us so we left them to continue south.

The birders in the group were happy to see many Black-vented Shearwater, a seabird that breeds on the local islands. Suddenly, an uncommon seabird that comes here from the western part of the Hawaiian Islands flew by, a Black-footed Albatross. David threw some bread over to bring it and the gulls following the *Spirit* closer. The gulls flew in behind the boat, then the albatross affording us great views. Suddenly there was a larger albatross with a pink bill flying up the stern wake. David excitedly yelled out "Short-tailed Albatross." This species is larger than the Black-footed and only breeds on two islands in Japan. With a population of only 2,000 birds, it is highly endangered. Our naturalists have done about fifty trips through these waters, but this was the first time they had seen this rare, beautiful seabird. It landed twice and flew around the boat for a good 15 minutes before it disappeared. Needless to say we were very lucky.

While we were looking at the albatross we found an Ocean Sunfish. This was a medium sized one, about three feet across. In fact this species is the largest bony fish in the world with some

exceeding six feet and two thousand pounds. Often they lie on their sides with their long dorsal fin flopping over the surface.

At 11:30 am we found a large group of 500 Short Beaked Common Dolphin. Most of us never tire of standing at the bow and looking down at them as they ride the bow wave just below us. It's a fantastic feeling to peer into their eyes and realize they intelligently may be as happy to see us and the other way around. We stayed with them until lunchtime. The weather was picking up and getting choppy so we continued down swell while we had our soup.

After lunch we spotted several more albatross, including a Laysan. This species also breeds in the Hawaiian Islands, but recently has started to nest on islands south of Baja and are becoming more common here. Finding all three North Pacific species in one day was quite a thrill.

While we were getting our sea legs and becoming used to the rhythms of the boat, some of the crew were perched high above in the crow's nest looking for spouts. In the late afternoon, in spite of the choppy weather, they found one. Once we got our bearing we could see the gray color of this large whale and its small dorsal fin helping to identify it as a Blue Whale. While we held on, Captain Brian drove carefully up swell following the whale on our sonar. It finally surfaced, and we had great views of the world's largest animal. However, the wind was now blowing 15 to 20 knots creating difficult conditions. We continued south toward our destination for tomorrow knowing that our first day was a very good one indeed.

Day 3 Tuesday 28 March

San Benitos Island - Pacific Coast

Although we had another windy night and rocking motion the following seas enabled us to reach the San Benitos Islands earlier than usual, by 7:00 am. Soon the *Spirit* anchored in the lee of the wind on the south side of West San Benitos Island. Our crew did a great job of landing us safely on the rocky beach near the small fishing community.

David gave us an orientation to the geology of the Baja peninsula and the San Benitos islands in particular. These small jagged landforms have been isolated from the peninsula for tens of thousands of years, long enough for several endemic species to evolve. One of the endemic plants, the San Benitos Tarweed was growing profusely in many areas. The average annual rainfall here is only four inches. However, this year there has been above average rain judging by the profuse growth of tarweeds wonderfully coating the island.

After walking to the south side of the island we were thrilled to see a group of Northern Elephant Seals. Although the winter breeding season is over, we saw many "weaners." These small, cute pinnipeds were recently weaned from their mothers. Most of the other, sub adult seals were there to molt skin and fur which was peeling off in big pieces in what is known as a "catastrophic molt".

The island is riddled with seabird burrows; Cassin's Auklets and Scripps or Guadalupe Murrelet are the main occupants. The primary reason these nesting seabirds are nocturnal at the island is to avoid predation by large and aggressive Western Gulls and Peregrine Falcons.

We then walked over to the northern side of the island, passing through the little town and checking out the local church on the way. There are six endemic plants that are found only on this island and we saw most of them including the San Benitos Mallow, Popcorn flower and a small Pincushion (*Mammalaria*) cactus. As soon as we got to the beach we could see lots of weaners. Most of the group enjoyed simply 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.

The north side of the island has many dramatic red chert outcrops. At least two of them had active Osprey nest perched on top. Some of us excitedly could see small, downy chicks in them. The birders in the group were also pleased to find a dozen Black Turnstones feeding along the seaweeds. A couple of American Oystercatchers also fed in the rocks a bit further on.

Most of us walked further along the rocky shore and were delighted to find several 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 ten years.

At 13:30 the crew raised the anchor and headed south. The wind had died down considerably and we all enjoyed a smoother ride. Some of us in the bow stated to see a few Cassin's Auklets sitting on the water or flying off. After awhile we started seeing more, small groups of ten or so. After a couple of hours we realized that we had seen almost a thousand, quite an exceptional number. As we continued south there were hundreds of phalaropes and another Black-footed Albatross.

We continued south to our destination for the morning, San Ignacio Lagoon, passing Cedros and Natividad islands. The former is an important breeding site for Black-vented Shearwater and hundreds were streaming by us, arcing over the waves. We watched them flying past until sunset and the end of a long, rewarding day.

Day 4 Tuesday, 29 March

Pacific Coast – San Ignacio Lagoon

After a relatively good ride all night, we awoke to a clear sky with a cold fifteen knots of east wind. Ahead of us was the entrance to San Ignacio lagoon. We were sailing southward past Punta Abreojos. The unmarked channel to San Ignacio lagoon was just a short distance ahead. Soon Captain Brian expertly guided the *Spirit* through the narrow passageway over the shallow bar (just 2 fathoms deep) into the lagoon with waves breaking on both sides. There were lots of Gray Whales surfacing all around us in the shallow water, even in the surf! No problem for these whales, as they are truly coastal whales, and they can easily navigate these shallows.

Once inside the lagoon, we made our way up to Rocky Point where we dropped the anchor and waited for skiff drivers. Shortly Romero, Tasho and Federico arrived in their pangas (skiffs). After they had breakfast we loaded into the pangas. In only a little time our drivers expertly drove us close enough to the whales that we enjoyed fantastic views, but very carefully so that they didn't feel threatened. We were all thrilled to have curious and friendly mothers and calves swim close enough that we could touch the whales! 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.

Being so close to these whales and interacting with them was a special experience that seemed to bring the child out of all of us. The first run out was choppy and cold but the weather was improving, which it often does around midday. We headed out for our second run which was very good, as the lagoon had calmed down quite a bit.

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. It's remarkable that mothers who formerly were called "Devilfish" are now "Friendlies". We all looked at the screens of our digital cameras, excitedly reliving these extraordinary experiences.

In the afternoon we went out for more whale watching in the pangas. The wind had picked up creating very choppy conditions. The whale watching was not as good, making us appreciate the great views we had in the morning that much more. On the lagoon we saw Great Northern Divers, Royal Terns and White Ibis.

Back on the *Spirit* we washed the salt spray off our cameras and shared stories. As the day ended, we relaxed, with glowing faces. We had another great dinner in the calm lagoon. Afterwards, we went outside looking at the sliver new moon and brilliant stars while listening to whales blowing all around us.

Day 5 Wednesday March 30

San Ignacio Lagoon – Pacific Ocean

The calm anchorage in San Ignacio Lagoon gave us a well-appreciated good night of sleep. We awoke to a cloudless sky, a moderately strong wind and whales around us, both typical for this special preserve.

At 7:30 our skiff drivers arrived and enjoyed the same hearty breakfast we did and by 8:00 we were back on the water looking for Gray Whales. Our pangas headed towards the mouth of the lagoon, a dramatic area where the mothers bring their calves to become more confident in turbulent water before starting their long migration north.

Initially there were many whales in the area, some spy hopping and milling around. It was quite adventurous to ride the bigger waves here. And then some of the boats had a friendly mother and calf right along the skiff.

At times we could see the mother and calf swimming directly under our pangas in unusually clear water, an amazing sight.

After all those cetacean encounters we needed a short break and headed back to the Spirit. Dan's fresh and very tasty banana bread and a cup of tea were well appreciated.

With a higher tide this was a good time to take a break from whale watching and head to the north side of the estuary to explore the mangrove habitat. The mangroves here are at their northern end of their range being a tropical species. Red and White 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. With enough attention, we had very good views of Mangrove Warbler as they darted amongst the prop roots and leaves. White Ibis, Snowy and Reddish Egrets perched in the trees or waded in the shallows. At a high tide roost a large groups of waders were feeding and roosted at the edge of the salt marsh as we rode by. Many photographs were taken of Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew and Willet. Some of the keen eyed in the group were able to see a Ridgeway's Rail.

Back on the boat we enjoyed a fabulous lunch and rest before going out again. Most of the group enjoyed more playful whales from the pangas. A few of us who stayed on the Spirit and saw a calf that repeatedly breached out of the water. Later the rowdy calf was joined by its mother to play right at our large boat's stern.

We had time for one more run to interact with Gray Whales in this amazing place and they did not disappoint us. A group visited the beach and was pleased to see an excellent variety of waders including Stilt Sandpiper, Gray, Snowy and Wilson's Plover. The sandpiper was quite unusual, a first for Wild Wings Baja trips. It was fascinating to see the bones and skulls of both Common and Bottlenose Dolphin.

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* traveled through the shallow channel and our route back to the ocean. Once we safely passed the breaking waves and returned to the deeper ocean waters the boat turned to the south.

We enjoyed another of Dan's great meals anticipating new adventures for tomorrow as we continued south.

Day 6 Thursday 31 March

Pacific Coast – Magdalena Baja

Most of us got up around 6:00 am, after a good night's run down swell. Dan's wonderful eggs benedict are a tradition onboard and it certainly was a tasty one. The *Spirit* was traveling southward a few miles north of the entrance or *entrada* to Magdalena Bay. Cabo San Lazaro was a prominent headland to the east. One of the first birds we saw today was a Masked Booby, the least common of the booby species usually observed. A couple of Sabine's Gulls were also stunning birds to see. Next we came across a group of about two hundred Long-beaked Common Dolphin with a few Royal Terns and Black-vented Shearwaters flying overhead.

At 10:30 am, we were enjoying relatively calm seas and seeing several Pink-footed Shearwater, Black-necked Grebe, Red-necked and Grey Phalaropes. Captain Brian found another group of five hundred Long-beaked Common Dolphins with a few California Sea Lions mixed in. Two Loggerhead Sea Turtles were seen rolling together on the surface. This unusual behavior seemed to be related to mating, but only the turtles know for sure.....

After a tasty lunch, we continued down swell, looking for whales. It was quiet, not much to see at all. We drove through an area where the water was a brown-red color. This was a plankton bloom, which in these conditions, with nutrient rich water mixed with lots of sunshine, results in tiny Diatoms “blooming ” and multiplying quickly.

At 15:00, the crew spotted a fluking Blue Whale, which was great because only a small number of them raise their fluke out of the water when diving. This was a spectacular sighting, as we could see the whole whale though the water very close to the boat. We stayed with it for over two hours and watched as it fluked numerous times. To photograph a 65-foot Blue Whale with a wide angle lens as it swam under the bow was quite special indeed.

Just when we thought it was time to relax, we came across two large Humpback Whales. In contrast to the Blue Whale, humpbacks are much darker. While not as long they are robust and show their flukes repeatedly. We stayed with them for a while before we had to continue south.

Just before sunset we found another Blue Whale. The group enjoyed great views of this whale that was larger than the one we had seen earlier. We were disappointed that it didn't fluke. However, the way it spouted in front of the setting sun was dramatic enough and a fitting end to the first half of our voyage.

Day 7 Saturday 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 choppy seas south of the Cape over a rich habitat, the Gorda Bank. The wind was from the north, the sky was partly cloudy and there was a large southerly swell rolling in. In the predawn light the lights of Cabo San Lucas twinkled, but other than a strong phone reception we didn't need to linger near civilization.

The bank is an important feeding area for Humpback Whales and by 8:00 am we found some. These whales have a similar migration pattern to the Gray Whales we had seen previously. After spending the summer and fall feeding along the central California coast they move south to Baja or mainland Mexico to give birth to their calves. We had good evidence of that now as we saw a small calf surface near the boat. Soon it's mother came up. A third whale appeared as well. The third whale is called an escort and is usually a male. How long the escort stays with the mother and calf and how protective he is remains unknown.

After watching those whales we headed north in search of other wildlife. Soon we found a Blue Whale! Captain Brian kept us near this whale for over half an hour. The wind had mostly died

down and the blue water was clean and clear affording us excellent views of this large whale. We all could see that this Blue Whale definitely was more robust than the ones we had seen previously. When it came to the surface after a long dive its exhalation or blow was very loud and impressive. It raised its back quite a bit and rolled, but never quite raised its fluke clear of the surface.

While we were looking at the whale some of the crew had noticed a large group of fish at the surface. We motored over to get a look. When we were closer, those of us on the bow could see hundreds and hundreds of small fish jumping at the surface. Scot told us they were Mackerel and this concentration was a “breezer.”

There was barely time to make a cup of tea before another group of Humpback Whales were seen. It was also a mother/calf pair with an escort. The juvenile whale came up more often than the two adults, as its lungs are smaller. Once it breached close to the boat, slapped its tail down and lay on its back with its long pectoral flippers waving to us in the air. David and Scot wondered if this playful behavior was something that it learned from adults around it or more instinctual. After enjoying these whales we continued north toward our destination.

By early afternoon we arrived at Los Frailes, a granitic headland jutting into the Sea of Cortez. Scot took a group snorkeling while David led another group into the hot dry desert for a bird walk. The snorkelers saw King Angelfish, Rainbow Wrasse, Parrotfish and even a Snake Eel

At 16:00, the snorkelers joined David’s group birding in the desert. The birding group was pleased to have excellent views of one of Baja’s endemic species, the Gray Thrasher. Many other birds were seen including Crested Caracara, 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 in a wonderfully calm sea state.

Day 8 Sunday 2nd April

San Jose Island – Santa Cruz Island

We had a good night’s run up the Sea of Cortez and with no swell it was actually calm for a change. As the sun rose we found ourselves east of San Jose Island. The boat anchored up at Punta Colorado at 6:45 am. This is one of the more magical sites we visit in the Gulf. Orange-pink cliffs of sedimentary rock were glowing in the morning light. A Peregrine Falcon stood watch on his “usual” perch. After the crew launched the skiffs we climbed ashore, a rocky ledge scattered with fossilized scallop shells. There was even a “rock” sea turtle in a tide pool that fooled many of us.

The group enjoyed a walk up the narrow, twisting arroyo. Palo Blanco, Palo Adan and Jojoba were some of the unusual plants that we walked by.

We had good views of Black-throated Sparrow, Verdin and Blue-grey Gnatcatcher. There were a few wildflowers blooming and the desert plants seemed bright and healthy. After hearing the

boat's engine for a week, the desert seemed very quiet. However, if one listened carefully, David told us, one could hear the soft sound of lizards scurrying through the dry leaves. Some of us were able to see Whiptail and Zebra-tailed lizards. The sun was hot, and we stopped to take breaks in the shade of the beautiful sandstone cliffs as we headed back down to the beach. Back on the *Spirit* we took a short break before our next activity.

Some of us went to the beach for a walk, while the rest went snorkeling in the clear 73-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. We had the place all to ourselves, and it felt great to cool off in the sea.

We had lunch as we headed out looking for whales and dolphins. It was not long before the crew spotted a herd of Offshore Bottlenose Dolphins. Brian made the first pass at full speed, which caused the dolphins to leap in the wake. Some did more than just jump; they did back flips and other dramatic leaps. On both sides of the boat they were coming out three or four at a time, high enough to break the horizon!

At 13:30 we headed to Las Animas, a small rocky island to the east. There were lots of Magnificent Frigatebirds roosting on the cliffs there. It was the heat of the day and the birds were hot. In order to keep cool they were "fluttering" their gular pouch. This behavior is analogous to a dog panting when hot and is the way birds keep cool. We had good views of Yellow-footed Gull, Brown Boobies and Brown Pelican nesting with a few chicks being seen.

There was a sighting of a *Kogia* or Dwarf Sperm Whale. This small whale is hard to see, but we had luck in the glassy water before it quickly disappeared. By the time David and Scot explained what they were we had a sighting of an even more rare species, the Pygmy Beaked Whale (*Mesoplodon peruvianus*)! They were quite a ways in the distance so we headed to the place they went down and waited. They can be down for up to an hour, but they popped up after fifteen minutes and we had a good look at four of them as they broke the surface to breath. The range of this rare cetacean is roughly the Pacific from Peru to Southern California. However, until recently most of our information about this type of beaked whale came from stranded, dead individuals. Although the views of this whale were not spectacular the rare status of this beaked whale made this an incredibly special sighting.

At 16:45 there were a couple of Humpback Whales sighted close to Santa Cruz Island. We followed one and enjoyed good views of its fluke. At 17:10 JP spotted a Sperm Whale spouting in the distance. Almost two miles away we watched it fluke as it went down. These whales are deep diving and can stay down for more than an hour. We waited for over an hour before it was spotted far away. By the time we could focus on this large toothed whale it had fluked again. This may have been a tantalizing experience for many of us, but just at sunset we headed to a huge group of Long-beaked Common Dolphins jumping in the pink, orange water. There were loads of birds feeding as the dolphins chased fish from below. Frigatebirds, gulls and pelicans all flew around this cacophony of animals. We enjoyed this spectacle until the light completely faded.

After a long, full day we motored in smooth waters to our anchorage at Santa Catalina Island.

Day 9 Monday 3rd April **Santa Catalina Island - Sea of Cortez**

We enjoyed our calm anchorage at the southern end of Santa Catalina Island. Many of us were through with breakfast before the sun rose above a calm pink sea. It was a good opportunity to gather at the bow as Scot suggested. Almost like a cult we waited as the glow in the eastern sky intensified. And then there was the flash of light! We had seen the mythic green flash at sunrise!

The boat motored up to the western side of the island, this was our destination for the morning. After anchoring 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 wonderfully. Northern Cardinal, Black-throated Sparrow, White-winged Dove, Loggerhead Shrike and Ladder-backed Woodpecker were just some of the birds that perched on these spiny plants.

Scot led a group up a side arroyo and found two Santa Catalina Rattlesnakes, an endemic species, found nowhere else in the world. With no large animals on the island the species has lost its rattles. With their grayish coloration the snakes are difficult to see even when we know where to look.

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 Lizard. Many in the group saw the expressive Desert Iguana including one that ambled boldly up to us instead of scampering off, their usual behavior. At the bottom of the rocky wash, just where David told us one might be we were thrilled to find a Chuckwalla. "Chucks" are the largest lizard in Baja. They reminded some of us of the marine iguanas in other parts of the world. Some folks went for skiff rides down the rocky shore and enjoyed great views of the near endemic Yellow-footed Gulls.

A small group jumped in the water for a quick snorkel in the clear, but chilly water. The clear water afforded great views of Sergeant Major, Mexican Goatfish, Moorish Idol and Cortez Rainbow Wrasse. Perhaps most dramatic of all were a group of Black-necked Grebes that dove and swam underwater very close to the snorkelers.

Back on the *Spirit*, the crew loaded the skiffs, while we enjoyed a very tasty lunch of chicken burritos. Lunch was barely cleared away when some of us spotted a tropicbird sitting on the water. Captain Brian turned the boat so we all could get a better view of this dramatic seabird. It flew off, but then sat on the water again. On this second try we approached from downwind, the bird was reluctant to fly, but only did when we got very close. Now we had great views of its long streamer-tails undulating in the air as it took off and cameras snapped lots of shots

The crew spotted a very large group of dolphins to the north so we cruised over until we were amongst them. These were Long-beaked Common Dolphin. We estimated there were about eight hundred spread out quite some distance in all directions. More than likely this was the same group that we had at sunset yesterday.

It was hard to say with certainty that the dolphins were feeding, however judging by the hundreds of gulls, pelicans and frigatebirds that were picking fish off the surface and chasing each other around there had to be a lot of fish forced to the surface. At least six Pomarine and one Arctic Skua harassed the gulls and joined in the feeding frenzy.

This was the furthest north we would go in the Sea of Cortez as most of the wildlife we wanted to see was south of this zone. It wasn't long before we saw some more Humpback Whales. We could see that it was another mother and calf with an escort. This was a frisky calf as it breached once as we first approached and then again as we were departing, the later was almost as if it didn't want us to leave.

As we left the whales there was a good comparison of Black and Least Storm Petrels flying near the bow. The much smaller size of the latter species was clearly seen.

Soon we detected a large splash in the distance. As we approached the group saw that it was a Humpback lifting the rear half of its body and tail out of the water and slapping its fluke down. This behavior is called lob tailing. Needless to say it can be quite dramatic and may evolve into other behaviors like breaching. We could see that there were two whales now. Interestingly one was "subordinate" to the one that lob-tailed a lot. The whales had very different fluke patterns so it was easy to tell them apart aside from their behaviors. With most of us on the bow suddenly the more aggressive Humpback breached in front of the boat. A few of us managed to get some photos of this incredible action, but more importantly all of us have that image imbedded in us. We hoped the whale would breach again, but its behavior settled down and we continued south.

It was about 16:30 when we heard that there was a sighting of another whale south of us. Looking with our binoculars it appeared to be a bushy blow suggestive of another Humpback, but soon we could see that the blow was angled to the side and then we could see part of the whale's back. It was a Sperm Whale; quite possibly the same one we had seen yesterday. Captain Brian alerted everyone over the PA with the simple pronouncement, "he's back."

This large whale came up in front of the boat several times giving us good views of its atypical blow, large body and half hump and half dorsal fin. It went down for several minutes before coming up not far from the bow. The Sperm Whale then raised its tail out of the water and its fluke and then dove straight down. Now our waiting game began again. Yesterday "this" whale stayed underwater for sixty-nine minutes. After fifty minutes now we predicted it might come soon. Five minutes later it did, but it was several miles to the north.

The *Spirit* cruised at top speed for five minutes to get a better view of the whale, we did get much closer, but then it rocked, submerged and raised its fluke out of the water and sounded again. It was sunset and almost time for dinner. We cruised over to the north end of San Diego

Island, which provided us with a smooth anchorage after another full, rewarding day in the Sea of Cortez.

Day 10 Tuesday 4th April San Jose Island to Espiritu Santu Island

The *Spirit* sat calmly on the anchor and all enjoyed a quiet night sleep. Captain Brian pulled the anchor at 5:30 am and we headed south towards the north end of San Jose Island. The sun had not risen yet but there was a dramatic blue glow in the sky.

Soon there was a view of a spout and then the dorsal fin of a very large cetacean. This view was enough to tell us that it was either a Blue or Fin Whale, probably the latter. When it came up again we could see the blackish coloration, distinctive curved dorsal fin and large size, all enough to identify it as a Fin Whale. This species is the second largest whale and closely related to the Blue Whale. When it came up again we had excellent views from the bow and then we saw that there were actually a pair of whales. Although we scanned the water for quite a bit we could not find them again.

As the sun rose we saw first dozens and then hundreds of Smooth-tailed Mobula, jumping and chasing each other around. Clearly this is some kind of social behavior, perhaps related to mating. We could see them following and chasing one individual, possibly a female. It is just speculation to suggest that it was being followed by up to six males. Watching them jump, flapping their “wings”, as if they were trying to fly was hilarious! Trying to photograph them was challenging, but with a little luck we all had some success.

At 8:15 am we went ashore at Nopolo, a tiny fishing community on the edge of a dramatically large, volcanic rock canyon. Many birds were active here including California Gnatcatcher, Phainopepla and Violet-green Swallow. Best of all, we were rewarded with great views of the Xantus’s Hummingbird, one of the Baja endemic species. Our group also heard the descending, whistling song of a Canyon Wren, an iconic sound in this landscape.

Brian headed the *Spirit* south along the intriguing Western shoreline where we watched beautiful pink and green cliffs go by as we had lunch. After a while he changed our course heading for Los Islotes at the northern end of Espiritu Santu Island. Many of us were excited, as this would be an opportunity to swim with California Sea Lions. Los Islotes is certainly one of the most dramatic and popular sites that we visit in the Sea of Cortez.

The entire group enjoyed skiff rides around these picturesque rocks and took many photographs of the sea lions and birds. Several Blue-footed Boobies displayed to each other just a short distance above our heads giving us some views of their brightly colored legs. A Wandering Tattler was another unusual bird seen here, however, the sea lions were clearly the main attraction. The snorkelers had exceptionally close views of these playful pinnipeds. After we entered the crystal clear water, some of these animals enjoyed swimming up to us, blowing bubbles and acting as excited to see us as the other way around. To see them come zooming by

with a few flipper stokes gave us a new appreciation for their hydrodynamic shape and muscular power.

Although the sea lions drew most of the snorkelers' attention, the collection of fish was wonderfully impressive. Thousands of Sergeant Majors swam by us, many less than a foot from our facemasks, seemingly oblivious of our presence. There is a surprising amount of reef fish, which the Sea Lions do not eat. Instead they feed on schools of fish off shore, such as sardines or mackerel. The reason the fish are so abundant here is because of the high nutrient load that comes from the sea lions and sea bird droppings on the rocks and water.

By late afternoon we headed south along the eastern shore of this volcanic island. JP surprised us with servings of fresh margaritas that he had just made. We certainly did need the drinks to enhance our celebration of this wondrous place, but everyone enjoyed this cold Mexican treat.

Captain Brian found us another group of Smooth-Tailed Mobula near the south end of the island. They were more concentrated than the ones we had seen in the morning and gave us quite a show. Everyone was on deck enjoying this unique display that few people get to see. The excitement and enjoyment was symbolic of the trip as a whole. Dan served us another wonderful dinner and we smoothly cruised south.

Day 11 Wednesday 5th April Los Frailes – Cabo San Lucas

From our anchorage just south of the granitic headlands at Los Frailes (the Monks) we had an excellent vantage point to watch the sunrise. Of course now it had become tradition to look for the green flash the instant the sun appeared over the horizon. Many of the photographers gathered at the stern and were partially successful in capturing the rapid blur of greenish blue light.

Since we've been fortunate to have calm conditions throughout our visit to the Sea of Cortez we were able to have some flexibility in our itinerary. Most of the group enjoyed a second desert hike in this rich habitat with many trees and large cacti. The relative morning cool helped produce an impressive list of species. Many of the birds were familiar to us by now including Cactus Wren, Gray Thrasher, Northern Cardinal, Hooded and Scott's Oriole. However, on this longer walk we also saw Gilded Flicker, Pyrrhuloxia and a Roadrunner.

Walking around the warm desert for two to three hours was tiring. Some of the group quickly changed into bathing suits and snorkeling gear to enjoy one last dive in this rich marine ecosystem. They were happy with a Spotted Moray, and many reef fish.

After lunch we left our anchorage and headed south searching mostly for cetaceans. It wasn't long before we found a single Humpback Whale. However, we had become a bit jaded and were looking for a more playful whale.

Later in the afternoon we found some more interesting humpbacks. Brian again expertly drove the boat so they repeatedly spouted just below us on the bow, fantastic. Soon the whales seemed to take more of an interest in us and swam under the boat several times. We enjoyed this behavior for quite some time until sunset. After motored close to the shore of San Jose del Cabo we anchored for the night. The lights and sounds of several hotels and discos drifted across the water towards us, but we were still focusing on our amazing trip that was now coming to an end.

Day 12 Thursday 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. One couldn't but notice several new hotels being built along the road to the airport.

These buildings, the busy highway and many tourists here were a reminder that we were privileged to see a special Baja that the average visitor doesn't. The abundance of marine mammals, birds and other creatures we had seen were so rich that few places rival it around the planet. We knew that soon we would be on flights home, however the memories of so many special experiences will linger on for a long, long time.

Marine Mammals

Blue Whale
Fin Whale
Gray Whale
Humpback
Sperm Whale
Peruvian (Pygmy) Beaked Whale
Dwarf Sperm Whale
Short-beaked Common Dolphin
Long-beaked Common Dolphin
Bottlenose Dolphin (inshore and offshore forms)

Harbour Seal
Guadalupe Fur Seal
Northern Elephant Seal
California Sea Lion

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