



**WildWings**

## **WildOceans Baja California & The Sea of Cortez 2013**

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

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

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

Many of the group arrived from the United Kingdom the previous evening and after long delays were quite happy to arrive in San Diego. Today a small group joined David for a full day birding in the varied habitats of San Diego and adjacent cities. One of our first birds was a stunning male Allen's Hummingbird. Nearby an equally colorful Western Bluebird also drew our attention. Mission Trail's Park had beautiful chaparral plants where we saw Wrentit and Lesser Goldfinch with California Thrasher singing, but being elusive. Nuttall's Woodpecker, Orange-crowned Warbler and House Wren kept the photographers happy.

Undoubtedly the highlight of the day occurred at the mudflats near the south end of San Diego Bay. We thought enjoying comparisons of Royal and Elegant Terns was good enough, but when they all exploded into the air it was a sign that a raptor was coming. Scant seconds later a Peregrine smashed into a coot, circled around and then dropped on it. For the next twenty minutes we watched this magnificent bird dragging and then eating its prize meal. Almost one hundred species were observed during the outing, including nine raptor 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 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 dozens of California Sea Lions were barking at each other. Great Blue and Black-crowned Night Herons intently tried to feed from the tanks. About four hundred Brandt's Cormorants, an especially impressive total, stood on the tanks as well. 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 Wednesday 27th March)**

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

Smooth sailing down to Ensenada allowed most folks to have a restful night's sleep. After clearing customs at 5:30 am, we left the harbor and headed out towards Todos Santos Island. It wasn't long before a group of about twenty Long-beaked Common Dolphins found us. We were thrilled as they rode the bow wave in the early morning light. These rocky islands were bright green with fresh plant growth after recent rains. As we left the island, we spotted two Brown Boobies and a Masked Booby sitting with some Brandt's Cormorant on a rock at the south end of the island. The former was well north of its usual range and possibly indicative of an upcoming El Nino condition.

It was only 8:00 in the morning as we came across a much larger group of Common Dolphins. In the distance we saw a few spouts and headed that way. On closer inspection we could tell these 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 diagnostic.

At about 11:00 am a group of five Gray Whales was seen. We followed them up swell (north) for a half hour, watching them spout and surface, as they traveled to their feeding grounds in the Bering Sea. All this activity made us hungry and lunch was being served. Not so fast, we had another big whale on the horizon. Dan and Dean served up a beautiful clam chowder and salad for lunch. The group ate quickly and then rushed out to see our first Blue Whale! We enjoyed wonderfully close views (less than a Blue Whale's length - 70 feet) of this huge cetacean. The whole whale could be seen in the clear water and the sound of its spout was impressive to say the least.

Not long after we left the Blue Whale, the crew spotted a large Ocean Sunfish or *Mola mola*. These huge fish feed on jellyfish and are seen floating on the surface warming up and letting gulls pick parasites from their massive bodies. At 13:45 we found more Long-beaked Common Dolphins (about 400). Nearby was a huge group of Bonaparte's Gulls, the most Scot and David had ever seen, picking at the surface. There were at least five hundred of these northern breeding gulls feeding on krill. Several Pink-footed Shearwaters also fed in this frenzy.

All these cetaceans would have been plenty for our first day, however we had one more treat. Brian motored the *Spirit* close to a single Humpback Whale. This animal seemed to have the exuberance of a teenage male. It alternated lob tailing, breaching and blowing just below those of us excitedly gathered at the bow. It was tempting to stay with this whale longer, but we needed to keep heading south. Needless to say our first day at sea was an exceptional start to our Baja adventure.

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

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

Before dawn it was barely light enough for us to distinguish the grey water from the grey sky, but Captain Brian found a Black-footed Albatross for us to see. Soon there were more, including two Laysan Albatross. Both of these species nest on Midway and Laysan Islands, 1500 miles west of

the main Hawaiian Islands, but make foraging flights along the California and Mexico coast when feeding young. A delicious breakfast of eggs Benedict was an additional treat.

Shortly before 9:00 am we landed at the western most 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 Auklets and Guadalupe Murrelet are the main occupants. The primary reason the nesting sea birds come and go by dark 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 are hundreds of miles away on long feeding migrations since the breeding season is over.

At the northern side of the island there were more Elephant Seals. Many of us enjoyed sitting quietly only a few feet from the 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 delighted 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. Their "woof-woof" barking was distinctive in addition to their extremely playful behavior. They continually wrestled with each other and climbed onto rocky ledges.

Shortly after returning to the *Spirit* we enjoyed skiff rides along the jagged, rocky edge of the island. More fur seals here barked back at us as well as curious elephant seals and several American Oystercatchers. Just before leaving the island several gulls visited the back of the boat. The adult Heermann's Gulls were especially photogenic. David explained that almost the entire world's population nests on one island, Isla Raza, in the Sea of Cortez.

Not long after leaving the island a few of our sharp-eyed crew picked out several blows to the west, the spouts of Blue Whales. A few eluded us, but we were able to stay with one for quite some time. It had a large notch missing from both sides of its fluke so some of us named it Two Notches. Scot suggested that the notches were bites left from Killer Whales.

It was time to continue to the south and our destination for the morning, San Ignacio Lagoon. We headed past 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. Many, many Cassin's Auklets bounced along the water and flew by us as well. We watched them flying past until sunset and the end of a long, rewarding day.

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

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

Most of us were up early before sunrise. A calm glassy sea allowed us to enjoy breakfast while the boat gently rolled down swell, approaching San Ignacio Lagoon. We were headed east, straight towards the sunrise. As we crossed over the shallow bar the waves were breaking on both sides of us. Captain Brian expertly guided the *Spirit* through the narrow, unmarked channel. All of the whales we were seeing were cow-calf Gray Whales. Those gathered on the bow were treated to views of Bottlenose Dolphins bow-riding.

We soon anchored south of Rocky Point and drivers, Max; Romolo and Choppy arrived in their panga (skiffs). Far from the calm sea we awoke to, the lagoon was choppy and filled with white caps. We donned our rain jackets and pants to protect ourselves from spray as we set off on a new adventure. It wasn't long before we saw several Gray Whale calves coming close to our boats. 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. This experience is not cerebral; instead it is emotional and seems to bring the child out of all. A lesson we can thank the Gray Whale for teaching us.

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.

In the afternoon we went out for more whale watching in the pangas. It was a little bouncy, but to the whales it was just another afternoon in the lagoon. We had some more friendlies and saw a lot of bubble blast, spy hopping and breaching. Back on the *Spirit* we washed the salt spray off our cameras and shared stories. As the day ended, we relaxed, with glowing faces and watched the sun set slowly, bringing closure to a full, wonderful day.

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

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

The calm anchorage in Laguna San Ignacio afforded most of the group a well appreciated good night of sleep. The pinkish gray sunrise was pretty, but clearly our attention was focused on the many whales blowing and surfacing near the *Spirit of Adventure*.

After our panga drivers enjoyed the same hearty breakfast as us, we climbed down to the boats for more whale watching, petting and other amazing interactions. After a few hours of Gray Whales we needed a break. Although some of us would have been happy to spend the whole day with the whales there was a unique habitat on the north side of the lagoon that warranted a visit.

The mangroves here are at the northern end of their tropical distribution. 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 excellent views of Mangrove Warbler as they darted amongst the prop roots. White Ibis, Reddish, Snowy and Great Egrets as well as

Tricolored Herons perched or waded in the shallows. At the high tide peak, dozens of waders roosted at the edge of the salt marsh as we rode by. Many photographs were taken of Marbled Godwit and Willet. A Belted Kingfisher flew overhead.

After a great hamburger and macaroni lunch we enjoyed more visits with the whales. And the whales were in a wonderfully playful mood. One calf was particularly frisky and thrashed around as we petted and scratched it. It was hard not to think they were enjoying this playtime as much as we were.

By 15:00 some of us actually had our fill of whale watching from the pangas and went on a beach exploration. Hundreds of dead or dying Sea Hares littered the beach creating an unpleasant odor. We focused more on the many bones about. There were several vertebrae from Gray Whales and skulls or jawbones from a Loggerhead Sea Turtle and both Common and Bottlenose Dolphin. Scot explained how the dolphins expel noise and hear sounds with different parts of their skull. At the edge of the salt marsh the group saw a Yellow-crowned Night Heron. A Clapper Rail ran chicken like out of the mangrove prop roots and afforded us views of this normally elusive bird.

Those of us who wanted to “whale” every moment thoroughly enjoyed our last panga ride. One calf stayed with the boat a very long time while another group enjoyed a calf that breached several times wonderfully close to their panga.

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 entrance to the lagoon. After we passed the breaking waves and returned to the deeper ocean water the boat turned to the south. Several of us photographed the spectacular clouds that turned into a stunning sunset as the day ended. We enjoyed another of Dan’s great meals anticipating new adventures for tomorrow.

## **Day 6 (Sunday 31 March)**

### **Pacific Coast – Magdalena Bay**

At daybreak the *Spirit* was traveling southward just off Punta Lazaro, just north of Magdalena Bay. At 6:15 am, the day began with a bright orange glow as the cloudy sky to the east began to reflect the morning sun light. The bright orange sky lit up the ocean and revealed a lumpy sea, but no wind to speak of, less than ten knots. At 6:45 am, a Masked Booby flew around the boat, checking us out. Later in the morning, we saw a few Pink-footed Shearwater, Grey Phalarope, Sabine’s Gull and Black Storm Petrel. However, in general there was not much life in this stretch of ocean.

After lunch the group watched a Cousteau video called “Gray Whale Obstacle Course”. It gave us an appreciation for the man made and natural threats that whales face on their migration.

After a long time devoid of seabirds or marine mammals the crew finally spotted a spout. We all hurried to the bow to see what it was. We had found another Blue Whale. Captain Brian followed the whale with the sonar. When it came to the surface the whole whale could be seen through the water. Although this whale only blew twice every ten minutes, the blow was loud and impressive. We took one last look, as the whale was very close and headed south again. Just before sunset we came across an area with lots of phalaropes and another Blue Whale. This animal was quite thin

which is not unusual for this time of year. As we followed this whale the clouds built up creating a dramatic sunset. The whale's huge blow bathed in an orange glow was a spectacular ending to the day.

### **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 glassy seas south of the cape over a rich habitat, the Gorda Bank. Dan's *huevos rancheros*, tasty, but spicy eggs, chilies and tortillas was a tradition that most of us enjoyed.

Around 7:30 am we encountered a group of Humpbacks. Brian expertly positioned the *Spirit* so that the whales were in good light off our starboard bow. Six, seven, eight humpbacks surfaced with repeated, explosive exhalations. Rainbows of colors showed in their blows. They surfaced in a tight group, turning on themselves and forcing the boat to turn as well. Some arched their backs quickly and then raised their flukes clear of the sea, a cascade of water dripping off their dorsal sides before sounding. As noisily as they appeared before us, they dropped silently below the surface. We enjoyed this group of whales and several others surfacing dramatically for over two hours.

These were mostly males that were acting quite rowdy after the mating season. They swam quickly at the surface, one snorting as he exhaled. Most of them raised their flukes repeatedly from the sea and many photographs were taken. In the distance some of the whales breached, but it was challenging to get close to them.

We were seeing distant small, puffy blows and the dorsal fins of Bottlenose Dolphins. After some work Brian maneuvered the boat so that we had wonderful views of these robust animals swimming under the bow. These were the offshore variety. A few of these dolphins jumped and cart wheeled off the stern wake, a fantastic sight.

After all those cetaceans we may have needed a break, but soon a brownish shape was pointed out to us, the humped shell of a sea turtle. Standing along the port railing we had great views of a Pacific Ridley Sea Turtle raising its head above the gin clear water. We enjoyed the wonderful view of it for a minute or two before it raised its large fore flippers, paddled twice and sank under the surface. Only a few minutes later another turtle came into view. This one had a very large, flattish head with a distinctive brown-orange body color. Those features helped identify it as a Loggerhead Sea Turtle.

Seabirds were not plentiful this morning, however we did see a few storm petrels, shearwaters and frigatebirds. A Striped Marlin swam in front of the bow for several minutes providing us with good views.

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 lush desert for a bird walk. The snorkelers saw Parrotfish, Surgeonfish and many of the other fish that the gulf is famous for.

The birding group was pleased to have excellent views of one of Baja's endemic species, Gray Thrasher. Many other birds were seen 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 16:30 the crew had raised and stored the skiffs and we headed north with moderately calm conditions. Shortly before Punta Arenas we began seeing many mobula jumping out of the water. These were the smaller species, the Smooth-tailed Mobula. Through binoculars we could see their large dark eyes set against a whitish body. The way they jumped clear of the water had a comical aspect to it and most of us couldn't help laughing at these strange animals. The western sky glowed behind the Cape Mountains drawing an end to a wonderfully rich day and a great introduction to the Sea of Cortez.

### **Day 8 (Tuesday 2nd April)**

#### **San Jose Island – Sea of Cortez**

After running all night we dropped the anchor off Punta Colorado at 5:30 am. A nickname for the Gulf of California is the Vermillion Sea. Soon we could see why as the bright sun bathed the pink sandstone cliffs with orange light and the glassy sea reflected these and other colors. We were about to explore the eastern side of San Jose Island. A spectacular rocky ledge dotted with fossil scallops and other shells was our landing site. 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. The floor of the beautiful arroyo we walked up was filled with large granitic stones and surrounded by pink and white sandstone cliffs. The shade of the cliffs and Palo Verde trees were welcome as we looked for birds in the quiet desert.

We had very good views of Black-throated Sparrow, Verdin, Ash-throated Flycatcher, House Finch and a pair of nesting Phainopepla. Soon the warming air brought lizards into activity. We saw Side-blotched, Zebra-tailed and the very colorful Baja Whiptail. Earlier, we found fossil whalebones and a sea turtle shell in the rocks near our landing. 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, Balloon fish, Giant Damsel fish, Blue, Gold and Yellow Snappers. Blue Gorgonians festooned the rock wall with lots of colorful marine algae as well. Others took skiff rides south down the coast and were lucky to see many White-throated Swifts zooming in and out of a cave.

As we sat down to our tostada lunch the crew pulled the anchor and we headed north. We barely had time to finish our food before a Blue Whale was found. Blue Whales are amazing to begin with, but we had stellar views as Captain Brian maneuvered the *Spirit* close to these magnificent animals. The warm calm conditions and the clear water of the Sea of Cortez, make this the best place in the world to view Blue Whales, the largest animals in the world. Their blue color, visible through the water, filled our camera lenses; with the whole whale along side the boat just yards away.

There were lots of Spiny-tailed Mobula at the surface. Different from the Smooth-tailed Mobula, these are larger, when they jump they flip end over end. They were “finning” on the surface and we could see the tips of their pectoral fins cut through the water, one white and one black showing the ventral and the other the dorsal side respectively. These beautiful rays seemed to be waiting for the krill to come to the surface. The whales on the other hand were diving to the depths to feed. The krill showed up on the depth finder as a dark band, from 20 to 60 fathoms deep. When Blue Whales dive deep, they sometimes fluke, raising their tails high above the sea, the water slides off their flukes like a waterfall, an amazingly beautiful sight!

We spent the whole day within a few miles of where we started. Brian followed these whales around and around for seven hours as the light faded into night. The sky filled with stars and the krill came to the surface sparkling under the boat. After dinner we headed to Santa Catalina Island to anchor for the night, bringing the end to another spectacular day.

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

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

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, Costa's Hummingbird and Ladder-backed Woodpecker were just some of the birds that perched on these spiny plants.

Our group included several keen observers. We found four Santa Catalina Island Rattlesnakes, an endemic species; found nowhere else in the world. With no large animals on the island the species has lost its rattles. 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 skiff rides along the rocky shoreline. Among the birds viewed, undoubtedly the highlights were several Wandering Tattlers.

Shortly after leaving the island a group of about a hundred offshore Bottlenose Dolphins were seen. In calm water we were thrilled to watch these animals serenely swimming below the bow and rambunctiously jumping off the stern wake. Needless to say many photographs were taken of these acrobatic cetaceans.

A white tern like bird was seen sitting on the surface. We slowed to give everyone a chance to get to the bow to see this uncommon bird, a Red-billed Tropicbird. Combined with the rich color of the bill, the beautiful black pattern on the bird's back and wings and long central tail feathers give this bird a stunningly beautiful appearance.

We cruised north towards the island of Montserrat. From many miles away we could see a large number of birds circling above the water, a sure sign that dolphins were forcing fish up to the surface. The magnitude of this feeding frenzy only became apparent as we got closer. In several



groups over five hundred pelicans circled around and then rained down and dove into the water in a motion that almost seemed choreographed. About two hundred Common Dolphin churned the sea perhaps feeding on the swarms of sardines that darkened the water at times. Occasionally the boat moved over a cloud of these fish, the sheer number was awesome. Yellow-footed gulls, shearwaters, Brown and Blue-footed Boobies joined into the frenzy, but most dramatic of all were the dozens of Magnificent Frigatebirds that zoomed about like fighter jets. These pterodactyl-like birds have six-foot wingspan, but only weigh a few pounds. Their scissors like tail allows them to make very rapid abrupt turns and allows them to grab fish from other birds or to snatch them off the surface. Many of these wild birds flew directly over the boat.

The feeding frenzy, some would call it a massacre, went on for over two hours. It seemed to dissipate, but then the birds and dolphins would concentrate again a few miles away. We explored these different feeding groups before heading south. Just before sunset we saw a larger blow and then the familiar color and dorsal fin of a Humpback Whale. We saw another whale and were excited to watch both of them fluke several times in the pink, orange water that reflected the sky.

Right after dinner we were about to go over the list of wildlife we saw during the day, a tradition that is repeated every night. Tonight we did not do the wildlife list; we were interrupted by a voice that called out “there are dolphins in the bioluminescence.” Most of us rushed out to the bow and looked down to the water and were thrilled to see the sparkles of light dancing off and in the bow wake. David and Scot excitedly explained that the bodies of millions of small invertebrates containing phosphorous glow when moving water agitates them. This phenomenon is only seen on a few of our Baja trips. These microscopic animals have to be concentrated in large numbers and we need the very dark moonless skies.

Although the light coming off the Spirit’s wake and in the waters we churned through was stunning, there was one thing missing. And then it happened; several dolphins swam in to ride the bow wake. Their bodies and the trail of agitated waters trailing behind their flukes were outlined in ghostly tubes of light. Some of us tried to photograph this unusual sight, knowing that it wasn’t going to work. However, we all knew that this was the kind of natural event that would defy description. The dolphins were only with us for a short time, but that memory will last forever for those of us who were lucky enough to see it.

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

#### **Los Dolores – Los Islotes – Sea of Cortez**

Most of us were up early to enjoy the blue light before sunrise. Then the orange color intensified and we were lucky to see an awesome green flash over the glassy sea. We pulled anchor, headed south and stopped to observe and photograph the seabirds on a small rocky island. Brown Pelican, Yellow-footed Gull, Magnificent Frigatebird all roosted here, but clearly the highlight were eye level views of Brown and Blue-footed Boobies. We enjoyed some of the best views of the bright blue feet of the latter. A Peregrine Falcon sat atop its perch calling.

We dropped anchor near a clean sandy beach at Los Dolores, got in the skiffs and motored to the beach. Once ashore, David set out to find the elusive Xantus’ Hummingbird, the desert was warm and getting hot. Finally, by waiting patiently near its preferred flowers he was successful. The group enjoyed good views of this Baja endemic before it disappeared. This hummingbird is larger

than the Costa's Hummingbird with a white-eye stripe and has a two-toned bill; red with a black tip. Walking into the desert we saw Phainopepla, Northern Cardinal, California Gnatcatcher and many orioles.

After leaving Los Dolores, the *Spirit* cruised south down the San Jose Channel. We were very fortunate to have a crew that are such keen observers. One of them picked out the dorsal fin of a Sailfish and some of us were able to see the whole animal as it swam by the bow. Brian took us close to the shore where dramatic volcanic cliffs and mountains rose out of the sea. One could almost read the landforms and discern the geology of the Baja peninsula. Bill did just that.

Many of us had to eat lunch quickly as a group of Common Dolphin was spotted. The size of the group seemed to increase to several hundred as we stayed with them. The photographers especially enjoyed the image of these animals churning through the water with the colorful, rocky shore behind.

As we headed south towards Los Isolotes a group at the bow were able to pick out several tiny birds flying low over the water with a butterfly like motion. They were Least Storm Petrels, a new species for many of the group.

Los Isolotes, the islet at the north end of Espiritu Santo Island, is certainly one of the most picturesque and productive sites that we visit in the Sea of Cortez. Although boobies and other seabirds are exceptionally close here, the California Sea Lions are the main attraction. Many of us soon had exceptionally 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. Often the way we detected them was by seeing the huge school of herring part like an opening curtain and then these wonderfully hydrodynamic pinnipeds came zooming by. Besides the sea lions there were many Yellow-tailed Surgeonfish, parrotfish and other reef fish.

We all enjoyed skiff rides around these picturesque rock and took many photographs of the seals and birds. Ironically, Brandt's Cormorants in the breeding season now have almost the same blue color in their throat patches as the feet of the Blue-footed Boobies.

While the *Spirit* headed south along the eastern side of Espiritu Santo Island Aaron and Steve brought out the mixer, triple sec, limejuice and tequila. The late setting sun and great calm sea conditions allowed us to enjoy our special Margaritas on the bow. 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.

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

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 did a second desert hike this morning to see the varied birds here. The relative morning cool helped produce an impressive list of species. Many of the birds were familiar to us by now including Cactus Wren, Gila Woodpecker, Northern Cardinal, Hooded and Scott's Oriole. However, on our longer walk we also saw a Great Horned Owl with a young chick in its nest on a cliff face, Gilded Flicker and a Gray Vireo. Others saw Pyrrhuloxia and a Roadrunner.

Walking around the warm desert for three and a half hours was tiring. Back on the *Spirit* we changed footwear and drank cold drinks while our hard working crew stowed away the skiffs. We examined photographs that we took of the many butterflies, moths and birds we saw and identified.

The ship was headed south to look for Humpbacks, but before we traveled very far the engines slowed, often a sign that wildlife had been sighted. Then we heard the words over the loudspeakers that are rarely heard on our Baja trips, "Whale Shark." Needless to say we all rushed out of the main cabin to the bow to join others on the top deck. The rounded, moderately large dorsal fin of the shark, the largest fish in the world, came into view a hundred meters off the bow. Brian expertly cut the engines and the dramatically patterned shark swam alongside the boat and then under the bow. Those of us on the bow were treated to an incredible view of the Whale Shark, a new animal for most of the group. Without a polarizing filter it was hard to get a good photograph of the shark showing the intricate pattern of spots and lines on its back, but undoubtedly the image will last in our memory for a very long time.

There were some Bottlenose Dolphins about, but we were hoping for playful Humpbacks. For most of the afternoon we moved between several groups that surfaced and dove very close to the boat, but we were spoiled and wanted more. By late afternoon we discovered a cow-calf pair with a male escort. It was delightful to see the tiny calf surface right in front of the *Spirit* and roll over with its small pectoral flippers. It could not raise its fluke from the water and dive like its mother that we saw sounding several times.

The cow calf pair was great to see, but we were still hoping for a more acrobatic whale. Then our luck changed. We cruised over to a group of whales. It was another cow-calf pair with an escort. Suddenly the young Humpback Whale leapt out of the water close to us. What a thrilling surprise, but now we were expecting more and we got it. This playful juvenile whale breached several more times interspersed with energetic lob tailing. We enjoyed all this activity especially the photographers who recorded the action in the stunning warm light as the sun was setting. Baja is a place famous for sunsets and sunrises. Now we were treated to a spectacular one as the sky turned red then pink, orange and finally purple behind the jagged coastal mountains. The young whale continued to play with its mother surfacing as well until it was too dark for us to see them and we continued west to our anchorage near San Jose del Cabo.

The *Spirit* cruised on through calm seas. Many of us enjoyed a prime rib dinner, the last of many wonderful meals on the *Spirit of Adventure*. We toasted the day's great adventures and our remarkable journey that would soon come to an end.

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

### **Cabo San Lucas**

At sunrise we slowly cruised just west of the dramatic granitic spires that mark the tip of the wonderfully rich Baja peninsula. A clear sky left a sharp horizon and just before the sun rose above it many of us were able to see one more *green flash*. A large cruise ship in the Cabo San Lucas harbor served as a reminder that we had experienced this special area in a unique way that few others do. Our visit to this busy harbor was brief and soon we were on our way to the airport. A small group detoured to the freshwater marsh in San Jose del Cabo where they saw many birds including the endemic Belding's Yellowthroat. 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

Blue Whale

Fin Whale

Humpback Whale

Long-beaked Common Dolphin

Bottlenose Dolphin (inshore form)

Bottlenose Dolphin (offshore form)

(NB: Other often seen species include Bryde's, Sperm, Short-finned Pilot, Dwarf Sperm & Killer Whales plus Pacific White-sided Dolphins)

#### PINNIPEDS

Harbour Seal

California Sealion

Northern Elephant Seal

Guadalupe Fur Seal

#### BIRDS

Pacific Diver (Pacific Loon)

Great Northern Diver (Common Loon)

Pied-billed 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  
Masked Booby  
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  
Turkey Vulture  
Black Brant  
Wood Duck  
American Wigeon  
Mallard  
Blue-winged Teal  
Northern Shoveler  
Ring-necked Duck  
Greater Scaup  
Surf Scoter

Bufflehead  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Ruddy Duck  
Osprey  
Northern Harrier  
Sharp-shinned Hawk  
Cooper's Hawk  
Red-shouldered Hawk  
Red-tailed Hawk  
White-tailed Kite  
Northern (Crested) Caracara  
American Kestrel  
Merlin  
Peregrine  
California Quail  
Clapper Rail  
American Coot  
Grey (or Black-bellied) Plover  
Snowy Plover  
Killdeer  
White-tailed Kite  
American Oystercatcher  
American Black Oystercatcher  
Black-necked Stilt  
American Avocet  
Greater Yellowlegs  
Lesser Yellowlegs  
Willet  
Wandering Tattler  
Spotted Sandpiper  
Whimbrel  
Long-billed Curlew  
Marbled Godwit  
Black Turnstone  
Surfbird  
Sanderling  
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  
Guadalupe Murrelet  
Craveri's Murrelet  
Cassin's Auklet  
Rhinoceros Auklet  
Roadrunner  
Rock Pigeon  
White-winged Dove  
Mourning Dove  
Common Ground Dove  
Greater Roadrunner  
White-throated Swift  
Xantus' (Black-fronted) Hummingbird  
Anna's Hummingbird  
Costa's Hummingbird  
Allen's Hummingbird  
Belted Kingfisher  
Gila Woodpecker  
Ladder-backed Woodpecker  
Nuttall's Woodpecker  
Gilded Flicker  
Gray Flycatcher  
Pacific-slope (Western) Flycatcher  
Black Phoebe  
Ash-throated Flycatcher

Western Kingbird  
Cassin's Kingbird  
Loggerhead Shrike  
Bells' Vireo  
Gray Vireo  
Hutton's Vireo  
Western Scrub Jay  
Common Raven  
Tree Swallow  
Northern Rough-winged Swallow  
Barn Swallow  
Verdin  
Bushtit  
Cactus Wren  
Rock Wren  
Bewick's Wren  
House Wren  
Marsh Wren  
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher  
California Gnatcatcher  
Western Bluebird  
Northern Mockingbird  
Gray Thrasher  
California Thrasher  
European Starling  
Phainopepla  
Orange-crowned Warbler  
Mangrove (Yellow) Warbler  
Yellow-rumped Warbler (Aubudon's)  
Yellow-rumped Warbler (Myrtle)  
Townsend's Warbler  
Common Yellowthroat  
Belding's Yellowthroat  
Wilson's Warbler  
Green-tailed Towhee  
Spotted Towhee  
California Towhee  
Lark Sparrow  
Black-throated Sparrow  
Savannah Sparrow



Song Sparrow  
White-crowned Sparrow  
Northern Cardinal  
Pyrrhuloxia  
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

Bat sp.  
Black-tailed Jack Rabbit  
Brush Rabbit  
California Ground Squirrel  
White-tailed Antelope Squirrel

### REPTILES

Pacific Ridley Turtle  
Loggerhead Turtle  
Desert Iguana  
Common Chuckwalla  
Zebra-tailed Lizard  
Baja Spiny Lizard  
Santa Catalina Side-blotched Lizard  
Side-blotched Lizard  
Whiptail sp.  
Catalina Rattlesnake  
Rock Lizard sp  
Speckled Rattlesnake

## INVERTEBRATES

Salp sp.  
Pelagic Red Crab  
Sally Lightfoot Crab  
Kreel

## SHARKS, RAYS and FISH

Mobila  
Ocean Sunfish  
Whale Shark  
Remora (Suckerfish)  
Mullet sp.  
Striped Marlin  
Pacific Sailfish  
Californian Flying Fish  
Garibaldi Fish  
Anchovies

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Our next departure is 25<sup>th</sup> March – 7 April 2014