BAJA CALIFORNIA & The Sea of Cortez 2019

Trip Report by leaders
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Day 1 Tuesday 26th March
San Diego - Pacific Coast

A small group joined David for a birding expedition in the varied habitats of San Diego and nearby towns. At our first stop, the mouth of the San Diego River, we enjoyed many birds and great views of Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal.

We followed the river inland to Mission Trails Regional Park which had wonderful sage and other aromatic shrubs, a habitat called chaparral. In this area we searched for three near endemic species; Wrentit, California Thrasher and Gnatcatcher and we enjoyed excellent views of all.

Santee Lakes was a great lunch spot, but also provided close views of Great-tailed Grackle, Wood and Ring-necked Ducks. Our group was also happy to see Western Bluebird, Bullock’s Oriole and Nutall’s Woodpecker.

The southern end of San Diego Bay proved to be a good area for roosting waders. Dozens of dowitches of both species roosted here while we were able to pick out a few Red Knots. Just a few hundred meters north of the Mexican border in brushy habitat David heard the distinctive call of a Bell’s Vireo. He was able to call one in and we enjoyed very good views of this usually secretive species.

On the way back to the hotel we stopped briefly at a park where a Thick-billed Kingbird has returned to winter for eight years. It called out from the top of a sycamore and we were thrilled to get excellent views of it. In total we found 90 species and could see why San Diego has been called America’s “birdiest” city.

The group boarded the Spirit of Adventure in the evening. After unpacking our gear, we enjoyed the dinner buffet and met fellow travelers. Scot 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. Brown Pelicans, 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 Wednesday 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 day break.

An increasing number of fish pens where local fishermen farm tuna now makes a closer approach to the island more challenging. A Pelagic Cormorant, a species that is close to the southern end of its range, was seen flying by. The island was covered with Coreopsis in full bloom with their showy yellow flowers, a sure indication of a wet winter. We heard the high staccato whistle of a Black Oystercatcher and then we saw it foraging on the rocky shoreline.
Not long after leaving the island a group of Long-beaked Common Dolphins was seen. Later in the morning Captain Brian found a larger group, estimated to be around 400 in total. We were thrilled to see them jumping and swimming just below us on the bow.

The birders in the group were happy to see many Black-vented Shearwater, a seabird that breeds on the local islands. Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwater, birds that breed in the southern hemisphere, were seen flying by in smaller numbers. We also saw a few Royal Terns and Bonaparte's Gulls as well. An uncommon, but striking bird, the Sabine's Gull was especially noteworthy.

After we passed the dolphins there was a lull in the activity, but it wasn't long before we spotted several blows. These proved to be our first large cetacean, Gray Whales. They were three adults and two juveniles headed north. We enjoyed very good views of them as they came up several times in front of the boat. One of the animals raised its fluke clear of the water repeatedly before diving. Our 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.

After a tasty lunch of fish chowder we encountered another group of dolphins. For some of the group they appeared slightly different, they were. Their “snout” was noticeably shorter and the body a little shorter. Most authorities agree that this and the Long-beaked represent two different species and the Short-beaked are typically found in deeper waters.

Relatively calm conditions allowed us to become more familiar with the rhythms of the boat. We saw a few more dolphins and seabirds until the sunset marked the end of this rewarding first day on the Spirit of Adventure.

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Day 3 Tuesday 28 March
San Benitos Island - Pacific Coast

After a smooth ride all night we awoke to overcast skies with a fifteen-knot breeze on our stern. As the day broke and we could see a Black-footed Albatross behind the boat. At one point we counted twelve at once! We arrived at San Benitos Islands at 7:00 am. Captain Brian, anchored the Spirit in the little cove by the fishing village on the south side of the western island. We got in the skiff for the first time and headed ashore.

David gave us an orientation of 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.

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. This is known as a “catastrophic molt”. The new skin is a nice clean grey color replacing the old worn fur.
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. The danger of flying in at night is the Cholla Cactus, which some unfortunate birds crash into and may become impaled and die. As a group we had lots of these cactus stuck to our shoes.

We divided into two groups, Scot, lead one group to the lighthouse and the rest went with David to the north side looking for more seals. Both enjoyed the sights and sounds of this dramatic location. Two Guadalupe Fur Seals were seen by one group. Interestingly, both had radio tracking devices on their backs.

At 1:30 pm the crew raised the anchor and we headed south. The wind had died down considerably and we all enjoyed a smoother ride. Some of us in the bow started to see a few Cassin's Auklets sitting on the water or flying off. After a while we started seeing more, small groups of ten or so. After a few hours we realized that we had seen almost a hundred. As we continued south there were also hundreds of phalaropes.

By the latter part of the afternoon we found a whale with a large blow and were thrilled to realize that is was Blue Whale. In the relatively calm conditions Brian was able to stay near the animal for over an hour and we enjoyed fantastic views of it.

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

**Day 4  Friday, 29 March**

**Pacific Coast – San Ignacio Lagoon**

At daybreak we we were sailing southward past Punta Abreojos. The unmarked channel to San Ignacio lagoon was just a short distance ahead. Soon Brian expertly guided the Spirit through the narrow passageway over the shallow bar (just two fathoms deep) into the lagoon with waves breaking on both sides.

A few Gray Whales negotiated the narrow channel. They were all mothers with their calves and the surf didn’t seem to be any problem for them. Several Bottlenose Dolphins swam by, a few riding the bow wave. Cormorants, scoters and terns all flew about. Several skuas/jaegers, both Arctic and Pomarine flew by chasing the terns.

Once inside the lagoon, we made our way up to Rocky Point where we dropped anchor and waited for our skiff drivers. Shortly Maximus(Max), Alejandro and Victor arrived in their pangas (skiffs). Full of excitement 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.

The first run out was choppy and cold, but the weather was improving, which it often does in mid-morning as the wind dies down. We headed out for our second run which was very good, as the lagoon had calmed down quite a bit. We were all thrilled to have curious and friendly mothers and calves swim close enough that many of us 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.
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 and 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 other birds.

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 brilliant stars while listening to whales blowing all around us.

Day 5 Saturday March 30
San Ignacio Lagoon – Pacific Ocean

The calm anchorage in San Ignacio Lagoon gave us a well-appreciated good night of sleep. However, by the time we awoke to a cloudy sky, a brisk wind had picked up and the waters of the lagoon had turned choppy.

At 7:30 our skiff drivers arrived and enjoyed the same hearty breakfast we did. A half an hour later we put on our foul weather gear for the short, but wet ride to the mangroves on the west side of the lagoon.

The higher tide allowed us to take a break from whale watching and explore this unique habitat. These mangroves are at the 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.

Once inside the protected mangroves we started finding a variety of birds. All three of the boats had very good views of Mangrove Warblers as they darted amongst the prop roots and leaves. White Ibis, Snowy and Reddish Egrets perched in the trees or waded in the shallows. Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew, Short billed Dowitcher and Willet were among the waders that we saw roosting in the cordgrass and other salt marsh plants.

Back on the Spirit, we paused to enjoy a hot drink and freshly baked apple cinnamon muffins. By 10:00 am we were heading out again looking for Gray Whales. To our surprise we found a cow-calf pair right next to the boat. The calf came to the skiffs and put on a show, while mom “waited” nearby. We saw some spy hopping, where the whales rise slowly up, holding their head out of the water and then sink slowly back down.

At noon, we headed back to the boat where Kuyima, the cooperative that takes us out in the lagoon, had shirts and other items out for sale. A fabulous taco lunch was our reward for all the wildlife viewing we had and then a rest before going out again. The winds were calm as we headed out. Almost all the whales had been pushed down the lagoon by the outgoing tide, so we headed to the mouth of the lagoon. However, the wind had picked up quickly and by the time we were out of the lagoon at the breaking bar near the entrance, it was blowing 20-knots out of the north. The ride was something like roller coaster in a water park and not especially comfortable. We saw a few whales but the conditions continued to get worse, so we headed back to the Spirit for refuge. The crew got us back on board safely, where we dried off and warmed up. We said goodbye to our panga drivers and thanked them for showing us the amazing whales and other animals of San Ignacio. They had to leave, as there were called back to camp due to the high winds. And it was time for us to depart as well.

At 5:00 pm, we headed back out into the ocean with a Bottlenose Dolphin escort. Once we safely passed the breaking waves and returned to the deeper ocean waters the boat turned to the south. At 6:00 pm we came across an area with lots of feeding seabirds. We had good views of Sabine’s and Bonaparte’s Gulls, Black-vented and Pink-footed Shearwaters. A speckled cloudy sky created a beautiful sunset over the ocean as we sat down for dinner bringing a close to another fantastic day.
Day 6 Thursday 31 March
Pacific Coast off Magdalena Bay

The wind slacked off and the sun rose to a cloudless sky. 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.

Some of the birders were up early and saw a Black Storm Petrel before 7:00 am. As the morning progressed we saw other birds; Royal and Elegant Terns, Pink-footed and Black-vented Shearwaters.

Our first cetacean of the day were two Humpback Whales headed to the north. One was considerably smaller than the other, a yearling. The larger animal raised its fluke out of the water several times showing us its distinctive pattern which can identify a humpback almost like our own fingerprints. We enjoyed fantastic views of these animals, but they were going the wrong direction so we turned back to our southerly course.

We had seen several groups of dolphins, but probably the highlight of the morning was a group of about four hundred Long-beaked Common Dolphin.

We enjoyed fantastic views of these lively cetaceans jumping, surging through the waves and swimming directly below us.

It seems that whenever lunch is served wildlife is seen “inconveniently.” This was now the case as a tall spout was seen. It turned out to be a Blue Whale and her calf. For the next forty minutes we had fantastic views of these two animals just in front of the boat. Many photographs were taken of the animals as they showed their wonderful color through the water.

We had seen several sea turtles in the distance, but now slowed down near one. It was identified as a Loggerhead Sea Turtle by the ruddy-brown color of the shell. Interestingly this species always has large barnacles on the top shell. The group enjoyed great views of these animals.

By mid-afternoon we were seeing several whale blows. When we approached one, the group could see a moderately large curved dorsal fin. The naturalists explained this view put it into the category of “finner whales.” At a distance this group could include Fin, Sei and Bryde’s whales. As this animal surfaced we could see its brownish color, smaller size and several ridges extending forward form the blowhole. These marks helped to identify it as a Bryde’s Whale. Another name for this whale is Tropical Rorqual as it is typically not found in colder waters.

As we were trying to see the Bryde’s Whale better a large blow showed directly in front of us, another Blue Whale. This was a large, probably 80-foot long whale that we saw repeatedly. The group was thrilled to have amazing views of this animal, at times we could see the entire length of this large cetacean including its pectoral flippers and massive fluke through the clear water. It raised its tail upwards, but tantalizingly stopped short of bringing its fluke out of the water. To photograph a Blue Whale with a wide angle lens as it swam under the bow was quite special indeed.
We had seen a number of sea turtles, but this one was different as a booby was standing on it. Clearly it was the best place in this part of the ocean for this Brown Booby to have a rest. We drove over to get a look at this curious looking bird before it flew off.

It wasn’t long before we saw another booby sitting on the surface. This seabird was dramatically colored black and white with a noticeably pinkish bill. The birders excitedly identified it as a Nazca Booby. This is a recent “split” from Masked Booby. Typically it occurs further south, especially around the Galapagos Islands while the Masked Booby is the species that breeds along the Mexican coast.

The sun was getting close to setting as we enjoyed the calm conditions in a stretch of ocean that is often much windier. Some of us sat in the rear of the boat enjoying a beer or glass of wine remarking on what a great day it had been. Suddenly a voice came over the PA, “Tropicbird on the water.” We bolted up from our chairs and rushed up to the bow where we saw the white bird sitting on the water before taking flight to reveal its long white central tail feathers. A dramatically patterned Red-billed Tropicbird. This special seabird seed to be a fitting end to a wonderful day.

Day 7 Monday 1st April
Sea of Cortez – Los Frailes

After a comfortable run down the west coast of Baja we rounded the corner at Cabo San Lucas in the dark. The Spirit cruised eastward in a calm sea as the sun rose at 6:10 am over a sharp, clear horizon. Some claimed to see a “green flash.” The air was warm, the sea clear blue with not a cloud in the sky. We came across a small group of Common Dolphin, on our way to the “Gorda Bank” a place where we usually see Humpback Whales. At 7:15 am we found a group of three Humpbacks, one had a beautiful white pattern under its flukes.

There was a small dolphin following along with the whales. Dolphins by nature are social animals that do not survive well alone. Clearly this animal had been separated from its group. It had a forward pointing dorsal fin, uniform gray color and was thinner than a Common Dolphin. After checking the book, Scot determined that it had to be an Eastern Spinner Dolphin. These Dolphins are found in tropical waters. They occur off Baja mostly in the summer but have only been seen once or twice before on our trips.

At 8:30 am we came across a Striped Marlin. Though polarizing sunglasses, one could see it flashing bright blue stripes as it darted away. More humpbacks were found and Brian kept them just off the bow for some exceptional views. These whales were huge robust animals which made a tremendously loud sound when they exhaled. We stayed with them for over half an hour, enjoying amazing views as they were just below the bow. However, they were headed south and we needed to go north. The wind had picked up and the sea got choppy quickly. The crew found two different humpback cow-calf pairs. One calf was especially active, rolling, half breaching and playing on the surface, almost like one of the Gray Whale calves.

After enjoying these whales, we continued north toward our destination, Los Frailes, a granitic headland jutting into the Sea of Cortez. Scot took snorkelers to the beach for a check out snorkel. Although there were not many fish here, some of the group did see King Angelfish, Rainbow Wrasse, Parrotfish and even a Spotted Eagle Ray. David led another group into the hot, dry desert for a bird walk.

At 4:00 pm, the snorkelers joined David’s group. We were pleased to have excellent views of many birds; Crested Caracara, Cactus Wren, Gila Woodpecker, California Gnatcatcher, Pyrrhuloxia, 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 6:30 pm the crew had picked everyone off the beach and brought us back to the Spirit. We were pleasantly surprised to see that margaritas were being served. The wind had completely dropped and many of us enjoyed our first sunset behind Baja’s coastal mountains. The crew raised and stored the skiffs and we headed north into a wonderfully calm sea.
Day 8  Tuesday 2nd April
La Paz Bay – Santa Cruz Island

We were blessed with continued calm seas as we cruised north by Isla Cerralvo and by 7:00 am we dropped anchor two and half miles off the beach in La Paz Bay. By 9:00 am three skiffs came out to meet us. With great anticipation we were being taken to see Whale Sharks (Rhincodon typus). Two of the boats carried the snorkelers while the other boat had those of us who were content just to see these large sharks from the deck. All of us were not disappointed.

Our guides shared the natural history of these unique fish, the largest cartilaginous fish in the world. We learned that there are about 80 to 100 of them that migrate to La Paz Bay to feed on the rich soup of plankton that occurs here from October to April. The numbers have increased in the last few years due to protections and regulations that are well enforced. The sharks that congregate here are mostly juveniles ten to twenty-five feet long.

Both those of us who swam a few feet from the sharks and those who enjoyed views from above the surface were thrilled with the sharks that we saw. These large fish have beautiful patterns of checks and spots on their back. It was amazing to look into their eyes as they swam placidly by us. It was a challenge to keep up with the sharks, but it was incredible to see underwater as they gracefully swim by.

After riding back to the boat and excitedly sharing stories of being so close to these giant, but gentle sharks we thanked our guides and headed out of the bay.

We had lunch as we cruised eastward looking for whales and dolphins. It was not long before the crew spotted a group 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 jumps. These were the offshore variety or population of Bottlenose. Although they are darker, larger and more robust than the coastal form, they are not considered a separate species.

The seas were calm and that allowed us to cruise around the east side of Espiritu Santu Island, however, there were very few animals there. This was the first time during the trip that the weather felt tropical, in fact it was quite warm and many of us sought the shaded parts of the boat.

By the late afternoon we were approaching the southern point of San Jose Island. Forty or fifty Elegant Terns dropped down to the water indicating that some dolphins might be feeding nearby. Sure enough we soon spotted a group of Long-beaked Common Dolphin. Rather than just taking a short look we stayed with these animals for quite some time. It seemed the longer we were there, the more dolphins we saw. We estimated there were about a thousand spread out quite some distance in all directions.

We also enjoyed our first views of Yellow-footed Gulls following the boat. This species is almost endemic ot the Sea of Cortez. Much less common were three Laughing Gulls that flew near the boat.

The setting sun bathed the mountainous spine of San Jose Island as we kept going north. After a long, full day we motored in smooth waters to our anchorage at the northeastern side of the island.

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

After a calm night on the anchor, Brian fired up the engines and we headed south to Punta Colorado. Even before the sunrise most of us were on deck photographing the warm, beautiful morning light on the bright orange sedimentary cliffs. This is one of the more magical sites we visit in the Gulf. After breakfast the crew launched the skiffs and we headed ashore. Sally Lightfoot Crabs scrambled on the cliffs just above the water line as we climbed ashore. The sandstone was scattered with fossilized shells.

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 Ash-throated Flycatcher. 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 found the boat was covered with bees! They were some type of honeybee, which was desperate for water. Brian, drove around to “shake them off” and it mostly worked!

We drove north to a cove where we anchored the boat again. We quickly got back in the skiffs and went snorkeling in the clear 71-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.
Heading north, we had lunch while the crew was “glassing” ahead looking for whales. At 2:15 pm, the crew found a large “finner” type whale. Since three species, Sei, Bryde’s and Fin Whales, share common field identifying characteristics, they can be hard to identify. Brian, got us on the whale’s right side where we could see the jaw as it surfaced. It was white which is diagnostic for Fin Whale. It had an overall dark brown color with a pale “chevron” pattern on its back and a large falcate dorsal fin.

Less than an hour later the crew spotted a Blue Whale a half mile away, so we went to take a look. It was big, 75 to 80 feet long. Best of all, it fluked each time it dove. Brian, could follow it on the sonar as it dove 600 feet to the bottom to feed. The krill, which had been deep began to rise up all the way to the surface. The whale was now on the surface taking shallow dives, not fluking, and “lunge feeding”. Taking advantage of the krill at the surface, the whale was pinning the krill against the surface where they could not escape. We were amazed to see it suddenly appear at the surface showing its “ventral throat grooves”. At the same time, we could see the krill in mass through the water. Sometimes the whale would speed up, roll, open its mouth in a “lateral lunge”. Its huge pectoral fin, lower jaw and rostrum all breaking the surface as it engulfed the krill.

The whole experience was quite exhilarating, we never knew where or when this huge whale would lunge, since the krill would block the sonar. Each time someone would yell “there”! As quickly as it started, it ended at 6:30 pm. The whale stopped lunge feeding and began deep diving again and the surface krill disappeared. We had dinner, while on our way to Santa Cruz Island for the night, knowing that we had seen an extraordinary behavior that few others have.

Day 10  Thursday 4th April
Santa Catalina Island to Sea of Cortez

Before daybreak our boat motored up to another anchorage on the western side of Santa Catalina island. This was our destination for the morning. After anchoring we headed ashore to explore one of the most dramatic desert landscapes in the entire Sea of Cortez. Above the sandy wash we walked up the tall multi-branching Cardon and the endemic Giant Barrel Cactus were 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.

Despite looking hard, we could not find any 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.

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 larger, fast moving Desert Iguana.
A small group jumped in the water for a quick snorkel in the clear, but chilly water. The excellent conditions afforded great views of Sergeant Major, Mexican Goatfish, Moorish Idol and Cortez Rainbow Wrasse.

Many of us also went for skiff rides along the rocky shore and enjoyed great views of Yellow-footed Gull and other birds.

After lunch we headed westward back towards the Baja peninsula. Captain Brian turned the boat so we all could get a better view of a Red-billed Tropicbird sitting on the water. It flew off, but then sat on the surface again. On this second try we approached from downwind, the bird was reluctant to fly until we got very close. Then we had great views of this dramatic seabird, its long streamer-tail feathers undulating in the air as it took off and camera shutters snapped repeatedly.

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 a group of offshore Bottlenose Dolphin. Many of us gathered on the stern to photograph these wonderfully acrobatic cetaceans as they jumped high in the air. At one point six of them were in the air at once.

The late afternoon can be a good time to see the tall blow of a whales backlit by the sun. Right on cue the crew spotted a blow. It was a Blue Whale. As we approached, we could see several other Blue Whales in the area. This was the same area that we had seen the dramatic lunge feeding the day before and we speculated that it might happen again.

Sure, enough the whale surfaced with its mouth agape as it had yesterday. We had no way of knowing if this was the same whale as we saw before. Presumably most, if not all of them know this feeding behavior. We were thrilled to see it feed this way until the sunset. And what a sunset it was. In a land famous for amazing sunsets this was a pretty awesome one with the whole western sky colored pink, blue, purple and orange and many dramatic clouds.

The group enjoyed dinner thinking our day was over, but not quite. Brian came on the PA inviting people to head back on the deck to see some brilliant bioluminescence. We did and were not disappointed. Even more special, the sparkling in the water was being emitted by millions of krill floating just a few feet below us. Scot and David explained that this was really different then the bioluminescence of smaller organisms whose bodies are energized by moving water. These organisms were showing light even without the wake of the boat to disturb them.

Regardless of the scientific explanation we knew this was something quite special. One of us remarked that it was as if the stars had fallen into the sea and that’s as good a description of what we saw as anything.

We headed south to a smooth anchorage after another rewarding day in the Sea of Cortez.

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**Day 11 Friday April 5**

**Espiritu Santu (Los Islotes) - Sea of Cortez**

At day break we were south of San Jose Island on a 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 were a short distance above our heads giving us partial views of their brightly colored legs, but 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 offshore, 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 seabird droppings on the rocks and water.

After leaving the island we headed south, but it wasn’t long before we spotted a tall blow. With the exceptionally clear and calm water it was easy to see the right, white lower jaw of the large cetacean. It was a Fin Whale. Soon we were tracking it and several others. In fact we stayed with these fast moving whales for over an hour and enjoyed exceptional views. These are the second largest animals in the world, only exceeded in size by the Blue Whale.

The Spirit continued to motor south in calm seas. There were no additional sightings of marine mammals or seabirds, but by late afternoon we found several groups of Smooth-Tailed Mobula. These “rays” were smaller than the Spiny-tailed Mobula we had seen swimming near the boat yesterday. However, what they lacked in size they more than made up for in their sheer numbers. First we saw dozens and then hundreds of these strange animals jumping out of the water. We could see them swimming under the surface, probably chasing each other around. Clearly this is some kind of social behavior, perhaps related to mating. 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.

After a while we realized that there were not hundreds of these rays and not thousands, but tens of thousands as we were seeing them all the way into the beach and for miles in every direction. Everyone was on deck enjoying this unique display that few people get to see.

As if this unusual “wildlife” encounter wasn’t enough, 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 and toasted to our good fortune to have seen so much in Baja.

Day 12 Saturday 6 April
Cabo San Lucas

At sunrise we slowly cruised just east of the dramatic granitic spires that mark the southern tip of the wonderfully rich Baja peninsula. As if to remind us of the wildlife we had enjoyed one last Humpback whale surfaced near the boat.

Regrettably, for some, we left the Spirit to head homeward. New 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 see. The abundance of marine mammals, birds and other creatures we had seen was so rich that few places rival it on 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.
Next sailing 26th March – 6th April 2020..........

Baja California
& The Sea of Cortez 2019

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