

WildWings (WildOceans) Baja California & The Sea of Cortez 2016



Trip Report by leaders David Wimpfheimer and Scot Anderson

Day 1 Saturday 26th March

San Diego -Pacific Coast

Most of the group arrived from the United Kingdom the previous evening and were happy to arrive in warm and sunny San Diego. Today a small group joined David Wimpfheimer for a birding tour in the varied habitats of San Diego and nearby regions. A low tide at the mouth of the San Diego River showed us many waders including Marbled Godwit, Willet and Long-billed Curlew. A group of over seventy Black Skimmers was noteworthy and the very close Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal were wonderful for the photographers.

The group did well finding the near endemic California Thrasher, Allen's Hummingbird and Wrentit. Five species of warbler including Townsend's and Black-throated Gray added colors to the day. In total we found 96 species.

With much anticipation the group 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 briefed us on other details. 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. We enjoyed seeing many Double-crested and Brandt's Cormorants on the tanks as well. The lights of Tijuana twinkled in the distance as the *Spirit* picked up speed and ventured into the ocean. We went to sleep full of anticipation for the forthcoming adventure.

Day 2 Sunday 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. Juan Cabrillo, a Spanish explorer, had discovered these islands in 1544. We skirted by the island, seeing and hearing the distinctive whistling call of a Black Oystercatcher. The keen eyed observers amongst us picked out a pair of Peregrine Falcons perched high up on a steep cliff.

Not long after leaving the island we saw a few dolphins. It wasn't long before they were riding the bow wave and the group could look down at several Long-beaked Common Dolphins. We enjoyed great views of these cetaceans, but soon we started seeing spouts and had to focus on a group of Gray Whales.

Our naturalists told us that it is common to see Gray Whales here as they are migrating to the north. However, this group of cetaceans was particularly active at the surface, showing their mottled flukes many times as they dove, often in unison. We enjoyed excellent views of these baleen whales, practically looking down their double blowholes as the animals came up in front of the boat. There were particularly good views of these animals in warm, morning sunlight for the photographers. All this occurred before eight o'clock in the morning!

We knew there would be more Gray Whales in the trip so we continued south. It wasn't long before we encountered another, larger, group of dolphins. As the animals swam by us we could see the shorter snout helping to identify these as Short-beaked Common Dolphins.

Some of the dedicated birders on the upper deck yelled out Fin Whale. Those of us gathered on the bow were not able to see the whale, but were not disappointed as we did find two Laysan Albatross flying behind a fishing trawler.

All that activity had worked up our appetite so the delicious lunch of chicken soup, salad and home made rolls was a big hit.

The boat's crew are excellent spotters and from their vantage point high above the main deck they shouted out "tall blow." The naturalists explained that several species could fit that description. As the group rushed up to the bow we saw a large cetacean surface and blow. Its mottled, grayish color and small dorsal fin helped to identify it as a Blue Whale. We followed this huge baleen whale for over an hour as it repeatedly dove down a hundred or more meters to a layer of food and then rose to the surface. Captain Brian steered the boat expertly so the whale was always in front of

us. We were quite lucky to have calm, almost windless conditions that allowed us to see the whole length of the whale underwater. Needless to say many photos and a lot of video were shot.

There were other whales in the area. One appeared darker, with a larger, curved dorsal fin. In the distance we saw a few spouts and headed that way. On closer inspection we could tell this was a “Finner” type whale, one of the *Balaenopteridae*, which includes Bryde’s, Sei and Fin all of which have a dorsal fin. Based on size, color pattern and shape of the dorsal fin it was determined that this large cetacean was a Fin Whale. The diagnostic white lower right-hand jaw was clearly visible.

As we continued motoring southward we saw several hundred birds ahead of us. They took flight as we go closer and it was a fun challenge sorting them out. Amongst the more numerous Bonaparte’s Gulls there were several Sabine’s Gulls, certainly one of the most striking species in that group. There were many Black-vented Shearwaters, and smaller numbers of Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwater. A Pomarine Skua (Jaeger) was also in the group harassing other birds.

Five different cetaceans and many seabirds were a great introduction to the rich marine habitats of the Baja Peninsula. Calm conditions allowed us to enjoy the first of many great dinners.

Day 3 Monday 28th March San Benitos Island - Pacific Coast

We arrived at the San Benitos Islands at 7:30. It was overcast and there were many Western and Heermann’s Gulls diving at the surface between two of the islands. The *Spirit* anchored in the lee of the wind on the south side of West San Benitos Island. 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. Although it was dry, the plants were bright green and a few were still in bloom, evidence of rain this season. 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. Other unique plants were enjoyed by the botanically inclined in our group.

The island is riddled with seabird burrows; Cassin’s Auklets and Scripps Murrelets are the main occupants. The primary reason these nesting sea birds are nocturnal at the island is to avoid predation by large and aggressive Western Gulls and Peregrine Falcons.

The crew did a great job of landing us safely and all walked to the south side where there were numerous Northern Elephant Seals. Many of the seals were here to molt and we saw only a few weaners (recently weaned pups) then in most years. David and Scot were both surprised to see so few. Perhaps, a large swell created by El Nino storms washed the pups away when they were first born and couldn’t swim? Or other unknown factors were at play. Regardless, there were plenty of seals for us to enjoy and photograph. The molting seals had skin and fur peeling off in big pieces in what is known as a “catastrophic molt”.

The group then hiked over to the northern side of the island, passing through the small fishing community and checking out the picturesque church on the way. As soon as we got to the beach we could see many weaners there. It is possible that El Nino storms did not affect the northern, larger

more protected beaches and that young newborn seals were spared. We all enjoyed sitting quietly near these pinnipeds and experiencing their different behaviors; sneezing, crawling, scratching and peering back at us with large, expressive black eyes.

We walked further along the rocky shore and were delighted to find a couple of dozen Guadalupe Fur Seals. These endangered pinnipeds, which had been hunted for their extremely fine fur, have only been seen at these islands in the last eleven years. These seal's black color, large earflaps, long flippers and pointed nose distinguish them from the similar California Sea Lion.

Some of the more unusual birds seen on the island included Rock Wren, Say's Phoebe, American Oystercatcher, Costa's Hummingbird, Horned Lark and the endemic San Benitos Sparrow.

At 13:30 we pulled anchor and headed south looking for whales and sea birds. We saw a spout in the distance and headed that way. The sea was choppy and it was hard to see this small Rorqual whale. The whale was small, the right lower jaw was white, had one rostrum ridge and no chevron pattern on the back. It could have been a Sei whale, however better views were needed to be sure. This group of whales is characterized by streamlined body, a fin which is about two thirds of the way towards the tail (except Humpbacks) and multiple throat grooves. They range in size from the massive Blue Whale (30+m) to the Dwarf Minke Whale (7.8m). In these waters Blue, Fin, Sei, Bryde's and Minke Whale are all possible and they may share similar features. The angle, size and shape of the fin, coloration, size and behaviors, overlap in these species. One needs to have several good views as well as photos in order to carefully identify which species it is. In any event, it was a good exercise in Rorqual identification.

As we continued south, all enjoyed a lovely Salmon and Asparagus dinner.

Day 4 Tuesday, 29th March Pacific Coast – San Ignacio Lagoon

Shortly after breakfast we were cruising southward past Punta Abreojos. The channel to San Ignacio lagoon was just a short distance ahead. Suddenly a Magnificent Frigatebird appeared overhead, a master of the wind currents, this species can stay aloft all day without resting. As some of us rushed out of the cabin to see this iconic large bird of the tropics, an equally large species appeared, a Black-footed Albatross.

The passageway over the shallow bar into the lagoon with waves breaking on both sides of the boat is wonderfully dramatic with whales and dolphins surfacing near us. Captain Brian expertly guided the *Spirit* through the narrow, unmarked channel. In addition to whales, several dolphins cruised by while many divers, scoters and skuas flew overhead.

As soon as we cruised into calmer water we could see that this was a very special place indeed. Many cow-calf Gray Whales pairs surfaced in different directions. Our boat soon anchored near Rocky Point and drivers Gabriel, Chino and Romero arrived in their pangas (skiffs). Dressed in foul weather gear, we quickly climbed down into their boats and set off with high hopes of getting close to these friendly whales. Remarkably the panga drivers expertly drove us close enough to the whales that they didn't feel threatened. We were all thrilled to have curious and friendly mothers and calves swim close enough that we could reach out and touch the whales.

The group enjoyed seeing several Gray Whale calves swim close to our boats. To be so close to these playful cetaceans was truly an incredible experience. Occasionally their mothers would come close to the boats too, but the pattern was that the two to three-month old calves were bolder and approached the boats more closely. 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 judging by the squeals and laughter from every boat.

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 good, making us appreciate the great views we had in the morning that much more. Back on the *Spirit* we washed the salt spray off our cameras and traded details of our encounters with these cetaceans. As the day ended, we relaxed with glowing faces and enjoyed resting at a calm anchorage. During dinner we watched the sun set behind dramatic clouds, bringing closure to a full, wonderful day.

Day 5 March 30th

San Ignacio Lagoon – Pacific Ocean

The quiet anchorage in Laguna San Ignacio afforded most of the group a well appreciated good night of sleep. We awoke to an overcast morning with a light sea breeze. Once we had our tea and coffee our attention was focused on the whales blowing and surfacing just off the bow of the *Spirit of Adventure*.

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. With low winds and high tide the lagoon was clearer than usual, very rare in these waters. All three skiffs had great luck with friendly whales coming to our splashing and excitement. At times we could see the mother and calf swimming directly under our pangas in unusually clear water, an amazing sight. The group cruised back to the ship for a short break, a fresh blueberry muffin and a cup of tea, but we were soon ready to watch and play with some more friendly Gray Whales. Heading out, we ran back down to the mouth of the lagoon where most of the whales were. We stayed a little longer to enjoy these great conditions and whales before lunch.

After lunch, and a rest, we headed to the north side of the estuary to look for the many bird species that live in the mangrove habitat. Red and White mangroves here are at their northern end of their range being a tropical species. In the subtropics around the world, 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 a Mangrove Warbler as it perched on a prop root. White Ibis, Snowy, Great and Reddish Egrets as well as Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons perched or waded in the shallows. The tide was relatively low and lots of waders

were feeding and roosted at the edge of the salt marsh as we rode by. Many photographs were taken of Marbled Godwit and Willet. Several Black-necked (Horned) Grebes surfaced wonderfully close to our pangas as brant and Red-breasted Mergansers swam by.

While we were in the mangroves, the wind had picked up to over twenty knots. The people who manage the whale watching in the Lagoon, closed the area to all whale watching for safety reasons. In reality, it would have been impossible any way. So we took a break cleaned up our gear and had a nice hot cup of tea.

At 16:00 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. Brian asked everyone to stay off the bow and sit down, while he drove the ship across the rough bar and dangerous entrance, with large waves breaking on both sides! Once we safely passed the breaking waves and returned to the deeper ocean waters the boat turned to the south.

As we passed through the channel many of us were entertained and intrigued by an immature Brown Booby that repeatedly flew around the boat, attempting to land on the mast. When it finally was able to perch, it didn't stay long in the wind.

Just before dinner, we looked for the elusive green flash. As usual some saw it and some did not. The sun's light actually turns green the last second before it goes down. We enjoyed another of Dan's great meals anticipating new adventures for tomorrow as we continued south.

Day 6 Thursday 31st March Pacific Coast – Magdalena Bay

The wind was still fresh from the northeast at daybreak creating a rolling sea. The *Spirit* was traveling southward a few miles north of the entrance or *entrada* to Magdalena Bay just off Cabo San Lazaro. Although some peoples' stomachs bothered them from the previous night, most enjoyed the chef's wonderful eggs benedict.

Not long after breakfast a few whale spouts were seen. The boat turned and then those of us watching the animal sounding saw the distinctive color and small dorsal fin of a Blue Whale. After a short dive of about six minutes we were thrilled to see the whale come up again directly in front of us. For the next hour the group was able to watch this individual and several others surface near the boat. Brian again expertly piloted the vessel so that we had excellent views of the cetacean even with the rolling seas. We were fortunate that it didn't stay under very long and best of all it always raised its massive flukes out of the water before making deeper dives. We were treated to a view of the animal and its flukes at least a dozen times.

After turning southward we detected a group of birds in the air ahead of us. After getting closer we could see they were mostly Elegant Terns feeding on small fish driven to the surface by a group of Long-beaked Common Dolphin. It was quite a feeding frenzy with Black-vented and Pink-footed Shearwaters milling around and a couple of Magnificent Frigatebirds patrolling the edges. We enjoyed the views of the dolphins as they were moving down swell.

Several Sabine's Gulls flew about the feeding frenzy. These birds were undoubtedly on their way back towards their breeding zones in the Arctic. They were quite stunning in their breeding gray, black and white plumage.

Lunch was about to be served, but the boat now was turning on another whale. Soon we could see the black color and lower right, white jaw color of a Fin Whale. That color made it easy to see the whale underwater before it came up in front of us. The animal turned in circles, but we were always able to see it quite well. Its dorsal fin was unusually pointed, some people remarked like a witch's hat.

After lunch it was time to catch up on chores like laundry and journal entries. A group did an exercise walk, steadily, around the deck.

We cruised by several turtles; the group in the bow was able to note the rich, brown color of a few, identifying them as Loggerhead Turtles. Another group of dolphins captivated us and despite a forecast of high winds we were quite pleased with all the wildlife we were finding.

Scot and David had been in this zone southwest of Magdalena Bay many times before on WildWings cruises and always hoped for a special mammal or bird. Now it appeared, a white and gray seabird that shot up, almost perpendicular to the water's surface and then zoomed down again. This flight style identified it as a *Pterodroma* petrel and that's what the shouts were. Initially it wasn't seen well and only by some of our keenest observers, but after tracking back and forth with a group of dolphins we were all able to get moderately good views of the seabird. Most importantly we were able to get good photos of it that helped identify it as a Cook's Petrel. Initially there were three, but by the end of the afternoon over a dozen had been seen. This is the most commonly seen *Pterodroma* seen in Baja's water's, but the first time one had been seen on a Wild Wings trip.

After enjoying this special seabird, more terns and the dolphins for quite some time we continued towards the Cape.

Day 7 Friday 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 south swell rolling in. After daybreak we enjoyed Dan's special breakfast, huevos *rancheros*, tasty, but spicy eggs, chilies and tortillas, a tradition for this site.

Humpback Whales are traditionally seen here as well and by 7:30 am we found two. Our best strategy with these whales is to follow them for a while, letting them get used to our presence. Being patient often allows the whales to exhibit some of their bold, possibly friendly behavior. This worked when suddenly one whale breached right in front of us, landing on the surface with a loud splash! The two whales moved apart and we stayed with a big male that had completely dark flukes. Fortunately this was the breaching whale. It breached again and then the cetacean rolled up and started "flipper flapping." Several times it lay on its back with both flippers in the air.

At 10:00 am, a different Humpback was seen a mile away and our breaching whale stopped its tricks and headed straight for it. The two whales came together and then swam and surfaced simultaneously. We saw one big breach behind the boat and then the whales separated again. Clearly the individual with dark flukes was dominant. The boat continued to track this whale, which began to tail lob, flipper flap and breach again. We all agreed this was amazing behavior, however, the wind had picked up and it was getting choppy so we left the whale at 11:30, over four hours of Humpback action!

While we were following the whales we were lucky to see a Masked Booby come and circle the *Spirit*. Some of the birders on the bow were amused when a very bold Elegant Tern almost landed on their heads. We were also thrilled to see about twenty offshore Bottlenose Dolphins here and there. These differ from the ones we saw in San Ignacio lagoon, which are lighter in color and rarely are seen offshore in deep water.

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 south swell had the water all stirred up with only fair visibility. However, the snorkelers still saw many colorful reef fish. And it felt great to cool off in the warm 23-degree (Celsius) sea.

At 15:30, 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, 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.

Back on the boat dinner was served while the crew raised and stored the skiffs. We finished up our strawberries and ice cream and headed north into the gulf. Finishing the checklist quickly before the *Spirit* bumped into the fresh northerly swells was a fun task.

Day 8 Saturday 2nd April

San Jose Island – San Diego Island

Although the wind had dropped during the night it was still blowing moderately as we headed towards the southern end of San Jose Island. In its lee the conditions were now calmer. Cruising towards the west we enjoyed a spectacular view of the Baja Peninsula glowing in the early morning light. David remarked that it looked like the Grand Canyon half full of water as there were many layers of pink, brown and tan sedimentary and volcanic layer exposed in the mountainous terrain.

The birders were happy to see several storm petrels. The larger species were darker and had deep wing beats, identifying them as Blacks. Smaller storm petrels and one of the smallest seabirds in the world were the Least Storm Petrel.

It wasn't long before we saw our first cetacean of the day. The huge size, tall blow and very small dorsal fin helped identify it as a Blue Whale. We had been told that most of the Blue Whales had already left the Sea of Cortez due to warm waters and lack of food, but clearly this large cetacean

didn't get the message. Best of all was that this was a "fluker." It showed its massive fluke while sounding every time, showing us a distinctive growth of sessile barnacles on the tip of its right fluke. The whole animal showed a stunning blue color and Brian steered the boat wonderfully close to it.

Not long after the encounter with the largest of baleen whales we found a group of about a hundred Long-beaked Common Dolphins. These toothed whales have extended family ties and can occasionally be seen in groups of up to a thousand. Many photographs were taken of the animals riding the wave under the Spirit's bow and also of animals jumping off the stern wake.

A volcanic spur of rock locally known as the Cayo Reef gave us excellent views of Yellow-footed Gull, Brown Pelicans and several Blue-footed Boobies. We were close enough to see and photograph the colorful feet of this iconic seabird.

Again in the lee of San Jose Island we stopped for an unplanned visit to the beach and estuary. Half the group enjoyed snorkeling in the clear 74-degree water below the volcanic cliffs and boulders. 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.

The group that explored the rocky shore enjoyed an equally productive visit. They were able to find several groups of waders including a dozen Wilson's Plover, an uncommon species. A migrant Yellow-rumped Warbler feeding amongst the marine algae and tide pools was a surprise to us all.

After lunch we headed north into the San Jose Channel. This is often a productive region for cetaceans and it wasn't long before we found a Humpback Whale. When it came to the surface the animal showed us its huge pectoral flippers that seemed to float almost at the water's surface. This cetacean was not frisky like the one we saw the day before. In fact it seemed almost lethargic as it surfaced, rolled and tried to raise its flukes clear of the water. Its behavior indicated to us that it was not totally healthy so we left in peace and continued north.

As we neared the tip of the island the Captain and crew spotted the distinctive splashes of a group of dolphins. Luckily these were the offshore variety of Bottlenose Dolphin. Scot and David told us that these animals are the most acrobatic of all cetaceans, soon the group saw why. After the Spirit picked up speed many of the dolphins began jumping off the stern wake. Some did more than just jump; they did back flips and other dramatic leaps.

As the sun dropped below the jagged coastal mountains the whole western sky seemed to glow orange and pink. It seemed the perfect introduction to this amazing body of water. We anchored just below the cliffs of San Diego Island.

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

The crew pulled the anchor at about 3:30 and we enjoyed a smooth ride up to Santa Catalina Island, the site of our morning activities. 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 with their spines glowing in the morning light. 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.

Further up the arroyo, we 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. By the time we walked back down the arroyo the sand had warmed enough to energize many lizards that scurried ahead of us. Most colorful was the endemic, wonderfully turquoise, Santa Catalina Side-blotched Lizard. Several Baja Spiny Lizards and Desert Iguana were seen as well. Some of us enjoyed skiff rides along the rocky shore. A Wandering Tattler was seen from one of the boats.

The snorkeling is almost always excellent here and today was no exception. In the clear, warm water there were great views of Sergeant Major, Mexican Goatfish, Moorish Idol, Cortez Rainbow Wrasse and Mexican Hogfish.

Back on the *Spirit*, the crew loaded the skiffs, while we enjoyed a very tasty lunch. In the afternoon we scanned the waters looking for wildlife as the boat cruised west. A small group of Offshore Bottlenose Dolphins was seen, but they didn't "play" with us much. After we crossed the rough waters we turned down swell and the crew spotted a pair of Red-billed Tropicbirds. A little later we found two more, an adult and a juvenile sitting on the water. The boat approached them slowly and quietly and the group enjoyed great views of their long streamer-tails undulating in the air as they took off and the cameras snapped lots of shots.

By the late afternoon the sea calmed considerably. That helped some of us spot a few Dwarf Sperm Whales. These little known whales, in the genus *Kogia*, are hard to spot unless the surface is glassy calm. Even in the best of circumstances, they are still hard to see. They look like an upside down surfboard laying on the surface with the largish fin showing above. We enjoyed good views of several of these mysterious animals.

Another animal was seen jumping out of the water by a few on deck. It wasn't seen well, but most people commented on its long tail. Scot remarked that it was probably a Mako Shark, a species known for its jumping behavior.

At the day's end the colorful, cloudless sky was reflected in the water as we dropped anchor. San Diego Island provided another calm night for us.

Day 10 Monday 4th April

San Jose Island – Espiritu Santu Island

The *Spirit* sat calmly on the anchor at San Diego Island and we all enjoyed a quiet night's sleep. The captain pulled the anchor at 4:30 am and the boat cruised south. Even before sunrise those of us on deck admired the stunningly colorful cliffs of Punta Colorado. Looking east many of us glimpsed the *green flash* as the sun rose over the glassy Sea of Cortez, the wind had finely quit. An evocative name 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.

After breakfast we explored 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. A few fossil whale bones studded the sedimentary rock as we climbed around to the south side. David interpreted the geologic history of the area, the formation of the igneous rocks and how the Sea of Cortez opened up along the San Andreas Fault.

Just after leaving the beach we found two Gray Thrashers, an uncommon species on this and most of the gulf islands. The floor of the beautiful arroyo we walked up was filled with large granitic stones and surrounded by pink and white sandstone cliffs. Even though it was early in the morning, the desert was warming quickly so the shade of the cliffs and Palo Blanco trees were welcome. Hummingbirds have been strangely quiet this trip. Now, some of us had very good views of a male Costa's Hummingbird perched on a Palo Adan branch. It's brilliant purple throat glowed in the sunlight. Agave and Organ Pipe cactus dotted the landscape amongst other desert plants. As we walked back down the wash the warming temperature brought many lizards into activity. We saw Side-blotched, Zebra-tailed and the very colorful Baja Whiptail.

Most of us enjoyed skiff rides along the stunning cliffs and shoreline. We explored a sea cave where several White-throated Swifts screeched excitedly and zoomed in and out.

Only a short time after getting back from the island our hard working crew hoisted the skiffs and the Spirit headed south in search of more wildlife. At last we had some wonderful, calm conditions and we were able to see birds or another species at some distance.

Those of us on the bow saw a few turtles, but one particularly drew our attention. As the boat drew closer we could see its evenly rounded carapace and whitish head helping us to identify it as a Green Sea Turtle, a reptile that has changed little in the last two hundred million years. This turtle allowed us to get so close that those of us on the bow were able to look right down on it. The sea turtle dove a bit and we could see it swimming through the wonderfully clear water. Then it came back to the surface and remarkably swam towards us. Finally it paddled with its large forelegs, dove into the clear, deep blue water and we continued on.

After only a short time we turned to get a better view of another sea turtle. As we approached and began to see its head and shell another animal surfaced further in the distance. Those of us not distracted by the sea turtle saw a smallish cetacean, seemingly a little larger than a Bottlenose Dolphin, but with a triangular dorsal fin like a porpoise. As the animal came up a few more times we could also see a gray patch forward of the fin. Not surprisingly few of us could identify this animal, but Captain Brian had seen several before on offshore fishing trips and even a Baja trip. His voice came excitedly over the loudspeaker, "Look at that animal, it's a Peruvian Beaked Whale." Fortunately the cetacean came up several more times so everyone could see it, clearly this rare cetacean was a new mammal for almost everyone onboard. We obtained very good photographs and realized we were extremely lucky to see the beaked whale so well. Usually they are observed at the distance and dive down for thirty to forty minutes, perhaps not being seen again. The species, really only described twenty years ago, is found from Peru to Southern California, but

is rarely seen alive. It is the smallest beaked whale, so another common name; Pygmy Beaked Whale (*Mesoplodon peruvianus*) is apt.

There was much to celebrate during lunch, not to mention our anticipated visit to Los Islotes, the northern end of Espiritu Santo Island. As we approached the group could see the dramatic volcanic spires and bluffs, perfect roosting places for frigatebirds and boobies. However, before we got much closer the boat made a sharp turn, another whale had been spotted.

In the next thirty minutes we got reasonably good views of several whales. One was a Fin, identified by its tall blow and other characteristics. Another was a Bryde's, which came up directly in front of the bow although it's was hard to see the longitudinal ridges that extend forward from the blowhole. While waiting for the latter species to come up again another animal swam across the water just in front of the Spirit. Not all of us saw it well, but a few did see it clearly enough to note the distinctive spots and checkered back pattern of a Whale Shark. We did not see it again and chose to ignore other whale spouts and head to Los Islotes.

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.

Although frigatebirds, Blue-footed boobies and other seabirds were exceptionally close here, the pinnipeds were clearly the main attraction.

Some of us soon had exceptionally close views of these playful sea lions after entering the crystal clear water. A few of these animals really enjoyed swimming up to us, blowing bubbles and acting as excited to see us as the other way around. To see these pinnipeds come zooming by with a few flipper strokes gave us a new appreciation for their hydrodynamic shape and muscular power. The sea lions were clearly the highlight for the snorkelers, but the collection of fish was wonderfully impressive. Thousands of Sergeant Majors swam by us, many just inches from our facemasks, seemingly oblivious of our presence. They were busy feeding on some of the small jellyfish that filled the water. Additionally there were many green, blue and gold parrotfish and other reef fish.

It was late afternoon as the crew pulled up the skiffs and we headed along the west side of Espiritu Santo. As the sun started to set the warm light bathed the dramatic volcanic rock layers. Those of us on the bow enjoyed the calm conditions and our good fortune with all that we had seen this day. However, it wasn't quite over as a whale spouted in front of us. Soon we could identify it as a Blue Whale. Some of the more spoiled amongst us were disappointed that it didn't show us its flukes as it dove in the sunset glow, but mostly we were thrilled with the day as we dropped anchor in a small cove on the western side of the island.

Day 11 Tuesday 5th April

La Paz Bay – San Jose del Cabo

At 5:00 Brian pulled the anchor and set our course for La Paz Bay. As the sun rose in the east, it lit up the clouds. The sky became a stunningly electric orange with a blue background. Yet another example of why Baja is famous for its sunrises and sunsets. We came across some Smooth-tailed Mobula, a type of small Manta Ray. They were near the surface jumping clear out of the water. This seems to be some kind of social behavior. Whatever the reason, we couldn't help but laugh as

they flapped their “wings”, almost as if they were trying to fly a long distance, but failing and then plopping back down to the water.

At 8:00, we arrived at our destination just off the beach in the southern end of La Paz Bay. We dropped the anchor and met our skiff drivers and guides for the morning. By 8:30 we set out looking for Whale Sharks, the largest fish in the ocean! Although it was overcast, the water’s surface was flat, a beautiful day to jump on the water and hope our great luck continued. It did, there were at least four large Whale Sharks in the area. All the boats had success in finding a shark to swim with and follow. From the surface we could see the shark’s large, round dorsal fin moving slowly through the water. Once the boat got close enough, the spots and size of the shark appeared through the calm sea. Our experience was truly unreal. For most of us, it was like a dream to be so close to a six-meter long shark and not have to worry about being swallowed whole!

Our guides told us about the life history of these still mysterious creatures. Although it is known that they take nine years to mature and will give birth to over three hundred young at once relatively little is known about them. We learned about the factors that cause such a large concentration of these sharks. La Paz Bay is shaped like a giant hook, facing north, as the wind blows down the coast huge numbers of *copepods* concentrate at the surface in the bay. Whale Sharks, which come here to feed, know about this seasonal plankton bloom. The sharks we were in the water with were searching for food. And we had to swim hard to keep up with the animals as they cruised along. The guides instructed us not to stop swimming, to keep up and not to touch it.

Who would have thought this massive shark would be so graceful, swimming along with its huge tail swaying back and forth. One could see clearly the small eye, the *Remora* fish hanging about and the wild pattern of spots all over it. Scot, who has studied sharks for almost three decades, thought to himself, “am I really here doing this right now?”. Yes, he, and we were!

We thanked our guides for enabling us to have such an extraordinary experience, said good-bye and headed out of the bay.

At 11:00 am two Red-billed Tropicbirds were spotted. We had great looks at the pair, sitting and then flying, showing off their streamer tail feathers. Craveri’s Murrelet, a relative of the puffin, is a species that breeds here in the gulf and nowhere else in the world. In the next thirty minutes we saw at least a dozen of them. Many took flight, but we were able to see their dark underwings, a diagnostic feature.

Continuing south down the Cerralvo Channel we found a single female Humpback Whale at 13:30. It was determined to be a female by the smooth black back and fin, unlike the males we saw earlier which were very scared up by fighting with each other. The animal had beautiful white flukes with an “X” mark that showed when she finally fluked. We enjoyed several good views close to the boat before we continued south.

In the distance the crew found some Long-beaked Common Dolphins, which were chasing fish with sea birds diving from above. Soon the dolphins were bow riding and jumping in the stern wake, a beautiful sight. We had seen Magnificent Frigatebirds before, but now they were directly over our

heads and near the boat as they chased each other over fish. Dozens of Black and Least Storm Petrels flying low over the water added to the overall drama.

What was next? Surely it wasn't needed, but the margaritas that JP and Dean mixed and now served to us were a great way to end the day. Stories abounded about the amazing wildlife and places we had seen on our journey. It's hard to describe a day on the *Spirit of Adventure*. But if you looked just at today, one has to wonder if it gets any better? We continued the good cheer all the way to dinner.

After one last great meal prepared by our wonderful chef Dan, David and Scot briefed us on the next day's transition from our fantastic adventure to the *real world*. Scot summed it up well. "It is the *Spirit*, the crew, the Captain, the cook and the food. You take this and put it in a Baja's wild ocean wilderness and the Sea of Cortez with all the animals and plants found there. And you come away with an experience, which is far richer than just ticking off the checklist of wishes. One can't help but see the beauty in it all".

Day 12 Wednesday 6th April

Cabo San Lucas

We enjoyed our last night cruising smoothly in the Sea Cortez. The sky was overcast at sunrise, but still showed us some of that Baja beauty. Most of us were full of emotions; sad that such an incredible journey was coming to an end, but perhaps eager to return to our busy lives. We motored by the dramatic granitic spires that mark the tip of the wonderfully rich Baja peninsula. Our visit to this crowded harbor was brief and soon we were on our way to the airport. One group detoured to the freshwater marsh in San Jose del Cabo where they saw White-faced Ibis, several orioles and 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.

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