



Baja California & The Sea of Cortez 2015

Trip Report by leaders David Wimpfheimer and Scot Anderson

Day 1 Thursday 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 group joined David Wimpfheimer for a full day birding in the varied habitats of San Diego and adjacent cities. He was happy to find several Allen's Hummingbirds, a species confined to California's coast. At the mouth of the San Diego River many waders including Marbled Godwit, Willet and Long-billed Curlew were especially conspicuous. American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and a male Blue-winged Teal that displayed itself were quite obliging.

Mission Trails Park had beautiful chaparral plants where we saw several confiding California Thrasher and Quail. Orange-crowned Warbler, Nuttall's Woodpecker and Western Kingbird were good finds in the riparian habitat. At nearby Santee Lakes, Ring-necked and Wood Ducks were easy subjects for the photographers, while a stunning orange and black Bullock's Oriole perched in a Sycamore tree.

The Mexican border was a scant few hundred meters to the south as we drove through the Tijuana River Valley. David was hoping that a good bird would appear and serve as an exclamation point to a really good day. When Judy found a Roadrunner attacking insects off in a field his hopes and those of the group were realized. In total we found 86 species.

With much anticipation we boarded the Spirit of Adventure in the evening. After unpacking our gear we enjoyed the dinner

buffet and met fellow travelers. Scot Anderson and David gave us an orientation and outlined aspects of the journey. Later Captain Brian Evens explained the safety features of the boat and gave us a briefing. Shortly after leaving the dock we motored by the bait tanks where 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 three 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 Friday 27th March Todos Santos Island - Pacific Coast

Smooth sailing down to Ensenada allowed the entire group 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. David and Scot had told us that the temperature was much warmer than normal. Possibly that was instrumental in a thick fog that enveloped the island. Juan Cabrillo, a Spanish explorer, had discovered these islands in 1544. Although our visibility was limited we did see a Black Oystercatcher and a Pelagic Cormorant.

As we left the island, we spotted five Brown Boobies sitting with some Brandt's Cormorant on a rock at the south end of the island. Most years we don't see any this far north. Their presence here is possibly indicative of an upcoming El Nino condition.

It was only 8:00 in the morning as we came across a large group of Common Dolphin. Soon they were all around the Spirit, jumping in front of us, swimming by and smiling back at the wide smiles that surely were on everyone's faces. There were quite a few juvenile dolphins jumping and swimming with their moms. We thought we had seen the full variety, but then some of us saw a tiny, tiny calf. Brian turned the boat around and everyone was able to see this newborn calf, possibly just hours old. Its dorsal fin was still flopped over to the side. We stayed with the dolphins for over half an hour.

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 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 these large cetaceans were Fin Whales. The diagnostic white lower right-hand jaw was clearly visible. Captain Brian did a marvelous job of maneuvering the boat so that we were very close to these whales. In the calm, clear water it was spectacular to see the whales gliding by and then surfacing after a huge exhalation. Fin Whales never raise their fluke out of the water, but several times we could see their large flukes through the crystal clear water.

We left the whales and continued south. After only a short time we encountered the group of dolphins that we had seen previously. This time many of them leapt and jumped off the stern wake of our boat. This wonderful behavior afforded the photographers amongst us many opportunities to capture them.

Watching all those cetaceans had worked up an appetite so the delicious lunch of lentil soup, salad and home made rolls was a hit. Only a short time after the meal we were told that a few Pacific White-sided Dolphins were riding the bow wave under the boat. Most of us were soon at the front gazing down at these dolphins that are more typical of the cold waters from central California to Alaska.

An unusual fog set in for most of the afternoon that impacted our visibility. However, to observe so many dolphins and wonderful views of the Fin Whales was an auspicious start to our Baja adventure.

Day 3 Saturday 28 March San Benitos Island - Pacific Coast

After a calm ride down swell all night we awoke to a clear sky and a beautiful sunrise. Dan cooked us a delicious breakfast of eggs Benedict to start our day.

We arrived at the San Benitos Islands at 7:30. There were many Western and Heermann's Gulls and a few Brown Boobies 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. It was clear that it had not rained here for a

long time, even so many shrubs and wildflowers were blooming. 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 these nesting sea birds are nocturnal is to avoid predation by large and aggressive Western Gulls and Peregrine Falcons.

There was a large south swell rolling up on the rocks, so the crew went in and checked to see if it was safe to land on the island. Brian gave us the go ahead and we rode the skiffs to the beach. 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, 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 many more Elephant Seals. We all enjoyed sitting quietly only a few feet from these pinnipeds and experiencing their different behaviors; sneezing, crawling, scratching and peering back at us with large, expressive black eyes.

Some of us 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 ten years. Their "woof-woof" barking was distinctive in addition

to their black color, large earflaps, long flippers, pointed nose and extremely playful behavior. They continually wrestled with each other and climbed onto rocky ledges playing "king of the rock".

We headed back to the Spirit at 11:30. Brian's plan was to find a whale in the afternoon before we lost the good light. Traveling south Scot and David threw bread from the stern to attract gulls and hopefully other seabirds. It worked well and in the next hour we had great views of: Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwater, Heermann's and Sabine's Gull and Elegant Tern.

At 14:30 the crew spotted a large whale that turned out to be a Blue Whale! It was little choppy and the whale was headed north, so we held on waiting for our first views of this great whale. Finally it came to the surface and spouted. We could see the whole whale through the clear water, showing its iconic turquoise-blue color, for which this whale gets its name. We stayed with this baleen whale for an hour, during which time we could see the whole length of the animal to its fluke through the water, before we had to continue south to our destination for the morning, San Ignacio Lagoon.

The Spirit cruised 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 Sunday, 29 March

Pacific Coast – San Ignacio Lagoon

A calm night afforded us another good night's sleep. Shortly after breakfast we turned east into the narrow channel entering San Ignacio Lagoon. We crossed over the shallow bar as waves were breaking on both sides of us. Captain Brian expertly guided the Spirit through the narrow, unmarked channel.

As soon as we cruised into calmer water we could see that this was a very special place indeed. Many cow-calf Gray Whales surfaced in different directions while those gathered on the bow were treated to views of Bottlenose Dolphins bow-riding.

Our boat soon anchored south of Rocky Point and drivers Gabriel, Luis and Romero arrived in their pangas (skiffs). Although it was overcast Scot and David told us that we were quite lucky that the seas were calm, almost glassy. Our 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 touch the whales.

The group enjoyed seeing 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 the boats too, 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 very emotional and seems to bring the child out of all. A lesson we can thank the Gray Whales 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. 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. 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 Monday, 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. We awoke to an overcast morning with a light sea breeze. Once we had our tea and coffee our attention was focused on the many whales blowing and surfacing near the Spirit of Adventure.

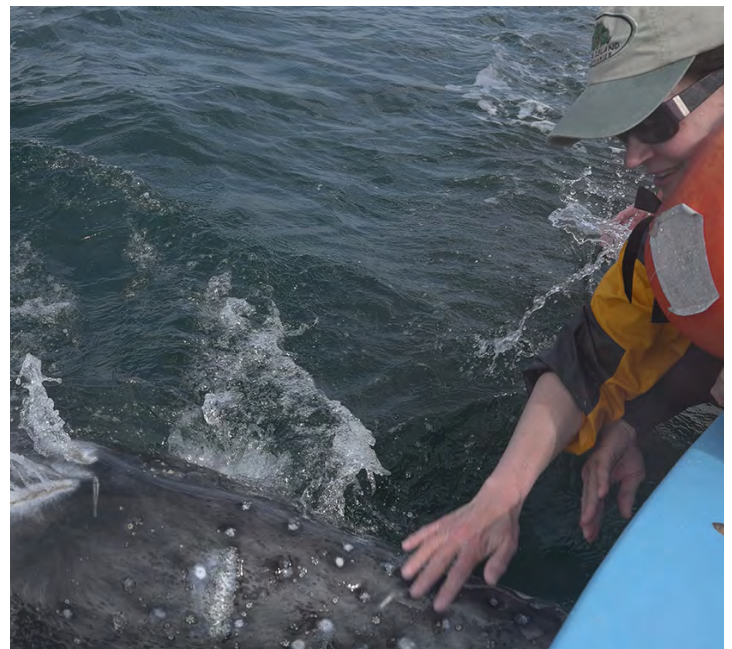
At 7:00 our skiff drivers arrived and enjoyed the same hearty breakfast we did. By 7:30 we headed to the north side of the estuary to look for the many bird species that live in the mangrove habitat. The mangroves here are at their northern end of their

range being a tropical species. Red and White mangroves serve as a nursery for many fish, shellfish and of course a variety of birds that roost, nest and feed in this productive habitat. With enough attention, we had excellent views of Mangrove Warbler as they darted amongst the prop roots and leaves. White Ibis, 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 was seen several times perched on a snag. We also had good views of Great Blue and Green Herons, as well as an uncommon visitor, a Merlin.

After our birding tour, we took a short break and then headed out to find more friendly whales. With low winds and high tide the lagoon was spectacularly clear, very rare in these turbid productive waters. All three skiffs had great luck with friendly whales coming to our splashing and singing. At times we could see the mother and calf swimming directly under our pangas in unusually clear water, an amazing sight. We stayed a little longer to enjoy the great conditions, making one more run whale watching before lunch.

After a great local treat of fish tacos we broke into two groups; diehard whalers and beach combers/birders. Those of us who wanted to "whale" enjoyed their last skiff ride. While the other group was rewarded with the freedom to walk on these isolated shores looking at many bird species and lots of shells and other creatures washed ashore by the wind and tide.

At 16:30 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. Brain 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. 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 Tuesday 31 March

Pacific Coast – Magdalena Bay

At daybreak the Spirit was traveling southward a few miles north of the entrance to Magdalena Bay just off Cabo San Lazaro. Around 6:00 am most of us who were up were transfixed by a wonderfully dramatic sky of large billowy clouds reflected on a glassy silvery, gray surface. In this magical setting we saw patterns on the water that looked a bit like raindrops. However, when we looked closer we could see they were small crayfish-like animals. Scot pulled up a bucket of them and in the tank we could see that they were Pelagic Red Crabs. This species of crustacean is closely associated with warmer waters. It was fascinating to see them swimming and feeding in the tank.

A few Long-beaked Common Dolphins were about and the first of many sea turtles. As the light came up we saw several birds; Pink-footed Shearwater and Black and Least Storm Petrel. We cruised by several turtles and now were able to identify them. Most were Pacific Ridley, which show a high, sloping carapace. In addition there were a few Loggerhead Sea Turtles that are best identified by their rich brown, orange color.

The water was wonderfully calm, continuing to reflect the unusual cumulus clouds. There was even a double rainbow and a funnel “tornado” cloud. Just before 7:00 Brian found a spout and when we got closer we could see that it was a Blue Whale. For the next half an hour we followed this huge cetacean as it surfaced several times showing the whole length of its body.

Most of us were very happy with those sightings, but soon there were more blows. As we approached we could see that this whale had a black body and a distinct curved dorsal fin, clearly this was one of the “finner” whales. When the animal surfaced again we could see that it was relatively small. David remarked that it was probably a Bryde’s Whale, half way in size between a Minke Whale and a Gray Whale. Their diagnostic field mark are a series longitudinal ridges forward of the blowhole. It can be hard to see this, but we were still certain that it was a Bryde’s. Rather than staying longer with that small whale we now turned our attention to the biggest animal that has ever lived on the planet.

This blue whale cooperatively was spending a lot of time at the surface. Brian was able to maneuver the boat so that in the crystal clear water we were able to see the whole length of this leviathan. Aside from their immense size, Blue Whales are a gray color that was now reflecting the sky’s color creating a beautiful turquoise color. It regularly rose to the surface showing a tremendous blow then rolling the whole length of its body. The whole group could see its massive fluke as it surfaced only a few meters from the bow of the Spirit, but tantalizingly, it never raised its fluke out of the water. After enjoying this whale for quite some time we continued towards the Cape.

The sea was remarkably calm and just before lunch we saw a frenzy of birds in the sky ahead. As we got closer we could see that they were mostly Royal Terns feeding on small fish that dolphins were driving to the surface. A few Pink-footed Shearwaters, which breed on islands in Chile, joined the frenzy.

Hundreds of Gray Phalaropes flew by or rested on the waves. A group of seven Sabine’s Gulls flew towards the north, undoubtedly on their way back towards their breeding zones. They were quite stunning in their breeding plumage gray, black and white.

After lunch we went through a “dead zone” with few birds or mammals, but there was nothing wrong with relaxing and enjoying the smooth ride along the Baja peninsula. The quiet period was interrupted by shouts of blows at the distance.

The tall blows helped to identify this animal as another Blue Whale and this one was a “fluker.” For the next hour we followed this large baleen whale as it surfaced, blew five or six times and then rolled and raised its massive fluke out of the water. The cascade of seawater that falls off the dorsal side of its fluke is called the waterfall effect, David told us. With several opportunities we all were able to get great photos and video of this special activity.



While we enjoyed spectacular views of the whale a brownish bird flew around the boat and landed on the water several times. Many photographs were taken and there was some debate whether it was a Pomarine Skua or a South Polar Skua, the latter is rarely seen in these latitudes in the spring.

Most of the group stood on the stern deck to enjoy a dramatic sunset and the end of a full, rewarding day.

Day 7 Wednesday 1st April

Sea of Cortez – Los Frailes

This morning marked the end of the first half of the trip and the start of our visit to the Sea of Cortez. In warm desert air the Spirit was cruising on calm seas south of the Cape over a rich habitat, the Gorda Bank. Dan’s huevos rancheros, tasty, but spicy eggs, chilies and tortillas was also a tradition that many of us enjoyed.

At 7:45 we found our first Humpback Whale of the day. The boat was just coming up on it, when suddenly the whale breached right in front of us, landing on the surface with a loud splash! Then it rolled up and started “flipper flapping.” At one point it lay on its back with both flippers in the air. We all hoped the whale would repeat that behavior, but it had settled down so we decided to look for others.

There were some offshore Bottlenose Dolphins here and there. These differ from the ones we saw in the lagoon, which are lighter in color and rarely are seen offshore. Next, the crew spotted a Striped Marlin “tailing.” As most of us crowded onto the bow we could pick out first its tail fin and then its broad dorsal fin as it swam at the surface.

At 9:00, Brian found a group of five humpbacks. These were mostly males that were acting quite rowdy now, after the mating season. They swam quickly at the surface. One animal distinctively snorted as he exhaled and lunged his head up high when he surfaced.

This aggressive male repeatedly ended upright under the bow giving us incredible views. Most of the whales raised their flukes repeatedly from the sea and many photographs were taken. Several others came in and joined the group and we stayed with them for over an hour and a half. They did not seem to mind us at all, as they swam just off the bow and close by both sides of our boat.



Seabirds were not plentiful this morning, however we did see a few storm petrels, shearwaters and frigatebirds. As we headed north there were several groups of California Sea Lions laying at the surface with their flippers in the air. This behavior is how these animals thermo regulate, warming part of their body in the sun to moderate the cool ocean temperature. The group enjoyed seeing a sleeping Green Sea Turtle, which we were able to approach very closely. A little later we saw a Red-billed Tropicbird sitting on the glassy sea. Brian slowly drove the boat closer, the bird seemed reluctant to fly in the calm winds, but finally when it took off we had fantastic views of its beautiful long streamer tail feathers and intricate wing pattern.

On our way to our afternoon landing, right at lunch of course, we were lucky to see a Masked Booby come and circle the Spirit. 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 Crested Caracara, Cactus Wren, Gila Woodpecker, Northern Cardinal, Hooded and Scott's Oriole. We also had our first introduction to the diverse plant life of the region including Cardon, Organ Pipe and Old Man Cactus.

By 18:45 the crew had raised and stored the skiffs and we headed north into the gulf with very calm conditions and a smooth ride.

Day 8 Tuesday 2nd April San Jose Island – Sea of Cortez

After running all night we dropped anchor off Punta Colorado. 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. 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 the desert was warming 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. 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.

We had good views of Black-throated Sparrow, Verdin and Costa's Hummingbird. John and Nigel found a rattlesnake along the side of the wash before it slithered below a boulder.

Soon everyone was able to get a view of it coiled and looking surprisingly quiet. The pale pinkish tan color helped to identify it as a Speckled Rattlesnake. 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. Three large Chuckwallas sunned themselves out near the crevices they had been hiding in earlier.

After getting back to the Spirit the snorkelers donned their gear and plunged into the warm 72-degree water. Many colorful reef fish were seen in abundance; King Angelfish, Rainbow Wrasse, Mexican Goatfish, Balloonfish, Giant Damselfish, Blue, Gold and Yellow Snappers. Blue Gorgonians festooned the rock wall with lots of colorful marine algae as well. Others took skiff rides along the dramatic coast and approached a group of twenty Blue-footed Boobies roosting on a boulder.

As we sat down to our tostada lunch the crew stowed the skiffs, pulled the anchor and we headed out into the gulf. Soon we saw the fins of Bottlenose Dolphins breaking through the water. Again these were the offshore variety. There is some debate whether these are full species or not. Regardless, the group enjoyed excellent views of them coasting in the clear water a few feet below us as we stood on the bow. Some of them jumped a bit in the stern wake, but Scot and David told us that they were capable of much greater acrobatics.

We had seen a few Common Dolphins, but now Brian announced that there was a large group of them. He drove the Spirit by this group of over six hundred cetaceans. For the next half an hour we enjoyed spectacular views of these animals riding the boat's wake below the bow and most dramatically of all the side and stern wake. The photographers amongst us became adept at shooting the dolphins as they rode the waves towards us and then jumped clear out of the water. Seemingly the dolphins were enjoying this activity as much as we were. Scot and David dropped a hydrophone into the water and were able to pick up the high-pitched whining sounds of the animals communicating to each other.

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 dorsal side respectfully. These beautiful rays seemed to be waiting for the krill to come to the surface.

We headed north as the sun approached the peninsula's mountains toward the west. JP in the crow's nest picked out a whale's blow to the opposite direction. As we approached we could see a distinctive dark, curved dorsal fin and with some effort the longitudinal ridges that extend forward from the blowhole. These features and the elimination of other field marks identified this animal as a Bryde's Whale, possibly around forty feet long.

If Humpback Whales are everyone's favorites mostly because they exhibit a lot of behaviors at the surface and are found in many areas, Bryde's Whales are just the opposite. Somehow this whale didn't know that. Several times the whale swam in front of our bow and turned on its side and upside down showing the whole length of its body wonderfully close to us. Our naturalists and crew told us they had never seen one doing that before.

Clouds in the west created a spectacular sunset, a feature Baja is famous for. The seas were calm; we enjoyed dinner as 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 dramatic landscape. 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.

Our group included several keen observers. We found four 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. Several Baja Spiny Lizards, Desert Iguana and Common Chuckwalla were seen as well.

Some folks jumped in the water for a quick snorkel in the clear, warm water. Although it was a little choppy the clear water afforded great views of yellow and purple Pyramid Sea Stars, Red Sea Urchins and a wide variety of reef fish. Back on the Spirit, the crew loaded the skiffs and Brian headed the boat to the northwest searching for whales and dolphins. While we enjoyed a very tasty lunch of pizza and salad the crew scanned the waters looking for spouts.

Not long after leaving the island we came across a Bryde's Whale. This orqual was not as playful as the one we had seen the day before so after a few surfacings we moved on.

The crew spotted a group of about sixty offshore Bottlenose Dolphins. 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.

Around 15:00 we came across a large group of Long-Beaked Common Dolphin. These sleek dolphins seemed to really enjoy riding our wakes. The reflections of them jumping and surging out of the water were especially stunning.

Late in the afternoon we saw dozens of Smooth-tailed Mobula jumping in the distance. These rays, unlike Spiny-tailed Mobula, jump together and land on their bellies with a big flop. Up close and in the distance we could see them "flying" out of the water together. As the boat got closer we were able to take many pictures and video of them jumping out of the water. While the exact reason they jump remains a mystery, it appears to be some kind of social behavior, since they all jump in unison. Whatever reason they jump it still made us laugh as we tried to capture these unique fish. There were big schools of them we could see through the water just beneath the bow. We also had good views of the larger Spiny-tailed Mobula. This ray flips upside down spinning backward when it jumps.

A cloudy sky obscured the sun as it set behind the sedimentary layers of rock in the Baja peninsula. We enjoyed another of Dan's hearty, delicious dinners, recounted the many species we had seen and went off to bed.

Day 10 Saturday 4th April Los Islotes – Sea of Cortez

At 4:00 we left out anchorage at the south end of San Jose Island and headed south. By 6:00 the Spirit was cruising in calm waters approaching Los Islotes, a rocky islet just north of the tip of Espiritu Santo Island. Captain Brian and our naturalists had planned to get there early to beat any possible crowds. An unanticipated result of the plan was a dramatic sunshine that unfolded behind the jagged volcanic spires of the islet.

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, 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. Some 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 less than a foot from our facemasks, seemingly oblivious of our presence. Additionally there were many green, blue and gold parrotfish and other reef fish.

After our visit to Los Islotes we pulled the anchor and headed off to the southwest. Many storm petrels and Pomarine Skuas sat on the water or flew not far from our vessel. The sun was high and there was no wind creating an almost glassy surface. There was still most of the day to look for whales

Those of us on the bow could see a few turtles in the distance, 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 swam away and we continued on.

As we made our way towards Cerralvo Island we spotted a new cetacean species, the Dwarf Sperm Whale. 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. One of these mysterious animals allowed us to get within a few hundred meters before it arched its back, fluked and dove.

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.

Just as lunch was being served Brian announced that the crew from their vantage point, high above the bridge, had spotted the atypical and distinctive blow of a Sperm Whale. This, the largest of toothed whales, had just sounded, but obviously we would stay here to wait for it to resurface. They are known to have very long dives so we were able to easily finish our meal.

After fifty-six minutes the whale's spout was seen again. It took

a while to get close to it, but this whale stayed on the surface for almost ten minutes allowing Brian to position the boat just behind it as it rocked and blew, exhibiting its atypical wrinkled skin and half hump, half fin. Finally it raised its massive, triangular fluke clear of the water and dove.

To say we were thrilled would be an understatement. Some of the group had seen this species before, but few so closely. For the next hour and a half, we pursued two different large male Sperm Whales. They were below for about an hour each time they dove. However, when they surfaced they stayed up for ten to fifteen minutes giving everyone on board ample time to get in position to see these unusual cetaceans that are only seen on half of the Baja trips.

The naturalists dropped the hydrophone over the side and we were able to hear one of the whales echolocating. This tapping sound sped up or slowed down presumably as the whale focused on possible prey such as squid.

Just before sunset we saw over a dozen marlin, mostly in pairs, slowly cruising with their fins cutting the surface. A few of these large iconic fish swam right towards our bow with the sun's last light reflecting off their dorsal fins. This was a dramatic end to a rich full day in the Sea of Cortez.

Day 11 Sunday 5th April

Los Frailes – San Jose del Cabo

From our anchorage just south of the granitic headlands at Los Frailes we had an excellent vantage point to watch a spectacular sunrise. It was a fantastic spot to enjoy another great breakfast that Dan and Dean fixed for us.





Since we had 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 took advantage of the opportunity to enjoy a second hike in this lush forested desert region. 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, California Gnatcatcher, Scott's Oriole, Gilded Flicker and Crested Caracara, but we also had exceptional views of a Roadrunner. The group on the longer walk saw a stunning purple and orange Varied Bunting, and most importantly, a Xantus's Hummingbird, one of the Baja endemics.

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 has been sighted.

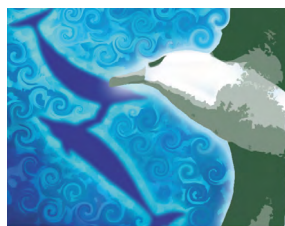
There were some Bottlenose Dolphins about, but we were hoping for playful humpbacks. For most of the afternoon we moved between several groups that surfaced and dove very close to the boat, but we were spoiled and wanted more. By late afternoon we discovered a cow-calf pair. It was delightful to see this 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 whales seemed to disappear from time to time. So Scot and David lowered the hydrophone to see if they were singing. As it turned out, they were! We could hear the strange "moaning" sounds of these great whales as they sang their unique song. Next, we found a group of Spiny-tailed Mobula chasing each other just beneath the surface. The group and the crew enjoyed amazing views as they swam through the clear water just ahead of the boat. Scot speculated that this was related to mating. Of course only the mobula know for sure.

The Spirit cruised on through calm seas. We checked the humpbacks here and there and watched them into the sunset before we headed for our anchorage for the night. Many of us enjoyed a steak 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 Monday 6th April Cabo San Lucas

At sunrise we slowly cruised just east of the dramatic granitic spires that mark the tip of the wonderfully rich Baja peninsula. 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 several 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.



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