

Baja Whales & Wildlife

Searcher Natural History Tours

APRIL 2002



Isla Santa Catalina's "elephant rock" is a favorite snorkel spot. (Photo by Frank Balthis)

Baja Islands offer birding, snorkeling, and hiking — not to mention some of the world's best whalewatching.

In the Sea of Cortez, Isla Santa Catalina is just one of dozens of subtropical islands that guard treasures waiting to be discovered. On a recent natural history tour, a spectacular early morning bird walk there led us to ladderback woodpeckers, loggerhead shrikes, and Costa's hummingbirds. We hiked among the island's giant wavy barrel cactus, keeping an eye out for the Santa Catalina Island rattlesnake (the only one in the world) and emerald-tailed lizards.



As the sun rose high overhead, sparkling waters and brilliant tropical fishes lured us to explore the island's underwater world with mask and snorkel. But soon whale blows beckoned. Captain Art Taylor spotted an enormous blue whale and gently guided the boat to a vantage point for incredible observation. Throughout the afternoon we saw magnificent fin whales and sperm whales and greeted large herds of bow-riding bottlenose and common dolphins. No wonder we love Baja!

A northern cardinal winters at Isla Santa Catalina. (Photo by Frank Balthis)

A TRADITION OF
QUALITY ECOTOURISM
TO BAJA CALIFORNIA

For nearly 20 years, the *Searcher* has conducted natural history expeditions to Baja California's coastal waters and islands. We are one of only a few U.S. businesses with special permission from the Mexican government to operate natural history cruises into Mexican ecological preserves and national parks.

OUR MISSION:

"To observe marine animals in their natural environment, and to share that experience with our passengers."

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Ask the Naturalist...

Linda Lewis answers:



Off the coast of Baja, I saw what appeared to be a school of bright red, baby lobsters. What are they?

You probably encountered pelagic red crabs (*Pleuroncodes planipes*), also called tuna crabs. These bright red, 2- to 7-centimeter (1 to 3 in.) crabs swarm in huge groups, coloring the water red.

Red crabs drift with ocean currents, although they sometimes settle to the bottom, and they are also capable of active swimming. They are common food for Baja's blue whales and probably other whales, seabirds, pinnipeds, and fishes. (Photo by Frank Balthis)

Photographing Baja Aboard the Searcher

An Interview with **Frank Balthis**, Nature and Travel Photographer

How does Baja compare with other wildlife photography destinations?

I've been photographing Baja California aboard the *Searcher* since the early 1980s. I probably I get more excited when first opening boxes of slides from my *Searcher* trips than I do for any other destination. I think it's due to the mystery, magic, and difficulty of photographing whales. The *Searcher* itineraries are without doubt the greatest trips in the world for photographing multiple species of great whales. Seals, sea lions, dolphins, seabirds, endemic plants and spectacular landscapes provide the icing on the cake.

Does photographing whales hold special challenges?

I recommend bringing two camera bodies or perhaps a zoom lens. One minute whales are next to the *panga* [open whale-watching skiff], and then suddenly there's a breach at 300mm telephoto range. Whales are large, so a wider lens is better. You have to be creative and pan with the whale.

Environmental ethics are an important part of natural history tours aboard the Searcher. What role do they play in wildlife photography?

We strive to minimize our impact on ecosystem. Telephoto lenses allow us to keep our distance from wildlife so that animals don't react to our presence, and we can capture natural behaviors. Our goal is to communicate about natural behaviors and relationships among wildlife species.

Laguna San Ignacio is known for its "friendly" gray whales. Are you able to capture that kind of interaction on film?

The gray whales of Laguna San Ignacio are unique in that respect—they actually approach humans, which makes for some incredible photo opportunities that you won't find anywhere else in the world. For "friendlies" I use a wide angle lens of at least 24 mm. Polarizing filters allow you to look beneath the water's surface by



The goal of wildlife photography is to communicate about natural behaviors. (Photo by Frank Balthis)



cutting glare, but the trade-off is that you lose one to two f-stops. I use my polarizing filter for photographing close “friendlies.”

What kind of equipment do you recommend bringing on a Baja natural history tour?

I use a variety of lens lengths. Telephotos in the 300–500mm range are useful from the decks of the *Searcher*. Be certain to try the *Searcher*'s upper deck for a different perspective. Macro lenses are useful for intertidal life, wildflowers, and insects. And underwater cameras capture some incredible snorkeling experiences. When photographing under water, watch your underwater focus, and lube your O-rings. Or bring an inexpensive disposable underwater camera.

What about film?

Baja is “bright.” I primarily use 50 and 100 ASA films there. However, if you have “slow” lenses (F5.6) then you may need some 200 and 400 ASA films. Remember that higher ASA films have more grain, less sharpness and less color saturation. Digital cameras allow you to vary the ASA, but be certain to have enough memory cards and battery power. As a pro I bring at

least five to ten rolls per day of the trip. Hobbyists should bring at least a roll per day. In a *panga* sometimes I go an hour without shooting and then crank off eight rolls in ten minutes.

How is photography different on moving boat than it is on land?

It's more challenging. Tripods are great for long exposures and telephoto images on land, but generally useless on a rocking boat. I hold my camera and lens steady using my body as a brace. I gently release the shutter so that I don't jerk the camera. I use a new lens with internal stabilization, like Canon's IS models, or a “fast” lens such as F2.8 and fast shutter speeds—250th and faster.

Any final advice?

We photographers—whether pro or hobbyist—can be a bit compulsive about our art. It's important to sometimes step back and take in the whole experience. If your photo equipment becomes a burden at times, set it aside and just enjoy the whales and the magic of Baja California.

Frank Balthis is an experienced wildlife photographer. He teaches seminars and offers his photos for sale. You can contact him at frankbalthis@yahoo.com

Polarizing filters allow you to look beneath the water's surface by cutting glare. The trade-off is that you lose one to two f-stops. Balthis uses his polarizing filter for photographing close “friendlies.” (Photo by Frank Balthis)

Camera Care on a natural history tour

On any natural history tour there are some risks to equipment. Out in a *panga* on Laguna San Ignacio, sometimes the friendly whales get so close that we can feel the salt water droplets from their breath. And if the wind comes up, there can be a quite a bit of spray.

Frank Balthis recommends the following to protect your photography equipment:

- ◆ When in a *panga*, keep your camera equipment in a plastic case or ice chest—it pays great dividends in terms of peace of mind!
- ◆ When whales are present, keep your camera under a light rain jacket. You get very good at reacting to the sound of the blowhole opening and closing.
- ◆ The beaches at Laguna San Ignacio are lined with fine white sand, so when winds are strong, be careful changing films and lenses on the beach. Some people use plastic bags and tape to protect their equipment.
- ◆ When you return to the *Searcher*, thoroughly clean all your equipment.
- ◆ If only a few frames are left on a roll, shoot them so that you'll start your next *panga* trip with a fresh roll.

**ANIMAL
PROFILE**

killer whale

Orcinus orca

Killer whales are instantly recognized by their size and their striking black and white coloration. White and black areas are well defined. Underwater, this coloration may help conceal a killer whale: the black areas disappear in the darkness.

A large adult male killer whale can be as long as 9.5 m (more than 31 ft.) and can weigh 8 tons. Its dorsal fin may stand as high as 1.8 m (nearly 6 ft.). Females are smaller, about 7 m (23 ft.) and 4 tons when fully grown.

Killer whales inhabit the oceans of the world, from polar waters to the tropics. They usually congregate in pods that may include as many as 30 individuals. While their worldwide population is unknown, experts agree that killer whales are not endangered or threatened.

As a group, killer whales hunt and eat a variety of fishes, seals, sea lions, walruses, sea turtles, penguins, other seabirds, and even other whales and dolphins. They are noted for hunting cooperatively. In the November 1999 issue of *Baja Whales and Wildlife*, *Searcher* Naturalist Celia Condit documented her observations as she watched a pod of killer whales as they killed and ate a Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*). (For more information on that encounter, email Celia at searcher@bajawhale.com)



Photo by Celia Condit



Letter from
Searcher
Owner/Operator
Art Taylor

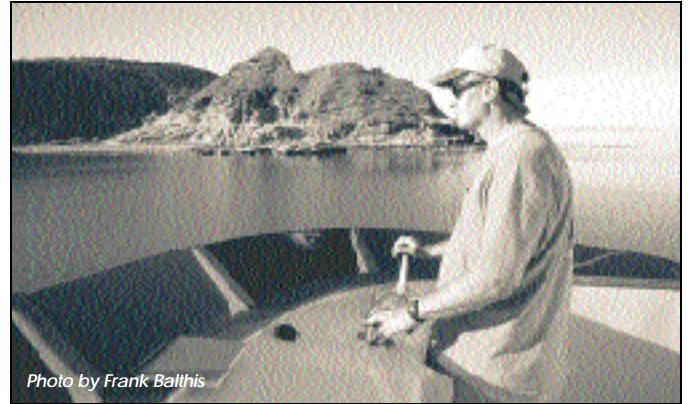


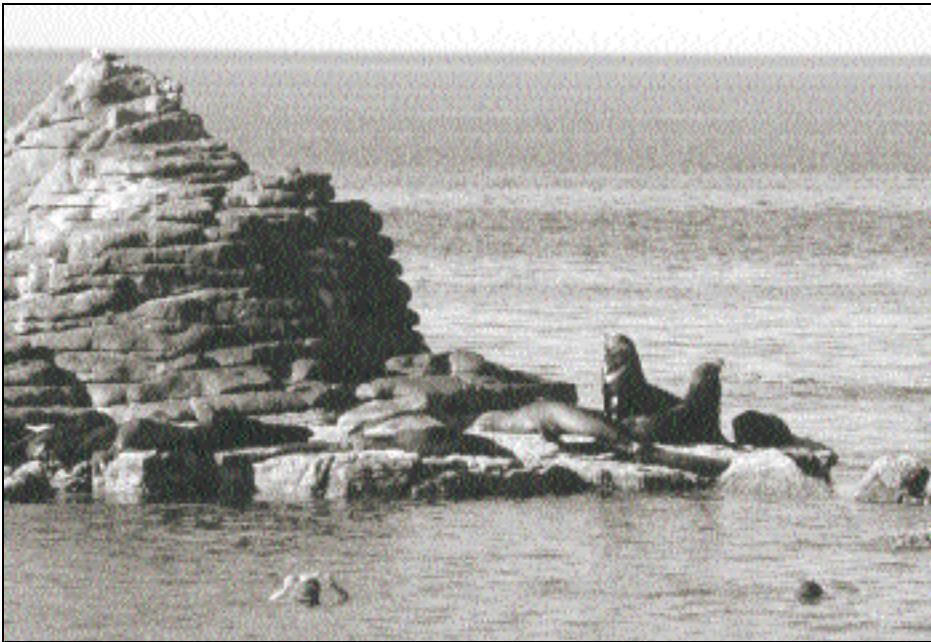
Photo by Frank Balthis

For me, one of this year's highlights was watching a giant blue whale lunge-feeding in the Sea of Cortez. It was very active and feeding at the surface on a huge swarm of krill. Open-mouthed, the whale repeatedly lunged through the water to gulp massive mouthfuls of the tiny animals. (Imagine a blue whale's ventral pleats expanded to hold thousands of liters of seawater and krill.)

What amazed us even more was when we realized that this was our second year in a row to encounter and observe the same whale. The whale's markings and behavior looked familiar, and we were able to identify it using photos. Crew member Kevin Ward photographed blue whales last year. He had his photos onboard with him, and when we compared the photos with the whale, we confirmed that it was one of the same blue whales we observed on a 2001 natural history tour! It was a truly remarkable experience to greet an enormous blue whale in the vast sea as "familiar face."

Along the same lines (sort of), we had 11 repeat passengers this year. Some returned to Baja with us to experience a longer trip; some returned to experience a different itinerary. Several brought friends with them, which is the highest compliment we could receive. We love greeting our old friends and seeing the familiar faces of our extended Baja "family." We hope to see many more of you in Baja in 2003.

Searcher Natural History Tours 2003 Schedule



Nine days in Baja:
San Diego to Cabo San Lucas
February 3-11, 2003

Magnificent gray whales, frolicking dolphins, and vast numbers of seabirds welcome you to Baja. Explore the offshore islands of *Islas Todos Santos* and *Islas San Benito* looking for harbor seals, sea lions, elephant seals, and nesting birds. Hikes reward you with breathtaking vistas and glimpses of rare plant life. We'll make *Laguna San Ignacio* our home for three days, where *pangas* bring us eye-to-eye with gray whale. You'll have time to explore pristine beaches and mangroves before we move south to spend more time at sea with gray whales and watch blue whales, common dolphins, and frigatebirds. Offshore Cabo San Lucas, we'll look for the acrobatic hump-back whales of *Gorda Banks* and explore the beautiful beaches of *Los Frailes*. Passengers board the *Searcher* in San Diego and fly home from Cabo San Lucas. \$2,200.



All photos this page by Frank Balthis.

11 days in Baja:
San Diego to Cabo San Lucas
March 2-12, 2003
March 16-26, 2003
March 30-April 9, 2003

All the beauty and excitement of our nine-day trip, plus more! We'll explore some of the most beautiful islands in the Sea of Cortez and snorkel among brilliant reef fishes and California sea lions. We'll search for blue, fin, and sperm whales as well as bottlenose and common dolphins and sea lions. Explore and photograph pristine beaches, tide pools, island plants and bird life. Passengers board the *Searcher* in San Diego and fly home from Cabo San Lucas. \$2,700

12 days in Baja:
San Diego to Cabo San Lucas
February 16-27, 2003

Spend an additional day among the gray whales in *Laguna San Ignacio*. Passengers board the *Searcher* in San Diego and fly home from Cabo San Lucas. \$2,950

