

## **Trip Summary**

### **Baja West Coast and the Gulf of California**

### **February 7-18, 2011**

**M/V Searcher: Captain Art Taylor, Aaron Remy, Kenny Merrill, Cole Crafton, Frank Brenha, Charles Howell, Steve Lamb**

#### **Paul Jones & Marc Webber, Naturalists**

2/7 Board M/V Searcher all afternoon. Welcome orientation at 8:00 pm. Lines away and departure at 10:00 pm. We stopped at the bait receivers in San Diego Bay on our way out to sea, and observed some playful California sea lions hauled out and barking on the dock platforms along with several species of sea and water birds.

2/8 We arrived at Ensenada, BCS to clear Mexican immigration and customs just before dawn. Depart Ensenada at 7:00 and motor out of the harbor by the jetties. Shortly after departure we sighted a single blue whale about half way across the Bay between Ensenada and the Todos Santos Islands. This turned into an outstanding and exciting first whale sighting as this whale not only “couldn’t care less” about having *Searcher* nearby, but actually approached us for several close passes before we parted company. A bit further across the bay we found a fin whale also moving leisurely along seemingly without a care. We ended up having numerous close looks and saw the distinctive right white lower jaw quite well. We arrived at the Todos Santos islands at about 9:00 and departed at 10:00. Arrive at I. Todos Santos at approximately 8:30. Depart at 10:00 pm heading south and southeast in search of marine mammals and seabirds, and en route to Islas San Benitos.

At Isla Todos Santos we observed large pens offshore used to hold and raise bluefin tuna for markets in Japan. The fish are caught in netting operations away from the islands and the pens are towed to the netted fish, they are transferred to the pens then fed and raised to market size before being sold and shipped to Japan. Wildlife highlights at I. Todos Santos included harbor and elephant seals on the beaches, California sea lions perched on a steep rock (distant), Brandt’s and pelagic cormorants in breeding plumage, numerous western gulls, and black and American oystercatchers.

Heading south for the rest of the morning we had two sightings of Risso’s dolphins that gave us a great show including a few breaches and many animals with wild patterns of scratches and blotches. At the end of the day there was a small group of short beaked common dolphins that came and entertained us with a show of bowriding. Northwest of Cabo Colnett in 60+ fathoms of water we came into an area of numerous Cassin’s auklets that were probably so full of food that they were unable to fly away and had to skitter along the surface or dive to get away from the boat. The presence of the auklets suggested there was krill in

the area as that is all that they routinely feed on, and sure enough we found further evidence of krill in the form of 8-10 fin whales in the area with a group of 5 actively lunge feeding through krill shoals at the surface. The krill swarms were large and visible at the surface as dark reddish patches in the green sea. The fin whale feeding was exceptional with many close surface lunges seen very well by our group, close in to *Searcher*. Later in the evening Art found as a red-billed tropicbird sitting on the water and we had the unusual experience of seeing this tropicbird – a warm water species, a bit farther north than usual flying alongside a northern fulmar, definitely a cool to cold water species of seabird.

- 2/9** We arrived at mid-morning at Isla San Benito Oeste, where we deployed our skiffs for hour-long rides along the southern shore of the island to observe Guadalupe fur seals, California sea lions, and northern elephant seals. It was fantastic to see Guadalupe fur seals reinhabiting their former colony site, and we heard characteristic “whicker calls,” saw some sparring, and many animals on the rocks and a few animals in the water including the “jug-handle” pose with a fore-flipper draped over the hind-flippers. Bird highlights included American and black oystercatchers, a peregrine falcon and ospreys.

At 10:00 we motored over to Isla San Benito Oeste, where a welcoming committee of around a dozen juvenile California sea lions came over to greet us and play around and under the *Searcher* in the very clear waters with numerous long fronds of kelp. We went ashore at the fish camp, negotiated our way around several laconic elephant seal bulls loafing around the pathways through the village, and hiked over to the main elephant seal rookery on the north shore. The rookery was found to be going full force with many adult males in attendance, and we heard the characteristic clap threat vocalization of the bulls many times. During the course of our visit we saw male displays with alpha bulls chasing off insubordinate subordinates and quite a few copulations. There were numerous nursing pups of all sizes, and some recently weaned pups in both woolly brown lanugo coats and others in freshly molted silver gray coats. Many females and pups were calling to each other and moving to avoid males, and throwing sand on their backs. A few dead pups littered the beach, evidence of the full force of the natural cycle and pattern of life and death on a crowded colony.

After the elephant seal briefing, we split into two groups with about half going on the 1.75 mile walk to the lighthouse on the north side of the island on the 500 foot marine terrace and back along the north side of the island. The rest of us stayed on the shoreline trail and watched, discussed, and photographed details of the fascinating behavior of these incredible diving animals. Also of note were the large number (150-200) of Guadalupe fur seals hauled-out on the rocky shore from near the boat landing along the rocky shore around to the west towards a small elephant seal colony on a peninsula with two beaches on opposite sides. Fur seals were rare on this island before a few years ago, and this large group may be the nucleus of a new colony location at the San Benitos Islands.

We pulled up anchor at 3:00 and motored into the channel between the Isla San Benitos and Isla Cedros to the east. Calm seas made our passage southeast by the very large Isla Cedros en route to San Ignacio Lagoon very pleasant.

- 2/10** At sunrise we were about 10 miles northwest of the entrance to Laguna San Ignacio, abeam of the town of Abreojos, and making about 10 knots heading for the channel entrance. Crossing Bahia Abreojos we had numerous sightings of gray whales, many inshore bird species including surf scoters, brown pelicans, many types of gulls and cormorants, royal terns, and a magnificent frigatebird.

We successfully navigated the sand bar at the lagoon entrance and made our way up the lagoon to our anchorage at Rocky Point, passing many gray whales on the way. Our skilled drivers from Kuyima Tours met us shortly after the anchor went down, and we began our whale-watching from the pongas at about 9:00. All three boats headed out from the *Searcher* & immediately saw mating behavior. Also observed enjoyed great observations of a variety of whales including a few cow-calf pairs, and many adults and sub-adults. After a short break on *Searcher*, we had a second round of morning whale-watching with many more good sightings including spyhops and a few breaches. Other observations included bottlenose dolphins, California sea lions and many terns, gulls, and and flocks of shore birds. We returned to *Searcher* around noon for lunch and a break.

After lunch, whale-watch began around 2:00 and ran until 4:00. We saw many whales up near Rocky Point, and a very large number of spy-hops. Almost no cow-calf pairs were near these many single whales that seemed to be idling in the ebbing current between the *Searcher* and Rocky Point. We ended the day with a great chance to enjoy the night sky, when Art turned off the generators and lights for a half an hour. Although it was windy and cool, and the moon was full, it was a great opportunity to get a feel for the remote wildness of this place, and realize that our boat is just a small island in the wide-open wildness of the Baja Peninsula. Several gray whales passed in the night.

- 2/11** We woke-up early at anchor near Rocky Point in San Ignacio Lagoon. After breakfast, we boarded our skiffs for two shifts of excellent whale-watching in the lagoon. The weather was excellent, and everyone had great sightings of gray whales, and a large group of approximately 12 bottlenose dolphins.

After lunch we split into two groups. One group boarded skiffs for for a trip to the mangroves to be followed by a beach walk. There were excellent sightings of a large number and diversity of shore, wading, and marsh birds including sightings and calls of the elusive mangrove warbler. In all we saw upwards of 20 species including great sightings of white ibis, tricolored and little blue heron, plus marbled godwits; great, snowy, and reddish egrets; and long-billed curlews. There was also a great look at a coyote peaking out at us from behind the mangrove prop roots. Initially, the coyote was quite relaxed about us approaching very close. It then got up a walked back behind the sand dunes. Later we had

another sighting on the mud flats, and again the animal allowed us to look at it for quite awhile before it walked across a shallow chanel and disappearing back into the dunes. We believe that there were probably two animals in the mangroves that departed at different times. What a great sighting! The beach walk on Sand beach was a refreshing chance to stretch our legs a bit, and Paul and Marc interpreted finds of shells and bones at this wonderfully pristine site where collecting is not allowed.

The die-hard whale-watchers went out for one last cruise around the lagoon. They had great success with friendlies, everyone coming back with big smiles from the numerous close encounters. For several folks, it was the experience of a lifetime. During our stay in San Ignacio Lagoon, in addition to many fantastic encounters with gray whales, there were numerous sightings of bottlenose dolphins, California sea lions, magnificent frigatebirds, and many other species of birds. All were back on board by 3:15. A short while later, Art hauled-up the anchor and we made our way out of the lagoon through several rows of breaking waves on each side of the bar to the open ocean.

- 2/12** The sun came up when we were passing west off the northern end of Bahia Magdalena through the fog. Our course was south southeast and we were roughly traveling down the 90 fathom curve. Today was a day of travel through a rich feeding and transit area for large whales and dolphins, and scattered seabirds. During the day, we had a sighting of a sei or Bryde's whale with a calf. Of interest was the calf with clear markings of a Bryde's whale, but the cow did not have the characteristic ridges. We had good humpback sightings with some breaching. We also had good sightings of other Bryde's whales and a fin whale cow-calf pair just before sunset.
- 2/13** Woke up to the songs of several humpbacks. After that, we had a wonderful humpback whale show following a group of five adults up close. We also spotted mobula rays, manta rays and bottlenose dolphins. Later in the afternoon after lunch, we had an excellent snorkel and hike at Los Frailes. The birding was good, as we spotted the endemic Xantus' hummingbird and the gray thrasher, among many other species. Snorkler's were "treated" with 64 degree Farenheit water and numerous reef fishes. We departed at 5:15 pm and watched a few mobulas from a large group flipping into the air as the sun set over the peninsula.
- 2/14** We sailed all night and Art anchored us at Punta Colorado on the north end of Isla San Jose. Our morning started with a gorgeous sunrise bathing the rocks and clouds in orange and reds. After an early breakfast we took an hour long skiff ride to look skiff rides to look at the rocks and wildlife of the shoreline. Of interest was a pair of peregrine falcons, the amazing layers of rocks with beds of fossil shells, and the many Sally light foot crabs. Much to everyone's delight, we got right in to feeding frenzies of yellowtail, sierra, and crevalle jacks, and black skipjack - all of which were working over small baitfish ("a pair of eyes and a wiggle") from below while seabirds hammered them from above. Following the

skiff ride we returned to Searcher for boots and packs and went ashore in a small bay near a sign placed by the managers from the Biosphere Reserve that described some of the wildlife on the island and threats posed to it by exotic species such as rats, cats, and “cucarachas” (cockroaches!). After we all assembled on the landing beach, Paul and Marc led a walk out onto a small peninsula to view some cetacean and a single sea turtle fossils in the 4-8 million year old (Pliocene age), up-lifted and tilted marine sediment layers. There were several ribs, vertebrae, and a pair of maxillary (upper jaw) bones. It is truly amazing to be able to see so much undisturbed habitat and so many fossils in-situ. The Mexican Government has done a fantastic job protecting these resources.

Then we went off for our walk up an arroyo into the interior of the island. Paul pointed out many shrubs and trees including elephant tree, palo adan, and ocotillo. Cactus species seen included organ pipe, teddy bear cholla, mammillaria, cardon, and pitaya agria (sour pitaya). Only a few bird species were sighted on the walk, but included on the list were desert favorites like verdin, black-throated sparrow, and our first loggerheaded shrike. Tracks and scat from the largest native predator, the ringtail, were also seen during the hike.

We weighed anchor after lunch and began heading towards the northern tip of Isla San Jose with the goal of spending the afternoon in one of our favorite whale watching spots in the world, the canal de San Jose and the deep water between Islas San Jose, San Diego, and Santa Cruz, and the east coast of the Baja Peninsula. This location plays host to numerous species and is a favorite of both mysticete (baleen) and odontocete (toothed) whales. As luck would have it we were soon following multiple sightings, and spent a very pleasant afternoon following first a single blue whale, and later a large spread out group of pilot whales.

The blue was traveling on a pretty steady pace of dives punctuated by 4-6 breaths, and we all had great looks at the steely blue-gray color and subtle mottling or lace-work of gray over the blue, which is characteristic of this species. The pilot whales were in the neighborhood for the whole time and it was easy to head over to them following a nice long look at the big blue. The pilot whales were spread out in numerous small groups all leisurely traveling along with regular surfacing and diving.

Towards the end of the day we happened onto adult Craveri’s murrelets with two chick and were able to get very close looks and hear the chick calling to the adults. Later that night after a fine Valentine’s Day dinner Art let Searcher drift with flood light pointed to the water. This light drew in a swarm of krill, and we caught some in a dip net along with a few marble-sized ctenophores, or comb jellies. A few needle fish jumped and tail-walked at the edge of our lights. The slide show was on new discoveries on rorqual feeding.

**2/15** In the morning, we went ashore for a lovely arroyo walk amidst cardon and barrel cactus. Our landing at Isla Santa Catalina on the beach near “Elephant Rock” began at 7:30, and we made our way up the cobble beach to a beautiful arroyo where we hiked until 9:30. This island is famous for its large cardon and endemic barrel cactus, both of which are some of the largest cacti in the world. The arroyo wound through the cactus forest, which also featured many other types of desert plants such as elephant tree, palo verde palo fiero, several kinds of cholla cactus, mammalaria, tronodor, and jojoba bush. Some plants were parasitized by desert mistletoe. Bird highlights included loggerhead shrike, ash-throated flycatcher, northern cardinal, and verdin, and with special sightings of zone-tailed hawk and Wilson’s plover. Aaron and Cole spotted two rattleless rattlesnakes, and helped guide all of us over to see one of them. Following an excellent snorkel, and skiff rides, weighed anchor to go whale watching in the direction of Monserrat Island.

Later that afternoon, we had a special sighting of a cow Bryde’s whale and her frisky calf. The youngster delighted us with several breaches, which were caught on camera by some of the nimble photographers. After that, we encountered a tight group of long-beaked common dolphins, followed by a group of energetic bottlenose dolphins with bow riding and high leaps. Then we spotted a fin whale, and when heading over to get a closer look, we crossed paths with a pod of approximately 40 false killer whales! We spent a long time with them, watching them breach, swim close to the boat, and break into smaller pods then coalesce once again. Art deployed the hydrophone so we could listen to their echolocation vocalizations. What an afternoon!

If that wasn’t enough, we had multiple sightings of blue whales until sunset before anchoring off Isla Monserrat.

**2/16** After a beautiful sunrise, we found two fin whales near the anchorage just west of the island. Multiple blue whales followed, and then a lone humpback. Then headed to a small island north of Monserrat for snorkeling and skiff rides. Loads of rafting California sea lions and a few ashore. Good snorkel along the shore of one of the islands. We left the islands to search for more whales, saw several Byde’s and were treated to a very good look at several dwarf sperm whales in absolutely flat calm grease conditions. We searched hard for some more “toothies,” but “only” found a mother and calf blue whale, several Byde’s whales, and more Craveri’s murrelets and a couple of basking California sea lying still and raising their heads in a convincing imitation of a sea turtle (!). That night, Charles and Steve pulled out all the stops with a rib barbecue served on the back deck while we sailed south towards the little community of Nopolo on the Baja Peninsula, about half way down the Canal de San Jose (between Island and the Peninsula). Just before we ate, several pipe fish tail-walked and danced in the wakes in Searcher’s just visible in Searcher’s flood lights.

**2/17** The crew had anchored Searcher near Nopolo fish camp and in the morning we woke to a brilliant sunrise over the amazing vista of this steep and rugged canyon.

A morning bird walk had Xantus' hummingbird, gray thrasher, and northern mockingbird as highlights for many.

Back on board we began to motor south towards our afternoon stop at Los Islotes. We had great sightings of a large mixed flock of least and black storm-petrels, many mantas cruising slowly at the surface, and a single hammerhead shark.

We arrived at Los Islotes about 2:30 and took skiff rides to view the many California sea lions, including large males, females with large pups, and many others of both sexes and all ages. One animal had a healing neck wound from a past entanglement in fishing line or rope. Many entangled seals do not survive this threat, and this is a huge world-wide problem for seal conservation that affects every marine species. Another female was nursing an older pup appeared to be in good condition. We also saw many blue-footed and brown boobies, yellow-footed gulls, and turkey vultures on this mixed seabird and sea lion rookery. Peregrine falcons could be heard as well. Frigatebirds attacked boobies several times in baldface acts of "kleptoparasitism".

After our skiff rides, a good number of us got into our wet suits and hopped in near shore from the skiffs to snorkel with the sea lions and view the rich community of reef fish. As usual, the sea lions completely stole the show, and many of us had close encounters with friendly juvenile sea lions that came to play. Brown pelicans dove near many snorkelers as they hit the large school of baitfish. It was a fitting climax to our wildlife adventure in Baja and the Gulf of California, but the show wasn't quite over.

At 4:45pm, the crew sighted blows on the bow about 5-6 miles away. In what was a remarkable longshot, Art slowed *Searcher* down after waiting 30 minutes for a resurfacing in the hopes of being near whatever it was that we spotted earlier. Ten more minutes passed until suddenly a large bull sperm whale surfaced off the port bow. Then another came up. All this with a backdrop of a pod of pilot whales and a rising full moon as counterpoint to the setting sun!

**2/18** Sunrise off the end of the Cape and transit to Cabo San Lucas to disembark. Because we never stop looking, we had a nice sunrise off Cabo San Lucas, a few sightings of humpback whales, and a crowd of curious brown pelicans. Adios new friends and members of the Searcher Family.