

Gray Whale

By: Bob Garrison and Liam Clemons¹

Every year people from all over the world flock to California to view something very special. Are they trying to catch a glimpse of the picturesque sunset at dusk or see how many sea lions they can count strewn across the rocks at low tide? No! They're whale watching. All along the Pacific coast from Alaska to Mexico, thousands of people are waiting for a chance to see one of nature's most intriguing animals.

Although whales are sometimes mistaken for fish, they are in fact mammals. Whales breathe air, bear live young, maintain a constant body temperature, and nurse their young on nutrient-rich milk. Whales are all but missing the most characteristic mammalian feature of hair, however, they do retain a few sensory bristles around their mouths.

Whales come in a large variety of sizes, ranging from the rather small pilot whale to the blue whale, which can reach lengths of over twenty-five meters. Despite their diversity, there are really only two types of whales; toothed whales, like orca or killer whale, and baleen whales, such as the gray whale. This may not seem like such a big deal at first, but whether a whale has teeth or baleen actually determines what type of lifestyle it will lead. The orca, like most toothed whales, is very agile and can swim fast enough to catch faster prey like fish and other whales. However, baleen whales are much slower and feed by filtering small animals from the water through a series of fringed baleen plates which extend down from the upper jaw on each side of the mouth. While most baleen whales strain food from open water, the gray whale feeds from the rich bottom sediments, straining tube worms and amphipods from the water and mud it draws into its mouth.

The gray whale, named from the mottled gray and white patches that cover its dark skin, was once found across the north Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Three distinct populations occurred: a north Atlantic population now extinct, a Korean or western Pacific group now highly depleted, and California's eastern Pacific population. The eastern Pacific or California gray whale has made a remarkable recovery from near extinction a century ago.

At the end of October, the eastern Pacific gray whales start the 10,000 to 14,000 mile migration from their feeding grounds in the Bering and Chukchi Seas to the warm waters of Baja California to calf and mate. The females enter shallow lagoons along the Baja coast to give birth and nurse their young, protected from winter storms and predators. The shallow lagoons which provide protection also served as a trap when whalers began hunting the grays in the 1840s. The first whalers arriving to California from New England chose to hunt the easier caught and

¹Liam Clemons is a Student Intern from Humboldt State University

more valuable sperm whales until declining numbers forced the whalers to pursue other species. Whalers started hunting grays in Magdalena Bay, but found the harpooned whales to be highly aggressive, ramming the long boats and killing many sailors. Whalers commonly referred to the gray whale as devil fish because of its aggressive behavior. With the discovery of additional calving lagoons and the use of the bomb-lance to kill the whales, whaling boomed between 1855 and 1865 until the population crashed. By 1874, the gray whale was no longer commercially worth pursuing although some shore whaling continued along their migration route. Modern whaling techniques utilizing motorized chase boats and factory ships renewed interest in the grays starting in 1910. Whaling drove populations to about 7,000 animals before full protection was granted in 1946. The gray whale has since bounced back to an estimated pre-whaling population of over 18,000. In 1994 it was removed from the endangered species list.

Where to Watch Gray Whales

The gray whale is one of the easiest and most convenient whales to view because of its predictable migration routes along the coast and its large population. Every year from December through April, you can stop almost anywhere along the California coastline to see gray whales as they travel north. The males return first with the females and calves following in March and April. Binoculars offer little help when searching the vast ocean for spouting whales. Simply watch for a geyser of steam erupting from the water as the whales surface to breathe. Once you spot a whale, follow its spouts and if you are lucky, you may see it jump from the water or raise its flukes at the start of a deep dive.

Watching From a Boat

Many commercial whale watching excursions are available throughout California. Choppy seas and winter storms can ruin a trip so call ahead and check weather conditions before you leave home. A list of tour operators are available at this California Division of Tourism website: <http://www.gocalif.ca.gov/guidebook/TD/whalewatch.html>

Watching From Shore

The best viewing locations are along coastal bluffs high above the water. Watch for a crowd of viewers gathered at a look-out or follow the brown and white binoculars road signs to the following wildlife viewing sites between December and April:

- North: -- Redwood National Park
- Point Cabrillo Preserve
- Sonoma Coast State Beach Vista Trail
- Point Reyes National Seashore
- Central: -- Andrew Molera State Park
- Big Sur Coast/ Ventana Wilderness
- Pismo State Beach
- South: -- Abalone Cove Ecological Reserve
- Crystal Cove State Park
- Torrey Pines State Reserve
- Cabrillo National Monument

You can purchase a *California Wildlife Viewing Guide* which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

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