

BAJA CALIFORNIA AND THE SEA OF CORTEZ

26 MARCH – 6 APRIL 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Although not my normal type of trip, I finally succumbed to the lure of Baja California, participating as a client on a Wildwings' cruise on the Spirit of Adventure from San Diego down the Pacific coast of Baja California and into the Sea of Cortez. The full trip report with photos will be available at www.wildwings.co.uk but the following summarises my own sightings.

It was a very successful trip with ten species of cetaceans including three Peruvian (Pygmy) Beaked Whales, Dwarf Sperm Whale, Sperm Whale and four Blue Whales, Guadalupe Fur Seal, some good birds including an unexpected Short-tailed Albatross although the best of all were the truly spectacular leaping Smooth- and Spiny-tailed Mobulas (Rays).

ITINERARY

- 26th Post dark departure from San Diego.
27th-28th Sailing south along the coast of Baja with stops on or offshore from Islas Todos Santos and Islas San Benitos.
29th-30th San Ignacio Lagoon.
31st Sailing south through Magdalena Bay.
1st -5th Sea of Cortez with stops/landings including Los Frailes, Islas San Jose, Islas Santa Cristalina and Espiritu Santo,
6th Disembark early morning at Cabo San Lucas

MAMMALS

Numbers quoted are my own personal counts unless indicated otherwise and numbers of dolphins and Humpback Whales in particular are only a small proportion of those seen in total on the trip.

Grey Whale
Eschrichtius robustus

27th – two as we headed south along the Pacific coast.
29th & 30th – 40+ per day in San Ignacio Lagoon. Fabulous encounters from the pangas but personally I preferred the views from the Spirit of Adventure with whales breaching close to the boat, rubbing themselves against the boat and giving fabulous views in the clear waters their size being easier to appreciate from the higher viewpoint.

Blue Whale
Balaenoptera musculus

27th – one as we headed south along the Pacific coast.
31st – great views of two in Magdalena Bay with one particularly large individual close to the boat for over an hour.
1st – excellent views of another in the Sea of Cortez.

Fin Whale <i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	4 th – two briefly close to the bows of the ship.
Humpback Whale <i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Under-recorded but one on the 28 th , two on the 31 st , 3+ on the 1 st , two on the 2 nd , 3+ on the 3 rd and 3+ on the 5 th including several breaching animals some close to the boat.
Sperm Whale <i>Physeter microcephalus</i>	One briefly and distantly on the 2 nd in the Sea of Cortez was re-found on the 3 rd and gave good views as we sailed towards it before diving and subsequently only giving views into the sun.
Dwarf Sperm Whale <i>Kogia simus</i>	One seen briefly but well in the Sea of Cortez on the 2 nd .
Peruvian (Pygmy) Beaked Whale <i>Mesoplodon peruvianus</i>	At least three of this rarely-seen species seen at mid-range in the Sea of Cortez on the 2 nd .
Short-beaked Common Dolphin <i>Delphinus delphis</i>	100s at sea off the Pacific coast on the 27 th .
Long-beaked Common Dolphin <i>Delphinus capensis</i>	100s approaching the southern tip of Baja on the 31 st and in the Sea of Cortez on the 2 nd and 3 rd .
Bottlenose Dolphin <i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	Under-recorded. Inshore form. 6+ on the 29 th and three on the 30 th in San Ignacio Lagoon. Offshore form. 20+ in the Sea of Cortez on the 2 nd .
Harbour Seal <i>Phoco vitulina</i>	Eight on Islas Todos Santos on the 27 th .
California Sealion <i>Zalophus californianus</i>	50+ in San Diego Marina on the 26 th , five at sea on the 27 th , 31 st and 5 th and 50+ at a colony in the Sea of Cortez on the 4 th .
Northern Elephant Seal <i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>	10+ on Islas Todos Santos on the 27 th and 200+ on Islas San Benitos on the 28 th .
Guadalupe Fur Seal <i>Arctocephalus townsendi</i>	A poor return with a single on Islas San Benitos on the 28 th with two more seen by other members of the group.
Black-tailed Jackrabbit <i>Lepus californicus</i>	Singles at Los Frailes on 1 st and 5 th .
White-tailed Antelope Squirrel <i>Ammospermophilus leucurus</i>	One at Los Frailes on the 5 th .

SELECTED REPTILES, FISH AND RAYS

Loggerhead Turtle <i>Caretta caretta</i>	Two at sea on the 31 st .
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Desert Iguana <i>Dipsosaurus dorsalis</i>	5+ on Islas Santa Catalina on the 3 rd .
Common Chuckwalla <i>Sauromalus ater</i>	3+ on Islas Santa Catalina on the 3 rd .
Santa Catalina Side-blotched Lizard <i>Uta squamata</i>	One on Islas Santa Catalina on the 3 rd .
Side-blotched Lizard <i>Uta stansburiana</i>	Small numbers at a number of stops.
Western Whiptail <i>Cnemidophorus tigris</i>	Small numbers Islas San Benitos.
Catalina Rattlesnake <i>Crotalus catalinensis</i>	One on Islas Santa Catalina on the 3 rd .
Thresher Shark <i>Alopias vulpinus</i>	One jumping clear of the water in the Sea of Cortez on the 3 rd .
Smooth-tailed Mobula <i>Mobula munkiana</i>	My highlight of the trip. Seen on three days in the Sea of Cortez with dozens jumping close to the boat on the 4 th as we toasted them with margaritas in hand. Spectacular is an understatement.
Spiny-tailed Mobula <i>Mobula japonica</i>	Smaller numbers of these on two days in the Sea of Cortez but even more spectacular being larger and more acrobatic.