

# WHALE EXPEDITIONS

## Whales and Sea Otters of Monterey Bay 2024 Trip Report

---

September 25th - 30th, 2024



**Group:** Brian  
Christie

**Trip Leaders:** Rachel Tobias and Sebastian Kennerknecht

\*This trip helped support 3 local captains,  
1 guide, and 12 local staff members

**Places Visited:** Monterey Bay, California



## Trip Highlights

**Humpback Whales Lunge-feeding:** This tour was designed to optimize the chances of seeing humpback whales lunge feed - and we saw a ton of action. On every day we were out of the bay we had lunge-feeding activity. Our sessions lasted up to three hours of surface feeding, and at times we had up to five whales foraging at once.

**Humpback Whale Breaching:** We had three different extended breaching events, all lasting over 20 minutes. This included a bigger calf that breached over and over again. The best activity was an adult that was breaching at sunset on our last afternoon on the water.

**Sea Otters:** We saw lots and lots of sea otters, at eye level, from kayaks. We utilize double kayaks where our guests sit in the front with their cameras, while we paddle them into position. This guarantees we don't disturb the animals, while our guests can focus on photographing and observing. Our sea otter highlight was for sure seeing a bunch of mating activity, with males grabbing females by their nose, to mate.



## Day 1 | Wednesday, September 25

After picking up guests at the airport we drove over the coastal mountains of central California, and arrived on the beautiful coastline of Monterey Bay. We settled into the hotel, had dinner, and gave a presentation for the guests on the proceedings of the tour over the following days.

## Day 2 | Thursday, September 26

As we pulled into the harbor, we were greeted by a ton of elegant terns flying overhead. We left the dock about 20 minutes before sunrise, on our fast, low to the water boat. Before we could even leave the harbor we saw two sea otters, a few harbor seal, and lots of California sea lions. Knowing we would come back for the otters and seals on another day, we moved on, with the hopes of finding some cetaceans.

As we moved along the underwater canyon, we came across gulls picking off parasites off of a Mola Mola, saw three black-footed albatross, and lots of pink-footed and sooty shearwaters. It didn't take us long before we found our first whales, a group of three males with a female. There was a ton of mating competition going on, despite being "too early" for the season. They were tail slapping, rolling, and bubble blasting. It was fantastic to see.

After spending some time with a pod of Risso's dolphin, and shortly after, a pod of Pacific White-sided Dolphins, we cam across our first group of lunge-feeding humpback whales. They would continuously move swiftly up the water's surface. Open their mouths, catch a ton of northern anchovies, while letting the water penetrate their baleen plates. It's incredible to watch such a large animal hunt.



In the afternoon we left the harbor at 4pm. The temperatures had cooled and the fog had rolled in. We couldn't see for more than 50 feet. After a little while, the fog lifted a little bit, but not much. Our hopes for seeing anything weren't very high. We stumbled upon three whales after an hour and idled the engines to watch them from a distance. To our surprise, all three whales came directly over to us, seemingly to check us out. They stayed around the boat for an entire hour, often no more than just a few feet away when they surfaced. Sometimes they would tilt their head out of water, and we could see their large eyes meeting ours. It was pure magic.

We then started to make our way back towards the harbor as the light was fading fast. On our way, we came across orca pod CA51A, which had two females and a sub-adult. They moved very quickly through the water and we couldn't stay long, but it was the first time seeing orcas for some of our guests!

### **Day 3 | Friday, September 27**

On our drive to the harbor it was once again very very foggy. We figured we would have that fog stick around until mid morning, but about 400 yards from the harbor, the fog completely stopped and we were excited by the possibility of nice sunrise shooting light. We put our two double kayaks into the water, with the guests sitting up front, allowing them to focus on photographing the wildlife. We had so many otters in beautiful sunrise light. Many of them were foraging, feeding on crabs, clams, and fat inkeeper worms. Utilizing behavioral clues, the direction of the light, and the tidal direction, we had some fantastic, close encounters with the otters. The highlight of the morning was probably watching a male and female engaging in mating. Otter mating, to put it lightly, is quite rough. The female did not have an easy time, as the male repeatedly kept biting her nose while mating, and rolling in the water.





After having a light lunch, we headed back out onto the water with the kayaks. The early afternoon was filled with elegant terns fishing, low-flying Brown Pelicans, and shorebirds foraging on shore. We finished the afternoon with beautiful sunset light, photographing otters grooming and foraging, as well as seeing two otters on shore. We also had one mother with an older pup that kept foraging near us, with the pup grabbing food from its mother as often as possible.



#### **Day 4 | Saturday, September 28**

Our first whale of the morning was one entangled by fishing equipment. We immediately called it in to a team that de-entangles whales on the bay. We stayed with the whale as long as we could, and then, despite being entangled, it vanished without us being able to find it again. The disentanglement team came on the scene and found the whale a bit away from us.



Soon after, we found a couple of pairs of whales lunge feeding, but they stopped as soon as a mother and calf came by, joining them instead. We then found another group of humpbacks that we watched lunge-feed for over two hours. The bait ball was huge, and there were lots of sea lions around, as well as gulls opportunistically predating fish. Some of the sea lions seemed completely uninterested in actually hunting, just lounging and thermoregulating on the surface. We had a drone up, and watched the whales come up from below, piercing the bait ball, over and over again.

In the afternoon we got to witness even more lunge-feeding, but it stopped after 30 minutes when the baitball was gone. We searched around a bunch more, but didn't find more whale feeding activity. Instead, we saw lots of cool seabird hunting activity as they went after krill.

#### **Day 5 | Sunday, September 29**

The surface of the water was glassy in the morning, with barely a ripple in sight. We watched a couple

of humpbacks lunge-feeding, but the morning highlight for sure was a calf breaching multiple times right near our boat. Because it did so multiple times, after the first breach we were ready for it, and our guests got some amazing photos of the subsequent breaches.

The afternoon started with some nice groups of California sea lions porpoising through the water. They do this to cover ground quickly, often in search of food. It is always hard to capture these swift marine mammals in mid air as they come up quickly for breath. Due to the calm seas we had a chance and we spent some time and effort in getting some very cool shots of these torpedoes braking the surface of the water.

Later on in the afternoon, we found an adult humpback that was pectoral slapping the water over and over again. Then we found two separate whales breaching, and we decided to stay with the one that seemed to be doing it more consistently. For over the span of an hour, the adult kept throwing its body three quarters out of the ocean. The light was only getting better and better, as we neared sunset. At times the whale was so close we could make out the different barnacle species endemic to the whale's body. Water was flying off into the direction that the whale turned its body. The whole experience left everyone speechless and jubilant, and we couldn't have asked for a better ending to the tour.





## Day 6 | Monday, September 30

Our guests made their way back home after breakfast, with lots of new photos and memories!

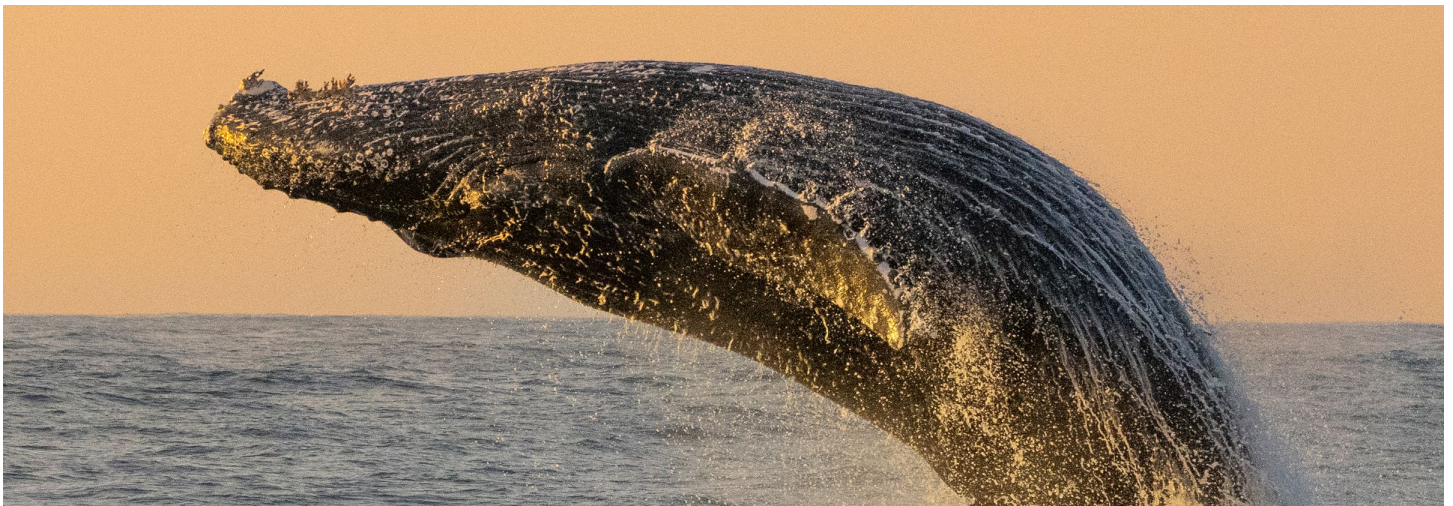
### SPECIES LIST

#### Mammals

Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeanglae</i>
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>
Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
Pacific White-sided Dolphin	<i>Sagmatias obliquidens</i>
Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>
California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>
Harbor Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>

#### Birds

Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>
Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>
Common Murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>
Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>
Heerman's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>
Elegant Tern	<i>Thalasseus elegans</i>
Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Black-footed Albatross	<i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>
Pink-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus creatopus</i>
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>



Whales and otters of Monterey Bay 2024