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At Point Mugu's Whale Festival, Have Fun While You Keep Watch

By BRENDA REES, Special to The Times

Situated between Malibu and Oxnard, sandy Sycamore Cove is one of the betterplaces on shore to see the annual migration of the gray whales as they head north. The reason? Gray whales, many traveling with offspring, like the cove's protective shallow waters because Orca ("killer") whales don't. (Orcas are known to attack both young and old gray whales.)

"You can see the grays here with the naked eye because they come so close to shore," says Cara O'Brien, interpreter for Point Mugu State Park, where Sycamore Cove is located. "This time of year is even better because of the babies. We have seen some as young as 2 to 3 weeks old."

To celebrate the gray whale migration, Sunday's fifth annual Point Mugu State Park Whale Festival will feature music, games, food, hands-on displays and, of course, whale watching. Telescopes will be set up along the shore for public viewing, and when a whale is spotted, park personnel will ring a bell.

So far, this whale migration season has been an unusual one. According to Diana McIntyre of the American Cetacean Society, the northbound migration is very late. As of March 1, only 41 whales had been seen heading north, and close to 400 have been recorded going south. "By middle February, there are usually more northbound than southbound whales," she says.

Though whales are a big part of the Point Mugu festival, there is often time between the 12 to 14 whale sightings that are expected that day, says Kathy Van Slyke, state park naturalist. "Kids get impatient, and so we have a lot of things to keep them occupied," she explains.

In addition to the information booths, storytelling and craft activities, children can participate in a re-creation of a 19th century whaling voyage. "We pull kids from the audience to be members of our crew. We do 'guided make-believe,'" says Walter Nelson of the group Flash Packet, part of the Lively Arts History Assn. (Flash packet is a nautical term referring to a ship that sails on schedule.)

* Point Mugu State Park Whale Festival, Sunday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sycamore Cove off U.S. Highway 101 between Malibu and Oxnard. Free. Parking at the state park's lot is \$3. (805) 986-8591.

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Where to Watch

For those wishing to catch a closer look at migrating whales, dozens of companies offer whale-watching boat tours that usually run 2 1/2 to three hours. Local whale cruises continue through the beginning of April, and a few companies run them until the end of April. Almost all excursions have naturalists aboard who can answer whale questions. Call for cruise times, reservations and other information.

* Ventura Island Packers (1867 Spinnaker Drive, Ventura, [805] 642-1393) is the official concessionaire to the Channel Island National Park and thus can bring whale watchers close to the islands for a look-see. Fares are \$24 for adults, \$16 for children.

* Oxnard Cisco's Sportfishing (4151 S. Victoria Ave., Oxnard, [805] 985-8511) offers two trips daily. Cost: \$22 for adults, \$16 for seniors and children.

* Island Packers (3600 S. Harbor Blvd., Oxnard, [805] 642-1393) also runs whale-watching expeditions twice a day from this harbor. Fare: \$24 for adults, \$16 for children.

* Marina del Rey Thunderbird Sportfishing (13759 Fiji Way, Marina del Rey, [310] 822-3625) pulls out once a day on weekdays and twice on weekends. Adults pay \$15 on weekdays, \$20 on weekends. Children pay \$10 at all times.

* San Pedro/Long Beach 22nd Street Landing (141 W. 22nd St., San Pedro, [310] 832-8304) has two whale cruises weekdays and three on weekends. Cost: \$13 for adults, \$11 for children.

* Los Angeles Harbor Cruises (Ports O' Call Village, Berth 78, San Pedro, [310] 831-0996) departs from the Village Boat House and offers two cruises on weekdays and four on weekends and holidays. Fares are \$15 for adults, \$8 for children.

* Pierpoint Landing Charters (200 Aquarium Way, Long Beach, [562] 983-9300) cruises out once on weekdays, twice on weekend days. Cost: \$14 for adults, \$8 for children.

* Spirit Cruises (429 Shoreline Village, Long Beach, [562] 495-5884) offers only one whale-watching trip on weekends. Fare: \$15 for adults, \$8 for children.

* Redondo Beach Sportfishing (233 N. Harbor Drive, Redondo Beach, [310] 372-2111) has two daily trips. Weekday fares are \$12; cost is \$14 on weekends. Children pay \$10.

* Newport Beach Davey's Locker Sportfishing (400 Main St., Newport Beach, [949] 673-1434) guarantees that you will see a whale and/or dolphin or you can go again free. Cost: \$15 for adults, \$12 for seniors, \$9 for children.

* Newport Landing Sportfishing (309 Palm Ave., Newport Beach, [949] 675-0550) also offers a free trip if you didn't encounter a whale and/or dolphin. Fares are \$14 for adults and \$10 for seniors and children under 12.

* San Diego Seaforth Landing (1717 Quivira Road, [619] 224-3383) departs from Mission Bay twice a day. If you don't see a whale and/or dolphin, you can ride again free. Cost: \$20 for adults and \$15 for seniors and children under 16.

* The American Cetacean Society will host the Floating Fiesta on March 17, an all-day whale-watching cruise around the west end of Catalina Island. Other mammals and bird life will be featured. Departing from the 22nd Street Landing in San Pedro, the fiesta is a fundraiser for the society. Tickets are \$50 for nonmembers, \$40 for members. For reservations, call (562) 437-4376.

