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Courtesy Gary Florin

No Fluke! Summer migration a whale of a good time

A group of whale watchers marvel at the sight of a whale's tail flipping in the water.

By Brenda Rees, PencilNews Correspondent

LOS ANGELES – From roughly February to April, people from all over the world flock to Southern California – not for the golden sandy beaches (it’s winter time and chilly) but rather to view one of the greatest shows on earth (besides the Oscars!).

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WITNESSING THE ANNUAL migration of the gray whales is a way everyday folks can pretend to be zoologists and naturalists as they catch glimpses of the 15- to 35-ton mammals swimming north to their summer feeding grounds in Alaska.

So far, this whale migration season has been an unusual one. According to Diane McIntyre of the Southern California-based 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,” McIntyre said, but added that now at the end of March, more than 300 grays have been spotted Alaska-bound. Making up for lost time, eh?

What’s great about Southern California for whale watching is that you really don’t have to be in a boat to see them. North of Malibu at Sycamore Cove in Point Mugu State Park, park interpreter Cara O’Brien says “you can see the grays here with the naked eye because they come so close to shore.”

Boats full of whale watchers head to the seas to catch a glimpse of the marvelous creatures.



Courtesy Cabrillo Aquarium

The whales, many of which are traveling with offspring, like the cove's protective shallow waters because orcas or "killer whales" don't. Orcas are known to attack both young and old gray whales,

says O'Brien. "This time of year is great for whale watching because of the babies. We have seen some as young as 2 to 3 weeks old."

Still, for folks who want to get a closer look at the whales, taking a whale-watching cruise is just the ticket. Many fishing companies run whale-watching expeditions this time of year since it's off-season for fishing. Larry Fukuhara is the program director for the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium in San Pedro that trains volunteers to be onboard naturalists for whale-watching trips.

Fukuhara says there are many things to look for when out whale watching.

"First thing to watch for is the blow. Whales have their noses on top of their bodies and sometimes the spray can be as high as 12 feet," he said. Whale spout consists of warm condensed air and seawater.

Other times, whales make themselves known by an exposed fluke or by "spyhopping," where they extend just their heads above the surface. "We also look for a swimming pattern for whales," Fukuhara says. "They do two to three short dives and then one long dive."

For all the years he's been out in boats whale watching, Fukuhara says he still likes to see people's faces light up when they have spied their first ever whale.

"They are amazed that despite the whale's size they are really graceful creatures," he says. "And if you get to see a whale breach, well, that's a special thing indeed."

Breaching is when whales propel their enormous bodies out of the water, coming back down in a huge splash. Scientists still don't know why exactly whales do this. Some say it's for communication, others suggest it may be just whale play.

Or maybe breaching is just the whales inviting us all in the water for a swim. We may never know!

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