

Tour Report

Mexico – Great Whales of Mexico’s Pacific Coast

10 - 18 February 2023

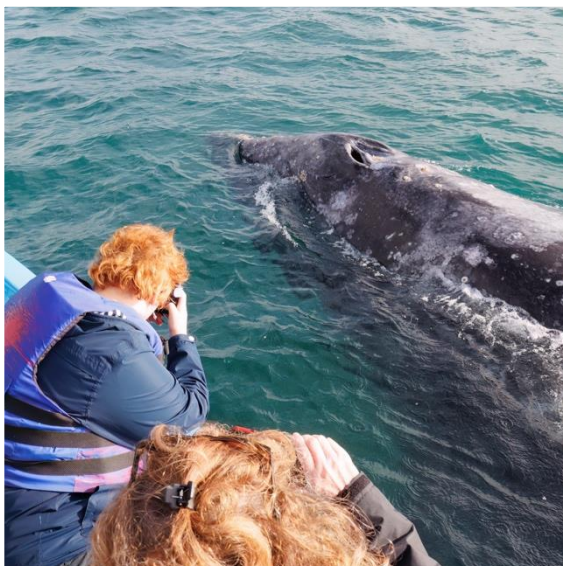
Humpback whale



Coastal agave



Grey whale



Brown pelican



Compiled by Chris Breen

Day 1: Arrive in San Diego

Friday 10 February 2023

Some of our group were already in America enjoying pre-trip visits, but ten had just arrived in San Diego on the BA flight from London.

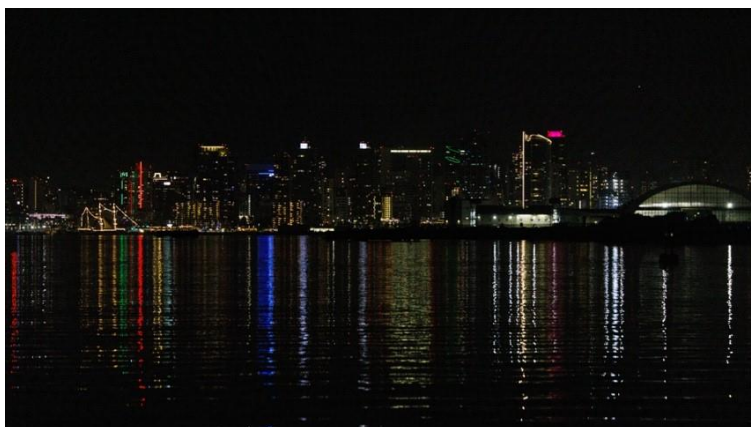
Chris was at the airport to meet everyone and, after arriving at The Bay Club Hotel & Marina and checking in, we gathered in the bar at 18:30 for drinks. Those that had just flown in were, not surprisingly, exhausted and all but one opted to rest rather than go out for a bite to eat. Six of us went out into the clear San Diego air and walked to Pizza Nova. On the way, we took a look at MV Searcher – our home for the next week. Everywhere closes early in San Diego, so after a bite to eat we headed back to the hotel before bed at 22:00.

Day 2: San Diego, boarding & departure

Saturday 11 February 2023

Saturday was a free day, allowing everyone to explore San Diego and the hotel surroundings at their leisure. Some opted to do a two-hour harbour cruise, some walked along Shelter Island and photographed nesting ospreys, and others went exploring elsewhere. Gradually, as the afternoon turned to early evening, everyone arrived onboard Searcher. As they arrived, they were greeted by Celia (one of the owners of Searcher), Rob (our naturalist for the voyage), and Steven (the author of 'Lagoon Time', the seminal work about the grey whales of San Ignacio Lagoon).

The group dispersed to grab a bite to eat - Pizza Nova and Mitch's Seafood were the most popular choices. At around 19:30, Chris welcomed everyone on the Searcher and enthused about the days to come, while Celia went through the vessel's facilities. Rob spoke a little about the itinerary and Captain Mike covered safety procedures, before introducing us all to his crew. At 21:30, as the captain was casting off, we had a glass of bubbly on the back deck to toast San Diego and our voyage to come. We photographed the magical skyline and looked at the birds on the live bait stations – black-crowned night heron, western gull, great blue heron, snowy and great egret, and of course plenty of California sea lions. We also saw our first cetaceans - bottlenose dolphins riding the bow wave. What a cracking start to the trip!



As we got out past Point Loma we could feel the ocean swell, so Rob cleared the bow and we retired to our cabins and bed.

Day 3: Heading south

Sunday 12 February 2023

Searcher was already in Ensenada, clearing customs and immigration, as we emerged from our cabins for tea and coffee. Once cleared by the local authorities, we began heading south. While leaving Ensenada Harbour, we saw several species of marine birds, as well as groups of California sea lions - both hauled-out and in the water.

At approximately 07:00, Dan, our chef, called us for breakfast and we were offered eggs, hash browns, crispy bacon and English muffins. There was also a spread of fresh fruit, porridge and cereals - a delicious breakfast!

We seemed to be heading into dark clouds and some swell, and it was raining quite hard, but at the first of the whales, we forgot all about the weather. Captain Mike cruised alongside the whales, and we watched the blows to see if we could determine the species. It wasn't long before we identified the beautiful heart

shape of the blow, confirming that it was a pair of grey whales. Shortly behind them were more whales, bringing the total to six. They were heading south, to their mating and calving grounds in Baja's lagoons.

Intermittently we headed inside to dry off and warm up, but as soon as we did there would be another call to watch the whales. Finally, Captain Mike felt it was time for us to move on and leave them. While enjoying a coffee break, we saw a pod of short-beaked common dolphins off the starboard side. It was difficult to see how many there were, but we estimated up to 15 individuals. Most of us headed back out on deck to see them riding the bow of Searcher: turning in and out of the pressure wave at the front of the boat.



Someone saw another blow – this time from a humpback. We quickly realised that three whales were present, probably a mother with young, and perhaps an escort. It was only 11:00, but we might have already experienced the sighting of the day.

We watched them for over 30 minutes, observing them surface feeding, fluking, and playing by the boat. The juvenile was intent on seeing what this great white boat was, and on two or three occasions spy-hopped to see if he could work out what we were.

First, the humpbacks were off starboard side, then at the stern, then under the boat near the bow, and then at the back of the port side. This was an incredible encounter, despite the cold and rain. We were soaking wet, but in awe of the whales that kept surfacing around us. Our time was up and the whales moved away. We headed south as the sky was clearing and the sun was beginning to come out.

Dan called us for lunch, and we were served Baja fish tacos with savoury rice. Excellent!

As the weather had improved, most people went back out on deck to search for more whales. Over the course of the afternoon we saw more blows from grey whales – but they were generally distant and heading south purposefully. Whilst we slowed down a couple of times to look at them, we didn't have any more encounters like the close ones that morning. But there were some good bird sightings, including Laysan albatross, black-vented shearwater, some medium-sized groupings of sanderlings, some Cassin's auklets, and a northern fulmar.



Dinner was served shortly after 18:00, and was a delicious beef stew served with garlic mashed potato, green beans, and freshly baked bread. Dessert was a homemade upside-down pineapple cake. After dinner, Rob did a short re-cap of the day's excellent sightings and gave us a briefing for Monday at West San Benitos Island, together with some wise words about pinnipeds (seals, fur seals and sea lions). By this time most eyes were drooping, and it wasn't long before the salon was clear and everyone had retired to bed.



Day 4: Islas San Benito

Monday 13 February 2023

Monday was a corker. Breakfast was served at 06:00 – we were already at anchor just offshore from West San Benito - and shortly after eating we gathered on the back deck to collect our lifejackets and attend a briefing on entering the aluminium skiffs safely, which was given by Captain Mike. The sky was clear, the sun above the horizon, and the island looked very inviting. After the safety briefing, Dan brought out packed lunches for everyone, shortly after which we boarded the skiffs and motored the short distance to the island.



Once ashore, we split into two groups. The first group of five went with Chris and Steven to the elephant seal beaches, just a 15 minute walk away, while the second group began a clockwise walk around the island with Rob. As we arrived at the first beach, we saw a large group of perhaps 30-40 brent geese taking off. Steven and the group stayed on the beach and explored the area nearby, while Chris returned to accompany the main group with Rob.

The first stop was at a small bay, where we found a few elephant seals hauled out. We then headed up Cholla Canyon, looking at the succulents and cacti, whilst trying to avoid the most annoying (and sharp!) species of the cholla. We saw and photographed plenty of interesting plants, including the tall flowering (and very beautiful) coastal agave, San Benito tarweed, and island bush mallow.

We reached the top of the canyon and looked back at the incredible views, photographing some magnificent Cedro's barrel cacti. We then continued on to the plateau (close to the 'new' lighthouse), where we found both horned lark and many savannah sparrows.

Although the skies were relatively clear, it was quite blustery and cold. Once we got to the old lighthouse, which stands proud on the north-western side of the island, we stopped and had our packed lunch. While eating, a few of us had a very brief glimpse of a distant peregrine, diving at high speed. It was too cold to sit for a leisurely picnic, so instead we headed downhill to the coast. As we walked down a scree-covered slope, we could see several ospreys and their nests. We also spotted western gulls and numerous ravens.

On the way back to our landing beach, we were on the lookout for Guadalupe fur seals, and we weren't disappointed. At almost every cove we found them, first two or three, then 10 to 15, and then a couple of hundred and more.

These seals have the most incredible ability to climb, and once we had seen one, putting binoculars on it enabled us to find more and more. Some were a great distance away from the water and at a considerable height above sea level. This was a very special fur seal to see, as it had almost reached extinction having been mercilessly hunted in the 19th and 20th centuries. Overall, we think we saw well over 1,000 individuals, and possibly as many as 2,000 in the area. The number of fur seals is a testament to the recovery of this species from near extinction.



Continuing along the coastal path, we stopped at another elephant seal beach, where there was a large group of weaners whose mothers had gone out to sea, leaving them to fend for themselves. In the next cove, there were adult females and attendant beachmasters jostling for position. Overall, we probably saw several hundred elephant seals.

It was time to return to Searcher, so we donned our lifejackets, walked down the beach past the sleeping male elephant seal, and headed back to the ship.



As we headed south, we grabbed a drink and some snacks, and some of us went out on deck to look for whales. As ever, we weren't disappointed. Mike called from the bridge that he had seen distant whales, and they turned out to be three, or possibly four, fin whales, which we were able to spend 25-30 minutes with.

The fin whales weren't travelling fast, and were spending extended periods of time on the surface giving us fabulous views of their tall blows and their

beautifully smooth backs as they cruised through the water. There was also a call of 'humpback' by the captain, though this was far more distant and not within photographing range. However, we did have a small collection of Pacific white-sided dolphins bow-riding at one point. What a way to end the day's wildlife viewing!

Dinner this evening was tuna, savoury rice, and fresh vegetables, with homemade bread rolls. We then had a tasty dessert of lemon sorbet, topped with fresh raspberries. After dinner, we all sang Happy Birthday to one of the group, and then Dr Steven Swartz gave our Feature Presentation, telling us about his grey whale research over the years and the conservation efforts that have been ongoing in respect of their breeding lagoons. It was a fascinating and illuminating talk which set us up very nicely for our activities over the coming days, which would begin first thing in the morning with our arrival at San Ignacio Lagoon.

Day 5: San Ignacio Lagoon

Tuesday 14 February 2023

Today was an incredible day. Some of the group members were up before the sun, and whilst we were still travelling south to the mouth of the lagoon, Captain Mike had reduced our cruising speed approaching the entrance. The ocean was calm, there was no swell, and the skies were clear.

Before we entered the lagoon, a pod of long-beaked common dolphins started bow riding. There was also a Californian sea lion nearby, and a couple of the crew had good sightings of a humpback. Slowly, slowly, Mike manoeuvred Searcher through the narrow, and more specifically shallow, channel that marks the lagoon's entrance. Skillfully, carefully, and then we were there, inside one of the most wonderful wildlife locations our planet has to offer. The lagoon is the jewel in the crown of Mexico's protected areas. As we slowly made our way to our anchorage (inside the whale watching zone), we saw our first grey whale blows – not just one or two, but too many to count as they were virtually everywhere that we looked.

Breakfast of ham and cheese omelette with fresh toast was shortly followed by a briefing from Captain Mike on how to enter the pangas that would be taking us whale watching for the day. Soon after, we donned our lifejackets and set off.

The lagoon was calm, with little wind, and the surface of the water was like glass. There were blows all around us. The thing that everyone craves more than anything is to experience one of San Ignacio's 'friendly' whales – and of course our first excursion didn't disappoint. Mothers and newly born calves were cruising from one end of the lagoon to the other. They allowed us to spend quality time with them, taking photos and videos, or simply just watching in awe as these amazing animals swam directly under us, or pushed their young up to our boats.



Our first excursion finished all too quickly, and after 90 minutes we had to return to Searcher for a break. One of the many wonders of San Ignacio is that the wildlife viewing is incredibly well organised and exceptionally well policed. It has a small whale watching area, limiting access to only 16 pangas at any one time, for a maximum of 90 minutes. Back on board, there was time for a quick coffee and some delicious blueberry muffins (which Dan had made for us), before we jumped back onto the pangas for a second whale watching activity.



Once again, in both pangas the viewing was exceptional – spy-hopping, rolling youngsters, males and females interacting and more. One of the pangas also had superb views of bottlenose dolphins – a number of which had calves with them.



We went back to Searcher – this time for lunch - before heading back into the lagoon for yet more whale-watching. We continued to experience amazing contact behaviour from the whales, and we were whooping with joy as they came close to our boats. When you are playing with whales, the time seems to evaporate. No sooner had we begun our afternoon excursion than it was over and we were back aboard Searcher for another break. Our final afternoon excursion was much quieter than the others, though we still saw plenty of whales. What an incredible place!

Back on board, there was an afternoon snack, and everyone showered, wrote notes, discussed our incredible day before heading for dinner.

There was no evening presentation planned, so instead we went outside, Mike turned the ships generator off, and we spent 20 minutes or so looking at the night sky. Many of the stars, planets and constellations we could see are also visible from home – the Great Bear, Orion, Venus and Jupiter – but there are few places in the world these days with no light pollution. We discussed the current location of the International Space Station – a piece of modern technology that can be seen in the sky at the right time, and tried (unsuccessfully!) to find satellites. All this, while listening to the occasional whale blow in the distance. It was the perfect end to an exceptional day.



Wednesday was another incredible day. We had four more amazing excursions at San Ignacio. Some of the group wanted to go into the mangroves on the fringe of the lagoon, so they went in a panga with Rob to explore. It is a completely different environment, and they saw a tremendous range of birds - from long-billed curlew and willet, to Caspian tern, a range of heron species (including snowy, great and reddish egret), white ibis, snowy plover, and many others – but the (near) endemic mangrove warbler was elusive.

Whilst the mangrove group were looking at birds, the whale watchers were enjoying whales in the lagoon: mum and calf pairs, groups of two, three and, on one occasion, four adults moving together, blows all around, spy-hopping and sometimes breaches. It is impossible to describe how incredible the whale watching in San Ignacio Lagoon actually is. Incredibly, it was at least 20 minutes after getting into the pangas that we reached the lagoon proper, but on arrival we were met by three grey whales playing around Searcher. They seemed to be interested in the water coming from the back of the boat, and were scratching themselves on the hull.

Over the course of the day we had four whale watching sessions, all of them different, and all of them outstanding. We had at least one encounter where one of our skiffs was approached by fully grown adult greys that clearly courted our touch, and were spending extended periods of time playing with the skiffs – being splashed, and swimming upside down under the skiffs scratching their bellies on the bottom of the boats. We were also watching them pushing skiffs with their huge noses – clearly just playing and having fun. The final excursion of the day (for some) was beachcombing with Rob.



Once back onboard, Captain Mike hauled anchor, Chris opened some bottles of bubbly to toast the extraordinary grey whales of San Ignacio, and we made our way out of the lagoon and into the Pacific once more. As we drew closer to the sand bar near the lagoon's entrance, numerous whales were swimming in the strong tidal current, as if to bid us farewell. It was time for the next part of our adventure.

After dinner Rob did an excellent presentation on baleen whales and told us stories about his time with whales over the course of the past few decades. Then it was time for bed.

What a morning! The light was beautiful when we got up for breakfast and, just as we were being served our eggs, there was a call of 'dolphins coming in.' Wow. There were thousands of them. Probably 2,000 to 3,000 long-nosed common dolphins. A group of them made their way to the Searcher, gathering continuously from all directions. They stayed with us for 20 to 30 minutes, with perhaps a dozen riding the bow wave at any one time, and hundreds upon hundreds out to the sides of the boat. It was the most incredible dolphin sighting that any of us had ever experienced. Then, as Mike slowed the boat down to look at some humpbacks that had emerged apparently from nowhere, the dolphins disappeared as quickly as they had come.



We were able to stay with the humpbacks for a good period of time before Captain Mike said it was time to head off. Just as we did, the humpbacks reappeared closer to the boat. After more photos, and more whoops of delight, we were ready to leave again, but they came even closer, so of course we stayed a bit longer.

Finally Mike accelerated, and we left the humpbacks, but then it was 'game on' again for the dolphins, which were approaching from all directions to ride with the boat. Some of the dolphins were young calves, while some of the adults had remoras attached to their flanks. And all of this before 08:00 in the morning – what a place!



The weather was calm all day, the sky clear, the sea flat, and the sun was shining – really perfect conditions for whale and dolphin watching.

The atmosphere on board was so happy, with everyone chatting about what we had seen over the past days and what we had seen that morning. We wrote notes, looked at photographs and chatted about what we might see over the remainder of the trip.

We had some more humpback sightings as the afternoon wore on, though none as good as the sightings earlier in the day. We also saw a large raft of California sea lions.



Captain Mike stopped the boat as the sun was going down, while some of us enjoyed sundowners on the back deck before dinner. Our post dinner Feature Presentation by Rob was about toothed whales – and it was fascinating!

Day 8: In the Tropics at Gorda Bank

Friday 17 February 2023

Overnight, we crossed the Tropic of Cancer, so we woke up in the tropics. It was quite cool, and the sea was a bit choppy, but it was sunny, and we were hopeful for some good whale watching. Breakfast was at 06:00, though we were in and out of the salon, as Captain Mike was almost continuously announcing blows that he was seeing. As the early morning wore on, the sea became calmer and the conditions even better for whale-watching.

There were plenty of eyes out on deck, and we were able to observe humpbacks throughout the day - often in all directions around the boat. There was one particularly amenable and energetic group, comprising three whales – a mother and calf, with an ‘escort’ (most likely a male wanting to mate with the female) that breached, rolled, tail-slapped, fin-slapped and fluked throughout the day. We must have seen well over 50 individual whales during the course of the day, and there was almost no downtime between sightings. There was one incredible breach that happened about 10 metres away from the bow of Searcher

Several humpbacks showed their flukes when diving, and we took fluke photos to add to Searcher’s fluke-ID catalogue.

We also had regular sightings of groups of bottlenose dolphins, and as the day wore on, we saw jumping mobula rays (including a very large close-by group in the late afternoon), striped marlin, green turtles and various seabirds.



At around 16:30, Searcher dropped anchor along the coast just east of San Jose del Cabo. Here a number of the group (and some of the crew) went for a swim in the refreshing water of the Pacific, with jumping mobula rays nearby. While at anchor Dan, Josh and the Searcher team made margaritas and laid out a delicious barbecue on the back-deck barbecue.

Captain Mike then went over some important logistical information regarding our arrival to port tomorrow at Cabo San Lucas. After which, each person aboard the boat recounted their personal highlight from a most-memorable trip. Chris then showed a short presentation of images and video taken during the course of the holiday.



Day 9: Disembarkation day

Saturday 18 February 2023

Early on Saturday morning, Searcher raised anchor and sailed to the marina in Cabo San Lucas, arriving at approximately 05:00 local time. Josh and Dan had put on a simple breakfast of fruit and bagels, whilst the crew attended to refuelling and other boat-related matters.

Once done, we hauled everyone's bags up from their cabins and out to the back deck, then loaded the waiting minibuses – one for those going to the airport, and the other for those heading up to La Paz for the Sea of Cortez extension. Then it was time to bid one another farewell and go our separate ways after what was a truly memorable voyage with some absolutely spectacular wildlife sightings.



Checklist



	Common Name	Latin Name	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>							
1	Common loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>				✓	✓		
2	Eared grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	✓						
3	Western grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>	✓				✓		
4	Laysan albatross	<i>Phoebastria immutabilis</i>		✓					
5	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓					
6	Black-vented shearwater	<i>Puffinus opsithomelas</i>		✓	✓			✓	
7	Brown pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
8	Magnificent frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>						✓	
9	Brandt's cormorant	<i>Urile penicillatus</i>	✓			✓	✓		
10	Double-crested cormorant	<i>Nannopterum auritus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		
11	Great blue heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	✓				✓		
12	Reddish egret	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>					✓		
13	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓				✓		
14	Snowy egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	✓				✓		



15	Little blue heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>					✓		
16	Green heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>					✓		
17	Black-crowned night heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	✓				✓		
18	Yellow-crowned night heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>					✓		
19	White ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>					✓		
20	Brant	<i>Branta bernicla</i>			✓				
21	Surf scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>		✓			✓		
22	Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>	✓	✓					
23	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>					✓		
24	Turkey vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>				✓			
25	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓		✓				
26	Northern crested caracara	<i>Caracara cheriway</i>			✓				
27	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓				
28	Clapper rail	<i>Rallus longirostris</i>					✓		
29	American coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	✓						
30	American oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus palliatus</i>					✓		
31	Spotted sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularia</i>	✓						
32	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>					✓		
33	Long-billed curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>					✓		
34	Marbled godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>					✓		



35	Willet	<i>Catotrophorus semipalmatus</i>			✓		✓		
36	Black turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>			✓				
37	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓		✓	✓		
38	Western sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>					✓		
39	Pomarine jaeger	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>				✓			
40	Parasitic jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	✓						
41	California gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>				✓	✓		
42	Western gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Heermann's gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
44	Caspian tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>					✓		
45	Royal tern	<i>Sterna maxima</i>		✓		✓	✓		
46	Craveri's murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus craveri</i>		✓					
47	Cassin's auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>		✓	✓			✓	
48	White-winged dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>	✓						
49	Belted kingfisher	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>	✓						
50	Black phoebe	<i>Sayornis nigricans</i>	✓						
51	Common raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓				
52	Horned lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>			✓				
53	European starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓						
54	Yellow-rumped warbler	<i>Dendroica coronata</i>	✓						

55	Brewer's sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>	✓						
56	San Benito savannah sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>			✓				
57	House finch	<i>Caropdacus mexicanus</i>	✓						
58	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓						
59	Ana's hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>	✓						
60	Rufus hummingbird	<i>Selasphorus rufus</i>	✓						
61	American crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	✓						
62	Rock dove (feral pigeon)	<i>Colunba livia</i>	✓						
63	Greater pewee	<i>Contopus pertinax</i>	✓						
64	Lesser goldfinch	<i>Carduelis psaltria</i>	✓						
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA							
1	Grey whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>		✓		✓	✓		
2	Fin whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>			✓				
3	Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
4	Common bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	✓			✓			✓
5	Common dolphin (formerly short-beaked & long-beaked)	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓ (short)		✓ (long)		✓ (long)	
6	California sealion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	✓		✓				
7	Northern elephant seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>			✓				
8	Guadalupe fur seal	<i>Arctocephalus townsendi</i>			✓				