

# GRAY WHALES

The gray whale, *Eschrichtius robustus*, is a baleen (mysticeti) whale that feeds by sieving water through flexible blades in its mouth, the baleen. The baleen is a filter trapping food and letting water pass; it is made of keratin, the same as your hair and fingernails. Gray whales are the only benthic-feeding whale; they dredge the seafloor with their jaws and then expel the muddy water out, using their baleen to filter out the bottom-dwelling amphipods and other crustaceans. Gray whales feed only during the summer when they are in the Bering, Chukchi and Beaufort seas. The rest of the year, gray whales live off their reserves. There are two stocks of gray whales: this "California" stock and the "Korean" stock. The gray whales inhabit coastlines and, on this side of the Pacific, feed in summer in the waters of the Arctic Ocean and Bering Sea. In winter they migrate down to three coastal lagoons (Scammons Lagoon or Laguna Ojo de Liebre near Guerrero Negro, San Ignacio Lagoon or Laguna San Ignacio, Magdalena Bay or Bahía Magdalena) in Baja California, Mexico where they breed along the way (and also breed in the lagoons); this migration is the longest of any marine mammal.



In the lagoons, the mothers give birth to babies that result from breeding during the previous migration. Since the breeding season is from late November to early March and gestation is 13 months, individual gray whale females breed every other year. The birthing season is November through May.



Gray whales cruise at four knots which is 4.4 miles per hour. Females grow up to 45 feet and males up to 40 feet. Babies are roughly 16 feet at birth and suckle for seven months. A full grown gray whale can weigh up to 45 tons. Gray whales are a mottled slate black/gray color with lots of parasites, barnacles, and scars. They have short grooves on their throats and the characteristic twin nostril blowhole of a baleen whale. Gray whales have backbone knuckles showing along their dorsal ridge and do not have a dorsal fin as some whales do.

# FEBRUARY 2001



During 16-20 February 2001, I went with Kathy and Leo, and stayed four nights with [Baja Adventure Company](#).

Ken Corben flew us down in a Cessna 182 Fairlane, and San Ignacio Lagoon dirt airstrip was greatly improved since our trip six years earlier. After an exciting flight at low altitude, we landed on a dirt airstrip and caught a ride in the back of a pickup truck to our accommodation at Baja Adventure Company: a canvas "cabin" in an expedition camp run by Maldo Fischer and Johnny Friday.

Food was heavenly, three Mexican-cooked meals a day with fresh tortillas, salsa, guacamole, and lots of scallops and other seafood fresh from the lagoon.

Whale-watching from the small open boats was superb -- lots of spyhopping going on! We even got to touch a few of the more curious youngsters who would sidle up to the boat, seeking attention, mother whales hovering a few feet away. Nothing like getting sprayed by whale breath!

This is a photo I took of Leo petting a baby gray whale, while Kathy looks on.





Other activities included kayaking in the lagoon (I managed to capsize twice, much to Kathy and Leo's amusement!), estuarine mudflat walking in wader boots to look at seahares, moon snails, and other sea critters, and examining the numerous whalebones washed up on the beach.

Leo had fun playing with some of the locals, and his Gameboy was an enormous draw each evening in the palapa. He even learned a few key Spanish phrases for Gameboy coaching, e.g. "Pone sobre el monstró! Jump on the monster!"

Leo also picked up on some local nature lore, and perfected a pee-in-the-tidepool-hole technique for flushing out octopus. Leo and Kathy had a great time as did I.

# APRIL 1995



Ken Corben flew Kathy and I plus Mike Sweet to San Ignacio Lagoon in April 1995. We left Leo with Mike's family, since he was two years old. Ken did a superb landing at the Lagoon's rough dirt strip in a strong crosswind, aborting the first landing and nailing it on the second attempt (I watched Ken's white knuckles on the



wheel). We pitched our tents next to Maldo's house and went out to see the whales for the next two days with Maldo's brother in a panga. We taught Maldo's brother how to play hearts; he got very good at beating us. Maldo's wife cooked us meals in their kitchen and we ate at their table. Lots of handmade tortillas and fresh seafood. Yummy.

Oh, and the whale watching was great, too ! Kathy even got to stroke the baleen inside a baby gray whale's mouth; it loved having its lips, gums, and baleen stroked. Since it was the end of the season and we were the only customers on weekdays, we paid for a double-trip and combined them into one long trip. This saved us from sitting through two trips out and back to whale watch in the morning and afternoon. We left in the morning and were out a long time. Sometimes we were the only boat on the lagoon and usually there was only one or two others. We didn't see adults and juveniles since they had already left. We saw only mother and baby pairs but we saw them extensively. There would only be a few mother and baby pairs about but since we had the place almost to ourselves, it was a great up-close opportunity without other boats coming over and getting into the background of your photos.

# FEBRUARY 1992



My February 1992 trip with Norbert Wu, Ken Corben and a friend of Ken's was a true low budget adventure. Ken drove his truck and

I drove mine. We first went to Laguna la Escondido north of San Ignacio Lagoon and camped there at a fishing camp. Laguna la Escondido is very pretty with mangrove-lined banks and channels; dolphins would come inside and cruise about. There were lots of birds around. We had an inflatable boat and we cruised out from the lagoon and into the waters of Bahia de Ballenas (which is offshore Laguna la Escondido and San Ignacio Lagoon). We saw gray whales in transit to San Ignacio Lagoon and as we neared Punta Bronaugh outside San Ignacio Lagoon, there were several small groups of 2- 3 gray whales thrashing about together. It looked like they were playing around; maybe they were mating (?). We also went diving on Roca Ballena off Punta Abreojos; this was an interesting rocky reef dive with butterfly fish, various colorful fish, and a sea turtle.. The fishing town at Punta Abreojos was an interesting visit. Ken and his friend played basketball with locals there. We purchased fish for our meals and had a nice fish dinner prepared in someone's house who serves visitors (there is no restaurant there). We could not take our boat into San Ignacio Lagoon due to regulations. We broke camp and drove around to the south side of San Ignacio Lagoon to have the fishermen take us out in their pangas.

Our journey to San Ignacio Lagoon was marked by my truck boiling off all of its radiator water due to a leak when I was 25 miles down the rugged dirt road to San Ignacio Lagoon and miles away from assistance. I refilled the radiator and left the radiator cap loose so that water would leak out at a normal gravity-flow rate rather than a fast pressurized-flow rate. Thanks, Dad, for that long-remembered advice; it's come in handy twice now in my life. After getting going again, this experience became particularly memorable because I forgot to release the inside hood release when I jumped out enroute to check on my water level. I was standing there trying to figure out how to open up the hood of my truck which I have owned for years. Even worse, I had opened it correctly not 20 minutes earlier when I refilled the radiator because it was empty. Talk about losing one's presence of mind in a crisis ! Finally some synapses actually fired in my brain and I remembered that it was necessary to pull the inside hood release and THEN open the hood with the outside secondary release. Jeez... I drove the final ten miles to the Lagoon, pulled the radiator from my truck myself (thanks for not helping, guys) and caught a ride from a kind-hearted local over to the only mechanic among the scattered fishermen's houses at San Ignacio Lagoon. I hand-signed what I needed in conjunction with words like "agua" and "alto". The mechanic soldered the leaking radiator fin shut and I caught a ride back. My friends had made lunch for themselves while I was gone (none made for me; thanks, guys). My very dear friends announced that they had arranged for a boat to take "us" out whale-watching and it was leaving in ten minutes. It was apparent that they would have left without me if I had been further delayed while getting my radiator fixed (and my truck carried much of their gear). Another typical

male bonding experience! So I left the radiator in the back of my truck, heaved my empty stomach into the panga, and went out to see the whales.



This picture of me was taken by Norbert Wu.

We saw lots of gray whales including spyhopping and some great breaching leaps out of the water. There were whales everywhere one looked in the lagoon, near and far. We got to stroke some juveniles or babies on their heads too. A whale rubbed itself on the bottom of the panga which gently rocked the boat. When they exhaled next to the boat, you got a misty shower.

## OTHER TIMES & PLACES

During the winter, I see them offshore where I work at Scripps Institution of Oceanography Library, and also sometimes from Bob Bayer's boat when diving off Point Loma in San Diego. We have seen juvenile gray whales off Point Loma, who seem to be taking their time moving slowly down the coast.

I've seen gray whales while whale watching offshore Monterey. A close up thrill was off Monterey's Cannery Row; a baby gray whale went right by the front of my friend's small boat while I was standing on the bow. The water was only fifteen feet deep in shallow kelp and so clear that I could see the passing whale in its entirety.

I had an opportunity to go on several whalewatching trips in Victoria, Canada, where I got to spend considerable time watching a gray whale bottom feeding. When the whale surfaces, it brings up a muddy cloud of water streaming out of its mouth from its feeding.

**Though I have seen gray whales many times, it remains a thrill every time.**

*Peter Brueggeman*

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