

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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MEXICO

Ocean Giants of Baja California

6 – 19 April 2016

TOUR REPORT

Leader: Ian Rowlands

Local leader: Rob Nawojchik

Captain: Aaron Remy

Day 1 - Wednesday April - London to San Diego

We enjoy an easy flight and take in the sights of snowy Greenland, Baffin Island and Hudson Bay from the air. Our arrival is smooth and we are soon on buses from San Diego airport that get us to the hotel by 7.30pm. Some elect to head straight for bed whilst others head instead for the Harbourside Inn where we get well fed and watered.

Day 2 - Thursday April - San Diego and setting sail

We awake and have breakfast to whilst outside we see Fisherman's Landing where our vessel The Searcher is tied up awaiting our arrival later today, but for now we have a free day to explore.

The rain picks up a little - very welcome in drought-struck San Diego but not what our party of British explorers were hoping for! Some people venture out for walks on the quayside, seeing first California sealions, plus birds such as belted kingfisher, great blue heron, spotted sandpiper, western grebe, house finch and yellow-rumped warbler.

Others take some of the transportation options around the city - trolleybus, metro tickets and more - some even going into Mexico to see Tijuana from the bus. Lunches are taken in various places, avoiding the now quite heavy rain, and we reconvene at the hotel at 5.00pm to gather our bags and wheel them the short distance to the quay where the crew help us load them onto the boat. We are getting properly excited about the trip now. Nearby there are birds such as elegant tern, black-crowned night heron, black skimmer, willet, Brandt's cormorant and western gull.

Having been shown to our cabins, we walk the short distance to a local restaurant, have dinner then gather once more on Searcher for our briefing and to meet the crew: Rob the naturalist, Charley the chef, Dan his assistant, Aaron the skipper, plus crew members Joe, Ryan and Kenny, and owners Art Taylor and Celia Condit.

By 9.30pm we are all done and briefed and, as we get underway, there are beautiful night-time views of the San Diego skyline and by the floodlit fish bait traps, dozens of barking California sealions, lots more cormorants, black-crowned night herons, great and snowy egrets and brown pelican. As we sail past Point Loma in the darkness we head for our cabins and sleep!

Day 3 - Friday 8 April - Ensenada, Islas Todos Santos and causing south

We are in Mexico. It's still dark when many of us begin to gather in the saloon at 6.30am and get served the first of Charley's great breakfasts. Unfortunately there is still grey cloud and drizzle, which does not show Ensenada off to its best, where we have docked in order for Mexican customs officials to board, stamp our documents and give us authority to enter the country. Outside there are flotillas of western grebes along with a few eared (black-necked) grebes.

We depart and reach open water, where despite the proliferation of fishing vessels we spot our first, brief, grey whale and encounter boisterous groups of short-beaked common dolphins - there are perhaps 300+ of the latter with some long-beaked common dolphins arriving too just as we reach Todos Santos Island.

The misty atmosphere makes the island redolent of the Scottish west coast rather than Mexico and the peregrine atop the crags and harbour (common) seals on the rocks adds to this impression. However, the Bonaparte's gulls, brown pelicans, and black oystercatchers dispel that, plus the beach is strewn with northern elephant seals. It's eerily flat calm as we depart, encountering more short-beaked common dolphins, flocks of north-bound birds fill the skies - marbled godwits, Brant, surf scoter, Pacific and common loons - and we also see Craveri's murrelets and pink-footed shearwaters.

By 10.30 the weather begins to brighten and some glorious sunshine and blue sky heralds our first whale blow and it's . . . a blue whale! The blue-grey giant gives us some reasonable views but our eagerness is rewarded as over the next hour first and second, then a third and then a fourth all show themselves - what a great start to the trip! With their blows reaching high into the sky and their broad, mottled, gun-metal-grey bodies rolling through the sea as they search for food, we are treated to some great views of the planet's largest mammal - plus a number of them lift their tail flukes into the air as they dive (only about 20% of animals do this). Amidst our excited commotion, we get some brief views of a humpback whale too, which breaches and slams down into the water causing much white foam, and then a scarce Laysan albatross appears and flying straight towards us it gives astonishing close views over the bow and along the starboard side of Searcher. We continue to play with the blue whales, Captain Aaron doing a great job of respectfully approaching them, and just as we are all called to the saloon for lunch, the closest blue whale yet swim right alongside us, being seen at close quarters by diners!

With a southward journey to continue we proceed in cloudier weather, clocking up another three more Blues, including further individuals that lift their tail flukes to much whooping and cheering from us. After that a lull of about an hour produces another Blue, about 4-500 more common dolphins including some spectacular breaching, and then another hour later our final blue whale of the day brings the total to 10. A sneaky, poorly-glimpsed Bryde's whale, wraps up our cetaceans for the day but we continue to cruise, all now a little sunburnt and pleasantly exhausted as the sea calms once more. The sun beams down and we head inexorably towards a compelling sunset, accompanied by regular big parties of common dolphins - maybe we've seen 1500+ today - many of whom leap very acrobatically in the wake of the boat, putting on a real show. There are quite a few young calves travelling in the group and many of the adults make spectacular leaps and breaches clear of the water - really high out of the water in fact - and all in lovely late afternoon sunshine. A great way to end the day.

Little flocks of red (grey) phalaropes, some Cassin's auklets, a parasitic jaeger (Arctic skua) and a black-footed albatross in the setting sun complete our day. And what a day it's been!

Dinner is very welcome, Rob gives us a briefing about tomorrow and a presentation about pinnipeds (seals and sealions), and as we tube into our bunks, Searcher continues to travel overnight heading for tomorrow and a landing at Islas San Benito.

Day 4 - Saturday 9 April - Islas San Benito

As the sun rises the beautiful glassy sea reflects the sun and illuminates the groups of common dolphins that accompany us. At 6.00am it's still dark but most of the group are having breakfast!

We arrive at Islas San Benito to be greeted by beautiful Heerman's gulls, plus Cassin's auklets, Craveri's murrelets, brown pelicans and black-vented shearwaters. By 8.00am we are making our first skiff landing on the island and we split into groups with some heading straight for the nearby coves where northern elephant seals, California sealions and ospreys can be seen close up. But all enjoy the arid, unique environment with our first prickly cholla cacti to admire and dodge, plus a few colourful splashes where mallow and California sunflower are in bloom.

The other group head around the perimeter of the island where, in the coves, elephant seals comprise a great many weaner pups plus the first of the moulting adult females. It's a treat to see these very noisy, very smelly animals on land, since at sea they dive to great depths while feeding, typically between 300 and 800 metres, and males can dive as deep as 1,500 metres. Plus, beginning in the 1700s, northern elephant seals were hunted extensively almost to extinction by the end of the 19th century, being prized for oil that could be made from their blubber. The population may have fallen as low as 100-1,000. Finding refuge in Mexican waters, by the turn of the century, there was only a sole surviving rookery, on Guadalupe Island, Mexico; and this colony was granted protection by the Mexican government. Numbers have now recovered to over 100,000. They are all terrifically entertaining – it's inspiring to see these creatures at close quarters, and to imagine the world that they inhabit offshore.

We see peregrines in flight and perched, plenty more ospreys plus savannah sparrows, northern mockingbirds, ravens and - after ascending "Cholla Cactus Valley" - plenty of horned larks on the plateau, plus some rare lark buntings. A hike to the lighthouse for lunch takes us past flowering plants such as Tarweed, whilst of particular note too are the scurrying San Benitos side-blotched Lizards (a little critter that's found nowhere else in the world!).

We hike down to the coast seeing black turnstone, Brandt's cormorants and a very close osprey nest with large young being fed, before Rob takes us to a high viewpoint where we are lucky enough to see some Guadalupe fur seals. The fur seals appear to have taken over many new areas since our visit last year. Sealers had reduced the population to just a few dozen by the late 19th century, but the species had recovered to 10,000 in number by the late 1990s and numbers continue to rise each year.

By 3.00pm we are ready to depart but not before we have seen a decomposing dead sperm whale and a live glaucous-winged gull. Our journey out aboard The Searcher is slow, very chilled (soft drinks, cold beer and sunshine snoozes see very popular) but busy with scanning, though none of the distant whale blows - blue whales - turn into good sightings. However there are busy feeding flocks of Cassin's auklets, black-vented shearwaters and western gulls above obvious shoals of bait fish, with occasional groups of common dolphins and sealions popping up too. They make quite a finale to the day before we cruise steadily south overnight heading for Laguna San Ignacio, the best place in the world to view grey whales . . . we can hardly wait. Rob gives us a presentation about baleen whales and then we head for bed.

Day 5 - Sunday 10 April - Laguna San Ignacio

It's a 'grey' day indeed but the early overcast weather at first light looks set to clear as we still cruise south with the dunes and mountains of the Baja peninsula to our left. San Ignacio is our destination but pre-breakfast there are still good birds too and cruising through the dark to a brightening sky we are approaching the entrance to Laguna San Ignacio but as the sun rises the first thing we encounter is actually

another blue whale! We spend about 20 minutes watching it before Captain Aaron takes us through the narrow entrance between the shifting sandbars

As we approach the sand bars that guard the entrance to the lagoon, we see increasing numbers of cormorants, pelicans and royal terns. Our speed is slow, cautious, and halting as Aaron plots a course through the underwater hazards, as inshore bottlenose dolphins show and we watch our first whale blows and flukes as grey whales begin to appear around us. The air of anticipation is tremendous and soon dozens, perhaps hundreds of whales appear, blowing, head breaching, tail slapping and generally wowing us! At this late stage of the season the females bring their calves into the channel currents to exercise them in preparation for their long journey north to Alaskan feeding grounds.

Entering, we pass the sandbars and reach our anchor point in the lower lagoon – one of the few vessels with a permit to do so within this spectacular National Park – and take in the views all around us: wide horizons, sweeping unspoilt beaches, distant flat-topped mesas, and spiky mountains distant in the heat haze.

In the calm and warmth we take in the overhead terns, the sparkling calm water, and the Grey Whales that swim by close to us. It's the local fishermen that have the licences to take us out to meet the whales in their small pangas – a great eco-tourism project – and soon we're climbing down into them and riding out on twinkling calm water on a date with our destiny . . . a hoped-for close encounter with a whale. And for many of us within just ten minutes we are touching our first grey whale calf!

For us here it soon transpires to be a 'morning of mornings' with encounters to rival any I've had in this beautiful place before, and within the hour everyone has touched a whale (and been touched in the heart themselves). The mothers with their calves approach us in our small boats and seem to invite contact. We splash water at them, stroke them as they come close and yell with excitement at each moment that appears more amazing than the last. Every one of us gets to touch a playful youngster.

After an hour and a half we speed back to Searcher (one panga accompanied by bow-riding bottlenose dolphins) for lunch. Back aboard we are all abuzz with what we've seen, chattering excitedly, comparing notes, or some quietly trying to come to terms with their emotions after the power of this magical encounter. What a place. What an incredible place.

Our second trip of the morning is a little less frantic and more in the way of a reminder of how lucky we have been, but all groups again get to pet friendly whales - some as many as four cow/calf pairs - plus interesting behaviours and a few birds such as marbled godwit, a Hudsonian godwit and white ibis. A beautiful day in San Ignacio, even to have lunch here is a treat, with every window in the salon presenting a picture of the blue paradise outside with birds cruising overhead and whales cruising by in the water. It's heaven on Earth!

After lunch we venture out again and again have special encounters - with all of us humbled and touched once more by our ability to attract them to us. Unfortunately the breeze picks up and puts paid to our fourth trip out but I think we are all glad of a chance to chill with a drink in hand and watch the whales go by!

In keeping with what has been a marvellous day, we conclude an unforgettable day by all going back up on deck to experience the lagoon by starlight, with the generator turned off so that we can truly appreciate the moment. The silence is profound as we enjoy seeing Jupiter and the constellations twinkling in the swirl of the Milky Way in the dark sky above as the international space station arcs overhead. What a day.

Day 6 – Monday 11 April Laguna San Ignacio

Another beautiful day in San Ignacio. Even to have breakfast here is a treat, with every window in the salon presenting a picture of the blue paradise outside with birds cruising overhead and sometimes whales cruising by in the water.

The lagoon stretches 16 miles into the desert and is 8 kilometres wide at its maximum. The upper lagoon is the shallowest and is known as the area where pregnant females give birth, the middle lagoon is where mothers have their newborns, getting them ready to join the majority of the whales at the lower lagoon. At the lower lagoon – where we are - males and females congregate looking for mates, but at this stage of the season it has a few cow/calf pairs but now it's down at the very sea entrance to the lagoon that we predominantly find calves with their mothers preparing themselves for the long journey north to their summer feeding grounds in the Arctic. And at this stage of the season they are very bored, very inquisitive, and especially ready to interact with the tourist boats. In fact many of the mothers appear to push their young up to our boats - why do they do it? More especially, why do they do it when they were hunted here so ruthlessly in times gone by?

San Ignacio Lagoon was originally discovered by whaling captain Jared Poole, and the first whaling expedition here occurred in 1860 led by Charles Scammon and six whaling vessels. Although many whaling captains would not risk losing their ships to the treacherous sand bar shoals, enough bold whaling captains did and this led to the near extinction of the Eastern Pacific grey whale.

So we have our first early morning excursions after breakfast and are soon all drifting out amongst the whales, gradually getting close to those animals that choose to have an interaction with us. Once again we have some especially wonderful encounters. After returning to Searcher for a coffee break – this is whale-watching with built in comfort stops – we head out once more.

With some opting for another whale watch, the majority take a trip into the mangroves aboard Searcher's skiffs. For many it's the first time in this special habitat, as we cruise the shallow azure-blue channels between the sandbars, mangrove roots and grassy banks watching shorebirds. It's warm, sheltered and tranquil with a special atmosphere and birds include yellow-crowned night-heron, little blue, green and tricoloured herons, reddish and snowy egret, plus lesser scaup, eared grebe, pied-billed grebe, red-breasted merganser, marbled godwits, willet, short-billed dowitcher and greater yellowlegs amongst others. There's a Belted Kingfisher and our first magnificent frigatebird, plus we 'squeak out' an elusive and unique mangrove warbler.

If anything the weather is even calmer, with the whale watchers getting close encounters taking place on tranquil, glassy water. Can life get any better?!

With the wind picking up, our last trip of the day is a trip to the beautiful, deserted beach around the lagoon. Some opt to walk with Rob to see grey whale bones and the skeleton of a bottlenose dolphin, whilst others join Ian to look at birds on the dropping tide, seeing marbled godwits, willet, American oystercatcher, sanderling and western sandpipers. All of us enjoy the warm sand, the desert environs and the chance to touch dry land, plus we see sand dollars, sea urchins, shells and coyote footprints on the sand. We return to Searcher and make our way reluctantly out of the lagoon, with hundreds of surfacing - and occasionally spy-hopping - grey whales to wave us goodbye. Out through the waves and chop of the sandbar entrance, we see brown pelicans, Brandt's cormorants, short-beaked common dolphins and, out in the open ocean, a blue whale! The swell begins to rise in the Pacific, we watch the blue whale for a while and then return for dinner in the saloon followed by a mangroves lecture from Rob. As Searcher rides the swell many people retire for the night, tired after two full-on days of excitement.

Day 7 – Tuesday 12 April - cruising south to Gorda Banks

Long-beaked common dolphins come in to the boat and bow-ride - a great start to the day and things continue with some Sabine's gulls, some of which are in full breeding plumage, and a brown booby. We've awoken to a reducing swell and a promising dawn.

In fact we are on a roll because after breakfast our first whale of the day shows up and it's a blue whale! We are delighted when it shows us its tail as it dives - there's a big cheer from us - and this is the seventh 'flucker' that we've seen, unusual when less than 20% of blue whales show their flukes when they dive.

We continue south and, reaching level with the entrance to Magdalena Bay near Margarita Island, we spot another blue whale. Quite unbelievable and this makes 15 blue whales for the trip so far. In fact we are rather blasé now and, having tried to see it a little closer, we move on with our journey seeing elegant terns, pink-footed shearwaters, a few turtles plus a fierce-looking tarantula hawk wasp, which sends the crew into a frenzy as they are scared of getting stung - though it flies off with no such drama.

Lunch is next and as we emerge we find that things have quietened and the sea reveals nothing more than the odd magnificent frigatebird, a brief blowing Humpback Whale that does not show well, plus our first few Cook's petrels.

The afternoon is enlivened by Ian's presentation about blue whales - which involves some audience participation - and we emerge back on deck to see a few turtles (green or hawksbill, it's always impossible to tell based on the views from the boat), some small flying fish and the occasional pink-footed shearwater.

As the day concludes we end with more Cook's petrels, some black storm petrels and a few red (grey) phalaropes which are still in winter plumage. We head for bed, still heading south and rocked to sleep.

Day 8 – Wednesday 13 April - Cabo San Lucas to La Paz

By the time it gets light and we are awake we have already cruised past Cabo San Lucas on the southern tip of the Baja peninsula and we discover we are on calm water dotted with long-beaked common dolphins and bottlenose dolphins. We are hoping for humpback whales here - it's usually a hotspot - but our avid scanning reveals just Craveri's murrelets, black storm petrels, pink-footed shearwaters and magnificent frigatebirds.

So keen is Captain Aaron to find the whales here that he makes a second sweep over the area with Searcher, but though we don't find any humpbacks we have a truly beautiful reward. Here in the calm, crystal-clear water, we find a group of manta rays! There are six or seven and they are circling in an elegant formation, their wing-tips occasionally breaking the surface as they show clearly through the water. It's a wonderful sight. The crew say that they have never seen anything like it before in all their years here.

Eventually we give up on the whales and anchor in the peninsula bay of Los Frailes. The azure blue sea is back by high hills, a white sand beach and the shacks and trailers of American and Canadian tourists who escape the winter snows of home by hanging out here. The big advantage to us is that many birds have become accustomed to the people and, after the crew have landed us ashore via the skiffs, we take a short, leisurely walk through the bushes, scrub and shade-giving trees, we put together quite a list of sightings. Popular are the northern cardinals, hooded orioles, Gila and ladder-backed woodpeckers. cactus wrens are mating and nesting, California quail scurry across the ground and White-winged dove calls from the hillsides. Other notables include: verdin; ash-throated flycatcher; chipping sparrow; northern mockingbird; ground dove; lark sparrow; grey thrasher; green-tailed towhee; turkey vulture; and osprey. Atop the cactus some impressively-large spiny-tailed iguanas survey their domain. Some of the group have instead taken a beach walk are a happy to find brown pelicans and a breeding plumaged Franklin's gull.

We return to Searcher where our 16 snorkelers gear up and are taken by skiff to the far side of the bay for our first foray into the water. An impressive variety of fish are seen, plus a green turtle and a green moray eel. Fish include: king angelfish, yellowtail surgeonfish, moorish idol, giant damselfish, Panamic sergeant major, leather bass, bluechip parrotfish, bicolor parrotfish, giant hawkfish, spotted boxfish, orangeside triggerfish, guineafowl puffer, balloonfish and more.

Soon it's time to rejoin Searcher and head out to see one more. The wind has freshened, a swell has got up but with some diligent scanning we manage to track down a few distant Humpback Whales. Unfortunately they are feeding over shallow reefs where we dare not take the boat, so we head north into the night having dinner riding the waves, after which Rob gives us a presentation about toothed whales, and surprises us with the news that tomorrow there is an opportunity for us to see and swim with whale shark. Wow!

Day 9 – Thursday 14 April - La Paz to Isla San Jose

In the wee small hours the crew have dropped anchor and we wake to find ourselves on calm water off the town of La Paz. There are a few Frigatebirds already circling, plus some brown pelicans, Heerman's gulls, some distant blue-footed boobies, and a couple of not-too-close red-billed tropicbirds. However the highlight is a humpback whale which surfaces just 200 metres from the boat and continues to give us good looks for about 10-15 minutes or so. What a great start to the day.

Breakfast is filled with anticipation and soon afterwards, we gather up on deck divided into equally-sized groups of snorkelers and observers - all awaiting the arrival of the local panga drivers and guides who are coming to take us out in search of whale sharks. To add to the buzz, we are joined by Searcher's owners Art Taylor and Celia Condit who have flown down to La Paz especially to experience this bonus activity they have laid on for us. When the local guides and panga drivers arrive, we head off in our mixed groups in differing directions soon to encounter these beautiful creatures - the largest fish in the ocean.

Seen from the pangas they look large enough but for those in the water they look even bigger - one of the groups has repeated encounters with one or more animals, the other a single, prolonged encounter with one animal, each animal about nine metres in length. In the water we get to within a metre of these fabulously-marked ocean giants, close enough to study every detail over a period of about 45 minutes in-water. It's an awesome encounter with Mexico's 'Tiburón Ballena'.

Back on board Searcher we embark once more on our cruise north, and are soon pleased to encounter another Humpback Whale which shows well, before we call in at some guano-covered rocks that host some more-easily-observed blue-footed boobies, where we even see their colourful feet. There are also frigatebirds, a great blue heron, and our first yellow-footed gulls. Even some dorado, or dolphinfish, surface by the boat.

No sooner have we left here - on super-calm sparkling blue water by the way - than we spy some black storm petrels and another humpback whale, and though this whale proves less cooperative, we soon spy another. This whale is a star performer for us though, and it gives repeated close views, raising its flukes and showing its gleaming white pectoral fins, even through the clear blue water. In fact this is what makes this encounter all the more magical, as we can see it under the surface for prolonged periods, even when it comes to investigate the underside of the boat. Captain Aaron points out its luminous shape beneath us and dubs it a 'sea angel'. Beautiful. And even though Charley summons us for lunch, a few of us take it up on the bridge 'viewing deck' to savour every moment of this precious encounter, and are rewarded with a final distant breach out of the water from this magnificent creature.

Our journey continues with a manta ray or two seen close to the boat, many mobula rays leaping from the water in dramatic display 'flights', and a small group of bottlenose dolphins. However our next destination is soon reached - Los Islotes, another outcrop of guano-covered rock stacks which is dotted with magnificent frigatebirds and turkey vultures, though the highlight here are the large numbers of breeding California sealions . . . and some of us are about to get in the water with them.

The skiffs are launched and we initially all embark on a circumnavigation of the islands in order to see the sealions up close. Sally Lightfoot crabs scuttle across the rocks and we see turkey vultures, frigatebirds, blue-footed boobies and yellow-footed gulls. With the barking of bull sealions echoing still in our ears, we return to Searcher for the snorkelers to gear-up and get into the water. Immediately we discover some of

the best fish life we've seen so far: king angelfish, yellowtail surgeonfish, moorish idol, giant damselfish, beaubrummel, Panamic sergeant major, leopard grouper, leather bass, bluechip parrotfish, bicolor parrotfish, sunset Wrasse, giant hawkfish, spotted boxfish, orangeside triggerfish, finescale triggerfish, guineafowl puffer, balloonfish, Panama graysby and more. Then, with the afternoon ending some of the playful sealions begin to investigate us and we get some fun encounters with them.

Nearby Isla San Jose is our anchorage tonight, which we reach just after dinner, and pre-bedtime Ian gives an identification-challenge on whales and dolphins before telling us more about WhaleFest and his other whale projects. Outside the moon is in the sky, the air is warm, the mood tranquil, and the lighthouse lights winks back at us.

Day 10 – Friday 15 April - Isla San Jose to Isla Santa Catalina

Punta Colorado glows red in the dramatic morning sunrise as we find ourselves, having travelled overnight, at anchor off the sandstone cliffs at the north end of Isla San Jose. Brown pelicans and the odd raven are on the wing as, after breakfast, we take to the skiffs for a visit to the land. There's an eared grebe on the water, Brandt's cormorants, Heermann's gulls and Sally Lightfoot crabs dot the rocks, whilst overhead there are turkey vultures soaring against the fossil-shell-studded walls of rocks.

We are landed on the cobble-rock beach where we get our hands on the washed up shells, fan corals, dried puffer fish, sponges and other detritus of the ocean, plus there are footprints from a ring-tailed cat and a peregrine sat on the cliff. Some explore looking at beach life before we all wander up the gentle mini-canyon arroyo where the silence of the desert-like interior greets us. Immediately Kim notices a snake and it is a beautiful speckled rattlesnake! It shows wonderfully and is such treat to see. There are torote 'elephant' trees, splashes of colour from Ocotillos and Malva Rosa, as well as a marvellous collection of assorted cholla cacti that seem out to get us – chain-link cholla, jumping cholla, teddy-bear cholla etc. In the silence a few birds quietly speak: Costa's hummingbird, verdin, phainopepla, blue-grey gnatcatcher, ash-throated flycatcher, black-throated sparrow, grey thrasher, loggerhead shrike, house finch, cardinal, canyon wren, and overhead there are white-throated swifts, turkey vultures and red-tailed hawk. Isla San Jose whiptail lizards and brush lizards bask on the rocks. It's a beautiful, delicate, special place.

We return to Searcher but are soon whisked out again by skiffs to a nearby beach for some snorkelling, swimming and sunbathing. The sand is hot but is adorned with some beautiful shells and the snorkelers find a good selection of fish - many familiar and colourful species as we gain familiarity with what's regular here.

Anchor is hauled up on our return. It's hot, sunny and calm, and our whale-watch cruise north takes us into some very deep water but this time – despite the anticipatory scanning – the cetacean life is scarce. Birds include some Sabine's gulls, black-vented and pink-footed shearwaters, a few black storm petrels, Craveri's murrelets, and our first red-billed tropicbird sat on the sea next to the boat, but our vigilant searching for whales is to no avail. We even cruise up as far as Isla Monserrat, but only a few bottlenose dolphins are our reward - maybe we will be luckier tomorrow.

As the sun sinks over the dramatic mountainous landscape to our west, we approach Isla Santa Catalina, seeing our first Cardon cactus, and find anchorage for the night. After dinner Rob gives us a presentation of evolutionary biology and then we are all very much rocked to sleep.

Day 11 – Saturday 16 April - Isla Santa Catalina to Isla San Jose

The morning air is filled with the fairly unfamiliar aroma of land and things growing – in fact the amazing vegetation of Isla Santa Catalina consists of hill-side forests of giant cardon cacti, and we can hardly wait to get ashore to explore.

After breakfast we take to the skiffs and land for a 3-hour for a jaunt ashore. The landscape itself is compelling with all manner of arid prickly scrub, cholla cacti, giant wavy barrel cactus and the mighty

cardons – some of which reach about 15 metres in height. However, it's the magical effect of the rising sun that really casts a spell, and as creeps across the hill slopes it illuminates the tops of the cacti, from which small birds begin to sing. The list is familiar, but special none-the-less: Ash-throated Flycatcher, Gila & ladder-backed woodpecker, verdin, loggerhead shrike, and black-throated sparrow, plus beautiful scarlet northern cardinals singing and turkey vultures perched atop the cacti as they warm in the sun.

Pam is a real star as she manages to find one of the elusive, endemic Santa Catalina rattleless rattlesnakes (yes, really) and we're thrilled to see this baby snake close enough to photograph. What we weren't to know was that we were in for a record-breaking rattlesnake roundup during our visit, since Judith finds two more and Ian two more again - bringing our total to five, a Searcher trip record!

The reptiles of the island are great and as the sun heats the land they become more active and the lizards are out in force, many of them unique to this island: Santa Catalina whiptail, Santa Catalina side-blotched Lizard and Santa Catalina desert iguana. All in all, it's far to say that we are all smitten with this beautiful, charismatic, cactus-strewn island, and we reluctantly head for the skiffs to reach The Searcher.

However, we are soon out again, as the swimmers and snorkelers get a short ride out to 'Elephant Rock' and an aquatic exploration that includes many wonderful fishes.

Back aboard, we enjoy lunch and then cruise south again through the deep waters that one again, unexpectedly this year, produce little in the way of cetaceans barring a few bottlenose dolphins. Instead, we do see some Bull Sharks swimming past the bow and plenty of seabirds including red-billed tropicbird, royal tern, black-vented and pink-footed shearwater, black and least storm petrel, plus close-up views of a totally unexpected - and previously unrecorded - white-throated storm petrel, a breeding bird from Samoa and Fiji!

As we reach Isla San Jose, Captain Aaron finds a sheltered anchorage where chef Charley sets up a back deck dining area, creates a delicious dinner and we dine the night away, sipping Margarita's under a waxing Moon in warm weather with views of the mountains of the Baja peninsula and the beach on Isla San Jose. It's a quintessential Baja experience.

Day 12 – Sunday 17 April - Isla San Jose to Isla San Francisco to Cabo San Lucas

The evening was such a delight that we are sad to leave San Jose but breakfast is taken as we slip anchor and cruise to nearby Isla San Francisco. It's such beautiful scenery, with the strata-marked cliffs of the peninsula a backdrop to our journey.

In fact the journey pauses as we find a regularly surfacing and fluking Humpback Whale close to the shore of San Francisco, with a tail adorned with barnacles and weed. It's a tranquil and inspiring start to the day, with an accompaniment of California sealions, some distant common dolphins plus the familiar Brandt's cormorants, brown pelicans, magnificent frigatebirds and yellow-footed gulls.

We press on and glide gently into a broad sweeping bay that might have been created specifically for a travel brochure - aquamarine water, white sand beach, and an arc of low red rock hills. Isla San Francisco is visited by a number of chartered luxury boats but we have the island to ourselves and are soon ashore exploring. Rob leads a group up to the ridge which commands dizzying views across the island and the ocean beyond - and he gives a fascinating insight into the multiple micro-habitats that there are. Ian leads a group across the dunes and the salt flat to the rocky shore beyond. Between the two groups we encounter snowy egret, a confiding least sandpiper, black-throated sparrows, verdin, osprey, peregrine, red-tailed hawk, turkey vulture, eared grebe and raven.

Back aboard Searcher - in now hot temperatures - many of elect for some snorkelling and swimming and enjoy not only the fascinating garden eels in the sandy bay, and the thousands of schooling white-spot grunts, but also a plethora of other fishes in what might be some of the best snorkelling of the trip.

Lunch aboard is a refreshing salad and is taken with idyllic views from the salon windows, before we up anchor and make our inexorable way south once more in an afternoon that includes a few bottlenose dolphins, many black and least storm petrels, magnificent frigatebirds and - best of all - some incredible 'dancing' smooth-tailed mobula rays. The latter leap from the water as the males display their 'flying' prowess in a fascinating - and very comical - display right alongside us. As the sun sets its a great finale to the trip.

As we journey in the dark towards tomorrow our last dinner is a riotous affair as, under the direction of Captain Aaron, we all recall our favourite moments from the last twelve days. With highlights as varied as 'swimming with whale sharks' to Laysan albatross to blue whale and more, it's been an amazing trip with a wonderful group of people - and many of us vow to return.

Day 13/14 – Monday 18 / Tuesday 19 April - Cabo San Lucas to home

We disembark early and catch our bus from busy, touristy Cabo San Lucas to the quieter San Jose del Cabo where we take breakfast at the lovely Hotel Tropicana plus grab the chance for some souvenir shopping - though even here we see Hooded Orioles, House Finches and more. Finally our bus takes us to the airport where we catch our flight to Chicago and then our connecting flight back to Heathrow, arriving mid-morning on Tuesday to a grey and chilly London. It's been a wonderful experience and we make our sad farewells.

CETACEANS

Grey Whale
Bryde's Whale
Blue Whale
Humpback Whale
Short-beaked Common Dolphin
Long-beaked Common Dolphin
Inshore Bottlenose Dolphin
Offshore Bottlenose Dolphin

PINNIPEDS

Harbour Seal
California Sealion
Northern Elephant Seal
Guadalupe Fur Seal

OTHER MAMMALS

Black-tailed Jack Rabbit

REPTILES

Pacific Ridley Turtle
Green Turtle
Baja California Spiny-tailed Iguana
Santa Catalina Desert Iguana
Western Fence Lizard
Brush Lizard
San Benito Side-blotched Lizard
Santa Catalina S-blotched Lizard
Side-blotched Lizard
Santa Catalina Whiptail
Baja California Whiptail
Santa Catalina Rattleless-Rattlesnake
Speckled Rattlesnake

BIRDS

Pacific Loon
Common Loon
(Great Northern Diver)
Eared Grebe
(Black-necked Grebe)
Western Grebe
Black-footed Albatross
Laysan Albatross
Pink-footed Shearwater
Sooty Shearwater
Black-vented Shearwater
Black Storm Petrel
Least Storm Petrel
White-throated Storm Petrel
Red-billed Tropicbird
Blue-footed Booby
Brown Booby
Brown Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Brandt's Cormorant
Magnificent Frigatebird
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron
Tricolored Heron
Reddish Egret
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night Heron
Yellow-crowned Night Heron
White Ibis
Brant
Mallard
Lesser Scaup
Surf Scoter
Red-breasted Merganser
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Red-tailed Hawk
Peregrine
Californian Quail
American Oystercatcher
Black Oystercatcher
Greater Yellowlegs
Spotted Sandpiper
Willet
Whimbrel
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Hudsonian Godwit
Black Turnstone
Sanderling
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Red-necked Phalarope
Red Phalarope
 (Grey Phalarope)
Pomarine Jaeger
 (Pomarine Skua)
Parasitic Jaeger
 (Arctic Skua)
Long-tailed Jaeger
Bonaparte's Gull
Heermann's Gull
Franklin's Gull
Ring-billed Gull
American Herring Gull
Yellow-footed Gull
Western Gull
Glaucous-winged Gull
Sabine's Gull
Caspian Tern
Royal Tern
Elegant Tern
Craveri's Murrelet
Cassin's Auklet
White-winged Dove
Common Ground Dove
Mourning Dove
White-throated Swift
Anna's Hummingbird
Costa's Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher

Gila Woodpecker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Empidonax flycatcher sp
Gray Flycatcher
Ash-throated Flycatcher
Horned Lark
(Shorelark)
American Crow
Common Raven
Verdin
Cactus Wren
Canyon Wren - heard
House Wren
Blue-grey Gnatcatcher
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher
Northern Mockingbird
Gray Thrasher
Phainopepla
Loggerhead Shrike
European Starling
Mangrove Yellow Warbler
Northern Cardinal
Green-tailed Towhee
Black-throated Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Song Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Lark Sparrow
Lark Bunting
Hooded Oriole
House Finch
House Sparrow