



Watching the Whales "Thar She Blows!"

by Jack Craig

Migration

The "Grays" (*Eschrichtius glaucus*) migrate each year from their summer feeding grounds in the Bering and Chukchi Seas to winter calving grounds in lagoons on the Pacific Coast of Baja, California. The 12,000 mile migration of the grays is the longest of any mammal.

Three or four Newport Sports-fishing boats took watchers out on this first Saturday whale watch. Our big 50-footer with two 670 horse power diesel engines left the Embarcadero Dock at about 1:15 pm on the bluster of a light squall which continued at various intensities over the three hour cruise.

It took nearly 30 minutes to reach the off-shore whale run. This Eugene groupie clung to the front rail of the boat, slightly hunched down in my cold weather gear including double sweat and T-shirts topped off with Gore-tex running clothes and running shoes to keep footing on the galloping deck, brought on by the boat lurching in long swells of the stormy and rainy gray ocean.

Like in the movie, "Moby Dick" the boat captain alerted our watch with a lusty "Thar she blows" and sure enough, we saw one, and another and another gray whale spouting and diving down with the big tale visible on downward lunges. The boat moved back and forth along the width of the whale migration. At times, our boat came within 25 to 30 yards of the

spouts and the diving whales. The horizontal tails of the whales are a sight to behold as they come up for air and then lunge downward.

Whales Depend on Hearing

Whales swim and dive most of the time, according to *World Book*. Whales are said to depend on their sense of hearing and from our observation point on the ship's bow, it seemed that the Grays were very much aware of the diesel engine noises and pushed rapidly ahead of the boat.

Whales are said to nap at the surface of the water for a few minutes at a time. In addition to the tails, the grayish-black dorsals were slightly visible in the greenish-gray ocean. Many white spots could be seen on the whales' bodies with what appeared to be many barnacles on the whales' heads.

The whale is reported to swim with up-and-down pushes of its powerful flukes (tail fins) and uses its paddle-like flippers for turning and balancing. Average whale swim speed is said to be about five miles an hour, but in the case of the Grays, they could easily out-distance the powerful twin diesel boat which would indicate a swim velocity in the 20-mile-an-hour range.

Spouting

The "spouting" of the whales is another site to behold as the giant

creatures blow; and the closer up, the more spectacular is the "blow-out." Scientists say that when a whale goes under water, it holds its breath. When air in the whale's lungs becomes hot and full of moisture, the animal blows out the hot breath which forms a spout of fog as the hot air strikes the colder outside air and condenses. The shape of a whale's spout helps identify the whale. The grays appeared to have a single spout although the scientific description says Baleen whales have two blowholes on top of their heads. At a distance, the spout appears single, at least from my own observations.

The Oregon Natural Resource Council gives each person a "release" of liability form to sign and this tract says, "The whales must be treated with respect. They are irritated by noise, such as loud boats and buzzing airplanes. They can be dangerous if provoked." While watching the whales, the observer wonders about the possibility of a huge whale coming up under the viewing boats. Because of the noise and other factors, it is not likely that a Gray would attempt to upend a viewing boat. The closest point our big fishing boat came to the fast-swimming gray whales was about 25 to 35 yards. Most of the sightings were in the several hundred yard range.

Clothing

The ideal whale watching weather would include blue skys

but January-February is not generally a period of blue skys. This brings us to some of the needed preparations for full enjoyment of the trip. Clothes, we have already mentioned. In short—as much as you can get on. A fisherman type "sou'wester" outfit is ideal. A hat is necessary along with gloves. Gortex is fine but without "sweats" underneath is not warm enough. Gloves are a must, and if you are using a camera, care must be taken with the ski-type glove for if it gets wet you can't easily get your hands back in. The hands and then the body get so cold it is hard to operate your camera.

Photographers should use a 200 to 400 ASA type film for the cloudy weather and carry along a telephoto lens for viewable close-up shots. When the grays are running in numbers there is plenty of time for good photo opportunities despite all circumstances including a lurching, bucking boat. I caught a number of good whale tails but they were too far away to be used as an illustration for this story. A zoom lens would have been ideal.

Seasickness should be a consideration for many who take these whale watch trips. Dramamine, from one to three pills, did the prevention trip for our group, although one sensitive person was a little lethargic from several pills. He didn't get sick but was sleepy on the drive back to Eugene.

Instructions from the Oregon Natural Resources Council advise that "a light meal beforehand will help prevent sea sickness. You may want to bring a thermos of hot coffee or other beverage (no alcohol please)." A hot bowl of chowder, hot chocolate, coffee and a warm early dinner would seem to be an ideal meal after the 4:30 pm return to the Newport dock. There are many eating places in the "old town" dock area including Mo's, a long-time favorite chowder house-restaurant.

Tour Arrangements

Arrangements for the Gray

Whale Tour are made through the Oregon Natural Resources Council at 1161 Lincoln, Eugene. Telephone is 344-0675. For those who cannot provide their own transportation, carpools will leave the Lincoln street address at 9:45 am each Saturday.

Cost of the whale trip is \$15 and remaining trips are scheduled out of Newport, Oregon on the following Saturdays: January 25, February 1, February 8, February 15, and February 22. All the whale watching cruises leave from the Embarcadero Dock in front of the Newport Sportfishing boat berths at around 1 pm. Check-in begins at 12:45 pm.

An ONRC representative will meet whale watchers at the dock. A map is provided in Eugene for those not acquainted with the Newport 101 Highway exit to the waterfront-old town area.

Persons should call the Eugene office of the Oregon Natural Resources Council between 8:30-9:30 am or Newport Sportfishing (265-7558) on the Saturday morning departure date to see if storm warnings have been reported and/or if the whale tour for that day will go ahead as scheduled. In the event of a cancelled trip, persons may either schedule another date of their choice, or may request a refund. Refunds are made only with a 10-day cancellation. No refunds are made for "no shows" but re-scheduling is listed as a possibility if all space is not taken up for later trips.

The whale tours can be a family outing. Children under 4 years of age cannot be taken and those under 12 years of age must be accompanied by an adult. From my trip, several valley area residents with children fared quite well under careful supervision. A cabin extension gives protection from the wind, rain and cold. Restroom facilities are available along with adequate life jackets.

Money above expenses goes toward environmental protection activities of Oregon Natural Resources Council.

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