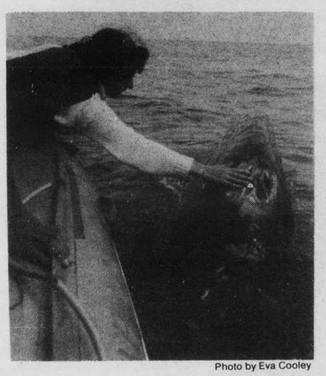


Photo by Eva Cooley

Having a whale of a good time

Whale watching in Oregon best now through May

By JIM GERSBACH
Of the Emerald

If you missed the elusive Rainier during its last migration, don't despair. Chances are good that this spring you'll be able to catch a glimpse of a more common but no less exotic Northwest species, the Pacific gray whale.

Toothless creatures that thrive on krill and other tiny ocean life, gray whales pass by the Oregon coast between December and May. They first pass while heading south to lagoons near Baja, California, where they calve. They then return to their Bering Sea feeding grounds, again via the West Coast.

Large numbers of whale enthusiasts also are drawn to the Oregon coast each spring, because at few other places along their 10,000-mile migration route do gray whales swim as close to land.

Traveling slowly in small groups, mothers and young calves — followed later in the spring by adolescent whales and bulls — meander within two or three miles of the shore, feeding on krill.

Although the gray whale has been hunted by Northwest Indians for centuries, it wasn't until the latter decades of the 1800s that American whalers brought the gray close to extinction.

But a ban on hunting the gray was imposed by the International Whaling Commission in 1937, and the gray whale has made an almost complete recovery. Estimates put the population of gray whales at over 12,000.

Grays are large whales, growing up to 50 feet in length. The best spot for viewing them on land is from promontories overlooking the ocean. On a clear day and with a good pair of binoculars you should be able to locate grays by their telltale spouts, the condensed mist formed when whales exhale.

Headlands within a few hours drive of Eugene include Cape Perpetua, Heceta Head and Seal Rock, all between Florence and Waldport.

Boat outings, however, offer a much closer look at the giant cetaceans. A veteran of one such close-up whale watching is Al Denfeld, Youth Program Supervisor for the Eugene Parks and Recreation Department.

"The first time I went out on a whale watch I'd never been out beyond the bar," Denfeld recalls of a Greenpeace outing a few years ago. As with most expeditions, the group detected the whales on sonar and sped to where they were feeding. The boats pulled close enough alongside the whales that passengers were sprayed with water when the whales dived.

"The whales would surface and people would get so excited they'd forget to take pictures," Denfeld says.

Denfeld will be an informational guide on a whale-watching trip out of Newport planned by the Eugene Parks and Recreation Department for March 21. Although that trip has been virtually sold out, more tickets will be sold if there are cancellations.

Several other Northwest groups also plan whale-watching excursions later this spring. In April the Portland Audubon Society will run two trips out of Bar View near Tillamook. Those trips also are heavily booked, but Mark Smith of the society says space may open up as cancellations occur. Cost of the society's trips is $20 for members, $30 for non-members. For more information write the Portland chapter at 5151 NW Cornell Rd, Portland, 97210.

The Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) has nine whale-watching trips planned for weekends beginning March 28 through May 23. Cost is $27.50 for museum members and $30 for the general public. For tickets mail a check or money order payable to OMSI Whale Watch, 4015 SW Canyon Rd, Portland, 97221.

The tickets are non-refundable and will be mailed along with trip information after OMSI receives payment. Three boats will leave Newport each weekend accompanied by a guide who will explain whale migration and habits, according to Karen Strom of the museum.

OMSI will coordinate its whale-watching expeditions with a program at the museum featuring films and talks about whales.

In Eugene, literature on gray whales is also available at the Greenpeace Foundation's office on 11th Avenue or at the University or Eugene Public libraries.

Economics push whaling ban toward major breakthrough

By LESLIE FARRIS
Of the Emerald

Conservationists may be one giant leap closer to securing a worldwide ban on whaling.

On Jan. 19, the Soviet Union news agency, Tass, announced "the Far Eastern Soviet Fleets will stop whaling in 1981." The Soviet whaling fleet is second largest in the world to Japan.

David McTaggart, chairman of Greenpeace International, issued a statement saying, "This is the first major breakthrough in the fight to stop whaling in 10 years. The Soviet Union's decision...has now isolated Japan as far and away the largest and the only strident supporter of commercial whaling."

Local Greenpeace members, however, are celebrating cautiously.

"We're going to wait and see," says Jackie Bryson of Greenpeace Eugene. "They've said these things before — we're going to stop whaling — and they haven't."

Bryson says economic more than conservation pressures prompted the Soviet announcement.

"Fuel for their boats — fishing vessels and factory ships - costs a lot of money."

If the ban carries through, Bryson predicts a noticeable increase in whale populations within a few years. The number of gray whales off the United States has increased significantly since Congress passed the Marine Mammal Protection Act in the early 70s.

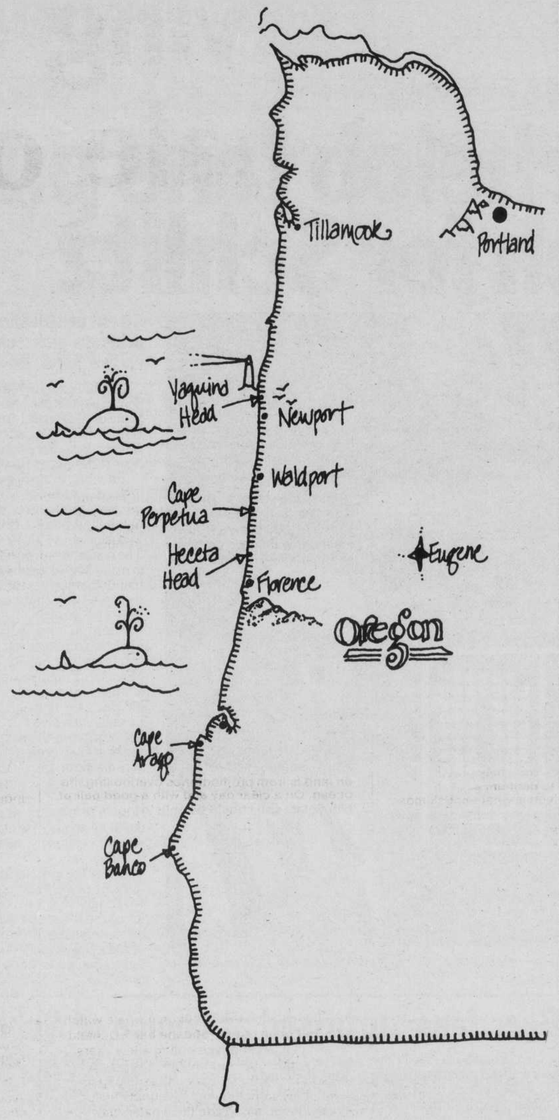
The Soviet ban allows for a "few" whales to be captured "to supply the needs of the aboriginal people of the great north." Bryson says although the provision may prove harmful, it's difficult to denounce.

"The bowhead, which is what the Eskimos whale, is one of the closest to extinction," she says. "On the other hand, this is the Eskimos' way of life. What would they have left, welfare?"

In addition to the whale ban, the Soviet Union plans to create marine sanctuaries in its coastal waters. Bryson says if the Soviets truly support conservation, the balance of power in the International Whale Commission could shift toward those nations favoring a worldwide ban.

Other whaling nations include Iceland, Brazil, Spain, Norway, South Korea, Peru and Chile. Japan and the Soviet Union account for more than 70 percent of the annual whale catch worldwide.

Greenpeace U.S.A. hopes to work with environmental groups in Japan to bring about a Japanese whaling ban. Bryson said a similar effort in Taiwan helped put an end to that country's whaling industry last year.



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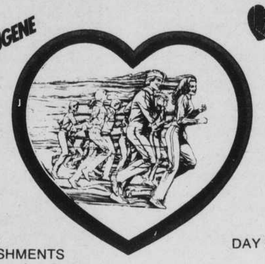

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