

In search of . . .



Where great whales come sailing by,
Sail and sail, with unshut eye,
Round the world for ever and aye?
"The Forsaken Merman"
Matthew Arnold, 1828-1888

“When you see one, yell!” Cindy Muniz, Greenpeace volunteer, gives this advice to novice whale-watchers before the boat 'Kai-Aku' sets off for open sea.

The sixteen passengers, clad in down coats, scarves, hats and cameras, heeded her advice. Unshut eyes scanned the waves for whales, southbound Gray Whales migrating to the Baja Lagoons for winter. Two sister boats, normally used for charter fishing, carried more whale watchers who hoped to see a huge sea mammal spouting for a breath of air.

Kit Stockman, captain of the 38 foot Kai-Aku and an experienced whale watcher, says "it just depends on what kind of mood they're in, I guess."

"Keep your fingers crossed," says Phil Ratcliff, Greenpeace volunteer. "It's kind of chancey," he admits, but adds, "We've never not seen any."

Ratcliff's comments ring with a certain optimism. After all, the weather conditions at Newport couldn't be better: sunshine, a slight breeze and a fairly calm sea by anyone's standards.

Although the Greenpeace-sponsored lark was an adventure for the 67 participants, the primary purpose, aside from seeing whales, was to raise money for the wildlife preservation and anti-nuke organization that extends across the United States.

The Eugene Greenpeace office, sponsors of the event for the last three years, had no problem filling the three boats for Saturday's and Sunday's outing. Muniz hopes that whale watches can be planned every other week-end throughout February and March.

For Jon Cope, 15, this watch was a special birthday present.

"You can't just walk down the street and see a whale," says Cope, who hopes to be an oceanographer.

Steve Barron, a Creswell school teacher quips, "It's

worth it just to be out of the valley."

After motoring three miles out to sea, Stockman spots one. And then somebody else yells. Almost fifty feet away, a slick grey body skims atop the waves. The huge mammal spouts and then disappears.

The Gray Whale belongs to the baleen branch of the whale family. Baleen whales, which include the Blue whale and the Humpback, have a strainer-like plate instead of teeth. With this plate, they feed on small fish and animals or "krill."

During the summer, from April to October, the Gray Whales feed on the abundant krill in the arctic seas. The whales, which can grow up to 45 feet long, refrain from krill during their migration, surviving instead off their stored fat.

For the *Eschrichtius robustus*, the Oregon Coast is part of a 12,000 mile trek that stretches from the Chukchi Seas, up near the Bering Strait, to the Baja peninsula near California.

The Gray Whales make this migration annually, with the pregnant females leaving the summer feeding grounds in early October for the winter calving grounds. The heaviest flow of bulls, non-pregnant females and young whales occurs during a three-week period this month.

By February, the females with newborn calves pass Oregon on the northbound leg of the trip. A Greenpeace information sheet says that paleontologists suspect that the Grays have gone the same route for 8 million years.

"I enjoy watching them," says Stockman, who has been working and playing on the ocean all of his 29 years. "It's real nice to see something at peace with nothing to worry about."

"Except for foreign fishing fleets," he adds.

The whales swim about five miles offshore, well within the United States' territorial waters and out of a foreign harpoon's reach. According to the information sheet, the whalers almost killed off the California whale species, but after 1947, the animal was protected. The Gray Whale recovered and now approximately 16,000 abound along the Pacific coast.

Apparently the California Grays' cousins on the East

Coast weren't so lucky. Whalers killed them off two or three hundred years ago.

Asked if the animals knew what we humans wanted, Stockman answers, "I think so."

"They've got a brain," he says. "They know if they're going to be hurt." The info sheet told us that the Gray Whale brain weighs about 10 pounds and "they are intelligent, sensitive creatures. They will avoid a loud noisy fanfare, noisy boats, and buzzing airplanes."

When one skipper spied a whale in the distance, he gunned the engine. Stockman explains "he ran up on them pretty fast and they (the whales) sounded," diving down deep, not to surface for another 15 or 20 minutes — and then who knows where they'll spout.

"See what ya did, ya took off and scared 'em," he scolds over the citizens band (CB) radio. "They were right next to ya."

The trick is to shut off the engines and drift, Stockman says. "When you cut the engines, (sometimes) they'll come up and rub their barnacles off on the boat's bottom," he adds with a laugh. When that happened to him, Stockman's boat bounced up and down.

Although he's never seen a whale attack a boat, Stockman once saw one flip a 24 foot boat with its tail. He notes that the boat's captain acted carelessly and provoked the animal. Stockman has also been in the company of 150 killer whales, or Orcas, who surrounded his tuna fishing vessel and played with it.

While off the Oregon coast in a 30 foot boat, he saw a 90 foot Blue Whale, the biggest of them all; "that made me look small," he says.

"Everytime you see one it's the same feeling all over again," Stockman says with awe in his voice. "It never changes."

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