

Having close encounters of the whale kind

Migrating whales offer students opportunity for a 'whale of a time'



"Oooooohh! Aaaaahh! Oh look, here it comes! A tail, a tail!" Then there's the audible sound of a dozen camera shutters clicking, and as the tail disappears from sight, a hush of expectancy again falls upon the group.

A gathering of fanatical shutterbugs photographing disembodied flying tails, you may be wondering?

Close, but not quite. The tails belong to gray whales migrating north to Alaska from California, and the voices and cameras belong to people who are taking advantage of the whale watching excursion offered by the Survival Center and People and the Oregon Coast. The excursions are offered every weekend during the months of January and March.

Saturday, an Emerald photographer and I joined 43 other people and our guide, Marc Albert, on two vessels chartered from Embarcadero Charters in Newport for a day of whale watching under a cloudless, blue sky.

We began our journey by meeting outside the Survival Center office at 10 a.m. After giving tardies a 15-minute leeway, our guide, 10 passengers and a dog named Hobo boarded a van outside the EMU. Although the sky was overcast as we left Eugene, the forecast assured us that we would have no problem meeting the other 44 people who had signed up for the trip by the designated embarkation time.

The clouds gradually evaporated as we drove, leaving nothing but a distant haze in the brilliant blue sky. The temperature was hovering at a balmy 58 degrees as we punctually joined the others at our destination.

We divided into two groups, one group boarding the Tempest, the other boarding the Kai-aku, and embarked on our sea journey shortly after 1 p.m. After leaving the "jaws" of Yaquina Bay behind, we headed in a southwesterly direction toward the last reported sighting of whales, made by a returning fishing boat. "Jaws" is the term used by Newport locals for the jetties, as they sometimes "chew up" boats during stormy weather.

As our prow cut through the ocean swells, the skipper of the Tempest, Brian Johnson, explained to me that the various vessels spread themselves out so as to have a greater chance of spotting migrating whales. When a pod of whales was spotted, the other vessels would be contacted by radio and would all converge on the targeted area.

The first sighting was made by a third boat, the Taku, after we'd been out for little more than an hour. By the time we joined the Taku, our anticipation had mounted to an explosive peak. When the first "spout," or "blow," was spotted, people began to point excitedly and all cameras went up to the "ready" position.

We stumbled across maybe two pods of whales, each with four to five whales. Their spouts were difficult to isolate at first because from a distance, they resembled ordinary whitecaps. With some practice, however, we were soon spotting them with ease.

A blow is created by the exhalation of



a whale as it surfaces from a dive. The spout consists mostly of condensation created as the whale's warm humid breath expands and cools in the sea air, along with sea water blown into the air as the whale begins its exhalation just below the surface.

Once we had caught up to the whales, our skipper cut back the engines to a slow idle and we followed the whales from a short distance, matching their leisurely pace. Albert, a veteran of whale watching voyages, was impressed by Johnson's gentle maneuvering of the vessel.

"The skippers are very skilled at easing up to the whales — adept at it, which is really nice," he said.

The whales were in a playful mood, teasing and tantalizing us by surfacing briefly, then disappearing for minutes at a time. We were first alerted to the surfacing of a whale by a sound resembling a hoarse, wheezy cough, which is made when they blow. This was always accompanied by a blast of misty spray.

As they glided into their next dive, we were able to see their scarred dorsal humps and ridges, rising like dark hummocks from the ocean surface. And if we were really lucky, the whales rewarded our patient observation with a momentary glimpse of their flukes, or tails.

Seeing a fluke was the highlight of a sighting, because they were quite large and distinctive. As the tails splashed down, they reminded me of gigantic flyswatters wielded by some creature that possessed inhuman strength.

After whetting our excitement with these fleeting displays, the whales would disappear under the surface for what seemed like hours, but was actually only minutes, before reappearing to our portside at twice the distance.

When this occurred, all the whale watching vessels in the vicinity (we had been joined by several more by this time) would increase their speed dramatically and converge on the whale's new location before slowing down to idling speed again.

This pattern continued for about an hour — our eyes rapidly scanning the surface of the sea as we watched for the next spout — before we finally turned back.

We docked shortly after 4 p.m., and after a quick but satisfying meal at Mo's Restaurant, we reboarded the van for the return trip to Eugene.

As we drove back singing songs, playing "20 Questions," or napping, one of the members of our group playfully summed up the fun and excitement we'd all experienced, saying, "I had a whale of a time!"



Story by Mike Rivers
Photos by Michael Wilhelm



Clockwise from top right: A whale spouts in the distance; two whales surface together; cameras go up in the ready position in anticipation of the sighting; our mighty fleet in search of close encounters; leaning for a closer look.

