



File photo

Thar' She Blows!

"We got a couple at 11 o'clock, about a half-mile ahead."

Forty-seven pairs of eyes zeroed in on that position. Cameras and binoculars focused, searching over the lolling squalls for whales off the Oregon coast near Newport.

Seconds later, there were cries of "over there," and fingers pointed at two distant objects bobbing in the aqua sea.

Capt. Dave Hutchins, who had announced the spotting over the ship's intercom, threw the vessel into full throttle. All 45 passengers were up on tip-toes, most of them anticipating their first glimpse of a whale.

They would have to wait a bit longer. The objects turned out to be a pair of bouys.

This was the only disappointment of the day for the Sea Ven-

ture's inexperienced but enthusiastic sailors. Minutes later, a spout of water about 60 yards in front of the ship confirmed Hutchins' sighting. We had found two California gray whales, one estimated by Hutchins to be 40 feet long, the other about five feet shorter. They were about three miles off shore and migrating south, a bit tardy as most gray whales pass Oregon during January.

Hutchins cut throttle, and slowed the ship's speed to that of the whales. Both whales and boat were traveling at a leisurely 3 knots. "This is about their average pace," Hutchins stated, although he says California Grays could propel themselves "very quickly" if need be.

The pair we found were of average length, although mature Grays can reach 50 feet in

length, and weigh 50 tons.

Hutchins' crew was as interesting as the whales themselves. Two groups from the Eugene Survival Center occupied the boat, as well as volunteers from the Oregon Natural Resources Council. About two-thirds were from the University, including three foreign exchange students.

None of the students had ever been whale watching before. Some had never been on a boat at sea, made obvious by the amount of sea-sickness they exhibited. A couple of older, more-experienced passengers made crude jokes about "chumming for whales."

Most of the affected passengers didn't let their queasiness ruin an otherwise beautiful day. It was sunny and in the 50s when the Sea Venture

shoved off in the early afternoon. It's occupants were downing the last of their lunches or making idle chit-chat. One older couple started in on a cooler of imported beers, while another group was investigating the rumor there was a reporter on board.

The most excited passengers were two ladies sitting in the ship's cabin. 60-year-old Portland resident Myra Perala heard about the trip through the ONRC, a group she volunteers some of her time to. She brought along her longtime friend and neighbor, 86-year-old Ida Nevala, a retired librarian. Although neither had ever been whale watching, Perala says such unique activities were common in Nevala's life. "She's truly amazing," she said. "She gets such an enormous kick out

of life."

The 18-year-old ship slowly made its way off port, passing a group of sea lions feeding on fish that cleaners were throwing off docks. We soon encountered large, rolling waves, causing a roller coaster like ride. Passenger Carey Lea felt "the first wave itself was worth the \$15." Others less enthusiastic about the bumpy environment laughed nervously.

But the waves soon diminished in size and frequency, and the happy, aquatic couple was soon sighted.

For the next two hours and 10 miles, the Sea Venture would tail the giant couple. The whales would surface about every six minutes to breathe, spend about 30 seconds spouting water and

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