

I'm a WHALE watcher

As many as 10,000 people flock to see huge, gentle gray whales

By Steve Card
Emerald Photographer

Whale watching continues to grow in popularity as thousands of spectators flock to the Oregon coast during the annual migration of the gray whale.

As many as 10,000 people are reported to have been on the lookout for the 30-ton mammals during the Christmas season, said Don Giles of the Hatfield Marine Science Center in Newport.

Whales will be visible off the Oregon coast until about the second week of May as they continue their northern migration. The gray whale is around 45 feet long — about the length of two Greyhound buses — and is the farthest migrating mammal on Earth, making a round trip of 12,000 miles from the Chukchi and Bering Seas north of Alaska to the warm lagoons near Baja, Mexico.

Giles said popular viewing areas around Florence include Cape Perpetua, Sea Lion Caves and the mouth of the Umpqua River, where a whale watching platform has recently been constructed. Cape Foul Weather and Depoe Bay offer some excellent viewing as well, Giles said.

"Whales tend to come in quite close at these locations, normally within a half mile and sometimes as close as 200 yards," he said.

The Oregon Natural Resources Council, through Newport Sport Fishing, sponsors whale watching cruises every weekend through April.

Art Burk, owner of Newport Sport Fishing, estimates that 3,000 to 4,000 people view the whales from his boats each

year. Burk said that whales are sighted almost every time boats go out. "It's a good experience if you see them," he said. "That's why we don't run after April."

The National Marine Fisheries Service has established guidelines designed to reduce the level of disruption caused by whale watching expeditions. "We usually try to stay 200 yards away," Burk said.

Sometimes, however, the whales' curiosity will bring them within a few feet of the boat. "They play with them [the boats]," Burk said. "In Baja they come up and let you scratch their back," he said.

Whale watching requires patience and is something you get better at with practice, said Mary Koike, naturalist for ONCR. "When you whale watch, look about one to one-and-a-half inches below the horizon and look for blows," she said.

There's usually about three to five blows and then the whale is going to dive for about 15 minutes."

Some observers may also see a whale breach. "That's where the whale accelerates out of the water about three-quarters of its body length and then falls back down on its back or side," Koike said.

Research hasn't discovered why whales breach, but theories speculate that it is done to remove whale lice, to abruptly change direction or to simply to have fun, Koike said.

The vast majority of whales sighted off the Oregon coast are gray whales. According to a 1989 count done by the U.S. Department of Fish and Wild-

life, the number of the grays is estimated to be 21,000.

The population dropped to as low as 2,500 when the whales were hunted in the late 1940s and early '50s, Giles said. "The number is now at or above the levels before the heavy exploitation took place," he said.

"I think the biggest problem we face today is the possibility of oil drilling off the Oregon coast," Koike said. An oil spill would "have a catastrophic effect on the whale population," she said. "The oil would filter out the sunlight that allows the microscopic plant life to grow."

This would interrupt the food chain, ultimately affecting the whales, Koike said. The gray whale is one of the most primitive surviving baleen whales which strains its food while feeding off the ocean floor.

The whales stay within five miles of shore during migration and any large-scale activity within this pathway is potentially harmful, according to a report issued by the ONRC.



Photo by Steve Card

Running whale watching and sport fishing expeditions is a weekend profession for Pat Schenk, skipper of the Nauti-Lady. During the week, Schenk is a junior high school math teacher in Ilwaco, Washington.



Photo by Steve Card

People hoping to catch a glimpse of gray whales gather at the Embarcadero Dock in Newport to board one of eight boats operated by Newport Sport Fishing.

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