

A WINTER'S TAIL

Spout time you took part in Winter Whale Watch Week

By **PATRICK ALEXANDER**
Oregon Coast TODAY

Do Gray whales ever get 'hangry?' Let's hope not. That potent combination of peckish and peeved is tricky enough to handle in a moderate-sized human, let alone a 35-ton whale.

But it's a distinct risk for migrating Grays, who barely stop to eat as they tackle their annual 12,000-mile migration from the Arctic Ocean to lagoons off the coast of Mexico, where the females give birth in the warmer waters.

The migration, which sees an estimated 20,000 whales making their way along the Oregon Coast during a four-week period, is the reason behind the Winter Whale Watch Week, organized by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD).

From Friday, Dec. 27, through Tuesday, Dec. 31, OPRD will set up 24 observation stations at state parks and headlands along the coast, with 22 in Oregon and one apiece in California and Washington. At each site, trained volunteers are on hand to help people maximize their chances of seeing some of the Baja-bound giants.

The program is headquartered in the OPRD's Whale Watching Center in Depoe Bay, which, in addition to helpful staff, boasts a wealth of interpretive displays about whales and other marine life.

Ranger Luke Parsons said whales passing Depoe Bay tend to swim between one and three miles offshore. He recommends that whale watchers scan the horizon with the naked eye at first, looking for the spout — the release of air that can send water shooting 12 feet into the air.

"Each one of their lungs is the size of your household refrigerator, so that's a lot of air that comes rushing out," he said. "Once you see that spout, you can bring the binoculars up to get a closer look."

Parsons said he is hoping for calm weather to give watchers the best possible spotting conditions. Large screens within the center allow staff and volunteers to bring up video from the center's cameras for everyone to see. And people from around the world can join in, with the center live-streaming the footage on Oregon State Parks' YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/user/OregonParks.

Elsewhere on the Central Coast, headlands have historically topped the list

of whale sightings, with Cape Lookout near Tillamook and Cape Foulweather just south of Depoe Bay leading the rankings.

And if you spot better with a martini in your hand, nowhere quite compares to Fathoms Restaurant & Bar on the 10th floor of the Inn at Spanish Head in Lincoln City.

Occasionally, if the whales are a little closer to shore, watchers will be able to see their backs when they come out of the water.

And very occasionally, a patient watcher might be rewarded with the Holy Grail of whale watching — a breach, where the whale thrusts its body out of the water.

The sheer size of the gray whale makes even a partial breach quite a feat. Full size females reach 45 feet in length, the size of a yellow school bus, and weigh in at 70,000 pounds. Males tend to be smaller at roughly 35 feet long.

The whale watching sites are open from 10 am to 1 pm every day throughout Winter Whale Watch Week, with volunteers clearly identified by a placard reading "whale watching spoken here."

For people who want a closer look at the passing giants, the prospect of a

Whale Watch Spoken Here

From north to south, the Central Coast observation stations are:

- Neahkahnie Mountain Historic Marker Turnout on Highway 101
- Cape Meares State Scenic Viewpoint
- Cape Lookout State Park — 2.5-mile hike to site at tip of Cape
- Cape Kiwanda
- Inn at Spanish Head – Lobby on 10th floor
- Boiler Bay State Scenic Viewpoint
- The Whale Watching Center/Depoe Bay Sea Wall
- Rocky Creek State Scenic Viewpoint
- Cape Foulweather
- Devil's Punchbowl State Natural Area
- Yaquina Head Outstanding Natural Area
- Don Davis City Park
- Cape Perpetua Interpretive Center

boat trip into the path of the migration is complicated only by the December weather.

Whale Research EcoExcursions in Depoe Bay (541-912-6734) offers whale-watching trips in close-to-the-water Zodiacs, while Dockside Charters, also in Depoe Bay, (541-765-2545) invites whale watchers to take to the waters aboard a comfortable 50-footer.

