

**BAJA, CALIFORNIA:
AMONG THE GREAT
WHALES**

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TOUR REPORT
BAJA CALIFORNIA: AMONG THE GREAT WHALES
February 24-March 3, 2007

By Marshall J. Iliff

VENT's first Baja cruise with Lindblad Expeditions was a resounding success. Not only were the ship, the captain, the food, and the staff all terrific, but the whales were incredibly cooperative, and we managed to see a great selection of birds and other animals as well. Baja has become one of my favorite areas, with its rugged desert landscape plunging into the azure waters of the Gulf of California, and there is no better way to see it than by ship!

Our trip began wonderfully with two blue whales traveling alongside the ship for a full hour on our first morning. These largest animals on earth travel to the Gulf in March and April to bear their calves, and we were lucky to intersect them on our very first day.

The many islands of the Gulf of California hold a wide variety of terrestrial animals, and are especially well-known for their unique slate of reptiles. In the afternoon we landed on Isla San José, a rarely visited Gulf island with its own share of unique flora and fauna. Our walk produced the endemic Isla San José whiptail for aspiring herpetologists, but also netted some great birds. Foremost among these was Xantus's Hummingbird, a striking bird with a bold face pattern and rich cinnamon belly and tail. Another near-endemic to Baja that we encountered was California Gnatcatcher, and we were lucky to see them in direct comparison to Blue-grays. Other bird highlights included Whimbrel, Loggerhead Shrike, and Costa's Hummingbird, among others.

Our next morning began off Los Islotes, where leaping *Mobula* rays (like small manta rays) and bottlenosed dolphins provided initial entertainment. A close fly-by Red-billed Tropicbird was seen by only a couple of people. We spent the full morning exploring the small Los Islotes island group in zodiacs and snorkel gear. The California sea lions were a highlight, swimming up to us to check us out and blow bubbles in our faces. From the zodiacs we were afforded point-blank looks at both Brown and Blue-footed boobies, as well as Gulf endemic-breeding Yellow-footed Gulls and a pair of Peregrines.

We cruised south in the afternoon, chasing down a distant Red-billed Tropicbird on the way, and landed on Isla Espiritu Santo. The most special animals on our walk there were mammals, including the endemic black jackrabbit and Isla Espiritu Santo antelope-squirrel. Birds were in evidence as well, and we enjoyed good looks at such striking species as Black-headed Grosbeak and Black-throated Sparrow, along with Gila Woodpecker and others.

Many of us were awakened the next morning by the songs of humpback whales broadcasting over the hydrophone. From that point on we were among these great whales, and the morning's slate of highlights included almost every possible behavior

one could see from humpbacks. We saw flipper slapping and tail lobbing, large males, mothers, calves, and magnificent breaching displays. Most awe-inspiring, and not captured by even one of the 60+ cameras that were in constant action, was a simultaneous, side by side breach by two magnificent males. Everyone on the ship gasped as these two animals lurched from the water in tandem and double-splashed back to the sea. More cooperative for photographers was the animal that breached 50 times consecutively while we followed. That afternoon we visited Estero San José del Cabo, the birding highlight of our trip. More endemic Xantus's Hummingbirds here were bolstered by endemic Belding's Yellowthroats, a Zone-tailed Hawk, Tropical Kingbird, Ruddy Ground-Dove, a Sora, and a host of other species for the longest bird list of our trip with warblers, shorebirds, ducks, coots, moorhens, etc. We closed the evening with a sunset cruise past Land's End, with hundreds of swirling frigatebirds heading to roost.

Our final three days were spent in Magdalena Bay, where the gray whales added a nice personal touch to the end of the tour. Indeed, a curious youngster allowed almost everyone to pet him, and even rub his baleen and pick his whale lice! Magdalena Bay offered birding highlights as well. The mudflats were alive with shorebirds as we cruised past. Aside from the bitterns, we saw every possible species of Baja heron on our cruise, including specialties such as Reddish Egret, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, the endemic Green Heron subspecies, and multiple Tricoloreds. Neotropic Cormorant, American White Pelican, Brant, Redheads, Red-breasted Mergansers, and a host of other species made for interesting birding every day in Magdalena Bay. Our walks on shore were less birdy in the sparse but scenic dunes. Highlights included Mangrove Warbler, Western Scrub-Jay, Horned Lark, and the endemic Savannah Sparrow.

We closed our voyage at Sand Dollar Beach with a splendid sunset and the chance to say goodbye to all our new friends. I hope many of you will have the opportunity to explore Baja more in the future, but I can guarantee you saw it at its best on this trip!

Day 1, 24 February: Late evening arrival in La Paz; boarded the M.V. *Sea Bird* and headed north.

Day 2, 25 February: Morning enjoying Blue Whales and other sights in San José Channel; afternoon landing on Isla San José.

Day 3, 26 February: Morning snorkeling and touring Los Islotes; afternoon landing and bar-b-que at Isa Espiritu Santo.

Day 4, 27 February: Morning enjoying incredible Humpback Whales around Gorda Banks; afternoon field trip to Estero San José; evening passage past Land's End.

Day 5, 28 February: Morning spent entering Le Entrada, the mouth of Magdalena Bay; mid-day cruise in the mangroves of Magdalena Bay; afternoon spent passing up Hull Canal.

Day 6, 1 March: All day enjoying Gray Whales and other sights at Boca La Soledad.

Day 7, 2 March: Morning enjoying Gray Whales and other sights at Boca La Soledad; passage back down Hull Canal; evening visit to Sand Dollar Beach.

Day 8, 3 March: Morning bus ride from Puerto San Carlos to La Paz, with a few birds seen en route.

The below list includes all species seen by our group during the tour 30 Jan–5 Feb 2007. I provide some general comments for all species. Locations are listed for as many species as was practical, and I give some general comments on the abundance of each species on the tour. Dates are listed only when the date seen is not clear from the location (e.g., all Isla San José sightings will be from 25 Feb). Special highlights, rare or unusual species, and sightings that were particularly special are in ALL CAPS; regionally rare species are underlined.

ES=Isla Espiritu Santo/Los Islotes; ISJ=Isla San José; MB=Magdalena Bay; SJ=San José del Cabo; SL=Cabo San Lucas

SPECIES LIST

Brant – MB; these were “Black” Brant, *B. b. nigricans*.

Blue-winged Teal – SJ; 50 at the estero

Cinnamon Teal – SJ; just 4 at the estero

Green-winged Teal – SJ; 6 at the estero

Redhead – MB; common in Magdalena Bay

Lesser Scaup – MB; 2 seen among Redheads in Mag Bay

Red-breasted Merganser – MB

Pacific Loon – MB; 2 in Hull Canal 28 Feb

Pied-billed Grebe – SJ

Eared Grebe – ISJ, ES, SL, MB; seen daily, with rafts of up to 350 in San José Channel

Pink-footed Shearwater – one in San José Channel and 4 at La Entrada

Black-vented Shearwater – a couple probables near Gorda Banks, 40 off La Entrada

Black Storm-Petrel – two off ES and 2 near Gorda Banks

Red-billed Tropicbird – one seen by a couple folks at Los Islotes; another chased down west of ES

Blue-footed Booby – SJ, ES, SL; great looks at these birds at Los Islotes and Land's End
Brown Booby – SJ, ES, SL; great looks at these birds at Los Islotes and Land's End. These are subspecies *brewsteri*, with the whitish head in the male.
American White Pelican – MB; up to 50 at Boca La Soledad
Brown Pelican – Common throughout
Brandt's Cormorant – SJ, SL, MB; largest groups roosting at Land's End
Neotropic Cormorant – MB
Double-crested Cormorant – SJ, MB
Magnificent Frigatebird – ISJ, SJ, ES, SL, MB; huge concentration roosting at Land's End
Great Blue Heron – ES, SJ
Great Egret – SJ, MB
Snowy Egret – SJ, MB
Little Blue Heron – MB
Tricolored Heron – SJ (1), MB
Reddish Egret – MB
Green Heron – MB; two seen, these were the endemic Baja subspecies *anthonyi*, characterized by a more purplish head and neck
Black-crowned Night-Heron – SJ, MB
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – MB
White Ibis – MB
White-faced Ibis – SJ
Turkey Vulture – ISJ, ES, SL, SJ, MB
Osprey – ES, SL, SJ, MB
Bald Eagle – MB; Mark saw one immature opposite Puerto San Carlos. I have yet to see this species in southern Baja, but a few are resident on Mag Bay.
Northern Harrier – MB
Harris's Hawk – seen on drive south from Puerto San Carlos
Zone-tailed Hawk – SL; one spotted by Joanne as we entered the harbor at Cabo San Lucas!
Red-tailed Hawk – ISJ, SL, MB
Crested Caracara – seen on our drive south from Puerto San Carlos
American Kestrel – ES, SL
Merlin – SL ; one zipped out the harbor as we were leaving, seen by Kurt only
Peregrine Falcon – ES, SL, MB; nesting pairs seen at Los Islotes and Land's End
Sora – SJ
Common Moorhen – SJ
American Coot – SJ
Black-bellied Plover – MB
Semipalmated Plover – MB; 2 at Sand Dollar Beach
American Oystercatcher – ISJ, ES, MB
Black-necked Stilt – SJ, MB
Spotted Sandpiper – ISJ, SJ
Wandering Tattler – ES; one at Los Islotes was a highlight – this species is rather scarce here
Greater Yellowlegs – ES, MB
Willet – MB
Whimbrel – ISJ, MB
Long-billed Curlew – MB
Marbled Godwit – MB
Western Sandpiper – MB; a flock of peeps presumed to be this species
Short-billed Dowitcher – MB; dowitchers on Mag Bay presumed to be this species
Laughing Gull – MB
Bonaparte's Gull – Gorda Banks, MB; more than usual in southern Baja this year

Heerman's Gull – SJ, ES, SL, MB
Ring-billed Gull – MB
California Gull – SJ, ES, SL, MB
Herring Gull – MB
Yellow-footed Gull – SJ, ES, MB; the birds on Mag Bay were on the “wrong” side. It is not clear why so many Yellow-foots have been seen on this side recently.
Western Gull – MB
Caspian Tern – MB; one seen
Royal Tern – MB
Forster's Tern – Gorda Banks, MB; the bird on Gorda was surprising offshore
Pomarine Jaeger – Gorda Banks; two seen nicely as they worked the gull flock around fishing boats at Gorda Banks
Craveri's Murrelet – SJ, La Entrada; the couple seen near Isla San José were leader-only, but Joanne managed to see the small groups off La Entrada.
Rock Pigeon – SL
White-winged Dove – SJ
Mourning Dove – SJ
Common Ground-Dove – SJ
Ruddy Ground-Dove – SJ; a recent colonist of southern Baja, we saw one female
Xantus's Hummingbird – ISJ, SJ; great looks at this Baja endemic!
Costa's Hummingbird – ISJ, SJ
Belted Kingfisher – MB
Gila Woodpecker – ES, SJ
Gilded Flicker – SJ
Gray Flycatcher – ES; seen well
Black Phoebe – SJ
Ash-throated Flycatcher – ISJ, ES
Tropical Kingbird – SJ; another recent colonist, this species probably nests here but that has yet to be confirmed
Cassin's Kingbird – SJ
Loggerhead Shrike – ISJ, ES, SJ
Western Scrub-Jay – MB; in the mangroves
Common Raven – ISJ, ES, MB
Horned Lark – MB; endemic subspecies, appropriately named *magdalenae*.
Tree Swallow – MB
Violet-green Swallow – ES
Northern Rough-winged Swallow – SJ
Barn Swallow – SJ
Verdin – ISJ, ES, SJ
Cactus Wren – SJ; heard only, but seen by a couple folks on the drive south from Puerto San Carlos
Marsh Wren – SJ; heard only
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – ISJ, ES
California Gnatcatcher – ISJ, ES; not quite endemic (it sneaks into southern California), but a classic “Baja” species
Northern Mockingbird – ISJ, ES, SJ
European Starling – SJ; at a nest
Phainopepla – seen by a couple folks on the drive south from Puerto San Carlos
Orange-crowned Warbler – ISJ, ES, SJ, MB; at least two subspecies: *orestera* and *lutescens*, the latter being the brighter yellow ones that prevailed on the Gulf side

Yellow Warbler – SJ; we also had “**Mangrove**” **Warbler** at MB – gorgeous, chestnut-headed males

Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler – SJ

Black-and-white Warbler – MB; one seen and one heard

Northern Waterthrush – MB

Common Yellowthroat – SJ, MB (one female)

Belding's Yellowthroat – SJ; another Baja endemic, we had great looks at this large yellowthroat at the estero

Wilson's Warbler – SJ

Western Tanager – SJ

Green-tailed Towhee – ES; heard only

Brewer's Sparrow – ES

Black-throated Sparrow – ES

Savannah Sparrow – MB; endemic *magdalenae* subspecies. If Savannah Sparrows are “split”, this will be one of the “Large-billed” group.

White-crowned Sparrow – SJ; seen by Karen and a few others at the estero

Black-headed Grosbeak – ES, SJ; nice males seen on Isla Espiritu Santo!

Brown-headed Cowbird – SJ

Hooded Oriole – SJ; beautiful

Scott's Oriole – SJ; one singing first-year male

House Finch – ISJ, SJ

House Sparrow - SL

LEADER ONLY

Bell's Vireo – SJ

MAMMALS

Black Jackrabbit – ES; quick looks at this single island endemic as it dashed away from us

Black-tailed Jackrabbit – MB; on Isla Magdalena

Isla Espiritu Santo Antelope-Squirrel – ES; another single island endemic that we scored on ES

Coyote – MB; fairly common in MB, we saw 6 or 7

California Sea Lion – ISJ, ES, SL, MB; great experiences with this animal, especially at Los Islotes!

Bottlenosed Dolphin – ES, MB

Blue Whale – San José Channel; two massive animals

Humpback Whale – Gorda Banks area; at least 40 animals, including many giving an incredible breaching performance! The double breach was unforgettable.

Gray Whale – MB; how can we forget those friendly babies!

REPTILES

Zebra-tailed Lizard – ISJ

Isla San José Whiptail – ISJ; a single island endemic we found on our first walk

Side-blotched Lizard – ISJ, ES, MB

Baja California Spiny Lizard – ISJ

Pacific Garter Snake – SJ; this one we saw as it headed into the gullet of a Great Egret!

BUTTERFLIES

Howarth's White – ISJ, ES

Cloudless Sulphur – ES

Dina Yellow – ES

Ceraunus Blue – ISJ

Leda Ministreak – ISJ

Silver-banded Hairstreak – ES; spectacular!

Gray Hairstreak – ES

Murphy's Metalmark – ES

American Snout – ISJ; a really weird butterfly

Common Mestra – ISJ; only the third record for Baja!!!

Texan Crescent – ISJ

White-patched Skipper – ISJ

Dorantes Longtail – ISJ

Blackened Bluewing – ISJ