

Humpbacks aplenty feast off Central Coast



JODI FREDIANI/SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL PHOTOS

A trio of humpbacks feeds on a krill bloom, foreground. Humpback sightings have been plentiful on Monterey Bay lately.

Whales and Whaling
Upwelling of cold water draws krill to surface of sea

By Jason Hoppin
Santa Cruz Sentinel

SANTA CRUZ — Humpback whales are visiting the Central Coast in droves, feeding on a bloom of krill that is rooted in a recent spell of breezy weather.

Upwelling — the wind-driven process that pulls nutrients and cold water to the surface from Monterey Bay's deep canyons — is providing a smorgasbord for the playful behemoths.

"It's a pretty good humpback whale show going on right now," said Nancy Black, marine biologist with Monterey Bay Whale Watch in Monterey.

Humpbacks are being joined by other creatures, giving boaters and kayakers a show that has provided viewers with some of the most memorable whale-watching moments in recent memory.

"(Customers) have seen a couple

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A humpback fluke is seen in Monterey Bay, but observers have seen other types of whales in the area as well recently.

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of gray whales out with their calves, about a mile offshore," said Amelia Nommensen of Kayak Connection at the Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor.

Upwelling is key to the Monterey Bay's rich diversity. When winds blow surface water away, it is replaced by cooler, nutrient-rich water from the deep that supports a variety of marine life.

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"It just creates this big convection cycle," said Steve Anderson, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Monterey.

Not only did April wind speeds average more than 20 mph on the open sea, but until this week water temperatures were in the mid- to high-40s as well, nearly 10 degrees cooler than they are now.

Those added nutrients reverberate up and down the food chain, bringing

the bay to life.

Humpbacks and gray whales heading north aren't the only top species on the Monterey Bay: Killer whales have also been spotted over the past months.

But they don't eat krill — orcas have been spotted feasting on gray whale calves. And dolphins have been spotted in unusual abundance.

Black estimated seeing three-dozen humpbacks in the Monterey Bay, a fairly high number. Wednesday alone, she spotted 20

within a fairly confined area.

"When there are a lot of humpbacks here, they're not just feeding but sometimes they're fairly active," Black said. "They seem to be more active when other whales are around."

That can include breaching and even approaching tour boats. Black said two pairs approached Wednesday, turning on their sides to get a better look at the boat and generally acting curious.