

Whales Along the Coast of Davenport

By Alverda Orlando

From the Davenport area you can view the annual southern migration of the California gray whale. The gray whale spends the summer in the Bering Sea feeding on small squid and krill. The whales migrate south to spend the winter in the warm lagoons of Baja California, where they mate and have their young. It is believed that they follow a shore current and that the kelp beds offer some protection. The migration takes place from January, when the whales are first observed heading south, to the end of May, when the last of those heading north are seen.

The females are larger than the males. They grow to a length of about 45 feet. The young are born tail first and are from 12 to 15 feet long. As soon as the young calf is born the mother noses it to the surface so it can get its first breath of air. It will grow 18 feet in a year.

There are two classes of whales, those with teeth and those with baleen or whalebone. The grays belong to the latter. They are not gray as the name would imply, but almost black with many white and gray spots like patches and many scars. Barnacles attach themselves to their great bodies just as they do to ship's hulls and wharf piling. It is thought that whales scrape against the rocks to remove the barnacles from their bodies.

Davenport is as close to gray whales' route as any spot along their 6,000 mile journey. They have scared many a fisherman in small boats when they spyhop. When spyhopping, the head comes out of the water straight up about 8 or 10 feet as if they were walking on their tails. One fisherman recalls fishing off Davenport in a 12-foot boat in about 30 feet of water and when he looked up from baiting his hook wondered where that "rock" had come from. He did not see it a few minutes earlier. The "rock" turned out to be a spyhopping gray whale who quietly surfaced.

Captain Davenport devised a plan whereby he and his men could go out from shore in a whale boat, make the kill and tow the body back to the land station where the blubber could be removed and dried out in huge pots. This method kept the crews with their families and proved more successful than completing the whole operation on board ships at sea.

On January 1, 1976 the California gray whale became the state's official marine mammal. The gray whale was ordered protected by international agreement in 1938. It is with deep sadness that this brief period came to an end in 1978. The International Whaling Commission, meeting in London that year, removed the whale's protected designation. "Stocks are healthy at the present time," was the reason given for the action. Annually, 178 gray whales may be killed legally. Alaskan and Russian aborigines take the California gray whale for food. The last whaling enterprise in the United States ended in 1971 with the closing of the station at Point San Pablo in the San Francisco Bay.

Sources

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