

# A Glimpse Of The

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## California Gray Whale

At first, there's an almost imperceptible spray of water and you think your eyes may be playing tricks on you.

But as you carefully scan the waters of Monterey Bay, you finally see it. For just a few seconds, the 40-foot-long back of the California gray whale humps out of the water.

And if you're patient enough to continue to watch the waters, five minutes or so later the whale's huge tail flips up from the bay as if to wave goodbye.

The sport is known as whale watching and it can be done from such spots as the cliffs of Davenport, Lighthouse Point or, better yet, from the deck of a boat.

For it's the time of year that some 3,000 to 4,000 California gray whales are making their way from Alaska to birthing lagoons in Baja Mexico and back again, a trek equal to about 7,000 land miles or 6,400 nautical miles.

The most popular times to see the whales from this Central California vantage point is either during the first two weeks in January, as the whales make their way south, or in mid-March, when the whales are on their way back to Alaska.

But if you missed these fascinating creatures these last couple months, don't despair. The best is yet to come, according to Ronn Storro-Patterson, a gray whale expert and vice president of the Whale Center in Oakland.

"The northern migration is far more interesting to watch because the southern migration is a businesslike affair.

"On the southern migration, the whales spend most of their time swimming. The northern migration is different because the animals seem more relaxed and will sometimes spend several days in one location," Storro-Patterson said.

Frank "Lud" McCrary, a veteran whale watcher from his cliffside office of Big Creek Lumber Co. near Davenport, also said the best time to see the whales is in the spring.

"They'll swing clear into a cove and play around for a couple hours," he said.

In the spring, the whales seem to be attracted to the fresh water pouring into the ocean from creeks and have been spotted playing in the waves near Scott Creek and Waddell Creek on the northern Santa Cruz coast, McCrary said.

"They're usually about three miles out. You'll just see a white puff. But if you get a telescope or binoculars on them, after that last blow you'll see their tails come up.

"Sometimes you'll see them jumping, especially in the spring. You'll see this big splash. It's like a big explosion," McCrary related.

While it's most always the gray whales that people see, McCrary pointed out that blue whale recently washed up dead at Pigeon Point in San Mateo County. He added that he's also seen the shark-like fin of the killer whale in these waters.

The gray whales are still passing by the Santa Cruz coast all the way into June, so people shouldn't stop scanning the coast after March, Storro-Patterson stressed.

"It's not generally appreciated that the female whales with their calves (newborns) begin leaving Mexico in early April and pass by here about the first of May.

"The most interesting thing is that people have stopped looking for the gray whale by that time and it's a shame because the cows (female whales) with their calves come closest to shore then . . .

"The cows and calves are around here all through May and June. You can see one or two per hour during these months," he said.

The gray whales leave their summer homes in Alaska as the waters start freezing over in early November. They are in search of warm waters, where the females give birth. This southern migration is led by pregnant females that will give birth in early January in the warm lagoons of the Baja.

They are followed by mature males and non-pregnant females and by juvenile whales. Some of these females get pregnant on their way south, giving birth 13 months later during the next year's migration.

The northern migration is just the opposite, led beginning in February by the males and by the females that haven't given birth. The cows and their calves are left in the lagoons, not leaving until April.

"The lagoons are probably especially impor-

tant to the calves, offering them protection from the rough seas," Storro-Patterson stated.

"This is highly important during the first few minutes to an hour of life. The lagoons further allow both the cow and calf to spend much time resting. They probably also provide protection from killer whales."

The newborn whales are about 16 feet long. The females grow to around 49 feet, while the males average around 47 feet. A full-grown gray whale can weigh 30-35 tons.

A whale reaches this incredible size not by eating large fish, but by consuming huge quantities of small marine life known as krill.

The gray whale belongs to a suborder of whales known as Mysticeti that feed by filtering sea water through sieve-like plates known as baleen. These whales don't have teeth. They also are known to eat krill off the ocean bottom.

Some would swear there's nothing more exciting than seeing one of these huge creatures come to the surface.

The whale's spout, what most whale watchers spot first, is the whale's breathing mechanism. A mammal, the whale must come up for air every few minutes.

"There's something kind of fascinating about it," McCrary said of whale watching. "I've been watching for about 30 years. I never seem to get tired of it, though. They'll usually blow about four times, then you'll see their tails and then they go down."

Fishing boats full of excited whale watchers leave such spots as Monterey and Half Moon Bay — as well as Santa Cruz almost every weekend in January, February and March.

The boats only have to go a few miles off shore to find whales, since the grays follow the continental shelf on their migration.

This area provides great whale watching opportunities because the continental shelf here swings into Monterey Bay and narrows into the shore at Davenport.

Some of the more experienced adult gray whales, however, will take a short cut across deeper waters at the mouth of Monterey Bay, avoiding coming into the bay.

One of those who enjoys taking out groups of whale watchers on a boat is Nick Rosa of Los Gatos, a veteran whale watcher himself and graduate student studying the reproduction problems of the gray whales.

Out with Rosa on a clear sunny day in late

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January, a boatload of about 40 people were treated to the sight of about 20 whales in six hours.

The first whale was spotted just minutes out of Monterey harbor, just a few hundred yards from shore.

During the day, the whales were spotted in groups of four and five. They were near enough to the boat to see with the naked eye, though binoculars or a telephoto lens just made the sightings more spectacular.

Standing on deck, continuously scanning the choppy waters for more whales, Rosa explained why he's so taken by this amazing animal.

"It's so big, yet it has a body temperature close to yours. It was born alive and it's fed on mother's milk.

"It has a very large brain. The largest brains in the world are in whales and dolphins. This thing that's as big as a Greyhound bus is warm, alive and aware. It's able to form complex pictures of its environment, but with its ears instead of its eyes. And, it's probably happy."

Whales have good eyesight, but because they travel in dark waters, they have had to get along without relying solely on vision.

"Whales and sea lions and penguins and fur seals all have developed sonar and find most of their food by it. Whales navigate by it. The way the whale is able to follow the coast is to find a bottom contour and, by sending out sounds, it follows this contour," Rosa explained.

Rosa will be taking out a boatload of whale watchers again in March from Santa Cruz and the Whale Center also has trips from Half Moon Bay planned. For more information, call Rosa at 371-1802 or 356-6330 or the Whale Center at (415) 654-4892.

While the California gray whale has been protected from mass commercial hunting since 1938, Rosa and other whale lovers are concerned that special protections may soon be eased because the gray whales are increasing in number.

Before whaling countries agreed to no longer hunt gray whales in large numbers, the popu-

lation had decreased to about 4,400, according to statistics provided by the Whale Center. Now, it's estimated that there are 11,000-17,000 gray whales.

This is getting close to the 15,000-30,000 gray whales scientists figure existed before commercial whaling in the 1800s and early 1900s decimated the gray whale population.

In this area, Davenport and Richmond were large commercial whaling centers then. The whales were sought mainly for their fat, which was turned into oil. In recent years, there's been little commercial need for this oil.

But fears are rising that the gray whales soon may be hunted again in large numbers, since the International Whaling Commission took them off the protected list in 1978 and reclassified them as "sustained management stock."

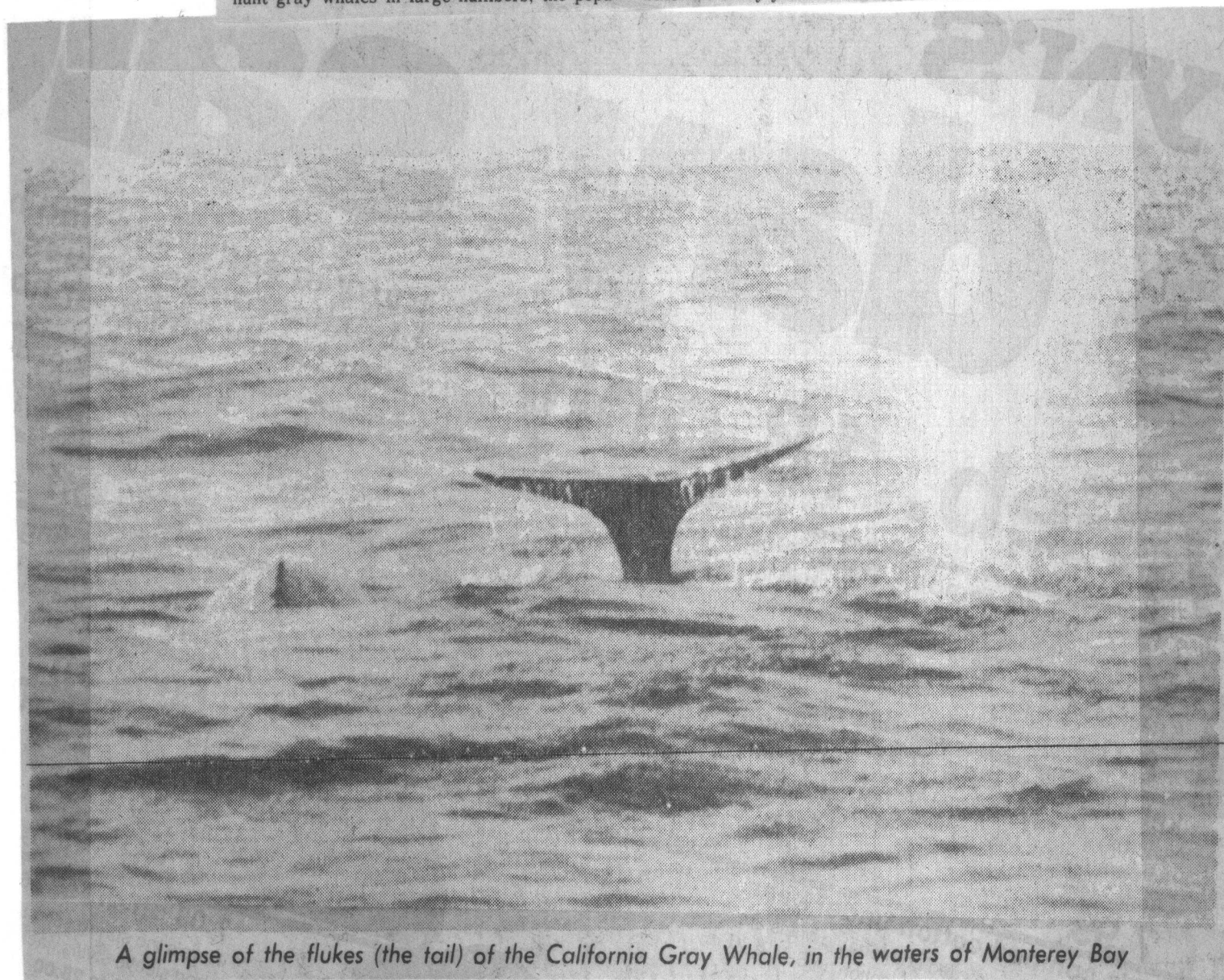
This means that commercial quotas can now be set by the commission. But whale lovers were relieved when the commission only set a quota of 178 gray whales to be killed a year for subsistence by the Eskimos of Alaska's Chukchi Peninsula and by the aboriginal people of the Soviet Union.

Gray whales first came under protection in 1938 when many whaling countries signed an agreement prohibiting their killing.

The Soviet Union, however, didn't sign the agreement and, although Japan did, it was wartime and the Japanese kept killing gray whales. Between 1938 and 1947, it has been estimated that 525 grays were killed by these two countries, which were using factory ships.

But in 1947, the Soviet Union and Japan joined most other whaling countries in signing the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling which continued the protection of gray whales from commercial killing and created the International Whaling Commission.

Since then, scientists and aboriginal hunters have taken 3,063 grays, leaving plenty in the waters of the Pacific Ocean to delight whale watchers every year.



A glimpse of the flukes (the tail) of the California Gray Whale, in the waters of Monterey Bay