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Bay Hosts Big Guests

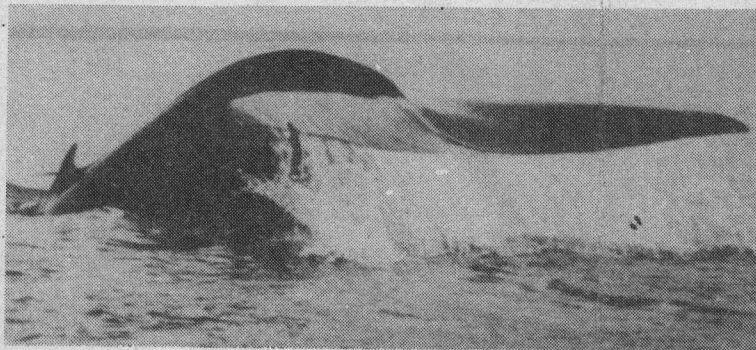
Terri Morgan

Rare blue whales, the world's largest animal, have been feeding in the Monterey Bay since last August. Attracted by swarms of krill, a half-inch-long shrimplike animal, dozens of blue whales have been participating in feeding frenzies in the bay and off the Farrallon Islands.

Researchers from the Moss Landing Marine Lab are spending as much time as possible getting a firsthand look at these endangered animals, which are larger than any of the dinosaurs.

"The excitement has been crescendoing," Brigit McAfee, a graduate student at Moss Landing Marine Lab told the United Press International. "The marine lab is in a subtle but discernible state of frenzy."

Little is known about the blue whales, except what scientists have learned from studying dead animals that washed ashore or those killed by whalers. With about 30 blue whales feeding in the bay, researchers are getting a chance to study their habits over an extended period of time. By scooping up whale droppings, researchers can learn what the whales are consuming. By listening



RICHARD SEARS

to their sounds underwater and watching their interactions with other whales scientists hope to unravel some of the mystery surrounding their social behavior.

Whalers hunted blue whales zealously until they were nearly extinct. Today, 20 years after hunting blue whales was banned by the International Whale Convention, the Sierra Club estimates the blue whale population to be about 11,000 worldwide, with 1,500 in the North Pacific. Some zoologists doubt that the blue whale will ever recover from over-hunting.

While the whale hunters did a number on the blue whales, the whales didn't go without a fight. A

100-foot adult, weighing in at 200 tons could be a formidable opponent when harassed. The steam whaler *Puma* reported being towed for nearly 24 hours, with its engines running at half speed astern, by an angry harpooned blue whale.

Blue whales have passed by the Monterey Bay before, on their annual migration to Mexico, but never so many, nor for so long. Blue whales spend their summers feeding in the Gulf of Alaska and travel, usually singly or in pairs, to Mexico where they breed offshore in the subtropical waters. No one knows exactly where and when they

breed, nor their exact migration patterns.

Despite the number of blue whales currently in the Monterey Bay, there is no proof that the blue whale population has increased worldwide.

"There is no evidence the blue whale is making a comeback," said Alan Baldrige, librarian at Stanford University's Hopkins Marine Station in Pacific Grove.

The whales have been visible to fishermen and sightseeing boats as well as to researchers.

"Late September, when I was albacore fishing we had one swim up and surface right next to the boat," said Ed Howard, an avid fisherman. "It was awesome. The whale was twice as big as our boat and it could have done some damage if it wanted to."

It's unlikely that a blue whale would attack a fishing vessel unprovoked, since blue whales are baleen rather than toothed whales. Blue whales feed on krill and other planktonic animals that they strain out of the water through large fringed plates that hang down from their upper jaw. With a feeding demand of two to four percent of its body weight, a 200-ton blue whale may eat four to eight tons of krill daily.

A lot of this food energy goes into their young. The average calf, weaned at about seven months, gains seven to eight pounds an hour while nursing.

Blue whales, like other baleen whales, are distinguished from toothed whales by their paired blowholes. In addition, female baleen whales are slightly larger than the males.

Blue whales are sexually mature at ten years. Females produce a single calf every two or three years, following a 12-month gestation period. Although they generally travel in pairs, scientists feel they do not travel with their mates, nor do they mate for life.

Since the whaling ban has been enforced, the blue whale's main predator has been the Orca or killer whale. "The same fishing trip," said Howard, "we came upon a pod of killer whales. They had surrounded a blue whale and were feeding on it. We must have just missed the kill. The killer whales were ripping off huge chunks of flesh and there was blood everywhere."

"We made tracks and left them alone," continued Howard. "We were on a 50-foot boat and watching the whales made us feel pretty small and insignificant."