



GRAY WHALES COUNT
SANTA BARBARA CHANNEL

A RESEARCH / EDUCATION PROJECT OF UCSB'S COAL OIL POINT NATURAL RESERVE, GOLETA + AMERICAN CETACEAN SOCIETY - CHANNEL ISLANDS + CASCADIA RESEARCH COLLECTIVE, OLYMPIA, WA + MARINE PHYSICAL LABORATORY, SCRIPPS INSTITUTION OF OCEANOGRAPHY, UCSD, LA JOLLA

COMMENTS ONLINE 2009

WEEK 8
MAR 23 - 29

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Saturday's Report: March 29, 2009

Observation: 8 hours
Totals: Northbound Er 5 Calves 0
Totals for season, thru Sunday:
Northbound Er 379 Calves 0

There was not much traffic this Sunday through the nearshore of the Santa Barbara Channel. Yesterday, there were lots of sailboats, not today. The humpbacks seem to have moved south towards the islands, and the sea lions weren't porpoising hither and thither.

The ocean highway was left to about twenty bottlenose dolphins and five, large, gray whales (no calves). With more room on the road, one of the whales took the opportunity to breach four times, just past the Point. The two otters took most of the day off in the kelp.

Saturday's Report: March 28, 2009

Observation: 8 hours
Totals: Northbound Er 4 Calves 0
Totals for season, thru Saturday:
Northbound Er 374 Calves 0

It was a beautiful, shirtsleeve day for us sit around and wait for a calf that did not come. We had two sightings of northbound gray whales. The first was three large whales that wasted no time passing Coal Oil Point. They had long (nine minute) downtimes and big blows with big flukes from one of the whales.

We saw very little of our fourth whale, but enough to bring the Count to four for the day and three hundred seventy-four for 2009.

The bottlenose dolphins went back to their usual mixed directions, and we were pleased to find three sea otters in the kelp to the east of the Point.

Note: We are not concerned that we have not yet seen a calf; just excited, waiting.

Friday's Report: March 27, 2009

Observation: 8.5 hours
Totals: Northbound Er 6 Calves 0
Totals for season, thru Friday:
Northbound Er 370 Calves 0

A survey is a continuous stream. Our dolphins that all went west yesterday, all, without exception, came back east today. This is the only time we can remember this boomerang happening.

And, the game was still on: Hide-and-go-north. Just before eleven a little gray whale raised its blow-hole and squirted a peculiar blow, then dropped down next to the kelp. Several minutes later we caught a back, and that was that.

Through almost the rest of the day we saw an osprey, our first migrating Pacific loons, two otters, and lots of hazy sky and sea.

Well after four, we sighted our second gray whale from blows backlit by the late-afternoon sun. In the sun path we saw one more blow, and considered ourselves lucky.

And, maybe we are ... just before five we saw a distant blow that was likely a gray whale heading our way. Literally a minute before five we saw a blow from what had to be a different whale already past Campus Point, a different whale.

The "different" whale was large and traveled along the kelp. It surfaced right next to one of our otters and a startled gull. The otter was unmoved. We tracked the whale across Coal Oil Point and past the buoys. Meanwhile, the first likely-gray-whale turned into three amigos, all gray, traveling in bold fashion, north along the Gringo Coast.

Vete en paz.



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Thursday's Report: March 26, 2009

Observation: 8.52 hours
Totals: Northbound Er 5 Calves 0
Totals for season, thru Thursday:
Northbound Er 364 Calves 0

The long and windy ...

We put in extra time because the sighting just before five could have been a cow/calf pair. We initially saw a big then much smaller blow, but it took fifteen minutes to see a body in the very heavy chop. We saw the pair three times more and knew it was not a cow/calf pair. Number one is still ahead of us (or "behind" in a geographical context as relates to the migration). Whatever ... it was a pair of gray whales on their journey north through windy waters.

In the morning, it was nice and we easily saw and tracked a trio of gray whales. We also saw about two dozen bottlenose dolphins, all, also going the same direction as the gray whales: west. Throughout the day, we did not see any dolphins going east, with the wind and waves.

Steadily the wind increased and we spent most of the day in twenty-plus knots of wind. Of course the windboarders had a blast. The two sea otter we noted stayed close to the Point. They rested, dove some, ate some, and did not swim west against the waves.

Humpbacks two miles out made sure we saw them even though it was wilder offshore. Maybe because of that, they (or one) breached many times. We know there was a group of three and we can't say for sure how many whales breached. All we know is there was a lot of splashing mixed into the whitecaps.

Wednesday's Report: March 25, 2009

Observation: 8 hours
Totals: Northbound Er 12 Calves 0
Totals for season, thru Wednesday:
Northbound Er 359 Calves 0

Hide-and-go-north is the new game our whales are playing. We found them in the kelp, along the kelp, under pelican splashes and in front of, be-

hind, and outside other whales. Sometimes they even looked like something they were not.

In the morning we saw a very small gray whale. It lifted its head and posed with a baleeny grin. No one had a camera ready, but we won't forget the image. The whale had a lot of barnacles and we think it may have been a yearling making its first solo, keeping ever so close to the kelp, stirring the two otters napping not so far away.

Another morning whale was hiding in the kelp (or more likely feeding) and disappeared for a while at Campus Point. When it got to Coal Oil Point, it made a right turn into the kelp again: another small whale.

A large whale built up our hopes of the first cow/calf pair. It traveled the right route, haltingly along the kelp, and it even cruised along the shore and inside the buoys passed our site and along the waves at Sands and Ellwood. Only thing was ... there was no calf that we could find.

Three whales in the first four hours: Perhaps the whales were winning the game.

We found another single at one-thirty and one more at two-thirty.

At Three-thirty it was -- apparently -- all-in-free because seven whales, three pairs and a single, stampeded north into the sparkling sun path, while observers scrambled to document the event.

Today was hump-day. At 1 PM we passed the halfway point in the survey. The last thing we saw today was a humpback whale breaching amidst the building wind three miles out.

Tuesday's Report: March 24, 2009

Observation: 8 hours
Totals: Northbound Er 11 Calves 0
Totals for season, thru Tuesday:
Northbound Er 347 Calves 0

High atmospheric pressure developed over the eastern Pacific Ocean, and the resulting warming trend and lack of wind created low pressure for the Observation Team. It was a laid-back,



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southern California kind of day. Everything was kinda slow.

Our first whale waited for the second hour. Our second waited until after lunch. Some bottlenose dolphins slowly moved west through the kelp about the same time.

Just after two in the afternoon we saw some blows and splashing in the distance. It was four northbound, gray whales seriously taking their own sweet time. This was not life in the fast lane.

The Condor Express reported seeing them at eleven and we expected the whales to arrive at Coal Oil Point between twelve thirty and one. There was no anxiety like Alice's rabbit. There was, however, some rabbit-like activity for two hours and counting. We had to let them be while we attended to another happy trio that was focusing a bit more on migrating and passed the group of four like they were just standing around, which, of course, they weren't.

In the last half hour our final pair of whales cruised on into the sunset and made our total eleven for the day. We also counted two sea otters.

Monday's Report: March 23, 2009

Some days are truly different, not just another shade of day.

Yesterday was atrocious. Gale-force winds kept us from Counting. Today, started cold and instead of gale warnings from NOAA, we faced SMALL CRAFT WARNING THROUGH THE AFTERNOON.

When we arrived, the wind was about seven knots with tiny whitecaps. That doesn't sound like much, but at Coal Oil Point, any wind in the morning is an indicator of tough times ahead.

The first hour we looked around and didn't see much, a crew boat going out to the oil platform at 9:45.

In the next hour, we found our only otter. Shortly after, we saw a whale, close on the right side of

the Point, already past us. There was a lot of glare from the early-morning sun blasting off the slight chop in the ocean: Fair Observation Quality, at best. We did, however, get good looks and realized it was a pair of northbound gray whales.

With that in the books, we saw a couple of blows, way to the east. It took this threesome an hour and twenty minutes to get past us. Yes, we got good looks, many good looks.

In the interim, a likely humpback blew at the horizon. On our datasheet, it became, officially, one of those Unidentified Large Whales. But, we were otherwise occupied and not too concerned. We were still engaged with the trio.

And, as that engagement ended, another trio appeared in the east and the wind had not increased a bit. It was becoming gorgeous, with Good Observation Quality, just some haze in the east.

Like the other group of three gray whales, we tracked these whales for a long time, an hour and a half. Both groups maintained consistent downtimes around eight minutes, a touch longer for the second group, and both traveled outside Platform Holly, two miles offshore.

Whenever anyone mentioned that the wind had not come up, someone else knocked on wood. That seemed to be working better than NOAA's forecast.

Ten minutes later, blows in the east. The pair whizzed by in just under one hour. (Our whales were exhibiting that migrating gray-whale trait: slow travel.)

A huge splash on the horizon was all we saw of our second likely humpback, our second Unidentified Large Whale. Yet again, our attention was quickly directed elsewhere, to a group of five gray whales that were playing all sorts of games as they rolled and slow traveled west past Coal Oil Point and just inside Holly.

Someone commented that we had not seen any dolphins, and three minutes later about twenty bottlenose dolphins showed up and stayed for the



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rest of the afternoon.

This was becoming a remarkable day, and a day we thought we would not get it in. We counted fifteen gray whales. What next?

Next was a surprise ... Straight out from our position, way out, we thought we might have more humpbacks. We caught a glimpse in our binoculars as we were tracking the gray whales pass much closer to our position. Through the spotting scope, we identified killer whales. Everybody, including some visitors to the site, got great looks of the distant, biggest members of the dolphin family. (Be careful what you wish for.)

As recounted, we had seen a lot of gray whales heading west, and the killer whales were not too far offshore.

Once more our attention was diverted by gray whales, a pair. A reason we track the whales is to learn more about them: their identities, how many are in the group, and if there might be a calf. This pair had us looking. Could this be our first cow/calf pair of 2009? Then someone remembered the killer whales offshore ...

OK ... those off you holding your breath may now breathe.

First it was not a cow/calf pair, and while we were on site, there was no interaction between the species. Actually, there was quite a bit of interaction between the bottlenose dolphins and gray whales. The whales were mating less than a half-mile offshore and they were surrounded by the dolphins who were joined by sea lions.

This was an amazing finale: the spectacle of whales, dolphins, and sea lions in the foreground with orca blows in the distant background.

Some days are truly different.

Observation: 8.07 hours
Totals Monday: Northbound Er 17 Calves 0
Totals for season, thru Monday:
Northbound Er 336 Calves 0