

Gray whale migration in full swing in local waters

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GRAY WHALES can be an impressive sight as they make their 10,000-12,000-mile migration to Mexico.

Photo courtesy of the Aquarium of the Pacific

Late last month I climbed into my 14-foot inflatable boat and made my way into the heart of the Santa Monica Bay to, hopefully, get a glimpse of a migrating gray whale making his or her way down to the warm waters of Baja California, Mexico.

While I found myself in the middle of no less than 50 common dolphin darting and jumping inches from the bow of my boat, I saw no grays that day.

It was a disappointment because the inspiration for heading out was a report of an incredible instance that

happened on Jan. 20. On a whale watch, longtime cetacean researcher and director of the L.A. chapter of the American Cetacean Society's Gray Whale Census and Behavior Project, Alisa Schulman-Janiger and a small group witnessed a pod of at least 23 gray whales in the same area I was camped.

Schulman-Janiger told the passengers it was indeed a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to see so many grays collected in one small area. The normal behavior of these animals during their migration, (10,000-12,000 miles, the longest of any mammal) is a steady plodding, either in pairs or solo – occasionally a male, female and calf. The cetacean researcher told NBC news that it was the largest sighting she had ever seen in this area of so many whales in one group.

This experience, along with solid local consensus numbers, is good news for a species that was hunted to extinction in the Atlantic Ocean in the 1700s and to the brink of total decimation here in the Pacific Ocean.

According to the Southwest Fisheries Science Center, the population of the eastern north pacific gray whales, which are still protected under international law, is presently estimated at about 20,000 animals.

"We saw a lot of early grays this season, like last season," Schulman-Janiger told The Argonaut. "Our counts are just below last season's counts, which were quite high for this time of year."

Since Dec. 1 the Census and Behavior Project has counted 654 grays making their way, mostly down the coast – 644 have been reported to be traveling south with only 10 northbound travelers.

The 99,000-pound mammals are thought to prefer the warm waters of peaceful Mexican lagoons for their birthing. It's supposed by scientists that these areas provide an effective environment for acclimation of newborn calves, and more recent theories involve the notion that they are also recognized by whales as a type of safe haven – specifically a place free of predatory killer whales.

They typically head from the northern waters of the Pacific down to Mexico with many hugging the coastline. With the mammals beginning their long journey in November, this time of year yields the whales' highest levels of traffic. Early travelers are on their way back north and others are still heading south.

From now until March it's possible to witness grays coming from either direction. Traveling at around four to six knots, they often clear Point Dume and swim along an invisible line to the Palos Verdes area. For local boaters and/or potential whale watchers, now is a great time to get a look at these incredible animals.

For boaters, remember that these whales are on a mission, many are pregnant and would rather not be harassed in any way.

"Many people don't know that these whales are protected or that getting too close can potentially cause harm to these magnificent animals," said local marine biologist Maddalena Bearzi, who spends numerous hours in the bay conducting research. "In the last week, paddle boarders and surfers were literally 'over' the whales [looking] for an up-close view of these animals and many boaters crowded their feeding areas."

So, be courteous and respectful of an animal that has come back from the doldrums of survival and is now simply trying to continue to enhance its fragile population.