

# The Mariner

A Publication For Where Land Ends

ISSN



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2018

## BLUE WHALE



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The Mariner received this correspondence from a reader named Richard Felipe with an attached photo a few days ago and it got the ball rolling towards an interesting path and a vivid reminder that this ocean, that is our backyard, is a true frontier and a universe full of mystery. Beneath its surface is an incredible array of life forms that are intelligent, sophisticated and physically awesome. The letter read:

“In my 18 years of sailing in the Santa Monica Bay and crossing over to Catalina I have seen some amazing sea life but only two whales spouting from a great distance. Last Saturday morning, I was sailing over to Catalina with my buddy Steve. We were about eight miles out in

the Santa Monica Bay - the seas were flat and the visibility was good. I first saw one or two whales spouting from a distance and was then on the look out for more. About 20 minutes later I saw two more and turned the boat to chase them down...”

The first thought was that perhaps a couple of gray whales were late in returning back to the northwest. A recent Los Angeles Times front-page story talked about some unusual gray whale behavior that was speculated to be the result of global warming. The article mentioned some whales were slow in returning on their yearly migration because they hadn't stored enough food before leaving and were now malnourished and searching for food. It was possible that this could be the case, but July is very late for grays to be in this area, so the assessment didn't quite add up.

Upon closer analysis it began to make more sense that what Richard and Steven saw that July day out daysailing Richard's Coronado 25 was more likely a blue whale. While these 90-foot long monstrosities, the largest animal on the planet and an endangered species, are sometimes seen in the Channel Islands area, they are seldom witnessed in the Santa Monica Bay. In fact, marine biologist Dr. Maddalena Bearzi, founder of the Ocean Conservation Society in Marina del Rey hasn't seen one in this area in ten years and there have also been other sightings in recent weeks by other marine mammal organizations.

Bearzi saw the blue whale about a half a mile off of Point Vincente and another instance where she and her team witnessed two swimming off the coast of Point Dume. It's assumed that the whales are following their food source, a tiny shrimp-like organism called Krill, which is found in abundance up in the Channel Islands. While they don't ordinarily patrol this area there is apparently something tempting them into this area.

"This is the first time in ten years we've them close to Point Dume and Point Vincente," said Bearzi. "Usually they don't come so close to Santa Monica Bay, they usually stay near the Channel Islands where they have their feeding grounds."

To be in the company of Blue Whales is particularly special because of how few there are in the world. According to the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada the total world population was estimated to be between 5,000 and 12,000 in 2002, but it is difficult to get accurate counts on an animal that is found all over the planet. But it's safe to say that these 90-100-foot long 150-ton mammals are in short supply due to aggressive whaling practices of the early 20th century.

According to WWF, the global conservation organization: "[the]Pre-whaling population may have been more than 250,000 strong. In 1931, during the heyday of whaling, an astounding 29,000 blue whales were killed in one season. In total, about 360,000 blue whales were killed in the 20th Century in the Antarctic alone.

"The interesting thing is that these animals are endangered species," said Bearzi of the recent sightings. "In the North Pacific we don't have many left, so any chance to see them so close to the bay is very interesting."

While California is thought to have the largest concentration of blue whales in the world, especially in the krill rich environment of the Channel Islands, a sighting even there is interesting, but in the Santa Monica Bay the event is magnified.

"The population size for blue whales compared to their range, which is world wide, is rather small," said Dudley Wigdahl, marine mammal curator at the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach. "So the odds of coming across one are slim anyway."

This rare whale is not only the largest animal on earth, but it's probably the biggest that's ever roamed the planet. Not even prehistoric dinosaurs boast such enormity. To give perspective, The Marine Mammal Center in San Pedro compares the whale's length to the size of three school buses parked one in front of the other. The size of their heart is said to be like a Volkswagon Beetle and a person could crawl through their Aorta.

But as massive as they are, a blue whale sighting is still a rarity anywhere you go. The Mammal Center indicates that while they are soundly protected through the International Whaling Commission's endangered species act, but it's a slow rebound. Females give birth to calves every two to three years and remain pregnant for about one year before giving birth. The Center states:

"There are probably fewer than 15,000 blue whales in the oceans, and they are considered an endangered species. However, we can see them in the summer and fall off the central California coast, feeding in such places as the Gulf of the Farallones and Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuaries. The 2,000 blue whales that feed along the California coast make up the largest concentration of blue whales in the world."

During the summer these Californian blues are expected to be eating their three or four tons of krill every day around the Channel Islands, Monterey Bay, and the Farallon Islands/Cordell Bank and possibly the Santa Monica Bay as well before migrating down south to Mexico and Costa Rica.

If in fact blue whales do become more common in the Santa Monica Bay Bearzi urges boaters to be very cautious when the opportunity to view them arises.

"Boaters need to have maximum respect for these animals and not go close at all. They're an endangered species and big enough where they can be observed from a distance. Don't approach them. You don't know the affect you have when you go close to them. And you also don't know where they may surface."