

THE LAST KINGDOM OF THE WHALES

The Extraordinary Cetaceans and Birds of Baja California

Monday 8th April – Friday 19th April 2013 (12 days)
Baja California Mainland Post-Tour Extension to Monday 22nd April (3 days)

Leaders: To be confirmed and Peter Gaede

Group Size Limit: 24 (16 on extension)

Tour Category: Easy (main tour); Easy to Moderate (post-tour extension)



Humpback Whale (Dafila Scott)

Whales are extraordinary creatures that have captured the imagination of humans since our species first reached the ocean shore and first saw a huge creature come to the surface, blow noisily and then slip away into the abyss.

Usually our encounters with whales are fleeting, and at a distance, but we consider ourselves lucky to have seen such gigantic yet threatened creatures at all, let alone close to. But imagine how it would be if huge whales sought us out, surfacing just a couple of metres from our small boat, and then came up and wanted to be stroked. How magical would that be?! Is this just a naturalist's fantasy? No, not in Baja California!

Here, in the great coastal lagoons along the Pacific coast, the Gray Whales

of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest come to calve during the northern winter, and by spring the calves are already 19-22ft (6-7m) in length and weigh several tons! They become both confident and curious before beginning their epic 5000 miles (8000km) or more odyssey to the north during April, and at this time in the season they and their much larger, 39-49ft (12-15m) long mothers regularly come over to whale watching pangas (small local boats) to inspect the strange creatures that are inside. They seem to welcome human attention and the calves in particular like to be stroked on their heads, repeatedly returning for more and even rising up out of the water to peer at us! Needless to say, it is an extraordinarily moving

experience for we small animals to be so close to such colossi and to actually touch them.

And what about the immense Blue Whale, the largest creature that has ever lived on our planet, far greater than the largest dinosaur? Have you ever wondered whether you would ever in your lifetime see this amazing animal, now that so few are left thanks to man's greed? Everywhere one goes one hears of rare sightings, but they are so hard to get to grips with. Well in Baja California, in April which is the very best month, you can be almost certain of sightings, and quite likely will enjoy multiple sightings. Indeed, we have seen this leviathan on several occasions on every cruise to date, watching them blow spray high into the air and even fluking!

And then there are the Humpback Whales. How can we begin to describe the wonder of being up close with the most playful and acrobatic of all the whales. Here you can watch them breaching, hurling themselves out of the water before hitting the surface with a gigantic splash, or lying on the surface lazily waving those long black and white pectoral fins to and fro, or emerging from the deep tail-first before repeatedly splashing their flukes onto the sea.

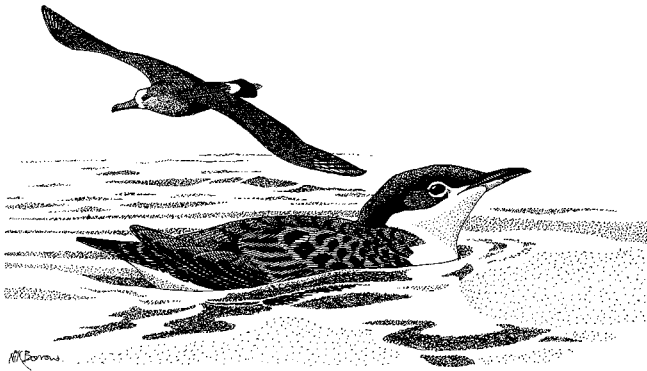
What about dolphins? Yes you will see hundreds and

hundreds, and at the same time! The huge pods of Long-beaked Common Dolphins have to be seen to be believed as they 'porpoise' in unison, and if you are in luck they will come to the bows at night as we glide across the calm waters of the Gulf of California and leave green streaks of phosphorescence as they streak through the water like so many fireworks!

And all this from the comfort of an excellent chartered boat that will take us safely through this remote region on the adventure of a lifetime. And we haven't even begun to mention all the wonders of Baja, the extraordinary desert scenery, the weird cacti, the unbelievable sunsets, the superb seabirds (including some sought-after species it is very difficult to see elsewhere), the endemic landbirds, the ugly yet captivating elephant seals, the playful sealions and the sheer fun of being on a boat for nearly two weeks with such a great crew. We have the boat entirely to ourselves on this exclusive Birdquest charter, so you can be sure that fabulous encounters with cetaceans, seabirds and interesting landbirds will be given total priority.

Our journey begins in the evening in San Diego, in southernmost California, and from here we sail overnight to Ensenada, the first port in Mexico, in order to clear





Xantus's Murrelet and Black-footed Albatross (Nik Borrow)

customs and immigration.

From now on we enter the wilderness, stopping first at Islas Todos Santos and then at the remote Islas San Benito, where the piles of blubbery Northern Elephant Seals on the beaches and the Guadalupe Fur Seals on the rocks are a sight to behold.

Seabirding is great throughout the journey and amongst the most exciting species we should see are Laysan and Black-footed Albatrosses, Black-vented and Pink-footed Shearwaters, Least and Black Storm-Petrels, Masked Booby, Heermann's, Yellow-footed and Sabine's Gulls, Cassin's Auklet, and the sought-after Xantus's and Craveri's Murrelets. The supporting cast includes Sooty Shearwater, Red-billed Tropicbird, Blue-footed and Brown Boobies, Magnificent Frigatebird, Pomarine and Long-tailed Jaegers (or Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas), Royal Tern and the beautiful Elegant Tern.

We spend the better part of two days at untouched Laguna San Ignacio with the Gray Whales and then sail south, through waters that hold Blue and Humpback Whales, until we enter the Gulf of California (or Sea of Cortez).

The last part of our journey will be spent amongst the dramatic scenery of the

coastal islands and mainland of southern Baja, where the sounds attract the great whales (Blue, Fin, Bryde's and Sperm in particular, all of which we should see) as well as enormous pods of dolphins.

We will make a series of landings on the very scenic islands, home to endemic plants (including some strange cacti) and reptiles, and a great selection of desert birds including the endemic Xantus's Hummingbird and the endemic Gray Thrasher. There will even be an opportunity to snorkel with playful California Sealions that like to gently nibble one's fins, or blow bubbles in one's face!

We will be travelling on *Searcher*, a large (95ft, or about 30m, in length), very well-equipped and comfortable, ocean-going sport-fishing boat that, on our special charter, will take up to 24 passengers in 13 twin-berth cabins, some on the main deck but most on the lower deck (we have limited the group size to 24 rather than the 26 the boat can hold in order to have some flexibility over cabin arrangements.) Cabins have two or more bunks (but we limit all cabins to twin or single occupancy), a washbasin, a mirror, 110v electric outlets and reading lights. The cabins are fairly small, but you are unlikely to spend any time in them other

than when sleeping. There is plenty of open deck space on two levels for wildlife observation and the bridge is open to all. There is also a spacious salon area (for dining and relaxing) and a library on the main deck. There are four bathrooms on the main deck, including two with showers. The crew are a great bunch and really make the voyage a fun experience for every passenger. Landings (and snorkeling trips) are usually made with *Searcher's* four skiffs, although at Laguna San Ignacio we have to use local boats because of national park regulations. Sea conditions are, on average, mostly calm, but moderate seas can be experienced along the Pacific coast of Baja. Rough seas are possible but very unlikely.

Travelling to Baja on *Searcher* and spending time with the whales and seabirds is really an extraordinary experience, so don't miss it!

Note: This tour is ideal for couples where only one partner is a keen birder. The wildlife, scenic and travel experience is a rich and varied adventure that anyone can greatly enjoy. Walking ashore is mostly very easy, with only short distances to be covered, so the trip is perfect for people of all levels of physical ability.

During the optional post-tour extension we will explore the marshlands near San José del Cabo and the isolated Sierra de la Laguna mountains of the Baja mainland in search of several more endemics, including the diminutive Cape Pygmy-Owl, Belding's Yellowthroat, Baird's Junco and San Lucas Robin.

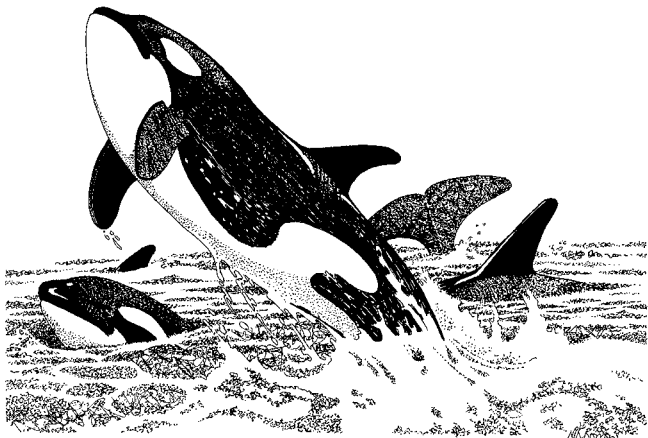
Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins after dinner this evening at the international sport fishing dock in San Diego. *Searcher* will sail tonight, bound for the Mexican port of Ensenada in northern Baja California.

Day 2 We will arrive at Ensenada in the early hours, in order to clear Mexican

immigration and customs. After clearance, around sunrise, we will head out of the broad bay in which Ensenada is situated towards the Islas Todos Santos. We are likely to come across Pacific and Common Loons (or Pacific and Great Northern Divers), Eared (or Black-necked) and Western Grebes, Brown Pelicans and smart Heermann's Gulls (a species that nests mainly in Baja California and on islands in the Sea of Cortez) before we reach this cluster of small islands. We will not be able to land, but we can approach the coastline closely to observe our first Harbour (or Common) Seals, Brandt's, Double-crested and Pelagic Cormorants, and Black Oystercatchers. Later, as we head southwards towards the distant Islas San Benitos, we will be looking out for our first pelagic seabirds, particularly the near-endemic Black-vented Shearwater, which breeds solely on islands of the Pacific coast of Baja California. Other likely species include the splendid Laysan and Black-footed Albatrosses, Northern Fulmar and visiting Pink-footed and Sooty Shearwaters from the Southern Hemisphere. This is a good area for first seeing the diminutive Xantus's Murrelet and equally tiny Cassin's Auklet, and we could come across a lingering Rhinoceros Auklet. We should also encounter flocks of Red-necked Phalaropes and, if we are very lucky, a few Red (or Grey) Phalaropes. Cetaceans to look out for on this leg of our voyage include the fast-moving and athletic Short-beaked Common Dolphin, the attractive Pacific White-sided Dolphin and, with a bit of luck, the large, pale, much-scarred Risso's Dolphin.

Day 3 Today we will go ashore on the arid and remote Islas San Benito, well to the west of mainland Baja. San Benito del Oeste is a rugged island with a tiny fishing village and a lighthouse,



Orcas or Killer Whales (Nik Borrow)

and impressive headlands, sandy coves and rocky reefs. Before we step ashore we will cruise around the rocky headlands admiring the Guadalupe Fur Seals that have comparatively recently recolonized the islands. Once brought to the edge of extinction by sealers, numbers are starting to recover and colonists have fanned out from Isla Guadalupe itself to recover some lost territory. The most impressive inhabitants of the San Benito islands, however, are the huge, flaccid Northern Elephant Seals that gather to moult in the small sandy coves. Dozens or even hundreds can be seen here, often at very close range. The huge black, liquid eyes of elephant seals make the females and large pups especially appealing, although their regular belching is a lot less attractive, especially close to! We can expect to have some wonderful encounters with these fascinating animals, watching them piled up together like so many large slugs on the beaches, or swimming with much more agility just offshore, watching us with those huge 'astonished-looking' eyes. Ospreys nest on the island, as do Peregrines, while Hudsonian Whimbrels and Black Turnstones feed along the seaweed-covered shoreline, and we may find

a few lingering Glaucous-winged Gulls amongst the many Western Gulls. The sole landbirds present are the inquisitive Common Raven and the 'Thick-billed' form of the Savannah Sparrow. Those who want to will be able to make a circuit of the island, climbing the coastal trail up to the lighthouse at the western end. Later in the day we will head southwards once more, keeping a lookout for seabirds and cetaceans. We could see our first Blue or Fin Whales on this leg of the journey.

Day 4 When we get up this morning we will not be far from the entrance to famous Laguna San Ignacio, but we may be delayed in our approach by cetaceans, with another chance for Blue Whale in particular in this interesting area. Eventually we will pass into the lagoon through its narrow, surf-choked mouth, experiencing a sudden change in conditions as we pass over the sandbar at the mouth and enter the calm waters of the lagoon itself, our home for the better part of two days. Once we have anchored and made contact with our Mexican panga drivers, who will take us to see the lagoon's famous Gray Whales, we will be ready to start our explorations. If ever there was a miracle of survival in our over-populated modern

world, it is the magical Laguna San Ignacio. Here, by lucky chance, a huge sheltered saline lagoon, abutting right onto the Pacific Ocean, has escaped 'development' and remains a pristine wilderness, into which, each year, over 300 adult female Gray Whales migrate from Alaska and the Pacific Northwest to have their calves. The calves are born in the midwinter period and grow rapidly before leaving the lagoon with their mothers from mid-March through April. Here we will be guided by our expert local panga drivers who know just how to find the whales and approach them without causing anxiety to the mothers or their calves.

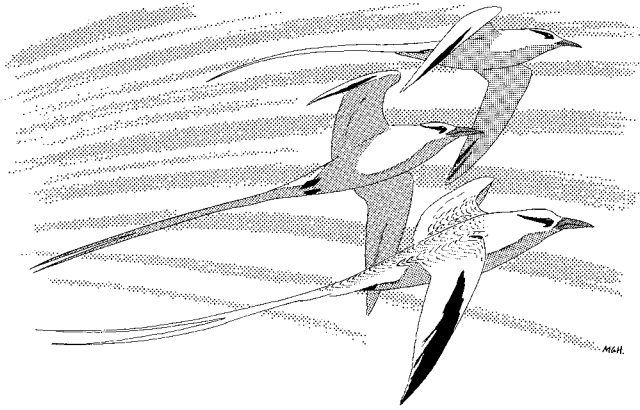
Laguna San Ignacio is surrounded by desert dunes, with arid desert mountains rising in the hinterland. At first it seems a remote but unassuming spot, with not a lot to see, but as we travel across the lagoon by panga we will soon spot the telltale blows of Gray Whales in the distance and make our way towards them. Gray Whales are famous for various reasons – for their close-to-the-coast migration technique that has allowed millions to watch them pass by from headlands along the US Pacific coast, for the fact that they have successfully bounced back from the possibility of extinction through the activities of 18th and 19th whaling industries, and most of all because they are extraordinarily trusting of humans and will allow a very close approach. As we approach the mothers and calves we will be able to watch them surface and blow in tandem, displaying their barnacle-encrusted heads and dark bodies with many pale blotches. From time to time a mother or a calf will 'spy-hop', rising straight out of the water to peer at these strange visitors with their large whale eyes and then slip silently beneath the surface. Then, all of a sudden, a calf of around 19-22ft (6-7m) in

length will surface near a panga and decide to come in close, perhaps first passing right under the panga and then surfacing on the other side. All of a sudden the calf is right by the boat, rolling on its side, asking to be stroked, and we will happily oblige. What could be more magical and more poignant than running one's fingers across the rubbery skin of a huge whale, a species that a century ago our forbears were harpooning at a frightening rate, sending the species sliding towards the abyss. Now the Gray Whales of San Ignacio can expect only excitement, stroking and laughter when they encounter people. A much happier state of affairs.

We should have plenty of time both today and tomorrow for Gray Whale encounters in the lagoon, and we may watch whales breaching and making a huge splash as they crash back into the water. This seems particularly frequent amongst the mothers and larger calves that gather at the mouth of the lagoon prior to embarking on their long migration north, a journey that is fraught with danger from the calves. Inside the lagoon they are safe, but once they leave, Great White Sharks and Killer Whales are ever on the lookout for a weak or unwary calf.

Other creatures we should find amidst or over the waters of the lagoon include Common Bottle-nosed Dolphin, Surf Scoter and the piratical Magnificent Frigatebird and Pomarine Jaeger (or Pomarine Skua).

Day 5 San Ignacio has much else to offer beside its extraordinary Gray Whales, although naturally these other aspects of the lagoon tend to be overshadowed by the magical whale encounters. Early this morning we will take our pangas through the mangrove channels towards the eastern end of the lagoon. Here, amidst the mudflats, creeks and low mangroves,



Red-billed Tropicbirds (Michael Hodgson)

we can look in particular for the impressive but rather clumsy Reddish Egret, Black Brant (large numbers winter at the lagoons of Baja), Clapper Rail and Mangrove Warbler, as well as Great and Snowy Egrets, Little Blue, Tricolored and Green Herons, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, White Ibis, American Oystercatcher, Greater Yellowlegs, the handsome Willet, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, Sanderling, Western Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Bonaparte's and California Gulls, Caspian and Royal Terns, and perhaps Northern Harrier. Later today we will have more opportunities to be with the Gray Whales before we head back out to sea before it gets dark.

Day 6 A day at sea as we pass offshore from Bahía Magdalena and head on southwards towards the southern tip of Baja California. This is a great area for Blue Whales and if we find some we will pause to follow these leviathans as they feed offshore, watching the impressively tall blows and then that long, long bluish-tinged back rise out of the water behind the blowholes, complete with a relatively tiny dorsal fin, before 'leviathan' sinks beneath the waves. From time to time we should see one 'fluke' as it raises its tail out of the water prior to a

deeper dive, but often the Blue Whales in this area simply make shallow dives and do not fluke. There is something awesome about being in the presence of these greatest of all the mammals, both present and past, so if we come across a group we are sure to stay with them for a long time, even if it means going in the wrong direction!

We should encounter our first Black Storm-Petrels today and we are likely to encounter numbers of Sabine's Gulls migrating northwards towards their breeding places on the arctic tundra. There is a good chance for Masked Booby and a slim chance of an early Cook's Petrel. We may also encounter Orcas (Killer Whales), a fearsome predator of the seas.

Day 7 Around sunrise we should round Cabo San Lucas, the southernmost tip of Baja. Nowadays, the once-sleepy town named after the cape has been transformed into a huge resort, but we will see little of this as we head up into the Gulf of California, otherwise known as the Sea of Cortez. Off the town of San José del Cabo are the Gorda Banks and here we will be expecting to find a number of playful Humpback Whales. These Humpbacks spend the winter here before returning to Alaska for the summer and the species is

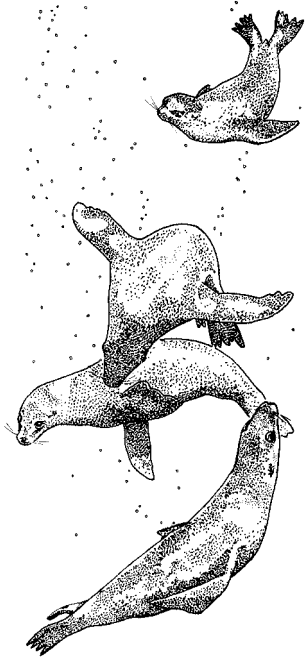
famous as being the most acrobatic of all the large whales. Not only should we find a number of Humpbacks regularly coming to the surface and blowing several times before they fluke and dive, revealing the bright white undersides to the otherwise black tail, but we should also see one or more regularly breaching, either emerging near-vertically like a small submarine for three quarters of the body length before crashing back into the waves with an enormous splash, or even leaping completely free of the water. At other times the whales loll on the surface, waving or slapping their highly extended pectoral fins with their pure white undersides, and we could also see one tail-breaching, hurling its tail end out of the water and smacking the surface repeatedly with its huge flukes, showering spray all around. Watching Humpbacks is sure to result in a chorus of 'ooohs' and 'aaahs' as these playful creatures perform, unwittingly, for their human watchers. Sometimes, though, they seem to know we are there and deliberately approach the boat, or even breach right next to it! What extraordinary animals these are, and how sorry we will be when the time comes to move further north into the Gulf.

As we sail onwards this evening we may be treated to our first encounter with 'bioluminescence' in the water as plankton, disturbed by the boat's wake, give out an eerie explosion of greenish light, and if we are really in luck dolphins will come and bow-ride, producing firework-like tracers of greenish-yellow as they streak through the plankton. Overhead will be the kind of awesome starscape one can only see when in the clear air of a remote desert environment, with countless thousands of stars visible and

the great wheel of the Milky Way, our own galaxy, visible from horizon to horizon.

Day 8 This morning we will be at Punta Colorado on Isla San José. Here, the rock formations in the limestone are an incredible colour combination of cream, yellow and orange-red, and after sunrise the whole headland glows deep yellow-orange as that wonderful early morning light catches the sheer cliffs. We will take our launches to explore the coastline, where Blue-footed and Brown Boobies nest, and Brown Pelicans and Yellow-footed Gulls (the latter virtually endemic to the Gulf of California) sun themselves on the rock ledges, Spotted Sandpipers feed along the splash line and Turkey Vultures and White-throated Swifts soar overhead. Afterwards we will land at a quiet beach and walk up the arroyo (dry valley) behind the beach. Almost every island in the Gulf of California has its endemic lizards and endemic plants, and Isla San José is no exception. Here, the valley bottoms and dry slopes are covered in numerous cacti of many different kinds, creating an unusual scenic architecture. As we walk up the canyon admiring the cacti, gnarled trees and attractive flowers, we should enjoy our first encounters with Gray Thrasher (endemic to Baja California), as well as the tiny Costa's Hummingbird, Verdin, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Black-throated Sparrow and Northern Cardinal. For those who like snorkeling, we will have the first of several opportunities here. Although there is little coral in the Gulf of California, there is an impressive variety of 'reef fish' present, including small Black-tip Reef Sharks (which are completely harmless to humans).

After leaving Isla San José behind we will head northwards towards Isla



California Sealions
(Mark Andrews)

Santa Catalina. This is a good area for Sperm Whales and somewhere in these waters we should encounter one or more of these deep-diving specialists that look really impressive as their huge dark flukes rear up as they dive after a long series of blows at the surface. Another feature of the southern Gulf is the huge pods of Long-beaked Common Dolphins that frequent the area. We could easily find a pod of several hundred, or even up to 1000 individuals out hunting, an extraordinary sight! We may well be able to sail in amongst the pod and have leaping dolphins all around us. Other likely cetaceans here are Bryde's Whale (pronounced 'brewder's, after the Norwegian for whom the species is named) and the widespread Common Bottle-nosed Dolphin. As we approach our anchorage for the night we are likely to enjoy yet another of the spectacular sunsets for which Baja is famous, watching the

clouds turn orange-yellow, the orange-red and finally crimson as the sun sinks behind the desert mountains of the mainland.

Day 9 This morning we will go ashore on Isla Santa Catalina, another of the endemic-rich islands of the southern Gulf. (The islands off Baja California are sometimes referred to as 'Mexico's Galapagos' because of the sheer variety of endemic animals and plants, all of which have diverged from those of the other islands and from the more widespread forms inhabiting the mainland.) Here the hillsides are punctuated by many impressive cacti, including the impressively huge Giant Barrel Cactus, endemic to Santa Catalina and a few other islands. Amongst the animals, our major target here will be the fascinating little Rattleless (or Santa Catalina) Rattlesnake, which we should be able to find curled up under a low bush as the sun begins to warm the arroyo. We can also admire some of the island's endemic lizards, as well as find White-winged Dove, Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Loggerhead Shrike and House Finch.

Later we will continue northwards towards Isla Carmen, looking out for cetaceans and seabirds. This area is good for Blue and Fin Whales in particular. On the seabird front, the area between Isla Carmen and Isla Santa Cruz offers our best chances for the diminutive Craveri's Murrelet, an alcid species that breeds on the islands in the Gulf of California and which later disperses to the Pacific, some reaching as far north as California or beyond. We should also come across a good number of handsome Sabine's Gulls and small numbers of equally elegant Long-tailed Jaegers (or

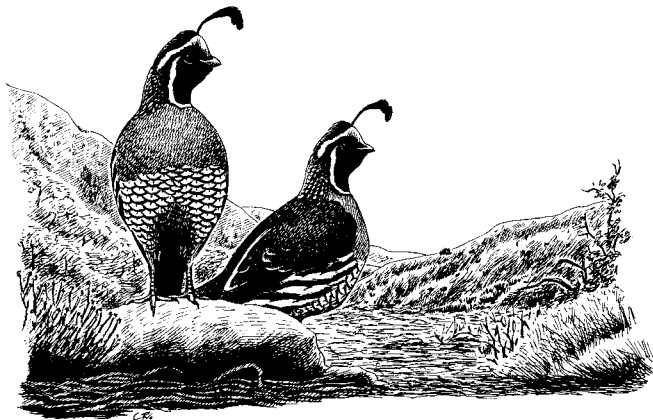
Long-tailed Skuas) migrating northwards, either here or elsewhere in southern Baja. Elegant Terns will become more frequent in these waters, for we are not that far from Isla Rasa, where 90% of the world population nests., while Least Storm-Petrels will join the more abundant Blacks, and we should also encounter the splendid Red-billed Tropicbird with its characteristic spine-like central tail feathers.

Day 10 A landing on the mainland at a huge and spectacular beach at Timbabiche this morning will allow us the opportunity for a pleasant hike to a saline lagoon and through the dry coastal scrub, where we may well find Great Blue Heron, Wilson's Plover, Least Sandpiper, Gilded Flicker, Gray Flycatcher, Western Scrub-Jay, Violet-green and Northern Rough-wing Swallows, Cactus Wren, the near-endemic California Gnatcatcher (a species that extends just over the border of Baja California into the San Diego area), Northern Mockingbird, Phainopepla, Orange-crowned Warbler, Lark and White-crowned Sparrows, and Hooded Oriole. Large numbers of Elegant Terns frequently gather on the beach at this time of year and we should be able to get some spectacular shots of these very attractive birds as they stand in a tight mass or swirl through the air before landing once more. Later we will head southwards through the narrow and spectacularly scenic channel that separates rugged Isla San José from the even more mountainous mainland coast, enjoying yet more opportunities to observe seabirds and cetaceans.

Day 11 Our final landing will be at the remote fishing hamlet of Nopolo on the mainland coast. Here a spectacular canyon reaches down to the sea and we will

walk a short way inland, enjoying the reflections of the canyon walls in the quiet pools and looking for the endemic Xantus's Hummingbird and the impressive Canyon Wren, one of North America's most impressive songsters (we are likely to hear its marvellous, liquid, descending whistles well before we spot the bird itself). From here we sail to Los Islotes, a small group of spectacular rocks to the north of Isla Partida and Isla Espiritu Santo. While surf breaks on the outer edge of the islets, behind them the sea is comparatively calm and here we can normally anchor our boat while explore the leeward side of the islands by launch, admiring the hordes of California Sealions hauled out on the rocks or gambolling in the swell all around us. Blue-footed and Brown Boobies nest in numbers on the cliffs and there is a constant traffic to and from the colony, watched over by attentive Magnificent Frigatebirds. For those who enjoy being in the water, there is one of the world's best snorkeling experiences awaiting you here, for the sealion pups love to play with snorkelers and scuba divers, swooping all around one, turning somersaults and perhaps blowing bubbles in one's face or gently nibbling at the ends of your fins when you are not looking! From time to time the larger females pass by and a huge bull may patrol past, making sure you are not a rival out to steal his wives. Eventually the time will come to leave this wonderful spot and head towards Cabo San Lucas, our journey to this wildlife paradise almost at an end.

Day 12 We arrive after breakfast at Cabo San Lucas and disembark, sad to be leaving behind *Searcher* and its wonderful crew after our extraordinary adventure together in 'The Last



California Quails (Craig Robson)

Kingdom of the Whales'. The tour ends at the dock at San José del Cabos.

Baja California Mainland Post-Tour Extension

Day 12 We will transfer to the town of Los Barriles for a three nights stay. En route we will explore an extensive lagoon where marshy areas provide a habitat for the impressive endemic Belding's Yellowthroat. Here we are also likely to encounter a number of other wetland species including Pied-billed Grebe, American White Pelican, Black-crowned Night-Heron, White-faced Ibis, Ruddy Duck (and perhaps some lingering wintering waterfowl), Common Moorhen, American

Coot and Killdeer, whilst adjacent scrubby areas holds species such as Brown-headed Cowbird and Brewer's Sparrow. We will stop to look for Thick-billed Kingbird and other birds en route to Los Barriles.

Days 13-14 A 750 miles (1200 kilometres) long mountainous finger separating the tranquil Gulf of California, or Sea of Cortez, from the wilder Pacific Ocean, Baja's isolated tip is home to several endemic birds. Much of our time during these two days will be spent exploring the isolated Sierra de la Laguna mountains. Two of our prime targets here amongst the wooded ridges and riparian growth will be the diminutive

endemic Cape Pygmy-Owl (a comparatively recent split from Northern) and the uncommon San Lucas Robin (which is often lumped in American Robin although it looks very different, appearing almost like an Eyebrowed Thrush!), whilst other species present are likely to include Acorn Woodpecker (the subspecies here has a dark iris), Warbling Vireo (the endemic breeding form here is a possible future split), Black-throated Gray Warbler, California Towhee, the beautiful Lazuli Bunting and Scott's Oriole. At higher altitudes, a fair amount of effort will likely be needed to walk up into the habitat of Baird's Junco (a ghostly version of the Yellow-eyed Junco, with which it is still often lumped). In the desert and scrubby areas at lower altitudes we should find the delightful Elf Owl as well as Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Northern Crested-Caracara, California Quail, Common Ground-Dove, Black Phoebe and the strange Pyrrhuloxia.

Day 15 The extension ends this morning at Los Cabos airport.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: For details of the accommodation on *Searcher*, please see the tour introduction. During the extension the hotel is of

normal Birdquest standard. Road transport is by minibus/passenger van or car and roads are rather variable.

Walking: The walking effort is easy throughout during the main tour. Walking is mostly easy during the post-tour extension, but there will be one optional long uphill walk on a broad track in the Sierra de la Laguna.

Climate: Mostly warm or hot, dry and sunny, but it is sometimes overcast. Rain is possible but unlikely. Sea conditions in the Gulf of California are typically calm. Along the Pacific coast conditions are typically calm to moderate at this season.

Cetacean, Seal & Bird

Photography: Opportunities are excellent, even extraordinary at times. Scenic photography is also very good.

Wild Images: The cruise, but not the mainland extension, is a shared departure with our Wild Images wildlife photography division. The great majority of visiting Birdquesters are keen to take good photographs while in Baja California, and the ideal itinerary for birders/whale watchers and wildlife photographers in this part of the world is identical, and so on this particular cruise it is easy to cater to the requirements of all.