

Gray whales now migrating along California shores

January 12, 1966

California gray whales are now migrating along the shores of southern California en route from their summer quarters in the Bering Sea to coastal lagoons situated along the western coast of Baja California.

Most of the migrants pass San Diego during January, although a few pass as early as November and stragglers can be sighted until mid-February.

The navigational methods by which the gray whale makes this 8,000 to 12,000-mile round trip each year are under investigation by Dr. Theodore Walker, associate oceanographer with the University of California, San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Dr. Walker, who joined Scripps in 1948, has been interested in the behavior of the California gray whale for more than 15 years. He is the author of "The Whale Primer," a popular handbook dealing with the general biology of whales.

"The whales must vacate the Bering Sea in the fall before the advent of the long, harsh Arctic winters, whose continual darkness prevents the whales from finding food," explained Dr. Walker.

"Scientists do not know why the whales make such an extensive trek. It is tempting to postulate, however, that the placid, sun-drenched coastal lagoons afford protection and warmth. Their migration route is only partially known."

The California gray whale may grow to 50 feet in length, he said. The mothers mate every other year, and produce a calf which at birth is 14 to 15 feet long. Calving normally takes place in the lagoons. The baby is nursed for eight to nine months and is then abandoned by its mother, which prefers the company of males. Mating occurs en route to the lagoons.

The gray whale feeds on bottom-frequenting amphipods, a shrimp-like crustacean, by a short, coarse filter, which springs down from the roof of the mouth whenever the mouth is opened. The massive tongue is elevated to drive the water back out through the filter, which collects the food.

This whale is the most primitive of all the whales, according to Dr. Walker, and it is now restricted geographically to the North Pacific.

There are two races of whales: a Korean form which summers in the Sea of Okhotsk and calves along the southeast coast of Korea, and the California herd, which fans out along the Siberian and Alaskan coasts and calves in Baja California.

"Conservation of the California gray whale was made mandatory in 1937 by its near-extinction, and although the species has made a spectacular comeback, it is still not abundant," Dr. Walker said.

"Unfortunately, whaling may be resumed shortly, even though the yield will be nominal and the species decimated. Products are saturated fats, dog food, and meal.

"There are now no more than 5,000 to 7,000 whales in the California herd and all these are not necessarily grown. We can only hope that the peoples of all nations will take the regulation of whaling out of the hands of whalers."

Whale-watching has made the California gray whale a major tourist attraction in San Diego, where the National Park Service maintains a whale observatory at Cabrillo National Monument, on the tip of Point Loma. A more intimate look at the whale is afforded by excursion ships and private boats.

Whalers considered the California gray whale the most intelligent of all the whales, for it quickly learned to avoid the whalers by changing its migration route.

When cornered or molested, it can be provoked into attacking and it can demolish a small boat with a single swipe of its powerful tail and ten-foot-wide flukes. It can also toss a boat out of the water with its head.

Like an iceberg, most of the whale is submerged. The thin sliver of the back is exposed for view each time the whale surfaces to breathe. The nostrils, or blowholes, are situated at the back of the head and the exhalation of spent air creates a foggy plume four to 20 feet high which quickly dissipates.

The whale remains at, or near, the surface a minute or more in order to take in two to five breaths. During this time a conspicuous wake accompanies the whale. Once the respiratory need is met, the whale dives deeply, then surfaces three to eight minutes later to breathe again.

The whale lifts the tail flukes clear of the water, just prior to a deep dive. The flukes are driven alternately up and down to force the whale through the water. Flippers just behind the head are used to turn the animal and to control its diving attitude.

(1/12/66)