

Big Blue

Largest creatures on Earth bluster past L.B. shores at up to 30 mph

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By A.K. Whitney, Staff writer

LONG BEACH -- The bright sunshine turned into haze as The Christopher pulled past Point Fermin. The water, so recently a bright blue, was now a metallic grey a few shades darker than the sky.

But the sudden puff of steam several hundred yards away, out in the direction of an invisible Catalina, was unmistakable.

“Thar she blows!” cried Dan Salas, captain of The Christopher and owner and operator of Harbor Breeze Cruises.

The gaggle of reporters, photographers, Aquarium of the Pacific employees and tourists (one with a tiny chihuahua tucked into her sweatshirt pocket) stirred itself to look, admittedly with far less enthusiasm than it had shown just an hour earlier. After all, this faraway spout was one of many already spotted on the trip, and sunburn, seasickness and concern about deadlines were beginning to take their toll.

But then, it happened. A gigantic grey-blue shape sprang from the water. It was the length of a bus, tapered at one end, fluid and floppy. It was airborne for a few seconds, then landed with a huge splash, displacing enough water to cause a swell.

It was a blue whale, which, at lengths reaching 100 feet and weights reaching 160 tons, is the biggest animal on Earth, not only now but possibly ever. And it had just done something, Salas assured the crowd as the boat began to accelerate toward the whale, that most people don't ever get to see -- it breached.

And then it did it again. And again.

By the time The Christopher had gotten close enough to get really chummy, it turned out the blue whale was not alone. The whale had a slightly smaller companion, and while both creatures obliged by spouting repeatedly and showing off their smooth grey-blue backs (in spite of their size, blue whales are surprisingly slim and tapered), the acrobatics were definitely over. However, each was more than happy to show off its tail as it dove deep into the water. In whale speak, this is known as "fluking."

Like their much smaller cousins, the grey whales, Northern Pacific blue whales migrate every year from Alaska to Mexico, passing Long Beach on the way. They breed, and feed on their diet of choice, tiny shrimp called krill. The average blue whale needs to eat four tons of krill a day.

And just in case you're wondering, when a blue whale is done digesting all that krill, the result is bright orange, and surprisingly small considering the size of the creature that emitted it.

"We've been blessed," joked an Aquarium employee as one whale spotted off Point Vicente left its souvenir in the water earlier during the trip. (Sadly for marine biologists, no one aboard offered to collect a sample for study.)

The whale's scat, however, may be the smallest thing about it. According to the World Wildlife Fund, "its heartbeat can be detected from two miles away and its heart is the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. A small child could crawl through its aorta

and an elephant could stand on its tongue.”

Blue whales are also the speediest of whales, swimming up to 30 miles an hour when needed. This had long made them less likely targets for whalers.

However, by the 20th century they were almost extinct. According to the WWF, in 1931 whalers caught 29,000 blue whales. A mid-'60s hunting ban has helped, but blue whales are still on the endangered list. The Northern Pacific has shown the most recovery, the WWF reported.

Dudley Wigdahl, a marine mammals curator at the Aquarium, estimated there are about 2,400 blue whales in the Northern Pacific. Calling them “cosmopolitan whales,” Wigdahl said they can be found in all the world’s oceans. How many world-wide is in question, with estimates varying between 5,000 and 14,000.

This vague number may have to do with blue whales, in spite of their size, being difficult to spot and track, Wigdahl said. In the past, Wigdahl added, it was very rare for a human being to see a blue whale unless she or he was far out on the water.

But things change, and not only scientists have noticed. Salas said his charter company has spotted 149 blue whales since June, which is unprecedented.

“Usually, we started to see the blue whales in August,” Salas said. “This year, we saw them in June.”

And why is that?

“The whole ocean this year is off,” Salas said. “The water is a little cooler than usual, there is an upswell, and the krill are coming nearer (to the coast).”

Could it be global warming?

Salas, not being a scientist, won't speculate.

"I've been working on the boats for 20 years," he said. "Over the past five years, I've definitely noticed a change in the ocean."

That change isn't just affecting the blue whales.

"Even the grey whales have moved a little further offshore. And we've noticed the grey whales having their babies on the way."

In the past, grey whales tended to calve once they reached Mexico, Salas said.

More whales, grey or blue, mean an extended whale watching season for local companies, including Harbor Breeze, which serves Long Beach and is based in Rainbow Harbor. More whales also means a chance for the Aquarium to raise public awareness.

A new piece has been added to an upstairs display focusing on Arctic whales, which are close to going extinct. Blue and grey whales are also featured, and the world's whales are shown according to size. The public can also listen to the sounds whales make and try to imitate them.

The blue whale, in keeping with its size, has a very deep, sonorous voice, leaving one to wonder if the whale who leaped out of the water off Point Fermin told its companion anything before it took off. It may very well have been "hey, look at me!"