

Sea of Cortés Trip Report

March 23 – April 1, 2017 with Guide Greg Smith



A Sea of Cortés wildlife cruise with Guide Greg Smith, with Clint, Laura, Karen, Wendi, Paul, Brenda, Jim, Pierre, Danilee, Holly, Larry, Linda, and Lee.

Thursday, 23 March San José del Cabo

Ah, spring break in some of the U.S. schools ... must be, given the length of the line through immigration. They had every window open and your place in the line actually moved forward every thirty seconds or so, but it still took those of us on this flight an hour to get through to the other side. But we did, found our shuttle service, and thirty minutes after getting on the van, we were at our lagoon and ocean front hotel.

Most everyone wanted to explore the Thursday evening Art Walk in the downtown area, but also have a chance to eat dinner. We ended up walking the 35 minutes to downtown and tried to get into the highly acclaimed Petit Marsala, but a table of ten had just been seated, so we walked down to a Mexican place and had a pretty fine meal.

Friday, 24 March Endemics

Maria-Elena of Los Cabos Birding met us out



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front at 6:30 AM as planned, and we headed off to the west to start our day of birding. First stop was at the toll-booth where we had Northern Cardinal, California Scrub Jay, and Pyrrhuloxia. We drove further and stopped along a side road where there were cut flower ag fields on one side and residences with a variety of flowering shrubs on the other. Those flowering shrubs were a magnet for orioles and one of Baja's endemics, the Xantus's Hummingbird. We got great looks at a male that was inserting his bill into the base of hibiscus flowers.

Driving to our next location we heard how the funds generated by these birding tours were funneled to a non-profit, Pronatura, and used to educate school kids on water, resources, and how everything was tied together in an ecological sense. Certainly a great use of our birding dollars.



As we walked alongside the road, a Gray Thrasher perched at the top of a shrub. For the next five minutes, we all got very good looks and the opportunity to take plenty of photographs. It was joined briefly by migrating Black-headed Grosbeak and Hooded Oriole. There were also Verdin, and White-winged and Common Ground-Doves.

Having seen the two more difficult endemics that were goals for the day, we headed to breakfast at what was essentially a family-run roadside restaurant. We had three different options: Empanada, burrito, or a tamal, all served with beans and a tortilla. Very tasty and very authentic, and it hit the spot. One of the additional benefits of this restaurant were the three or so Crested Caracaras on the outskirts of the fences.



After birding the perimeter of the farm/restaurant, we headed back towards San José del Cabo to look for the Belding's Yellowthroat. With Maria-Elena we were able to

access the Estero closer to the central part of town. On an island we had a Great Egret along with three lost Cattle Egrets (how they got to the end of this peninsula without any pastures, etc. ... who knows).

There were different waterfowl, shorebirds, an American Kestrel, White-faced Ibis, Green Iguana, Spiny-tailed Iguana, and more ... but no yellowthroat. There was always tomorrow.

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We headed back to the hotel after birding with Maria-Elena for eight hours. Most everyone still wanted to try Petit Marsala, so reservations were made and eight of us enjoyed an outstanding meal at this small Indian restaurant.

Saturday, 25 March Estero Birding / Embarkation

We headed out to the Estero expecting to run into Juan-Carlos Solis who would be our bird guide on the *Safari Endeavor*. And after birding the edge of the Estero between our hotel and then onto the beach for forty-five minutes, we found him.

But prior to that, a group of us started birding our way around the Estero. The sendero was flooded under at least a couple of feet of water, but we were able to pick our way around on some embedded palm logs. We soon got lots of looks at both Belding's and Common Yellowthroats, and a small flock of Palm Warblers. When we got to the un-vegetated part of the Estero we found Juan-Carlos and then more birds: Northern Harrier; Least, Western, and Baird's Sandpipers; Savannah and Song Sparrows; Black-necked Stilts; and three more species of waterfowl. We did add some species to our list this morning.



Around noon we taxied over to the Barceló and checked in with our Un-Cruise companions. We had about three hours to eat lunch and get ourselves familiar with the surroundings. Some took advantage of another section of the beach, while others introduced themselves and got to know our new shipmates. At 4:00 PM, all of us loaded up into our tour bus and did the two-hour drive over to La Paz. We had to do a slight detour of two blocks as the entrance to the



dock was blocked by the ongoing La Paz Marathon. But we made it on ship, had a very tasty dinner, and then watched Black-crowned Night-Heron forage on the dock. Pretty much all of us fell asleep before leaving the dock at eleven that night, but most all of us were up before sunrise. And it was one of the clear, cloudless mornings.

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Sunday, 26 March Isla Espiritu Santu

On deck we were port of some rocks off of Isla Espiritu Santo where both Blue-footed and Brown Boobies were present, Los Osioles. And Magnificent Frigatebird were up as early as the rest of us, spreading those six-foot wings and riding the thermals. Yellow-footed Gull were on the rocks (that could be a drink, eh?), and a few cormorants. Mobula rays were making themselves airborne and we also saw marlin sitting on top of the water. All this before our first breakfast.

After breakfast, the morning breeze died down and we kept our sea watch going and found a pod of Bottle-nose Dolphin doing some aerial acrobats, and then a little later, two different pods of Common Dolphin. The Commons decided our bow wave was the place to be and spent the next two-plus hours visiting us as we made our way to the south end of the island. A Blue Whale and a Humpback Whale visited before we anchored for lunch. And then we did some Zodiac tours of the shore ... that was until we spotted another Humpback doing multiple tail

slaps on the surface. By the time we got there, the whale had disappeared, but a second one showed up off the port side of the skiff and we headed over there. A cruise of the shoreline only provided looks at the desert landscape and more gulls...

Monday, 27 March Agua Verde

We awoke and found ourselves anchored in a small bay that was home to the town of Agua Verde. We were surrounded on three sides by land and were going into the outskirts of town for some early

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morning birding. For those on the ship that had not joined our pre-tour extension, this might be their only chance to see Gray Thrasher and Xantus's Hummingbird.

So about fifteen of us went ashore and right after seeing our first birds, a flock of Lark Sparrow, we found a Gray Thrasher tee'd up on top of a shrub. Again, plenty of time for pictures and long looks. Next up were Phainopepla and Vermilion Flycatcher, male and female of both species. Black-throated Sparrow put in an appearance, and then as we were heading back to the beach we found a male Xantus's Hummingbird feeding on agave flowers. It was interacting with a Costa's Hummingbird, and again, gave us long looks.



For the remainder of the day some of us did skiff rides and/or mule rides to a local ranch and/or standup paddling or kayaking. Some of those on a skiff saw American Oystercatcher, Brandt's Cormorant, and Brown Pelican, while those on mules got to see Verdin, Cactus Wren, and Scott's Oriole.



Tuesday, 28 March Punta Los Gatos / Marine Mammals & Seabirds

Punta Los Gatos is a long, sandy beach book ended by pink and white volcanic tuff that has been eroded and shaped into smooth cumulus cloud-shaped mounds. Most of this morning's activities were hiking, snorkeling, and skiffing. Although there weren't too many birds, some of the plants showed variations on their adaptations to the dry Baja winters. Most were leafless, while awaiting the summer hurricane season. Papery bark shaded some, while the more spiny plants had contracted their ribs to save as much moisture as possible.



There was evidence on some hikes of peoples long gone from the land. Small, level terraces atop the

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cliffs were littered with shells from meals that seemed to have been primarily collected nearby. Crude circles of rocks could be seen if one looked with a discerning eye, all signs of pre-historic inhabitants having fed on the bounty of the Sea of Cortés.

The afternoon was dedicated to looking for marine mammals and seabirds. It did take a while, but for maybe the right reason, we cruised into an area that showed no signs of feeding frenzies, but did give us some interesting bird sightings. In the course of the next hour we had Least, Leach's, and Black Storm-Petrels; five Red-billed Tropicbird; and Caspian, Common, and Royal Tern. We never saw any of these birds anywhere else for the entire trip, so right place, right time.

It was a breezy day and maybe that helped with the birds, but it made it more of a challenge for marine mammals. We finally saw a series of blows near shore, so slowly made our way in that direction. We never did get too close as the charts for this section of coast had not been updated since the 1860s. But fortunately, there was another series of blows behind us. And these we were able to get close to.

Our after-dinner talk was on marine mammals, and partway through the discussion someone noticed that there were dolphins riding the bow waves, and there was a red tide. Red tide turns whitewater (from the bow wake or from animals braking the surface of the water) into a glowing inflorescence trail. So as most of us gathered on the bow you could see the dolphins rocket in from sidelines and charge the bow wake, all with the telltale glowing water trail. Quite a finish to the day to see this rare phenomenon.



Wednesday, 29 March Isla San Francisco

Our anchorage when we awoke this morning was a fine, crescent-shaped bay on Isla San Francisco. Green waters (because of the sandy sea floor) and a white sand beach that was flanked by volcanic hills. Certainly a great setting for hiking, for beach parties (swimming, kayaking, standup paddling, etc.), and for looking down on from hikes to the top of the hills.

Different hikes saw different birds, with the highlight being an Osprey nest that we could watch from above. The female was incubating while the male perched on the side of the nest and made sure all was right. The other bird of interest was a very pale morph Red-tailed Hawk. Hard to imagine how it was making a living out here, but apparently it had found a way.

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Thursday, 30 March Isla Islotes / Isla Partida

We were back where we woke up on the first morning, the rocky Isla Islotes. But instead of a circle around the rocks, we anchored, as this is where some would swim with the California sea lions. Not lots, but there were plenty of Blue-footed Booby leaving the rocks for their morning buffet on the local seas. The sun cast an orange net across the horizon as we wandered into a light breakfast so we could get an early start.



There were two choices today: swim with the sea lions or skiff around the rocks. For those swimming, they had an hour in a cordoned off area to have sea lions charge and angle away at the last second. Schools of fish like calicos were abundant and there were some deeper water species moving through, too. It didn't take anyone very long to experience the shock and awe of these very adept swimmers as they made their presence known.

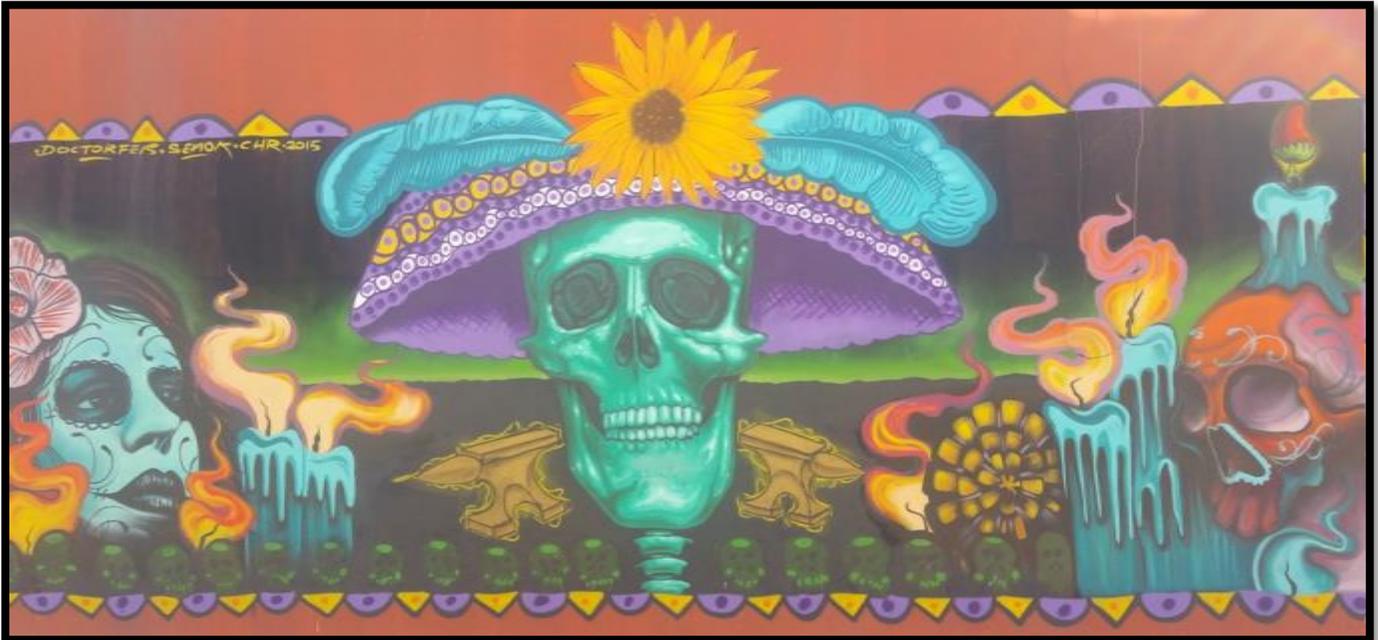
For those who skiffed the rocks, a slow circumnavigation provided plenty of opportunities to visit the sea lions as they cavorted around the inflatables and surfaced within feet of the cameras. Closer views of the boobies and gulls showed the blue and yellow feet, while older sea lions were sprawling out on flat ledges enjoying the morning sun. One skiff spotted a group of Common Dolphin a bit further offshore and was able to have the pod surround them, while doing flips (the dolphins ...) and racing ahead and underneath the moving inflatable.

Back on board, we all had a very hearty brunch and then a quick siesta as we were heading to our night's anchorage, Isla Partida.

Just because it was our night's anchorage didn't mean we were done for the day. It was time for a beach party, or a hike, or an opportunity to kayak. Those that decided on the beach party tried their hand at standup paddling and just enjoying the fine Baja weather. Those that hiked got to see the endemic Black Jackrabbit, found only on a couple of islands in the Sea of Cortés. For those that went kayaking, it was a three-and-a-half-mile geology tour, complete with fish. Certainly a great way to finish the day before heading back to the ship.

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Friday, 31 March

Whale Sharks & La Paz

We arrived at the dock at 6:30 AM and had until 11:30 AM to explore the wonderful town of La Paz prior to heading out to look for Whale Shark. The town square with the cathedral was just starting to wake up as merchants were setting up their display stands for the day. We walked through a section of town above the malécon that had brightly painted arches and murals, either with ocean inhabitants or Dia de los Muertos depictions.

Next stop was the Museo de Balleñas down near the waterfront. This is a fine museum, with relevant displays and numerous rooms that flowed from one family to the next. Everyone agreed that it did a fine job educating visitors and was appropriately sized for the theme.



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They had split the ship into two groups, and we were assigned to the second shift. It was about a thirty-minute ride by boat out to the area where the first group had seen the Whale Sharks, and then we started our search. It only took about ten minutes to find the first one, and then each of the three smaller groups got a turn to swim with the Whale Sharks. And then another swim and another, until we figured we must've seen at least three different animals, maybe even four. What a great way to finish our activities for this expedition cruise!

That night we celebrated our journey with a fine farewell dinner before watching the slide show documenting our week-long adventures. But then we had to pack.

Saturday, 1 April Flights Home

All of our group were heading home today with a staggered flight schedule. So after one last breakfast aboard the ship, we hopped on the bus and headed to the Los Cabos airport and started our journeys north.