

Whale Migration - Central Coast

Gray whale migration:

Gray whales spend the summer and early fall feeding in the arctic seas and migrate south to the waters off Baja California in the winter. In the spring they head back north.

The first grays to travel south are pregnant females, in a hurry to get there. Some births occur en route. They are followed by the non-pregnant breeding-aged females and the breeding-aged males. The last to head south are the juveniles and adolescents, who aren't motivated to make it all the way. They may turn around and head north with the first northbound grays.

Our chance of seeing southbound whales is best in January and February. In February the first northbound grays go by. The newly impregnated females are among the first to head north. They are followed by all the rest of the herd except the mothers and calves, who remain in the Baja waters a month or two longer to allow the calves to gain strength before making the long journey. Spring is our best opportunity to view gray whales from the Piedras Blancas area because they usually travel closer to shore when they are heading north. The cow/calf pairs go by in April and May and they are seen very close to shore, often between the two Piedras Blancas rocks and land.

In summary, off Piedras Blancas, gray whales can be seen heading south from December – February, with the peak time around mid-January. The northbound migration is February – May, with the peak time in the first two weeks of March. The peak of cow/calves pairs is usually the end of April/the first part of May.

Humpback migration:

The central coast population of humpbacks spends the winter in the waters off Baja California or Central America and feeds off the central coast of California in the summer and fall. When we see them is not predictable because they go where the food is. During some years there are humpbacks that hang out off Cayucos and Morro Bay in the summer. Not all humpbacks make the migration. We saw a few off Point Piedras Blancas one February a few years ago - an exciting day indeed.

In brief, gray whales can be seen migrating south in the winter and north in the spring. Humpbacks may be seen off the coast during the spring, summer, and fall because they feed in our area.

Nothing is simple and there are always exceptions. Some grays don't migrate. Some don't go all the way to the arctic seas. What we are talking about is what most of them do.

Carole Adams
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