THE LAST GIANTS OF THE GULF

Words and pictures by **Michael Fishbach**.

A blue whale glides effortlessly through the waters of the Gulf of California (GOC) also known as the Sea of Cortez, off Mexico's famed Baja California Peninsula. This almost one thousand mile long, narrow, rugged piece of land protects these waters from the vast openness of the Pacific Ocean. It is here beneath towering, jagged peaks and next to a myriad of sub-tropical islands that the mightiest of all animals can be seen in some of the calmest seas.

I have been coming here for the past 21 years both to get to know individual blue whales and to understand some of the countless mysteries that surround their lives. I was first brought here by the father of modern blue whale research Richard Sears in the mid 1990s, and this cactus-studded land where the desert meets the sea instantly captivated me, and has now become a second home to my family and me.

'White Eyes', easily identified by the distinctive markings on his tail fluke, is a regular visitor to the Gulf of California.

This is a land of little water and few people, a dry place that has the sea, and in the wintertime it is a rich sea at that.

Here is one of the very few places on Earth where at sub-tropical latitudes baleen whales can come to nurse their calves and feed voraciously at the very same time. It is also one of the safest places left for blue whales, far away from any shipping lanes and the massive vessels that blue whales in particular seem unable to learn to avoid. It is a rare pleasure to watch these mammoth whales swim along while they feed, care for their calves, and even engage in courting behaviour, all with little but raw nature being part of any view.

Blue whales used to number in the hundreds of thousands, their population perhaps even half a million strong. But when whalers figured out how to catch them, a ruthless slaughter commenced. The industry appeared unable to stop itself even as it became increasingly difficult to find any more blue whales and at the time of the commercial whaling ban in 1986, there were just a few thousand left. Today, they are a highly endangered species, remaining only in genetically poor remnant populations. The size of the current population is believed to be between eight and 15,000 animals, whilst an IUCN estimate puts the number at 10–25,000.

Researchers can identify individual blue whales in the calm waters of the Gulf.

The gulf is a fabulous area for observing mother and calf blue whales

The Northeast Pacific population, of which the Baja Blue whales are a part, is believed to be the largest sub-population left on earth. Globally, the population level seems to be showing little or no recovery, although there are areas, for example the Southern Ocean, where it is apparent that a rebound from disastrously low numbers is occurring.

In the Northeast Pacific the blue whales range from the coast of California south to both sides of the Baja Peninsula and beyond to an area of upwelling called the Costa Rica Dome. It is here that we find individuals at the beginning or end of their annual migration. One easily recognizable individual is named 'White Eyes' after one very bold white patch on each lobe of his massive tail fluke. We have seen White Eyes in 11 of our Baja field seasons. He is a regular whenever we have a film crew on board, and he has been observed vertical lunge feeding, chasing a wide array of females, and moving slowly along the shore 50 metres off the cliffs in a rare Baja thunderstorm. White Eyes is usually very easy going, offering us views of his massive body and unique tail. This whale provides us with a fabulous example of habitat preference too, as he habitually returns to the same portions of a vast sea.

I am usually able to identify about 50 individual blue whales in a season, but that number can vary between 35 and 60. It depends on the year and how long the whales that are present stick around; the longer that individual blue whales stay in the GOC, the lower the turnover of individuals and the lower the overall count in any one season. In some years individuals stay no more than a few days, then move on only to be replaced by a new group. This can happen again and again, offering us the chance to capture many individuals on our cameras. Last year (2016) this was not the case and we struggled to record 30 individuals. But some whales were observed on as many as 14 different days and stayed feeding in our working area for as long as a month and a half.

The GOC is a fabulous area for observing mother and calf blue whales. We usually see between 1-4 cow/calf pairs per season. The calves are quite young at this time of the year but grow quickly gaining over 200 pounds per day while nursing on the world's richest milk. Some years back we saw four cow/calf pairs in the same area at the same time, a sight none of us will ever forget.

Left: Whales stimulate phytoplankton blooms via the release of essential nutrients such as iron in the fecal plumes. Right: Whale faeces being collected for studies by the author.

Some of the old-time blue whales have not been seen for a number of years now. We suspect they can live for 70–90 years, but we cannot know what age any of the GOC blue whales were when they were first observed, unless they were seen as calves. It is not rare for an individual to drop off our radar for a decade or so, suddenly to return, leaving us to wonder about their whereabouts for all those years we did not encounter them.

Six years ago, I started the Great Whale Conservancy (GWC), a non-profit organization dedicated to conservation of the world's great whales with special emphasis on the blue whale, and annual fieldwork off Baja helps to keep me in tune with these mysterious giants. Not only does the GWC aid in efforts to minimize the impact of ship strikes and entanglements, but also in understanding in more depth how these animals help to fertilize the essential plankton blooms that sustain all life in the ocean as well as on land. Phytoplankton photosynthesis is responsible for half of the oxygen in our atmosphere and blue as well as other great whales stimulate these blooms via their mineral-rich faecal contributions. A return of the great whales to their pre-whaling numbers is therefore important in aiding the earth's response to the threat of global climate imbalances.

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The spout of a blue or fin whale lit by early morning sunshine, Baja California, Mexico.