

It's whale-watching time again

December 22, 2020



From mid-December to mid-January, a tradition takes place along the Oregon Coast that has intrigued and fascinated thousands for years.

Nearly 20,000 gray whales make their migration south from Alaska to the warm lagoons of Baja, Mexico.

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department usually sets up its annual Whale Watching Week, utilizing volunteers at several key viewing points along the Oregon Coast to help people spot and learn the whales. But this season, Whale Watching Spoken Here is cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the following conversation, The Pilot gains insight about the 2020 whale migration from Oregon Parks and Recreation Department spokesman Chris Havel.

The Pilot: Give us the background of this popular event.

Chris Havel: Gray whales migrate along the Oregon coast twice a year. In winter (December–January), they head south from the Gulf of Alaska headed for the Baja peninsula to mate and take advantage of the calving grounds. We can expect 20-25,000 to pass by, peaking at about 30 an hour. Headed south, they tend to be 3-5 miles offshore.

In spring (March-May, even into June), adults and their young head north to feed in the Gulf of Alaska. They tend to travel a little closer to shore as they head north. We have 200-400 whales that more or less stay off the Oregon coast around year-round.

The Pilot: What changes have been made to this popular winter activity due to the pandemic and why?

Chris Havel: Whale Watch in Oregon usually involves 24 stations along the coast staffed by a big crew of volunteers guided by a few state park staff. We would set up spotting scopes and share binoculars and manage one visitor center in Depoe Bay to help people enjoy our marine friends. To reduce the risk of transmission between visitors and from visitors to staff and volunteers, the whale watch season is DIY this year: no staff, volunteers, shared equipment or indoor whale watch center.

The Pilot: Describe locations where folks should go, safely and following social distancing requirements, to get a good view of the whale migration?

Havel: First, travel only with a group of people who live with you in your household. Travel the shortest distance necessary to reach a good viewing spot (more on that below). If there are other people from outside your household at the viewpoint, wear a mask if you can't keep six feet away from them. Check the weather and road conditions before you leave. Bring the food/drink, weather-appropriate clothing and personal cleaning supplies with you so you are as self-contained as possible.

If it's sunny, the best viewing is before mid-day so you're not staring into the sun. Wide binoculars or a spotting scope are useful, but you can also just go with your eyeballs. Most people who spot a whale are just looking around without magnification, they spot a plume and then they use binoculars or a scope to zoom in. Higher is better, so look for parking areas and viewpoints that are elevated, rather than down on the beach.

The Pilot: What should we look for as the whales swim by?

Havel: The first thing most people see is the cloud-like puff from a whale's blow-hole as they surface and take a deep breath. It kind of looks like an old steam-engine train, except it just happens once or twice.

This time of year, you'll see that plume, and then the whale dives again and keeps heading south, so start looking to the left for the beastie to emerge and take its next breath a couple minutes later. If you're really lucky, the whale will jump out of the water, but seeing its breath is way more common.

The Pilot: From your insight, why is whale watching such a popular event in Oregon?

Havel: Most people are drawn to the wildlife they don't get to see every day. When you see a wild animal that isn't part of your daily routine, you feel like you're traveling to a new, exciting world. It transports you out of your own, well-known routine life and into that exciting, dramatic and unknown existence.

Your imagination can kick into high gear. It's wild and unpredictable and novel and you feel connected somehow to the greater whole. There's a second, deeper level when we talk about whales. When we're talking about 30 tons full-grown, you can't help but lose yourself in awe.

The other way to answer that question is, why do people like to see whales IN OREGON? Our public ocean shore makes it one of the best places on the planet to pick your front-row seat. You don't need to get the key to a gate or buy a ticket on a cruise (those can be fun if you have the means). You need yourself and some patience. The same whales pass by Washington and California. They have some mighty nice stretches of coast there. Nothing rivals the ease-of-access to 363 miles of the Oregon coast. In our humble opinion, of course.

What's next?

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department also lists information on its website about spring whale watching, which begins in late March as the gray whales travel north on their way toward Alaska. The first surge swims by around the end of March and the migration continues until June.

Summer and fall brings whales that feed along the Oregon Coast from June to mid-November.

For information, visit the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department website.