

March 2, 1980

I had a wonderful experience yesterday, and would like to relate it to you, and maybe pass some of the thrill of it on. I went out on an 88 foot ship, from Santa Barbara harbor, into the Pacific ocean, the area between mainland and the Channel Islands. I saw many, many whales on their migration to the northern waters, and also a wonderful episode of viewing about 200 dolphins cavorting and playing in the sea, near the ship.

This was part of a course given by the University of California at Santa Barbara on Friday and Saturday, and was called "Mustache Mouths, Fin Feet and Other Denizens of the Deep". I will receive a college credit for taking the course. The moustache mouths are the seals, sea otters, and walrus; the fin feet are fishes and whales, and other sea creatures were also touched upon.

On Friday, a professor in Marine Biology gave lectures, and also had us take notes in the laboratory at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, where sea animals are examined, studied, statistics obtained, bones preserved, fur from seals preserved, etc. We were able to see contents taken from stomachs of various creatures (in jars, in formaldehyde) and learn on what they live. It was not distasteful, on the contrary, was very interesting. Skeletons from different species were available to examine and look upon. It was all very enlightening. The lectures gave us information about the kinds of whales that exist. Very briefly, there are two main groups, the baleen whales, which take in large amounts of sea water and the baleen strains out the small organisms, shrimp, and other living organisms that become their food. They have no teeth. The other kind are the toothed whales (odontoceti). They grab fish, squid and other kind of creatures in the sea, and eat them, using their teeth to shred and tear. There are several kinds of whales that migrate along the California coast, but mainly, we were told, we would see the grey whale when we went out to sea.

The whales live in Northern waters, (in our area), which is their main feeding ground. Late in fall they make their way down the coast of Alaska, Canada, the United States and Mexico to the Baja peninsula area, where they have their calves. In February, March and April they may be seen returning, with their nursing calves, to the northern waters. They eat very little on their long journey northward; they move along usually, at about 5 knots an hour, though they can travel faster and have been followed in boats, moving up to 15 knots. When the calf nurses, the mother rolls on her side and sometimes is supported by another whale, to maintain this position as long as necessary. Our professor told us that one whale we saw, with the fin upward, was probably in this position for nursing, at that time.

The first sign usually seen, as one is scanning the surface, is a water spout, the whale is just under the surface, blows out his air, then comes up to take in some more air. Whales are mammals, and must breathe air. They then will go down again, and their flukes, or tail, will come up quite a way above the surface. Often their entire body will be visible, as they swim just at the surface before heading downward again. Occasionally, the whale will shoot upward, head first, from under the surface and almost the entire body will be visible.

We did not see this happen yesterday, but I did see it happen while in Hawaii, out on a sailing ship, and we sighted a whale nearby. It was a fantastic sight, to see this huge monster emerge entirely out of the water and fall back in!!! The whales area grey in color, but look spotted with white, for they are covered in splotches with sea lice and other parasites.

Killer whales are black and white. We saw the grey whales, of various sizes. The largest ones, I would estimate, to be about 40 feet long and they were very close to the ship. One group which we followed for quite a long time, swam along very close to each other, spouting, then coming to the surface, swimming along a little way with body visible, then submerging again, only to repeat the procedure again. At one time, all three spouted at the same time, and each one was visible with entire body at the surface, then they all went down again, together. It was a thrilling sight. We probably saw about 60 or 70 whales in the 4 hours we were out, far from shore. It took us another hour to reach harbor.

The captain called out at one point "dolphins over to the left". We all looked, and quite far away we could see a very large group of what looked like flying fish! He turned the ship in that direction, full speed ahead, and soon we were in the midst of a huge school, at least 200 in number, of beautiful tan and grey colored, large dolphins. They are a beautifully streamlined mammal, swim extremely fast, and are very playful. They leap up head first, out of the water, like a deer jumping over brush, then gracefully slip head first down in the water, only to come up again and repeat the procedure over and over. We had the dolphins swimming back and forth across the bow, so close we could almost touch them. They swam faster than the ship was traveling, going ahead swiftly, then darting across the bow and coming back again, swim with us, leap upward, and dart down into the water. They were so speedy, one wondered how they did not collide with each other. At one point, there were about 30 or 40 of them leaping across the water, in a straight row, diving down, leaping up again, then continuing this until they were away from us, and out of sight. It was a truly remarkable and wondrous sight. As they swam alongside the ship, they were just barely under the water, we could see them very plainly, were about 5 feet long. It was such a wonderful experience, I would like to go again, when the ship will spend time for whale watching, then stop for several hours of lecture on Santa Cruz island, about creatures inhabiting this island. Only the naturalist professor stays there, part time, otherwise it's uninhabited. It is a nature preserve.

On the way back to the harbor, we saw 8 large California seals sunning themselves on an oil drum buoy, near an oil drilling platform. They inhabit the waters in this area, and have their colonies for mating and bearing offspring, on the islands in the Santa Barbara channel. I truly saw a wonderful display of creatures of the sea today.