

The California Gray Whale

The entire Gray Whale population migrates past the Monterey coastline every winter and spring. These whales have one of the longest animal migrations known, traveling over 12,000 miles from their summer feeding grounds in the Bering Sea to their winter breeding grounds in Baja California and back again. Gray Whales have come back from the brink of extinction and now number over 25,000 individuals and have recently been taken off the endangered species list. Gray Whales are easily observed as they hug the coastline during migration.

Gray Whales are present off Monterey from December through May. Off Monterey, Gray Whales migrate south from December through mid February, with peak numbers occurring during mid January. Whales migrate north from mid February through May, peaking during mid March. Most adult and juvenile whales pass Monterey on their way to Alaska by mid April. Mother gray whales with their newly born calves pass Monterey during April and May. The mother/calf pairs are most susceptible to Killer Whale attacks in the Bay during this period.

Gray Whales reach lengths of 45', are generally gray in color with white mottling, and have many barnacles and whale lice embedded in their skin. They migrate slowly, at about 2-5 miles/hr, and generally blow 3-5 times before fluking up and diving for 2-7 minutes. During this migration they occasionally breach, siphon, and mate with other Grays. They travel singly or in pods ranging from 2 to 10 whales.

Monterey Bay is the best place along the California coast to observe gray whales. Since the shallow continental shelf does not extend very far from shore off Monterey due to the near shore submarine canyon, Gray Whales can be found within a few miles of the coast in this region compared to 15 or more miles from shore off San Francisco.