

Blue whales invade the bay: Ocean royalty comes for the krill, has company

By Jason Hoppin - Santa Cruz Sentinel Santa Cruz Sentinel

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An abundance of krill is setting the stage for a spectacular show in Monterey Bay, drawing not only humpback whales and rare sharks, but scores of ocean royalty - blue whales.

The largest animals on Earth, blue whales have shown up in droves this year, rivaling the numbers of Monterey Bay's resident aerial acrobats, the humpbacks. And they have been supplemented by basking sharks, the second-largest shark in the world.

"It's incredible," said Monterey Bay Whale Watch marine biologist Nancy Black of sighting a blue whale. "I tell people it's a once-in-a-lifetime chance."

The show seems to have its origins in strong northeasterly winds, which pull nutrients up to the surface of the ocean. Those nutrients are favored by plankton, which in turn are favored by krill, the staple of the blue whale diet.

"Everywhere you go you just see blows," Black said, who estimated as many as 100 blue whales in Monterey Bay, rivaling the number of humpback whales.

Needing four tons of food daily, blue whales feed by gulping in large quantities of krill, often lunge-feeding, and forcing water back through their baleen to leave mouthfuls of tiny crustaceans. Because they eat so much, they gravitate to high concentrations of krill.

Once abundant, the endangered blue whale was hunted nearly to extinction at the turn of the 20th century. They number now around 10,000, including 2,000 in the northeast Pacific Ocean. At up to 90 feet, they are the largest animal on Earth, and can dive for 20 minutes or longer.

A member of Black's crew also spotted a basking shark, a frightening-looking creature that is actually indifferent to humans. Like blue whales, it feeds on smaller sea life such as krill and zooplankton, opening wide its giant mouth to get its fill.

"It's kind of seasonal, periodic," said Sean Van Sommeran of the Pelagic Shark Research Foundation of the basking shark's visit. "It doesn't happen every year."

Having tagged 83 basking sharks over the years, Van Sommeran has been searching for them at Stillwater Cove near Point Pinos. He said they're fascinating partly because they buck the shark's image as a fearsome, dangerous creature.

"I like them because there's so little known about them," Van Sommeran said. "It's a big shark that's famous for reasons other than overturning boats."

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