

Sea Kayaker

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BY BIRGIT PISKOR

In awe, in trouble

A too-close encounter with gray whales

December 27, 2011, was just another day in paradise—or more specifically, another day at Los Cerritos, a relatively undeveloped stretch of beach along the Pacific Coast of Southern Baja, about an hour's drive up from Cabo San Lucas. That morning, Perry Abedor, a surfer who lives on the property where I was staying, invited me out on his tandem sea kayak to see if we could get some good sightings of the gray whales that are so abundant at this time of the year. That sounded like a fun, appropriately Baja-style adventure, so we gathered our gear and headed down to the water.

It was a little tricky getting the double sit-on-top kayak through the surf, but once we were past the waves the sea was relatively calm. It wasn't long before we spotted whales blowing in the distance. Excited, we paddled hard to see if we could intercept them. Sure enough, there they were. We stayed a respectful distance away from them and watched.

I had never been on the ocean in the presence of gray whales before and had never seen the exquisite arching,

the slow languid curve as their bodies reenter the sea, a curve that is endless and achingly beautiful. First one arching body, then another and then a third. It was grace beyond anything I had imagined, visceral and deeply moving. As suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone.

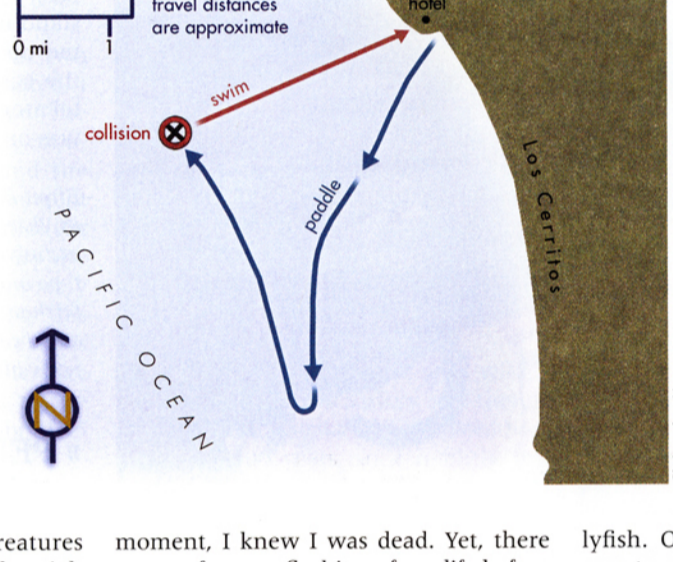
We had several more sightings that afternoon, each as exhilarating as the first, and for one glorious moment we were even able to keep pace off to the side of a small pod traveling south.

By mid-afternoon we hadn't seen any whales in a while and contemplated heading home. We drifted quietly, breathing in the beauty of the open ocean, when we spotted two whales moving north. Perry tried to get their attention. He made a squeaky sound by rubbing his hand hard below the waterline against the plastic hull of our kayak. Whether that squeak meant anything to them or not, the whales seemed to have heard it because they turned and began swimming west. Here

was our chance for one last encounter.

After several minutes of hard paddling to get closer to their new course, we stopped to wait. I said to Perry, "Wouldn't it be cool if the whales came up right beside us?" I recalled all of the photographs and films I'd seen of curious whales interacting with humans in small boats and allowing themselves to be touched. These peaceful encounters led me to believe that people can have a special, almost spiritual, relationship with these fellow mammals. What I mean to say is that I felt no fear, no fear at all for creatures that measure up to 45 feet and weigh over 35 tons.

Not ten minutes later, a whale exploded out of the water a few feet behind and to the left of us. It was so sudden and so massive that I could not comprehend what was happening. Terrified and bewildered, I turned to grab the edges of the kayak to brace myself for the wave that would soon be upon us. In that moment, the second whale breached directly in front of me, rising and rising until all I could see was whale; no sky, no land, only whale. In that suspended



moment, I knew I was dead. Yet, there was no fear, no flashing of my life before me. I closed my eyes, bowed my head and simply surrendered.

It turns out that Perry, sitting behind me, had kept his eyes open. He leaned way back and saw the whale twist and turn in the air and slam down directly on the kayak in the narrow space between us. I heard the mighty sound of the whale coming down, then felt the massive pressure as I was driven underwater. I opened my eyes, realized that I was still alive, and swam up through the swirling white water. When I surfaced, I saw that the kayak

had buckled in the middle and was rapidly sinking. Perry was already up and uninjured, and I had sustained some injury that was causing pain in my right leg and lower back. By some miracle, neither of us was bleeding—these waters are thick with hammerhead and tiger sharks. The whales were gone and we were easily two miles from shore.

Shock is a wonderful thing. It focuses the mind on the moment, on the task at hand, the actions that you must take to ensure your survival. I had no room for panic, no room for the horror of sharks and deadly jellyfish. Only one task existed and that was to swim. To swim and make it to shore before the sun went down. After a quick hug in the water to celebrate that we were still alive, Perry and I began our swim.

I was thankful that I've been a swimmer from way back and my work as a sculptor has kept my arms and upper body strong. I wasn't able to swim on my front due to my injury, but I was able to do the backstroke. It has always been a strong stroke for me. We swam and we swam until my hands went numb, but my arms kept moving. We were so far



Perry stands with the bow of his kayak; it washed ashore three days after the incident.

out that for the longest time it seemed like we weren't getting any closer to land. Fear began to seep in at the edges.

Eventually, it was clear that we were making headway and getting closer to land. While that was a refreshing relief, we had another challenge ahead of us; the current was pushing us northward, away from the long, sandy curve of Los Cerritos beach toward the rocky point that defines its northern end. The swell from the west had helped to bring us in, but it had picked up and huge waves

smashed with killing force against those rocks. I had to place my trust in Perry's knowledge of these waters. We didn't alter our course until Perry told me to swim hard toward shore. I saw our goal was a single narrow strip of sand to the north of the point. This was our best chance to get safely ashore—the rocky cliffs extended up the coast for quite a distance. Pain forgotten, I swam for my life. Perry was fantastic; staying just ahead of me, he shouted when to duck under the cresting waves and when to

swim. Without him, I doubt I would have made it ashore alive. I reached the beach hypothermic, sobbing uncontrollably and in shock. I was barely able to stand up the beach where we waited at the base of the cliff. People at the hotel atop the point had seen us and help was on the way.

Birgit Piskor is a professional sculptor based in Victoria, British Columbia. She works exclusively in concrete. This was her first time in a kayak in twenty years and the farthest from shore she's ever paddled. She may be reached through her website: www.birgitpiskor.com.

» PERRY'S PERSPECTIVE

BY PERRY ABEDOR

Birgit has given an accurate account, except I remember that both whales rose on the right side of the kayak. The first whale breached straight up, only 25 feet to the right of us. The nose of the whale reached 65 feet up while the tail was still in the water. It had to be 65 feet out of the water—these things were so giant. It was much larger than 50 feet, that's for sure.

It moved from west to east in a straight line and slammed into the surface of the ocean. It sent a five-foot-high wave toward us. Birgit braced for the wave, then 10 feet away, when the second whale broke right through it, canceling it out. This second whale went straight up like the first. I watched it reach its apex, turn its pectoral fins and come directly for our kayak. Had it continued on in an easterly direction we wouldn't have been on a collision course, but it turned north. I watched the whole whale until the time that it hit us. Its huge body fell across us, extending most of its length to the north of us. We were so close that the tail came right between Birgit and me. We were only about five feet from each other, with my legs extended between us. The force of the whale sent me 10 feet underwater and my whole body was in pain. I don't know if the whale hit me directly or if it was just the force involved that gave me so much pain. As I swam upward I felt all my limbs moving, so I knew everything was intact at that point. I clearly recall touching the whale for a split second as I reached the

surface. It slithered right by my hand and I felt the puffedness of his skin. I didn't have my PFD on at the time, but I found it floating nearby and put it on. Birgit had been wearing hers.

I believe we were more than the two miles out to sea that Birgit estimated. I think it was three miles or more. The current was in a southeasterly direction, pulling us farther out to sea, and the more we swam, the more the current sucked us away from shore. I thought we were going to die out there. By the time we reached land, we had probably swum a total of five miles. I know this because I used to swim four to five miles in the ocean every day, and when we finally got back to shore I was totally spent. We made it to the beach about 45 minutes before the sun set.

Perry Abedor has been in Baja California Sur for a year and three months. He competed with the United States Surf Team in Venezuela during the 2002-2003 season, and he currently gives surf lessons and repairs surfboards. He enjoyed whale watching from his double kayak until it broke in the breaching incident.

Editor's note: It can be difficult to estimate size and distance accurately, particularly when there is no frame of reference nearby. From the perspective of the kayak, the whale would have been in a foreshortened view and its length especially difficult to gauge, and it is difficult to guess the height of a tall tree

while standing next to its trunk. By the same token, judging a long distance to shore is difficult when you are sitting or floating close to the water's surface. An observer on shore who had been watching the kayakers when the whales breached—but who was unaware of the collision—put Perry and Birgit at "more than a mile from shore." Perry's and Birgit's estimates are presented here as they wrote them. Given the circumstances of the collision, any exaggeration is to be expected.

» LESSONS LEARNED

BY JAMES MICHAEL DORSEY

Man has shared the ocean with whales long before recorded history, and there is evidence that kayakers can be traced back at least 6,000 years, so it is likely that man and leviathan have had close encounters for at least that long. There is an account of a sperm whale that rammed the Nantucket whaling ship *Essex* on the morning of November 20, 1820. Many surviving crewmembers produced written accounts and all agreed that after its attack had been harpooned, the whale panicked, ramming the ship repeatedly until it split its head open and died. Since then there has been only one recorded incident that I know of. In the mid-1960s in the Mexican lagoon and whale sanctuary where I have worked for 15 years, one of Jacques Cousteau's crew was, in a Zodiac pursuing a gray whale; it breached underneath their boat

and killed two crewmen. At that time, Cousteau was the only person really investigating whale behavior. Little was known about whales, particularly where their comfort zone began or ended, so every one of Cousteau's encounters was an experiment. This one went badly. In 2010, there was a supposed attack by an orca against its trainer in a Sea World facility. My opinion is that confining an animal used to roaming hundreds of miles in a day inside a 40-foot tank is tantamount to locking a human in a closet, day in and day out, for several years; you can decide for yourself if this was an attack or the orca's inability to accept its environment any longer. (Orcas, by the way, are often categorized as dolphins, but the Cetacean Society International, the American Cetacean Society and I consider orcas the largest of the toothed whales. Their behavior sets them apart from dolphins, placing them more toward the whale side.)

I consider both the *Essex* and the Cousteau events to be instances of instinctive self-defense and not attacks. Both of the incidents I've cited happened long before the Marine Mammal Protection Act was enacted in the U.S. in 1972. While difficult to enforce, it requires that mammals be given a 100-yard zone that is not to be encroached upon. It states that it is permissible to be closer if the mammal approaches, but unless a whale has shown itself previously, a kayaker might not be aware of its proxim-

ity. The Marine Mammal Protection Act applies in the United States; Mexico and many other nations have similar laws protecting whales. (You can find summaries of many nations' laws linked at www.puertovallarta-whalewatching.com/html/official_regulations.html.)

Gray whales are very much like humans. They breathe air, give live birth, nurse their young and have hair and warm blood. In the womb, a gray whale has individual finger-like digits that morph into a pectoral fin before birth, while a human fetus has fin-like appendages that morph into fingers prior to birth. Only two living creatures have a soft spot on top of their heads at birth to allow for the growth of the brain: humans and whales.

Baby gray whales have almost no depth perception and are rambunctious and playful. In spring 1984 (Issue 1), *Sea Kayaker* published photos and an account of a gray whale calf capsizing a kayak in Magdalena Bay, Baja, Mexico. That incident can't be regarded as an attack. In their rush to investigate something new, young grays frequently ram into boats. I have seen this countless

times in the sanctuary of San Ignacio, a gray-whale nursery in Southern Baja, Mexico. During their first couple of years, baby grays are like human teenagers—curious, finding their way by experimentation and often ignoring their mothers to make mischief. Occasionally the juveniles have almost come out of the water right into my lap in their apparent eagerness to make contact. They do not know their own strength and have a compulsive curiosity. If something attracts their attention, they are drawn to it instantly without regard to consequences.

Birgit makes note of the fact that Perry made a squeaking sound by rubbing the hull of the kayak. This could certainly have attracted whales of any age. Only last year a young gray breached next to a sailboat off the coast of California and landed on top of it. I have been told by many boaters that the creaking sounds of their rigging attracts whales. This may or may not be true, but it is certainly possible.

Unlike dolphins, orcas and other toothed whales that navigate by echolocation, gray whales do not possess this ability and must rely on sound and eyesight to know what is around them. Grays do have some sensory receptors—dimples on their rostrum, or nose, with a single hair in each dimple—that pick up minute vibrations in the water and help them identify what is around them. In younger whales, this sensory ability is often not yet developed. Grays of all ages also frequently spy-hop, looking their eyes out of the water to bring around. Since their eyes face outward and down, they need to look above the water frequently to identify potential threats. Young whales do not always check their environs before surfacing. Think of a human teenager texting while driving or changing lanes without looking.

I have no doubt that these whales breached just as Birgit and Perry said they did, but I also believe they were most likely newborns or yearlings simply being reckless, as is their nature. The collision with Birgit and Perry's kayak was probably the result of a random breach, with no intent of harming people or kayaks. As far as I am concerned, it was simply an accident.

The size of the whales as reported by Birgit and Perry was exaggerated, though understandably so. A length of 35-40 feet is average for a gray whale and a large gray would weigh close to 40 tons. In two

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decades on the water among them, I have only seen two that would approach 45 feet. For a gray whale to have 65 feet of its body out of the water during a breach while its tail is still submerged would mean the whale was 70-75 feet long. There has never been documentation of a gray whale even close to 65 feet long.

The ocean is a vast to place full of creatures of awesome size and power. When we paddle there we are out of our element even under the best of conditions. We accept the risk that goes with entering the environment.

Most people—especially kayakers who have the best opportunities to see marine life up close—are fascinated by whales, but we should never lose sight of the fact that they are wild animals, and it is best to avoid an area where whales are known to be. In this case Birgit and Perry knew there were whales in the vicinity and tried to watch them from a safe distance, but it seems they had no way to know that two grays would come so close until they breached. **SK**

James Michael Dorsey is a long-time marine naturalist and frequent contributor to Sea Kayaker.