



Laguna San Ignacio Ecosystem Science Program

A Project of the Ocean Foundation in Baja California Sur, Mexico

January 2021 Field Report

Winter 2021 Gray Whale Research Begins:

Our small field research teams arrived at Laguna San Ignacio and Bahía Magdalena in mid-January to begin preliminary surveys of the gray whales and to observe the general conditions in each area. This year all of our researchers come from the Autonomous University of Baja California Sur's (UABCS) Marine Mammal Program (PRIMMA) in La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico. Our colleagues and collaborators from outside of Mexico are staying home for the winter because of the risks of traveling during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(see more on LSIESP website / <https://www.sanignaciograywhales.org/research/>)



This winter Dr. Lorena Vilorio Leads the Bahía Magdalena team which includes Daniela Bernot, Mario Marquez, Omar Ramirez, and Captain Miguel Gómez. In Laguna San Ignacio the research is led by Dr. Sergio Martínez A. accompanied by researchers Floryser Ronzón, Minerva Valerio, Alejandra Saavedra, and Andrés González. As we reported in early January, while in the field our researchers are operating under specific protocols to protect their health and safety, and to minimize the risk of becoming infected with the COVID-19 virus, and to protect the safety of the local residents of Laguna San Ignacio and Bahía Magdalena.

Both teams report that, while the pandemic has complicated life and activities in the field, the wonders of the gray whales and of these lagoon areas are as spectacular as ever!

Additional Cetaceans Species observed in Laguna San Ignacio:

Even before our researchers arrived, in late December eco-tourists from Antonio's Whale-Tours at La Frederia encountered for the second year in a row a juvenile Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) that was apparently chasing shoals of sardines inside the lagoon. See December 24, 2020;

(<https://www.facebook.com/antoniosecotours.mx/posts/3581464315306942>).



Photograph by Sergio Martínez A.

In mid-January, groups of Common Dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) were encountered inside Laguna San Ignacio. Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) are regularly seen inside the lagoon, but Common Dolphin are normally seen outside of the lagoons and along the outer coast of the Baja peninsula.

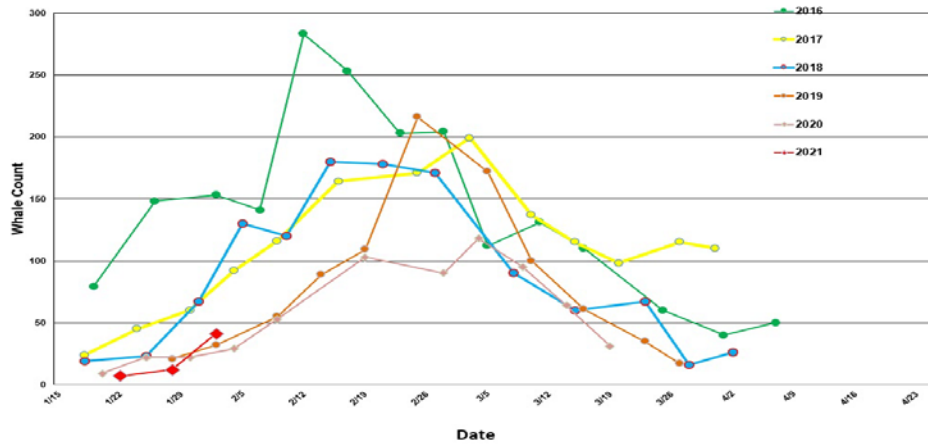
Numbers of gray whales gradually increasing in February:

In Bahía Magdalena, Lorena's team reported abundance survey counts between January 18-28 of 19-single whales in Bahía Almejas, and 4-singles in Bahía Magdalena, and no whales in the northernmost Canal de Santo Domingo. No female-calf pairs were seen. To date they have photographed a total of 81-singles whales, with 14 in "good" condition, 13 "acceptable" condition, 30 were in "poor" condition, and condition could not be determined for 25 whales.

The Laguna San Ignacio team reports their survey counts of whales inside the lagoon on January 21 was 5-single whales, and 2-mother-calf pairs, and on January 28 they saw 5-single whales and 2-mother calf pairs. While these numbers are low, it still early in the winter season, and the whale abundance is expected to increase throughout February. Unfortunately, the photo-ID surveys are still reporting many "skinny" whales that appear malnourished, and suggests that the Unusual Mortality Event (UME) that began in 2019 may be continuing into 2021.

(see NOAA UME blog: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2019-2021-gray-whale-unusual-mortality-event-along-west-coast-and>)

NEW DATA JUST IN: LSIESP researchers reported 39-single whales and 9-female-calf pairs in their February 2, 2021 abundance survey in Laguna San Ignacio. These numbers are expected to increase in February and track previous years.



Counts of adult gray whales in Laguna San Ignacio

Newborn Gray Whale Calf Observed Shortly After Birth:



Photograph by Floryser Ronzón

Finally, last Saturday January 30th, while on a routine photo-ID survey in Laguna San Ignacio the team observed a new-born gray whale calf with its mother, and found the placenta and umbilicus cord floating in the water nearby the whales. The young whale, probably only minutes old, was smooth grey in color, with floppy fins and flukes, and fetal folds from head to tail. This is only the second instance when our researchers have encountered a newborn whale just minutes following it’s birth. Truly an event we will remember forever!

More to Come on LSIESP Website www.sanignaciograywhales.org

Next month we will post another Field Report on our LSIESP website, so please check back for an update on the status of the whales and the activities of our research teams.



The "Milky Way" stars over laguna San Ignacio ~ photograph by Sergio Martínez A.

Please stay safe and stay well for yourself, your family, and your friends!