



## *Pale Whale Tales – Internet Edition*

The Newsletter of the Allison Wonderland

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### **Editor's Note**

Hi!

It's been a while. Here we go anew, with another run of CERF newsletters. It's been a hectic 18 months, and it's not looking like it's going to slow down any time soon! There have been a quite a few exciting changes at CERF since the last newsletter went out.

I'm now a Lecturer (Asst Prof) in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Bath, in England, and Lei Lani is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Rochester Institute of Technology, in upstate New York. Both of us are looking forward to developing our collaborative research programmes in the years to come.



*I've been waiting ten years for this shot!*

In 2002, we moved our research base to Duncanby Landing on a trial basis, and this year, we've made it permanent, with the opening of the **Goose Bay Laboratories**. The aim is to build a field research station with facilities which will attract researchers & students from all over the world to study the ecology of the *Great Bear Rainforest*. We taught UCLA and UBC courses from temporary classroom facilities at Duncanby last summer, and are looking forward to a new dedicated classroom / computer lab building being constructed this winter.

We won't be completely abandoning our base camp at Skull Cove – it has now become a permanent part of the BC kayaking scene, and we will be using it as a base for ecological research on the islands of the Bramham archipelago. Early next season, the camp will be busy with students from International Student Volunteers.

And finally, our Baja programme is now getting permanently established. We will be working from Laguna San Ignacio for two weeks this February, and from Bahia Magdalena in March (more info [below](#)). [Rachel Darvill](#) & I will be running the San Ignacio trips, and Lei Lani & Rachel will be teaching an RIT course at Bahia Magdalena. We'll be looking for company in San Ignacio – if you're interested, get back to me soon so I can start making bookings.

Enjoy the newsletter – hope to see some of you soon!

William Megill, PhD  
President & Research Director

## Baja 2004: Explorations

by William Megill

We're returning to Baja this winter for a three week field season. We'll be working in three different parts of the Baja peninsula, concentrating on different groups of animals in each. We'll start with ten days with gray whales in Laguna San Ignacio, where we've worked in previous years, and where we've made two matches with whales from the Cape Caution area in Canada. We'll follow that with three days in the Sea of Cortez, off Loreto, where we'll be looking for blue whales – the largest animals ever to have existed on Earth. Finally, we'll be back to the gray whales, offering a week-long undergraduate field course in Bahia Magdalena, on the west coast of the peninsula, about 100 miles south of San Ignacio.



The three expeditions will each have a very different focus. During the first week in San Ignacio, our primary aim will be to identify as many gray whales as possible, to compare with our Canadian catalogue. We're hoping to add to our current two matches as part of a study of these animals' annual migration. We'll also be collaborating with Mexican colleagues working on a population census and between-lagoon movements. We'll be based at Kuyimita camp on the shore of the lagoon, where it's not uncommon to count over a hundred spouts from your sleeping bag before you get up in the morning! Food at Kuyimita is excellent, served in a thatched hut restaurant called a *palapa*. Rachel Darvill will be leading the trip, working with the local whale-watching operators, on the water twice every day for three hours at a time (weather dependent). We can't obviously guarantee anything, but "friendly" whales are well-known in San Ignacio...

The second week will be more of a road-trip. We'll start in San Ignacio on the 22nd, where I'll join Rachel for two days focussed on gray whales outside the lagoon (as much as we can, weather dependent). The accepted wisdom on gray whales states that they fast all winter, but when we were there in 2001, we found them feeding in the mud outside the lagoon. We'd like eventually to build a research programme around that question, using divers and our automated submersible, but the first step is to determine where and how often they do feed outside the lagoons. This winter's work off San Ignacio will be completely exploratory – we have no idea what to expect. After those two days, we'll hop in cars (*because of this, the trip will be limited to 6 people only – first come first served*) and head for Loreto, on the Sea of Cortez side of Baja, where we'll go looking for blue whales. It's been known for many years that blue whales feed in the Sea of Cortez in February and March, but the ecological interaction between the whales and their prey remains little known. The aim of this winter's expedition is again reconnaissance – an opportunity to make some local connections before we start planning a full-blown research programme. We'll stay in a hotel in Loreto, and hire a local whale-watching operator to take us out to the animals. After three days in Loreto, Rachel & I will do the 7-hour drive to Bahia Magdalena to meet up with Lei Lani and connect with our collaborators at the School for Field Studies. We'll have two seats in the car for that trip for those who want to join us on a desert cross-country!





Blue whale off Isla San Francisco, Baja California (Photo: William Megill)

Our third week in Baja is part of an undergraduate course being offered by the Rochester Institute of Technology and taught by Lei Lani Stelle, my partner in all things CERF. Students in the programme will be hosted by the School for Field Studies in Bahia Magdalena. Space is limited on that course, and priority will be given to RIT students. However, if you're really interested in the course, please feel free to contact Lei Lani at [stelle@cerf.bc.ca](mailto:stelle@cerf.bc.ca) for more information.

### Dates

San Ignacio: Feb 14-24

Loreto: Feb 25-27

Bahia Magdalena: Feb 28-Mar 7

### Prices

In San Ignacio, our arrangement with Ecoturismo Kuyima makes it possible to offer an all-inclusive trip. Cost is \$200 USD per day (min 5 days) if you bring your own camping equipment. If you don't have your own, you can rent equipment from Kuyima, but if you're planning on joining us for more than a few days, it will probably work out cheaper to buy some gear and bring it with you. Our price includes two daily whale-watching trips, all food, campsite rental and instruction. Travel to San Ignacio is trickier. The nearest commercial airport is in Loreto, where you can catch a bus or rent a car. Ecoturismo Kuyima have a van which makes the two-hour trip between the lagoon and the town of San Ignacio (where the bus stops) – contact us if you'd like us to make arrangements for you. It's a bit of a trek, but it's well worth the effort!



In Loreto, we'll make reservations for you at one of the local hotels, and arrange whale-watching charters, but we won't make arrangements for food – we'll do some lunch shopping together when we get there, and all go *à la carte* in one of the local restaurants in the evenings. I haven't sorted out all of the final details yet – as soon as I know how many people are interested in coming on this trip, I'll start making enquiries. I expect the price will be about \$200 USD per day, plus food. Flexibility and a well-developed sense of humour will be essential prerequisites for this trip!

### Reservations

These trips are all limited to quite small groups, so we need to know soon if you're interested. Please email us at [info@cerf.bc.ca](mailto:info@cerf.bc.ca) if you'd like to come, and indicate which dates you'd like to participate (minimum 5 days). We'll have to ask for a \$250 US per person credit card (MC, Visa, AmEx) deposit to hold your spot – we'll send an authorisation form when you email to book – balance will be due the 7<sup>th</sup> of January, 2004.

### Cape Caution gray whales – 2003 season update

What a way to celebrate ten years' work at Cape Caution! We had a fantastic summer, with amazing weather (it was calm! never mind the rain...) and 50 whales. Our second biggest summer yet. Many of the regulars were back again, including Stormy (CG014), Target Left (CG005) and Kate Moss (CG054). Noddy (CG038) was up to her usual tricks – I even got head-butted on the last day of the season! It felt like a 40-tonne cat had rubbed its nose against the bottom of the dinghy – for a second, I wasn't sure I wasn't going swimming!



Photo: Sally Holden

A copy of our 2003 scientific report is available on our website at <http://cerf.bc.ca/pubs/cc2003.pdf>, for those who are interested. The major results are that we identified 50 whales (despite a short season and a camera failure halfway through it!). They were distributed more widely in 2003 than in any previous year – this was the first year we found gray whales on the west coast of Calvert Island. It felt like the whole feeding area had shifted north by ten miles. Not sure what was going on. It might just have been that they were off by a few degrees this year when they crossed Queen Charlotte Sound from Vancouver Island, or it may have been that something was different about the distribution of their prey. Unfortunately we didn't have the funds nor the personnel to run a diving programme this year, a situation we hope to remedy in future years with an autonomous underwater vehicle.



Our biggest news from Cape Caution this year, though, is the opening of the Goose Bay Laboratories at Duncanby Landing. We've entered into a joint-venture with Duncanby to operate a research station there, complete with proper lodge accommodation and, beginning next year, our own dedicated classroom/computer lab building. A far cry from the tents & tarps we spread out in the salal around Caitlin Bay back in '94!

Lei Lani & William taught undergraduate courses through UCLA and UBC there this summer, and we hope to bring SFU and Bath on board next year.

### Introductions

**Rachel Darvill** begins her masters with us this winter. She will be taking on the gray whale heart project as a joint student between Dave Jones' lab in Zoology at UBC and William's in Mechanical Engineering at Bath. The aim of the project is to measure the heart rate of a free-swimming whale – something which has never been done – using a suction-cup tag. We're still trying to decide which of two systems to use, whether to record electrical signals through the skin, or whether to build an underwater stethoscope. Either way, the tag will be equipped with depth and swim speed sensors so we can study the whales' heart rate changes as they dive to different depths in different behaviour states. Thanks to hard work by our University of Maine collaborators (Becky Woodward & Jeremy Winn), we now have a reliable system for getting tags on to the whales, which Rachel will be applying to her work both in Canada and in Mexico.



That's all for this issue. We'll be back later this fall – watch this space.

Have a great one.

William (&co)