



WEST MARIN WILD

By Jeff Miller

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Baleen and Booze

People are always asking me: "what are the best places in Marin to see whales and what beverage will best compliment my whale-watching experience?" OK, this is not exactly true, but as a public service announcement, I offer these suggested pairings of prime west Marin blubber viewing locations and appropriate libations.

Beginning in December, gray whales (*E schrichtius robustus*) began migrating past the Marin coast on their way to winter calving and breeding lagoons in Baja. January seems to be the best month to see gray whales from shore, but they will be making their way south through February. You will also have opportunities in March and April to see gray whale mothers with their calves close to shore, making their way back north to Arctic feeding areas in Alaska. Gray whales undertake the longest migration of any mammal on earth, covering about 10,000 miles round trip.

Coastal overlooks at high elevations are obviously the best viewpoints from terra firma. How can any reasonable cetacean enthusiast set out on an excursion without proper refreshments? Enjoy a drink - then scan the ocean surface for telltale mist clouds from a whale's blowhole. Gray whales travel in small pods, moving only about five miles per hour. They will usually blow several times nearly in unison every three to seven minutes. If you have binoculars and are sober enough to focus, you should be able to see the whales' backs and flukes. Take a drink each time you see a whale spouting, spy-hopping, breaching, throwing flukes or diving.

At Point Reyes National Seashore, the Point Reyes Lighthouse and Chimney Rock are usually the best whale viewing areas if it is not foggy. You can call the lighthouse at (415) 669-1534 to find out the weather.

Trust me, you're going to want to bring a thermos of hot chocolate spiked with peppermint schnapps to the lighthouse to ward off the wind and make new friends whilst you huddle on the viewing platform in the knife-cold fog. At Chimney Rock you can also ogle the mating elephant seals from a stupendous vantage point near the parking lot. Jaegermeister is the drink of choice here, as it will get you in the mood for the frat-boy antics of the bull elephant seals.

Hiking the Tomales Point Trail is another Point Reyes option with possible whale sightings. You will definitely see the resident tule elk and get good views of Tomales Bay. Since it is eight miles round trip if you make it to Bird Rock, weight is an issue for your backpack. Might I suggest bringing a small flask of a nice peaty scotch, such as Lagavulin or Oban. The elk, the rolling green hills, the stone outcrops and the smoky malt taste will combine for good effect to remind you of the Old Country.

In southern Point Reyes, the Coast Trail from Palomarin Trailhead to Double Point (past Bass Lake and Pelican Lake) is your best bet for whales. Four miles in, Double Point Overlook will reward you with a sublime view of the Pacific and any passing whales. A nice light chardonnay will compliment the picnic lunch you had the foresight to pack.

Should you find your way to the bluffs over RCA Beach or Agate Beach in Bolinas, you can wander the grasslands while harriers hover overhead and cast a watchful eye across a vast sweep of the Pacific. A bottle of port should bring the Farallones in focus for your sunset whale watch. Liberally passing the port and sharing your whale sightings will ingratiate you with the locals. To be continued...

***West Marin Wild* is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at P.O. Box 111, Bolinas.**