

## Gray Whale Migration

From [www.projects.edtech.sandi.net/encanto/graywhale/migrationinfo.html](http://www.projects.edtech.sandi.net/encanto/graywhale/migrationinfo.html)

The California Gray Whale travels the longest distance on migration of any mammal. This species is the only whale whose year-round habits and whereabouts are well known.

After feeding during the summer and fall, the entire gray whale population heads south. Early December is the beginning of the southward migration in the Pacific Northwest. Along the Oregon coast, the migration usually reaches a peak during the first week of January at a rate of 30 animals per hour. By mid-February, most of the whales have left Oregon waters.

Pregnant females are the first to migrate, followed by mature adults of both sexes and then by juveniles. Whales travel at a rate of up to five miles per hour during the southbound migration. It takes them about three weeks to get to Mexico.

Examinations of the stomachs of whales during the whaling days indicated that gray whales eat very little while migrating and while in calving areas. Thus, many whales may go without food for three to five months.

The animals travel south to the three major breeding and calving lagoons on the west coast of Baja California, Mexico: Laguna Ojo de Libre, San Ignacio Lagoon (also known as Scammon's Lagoon), and Magdalena Bay. Captain Charles Scammon charted many of these areas in the mid-1800s as he hunted gray whales.

By March, whales already are returning northward along the Oregon coast. The northbound migration begins with immature animals (some of which may not have gone all the way to Mexico), adult males, and females without calves. These animals pass the Oregon coast from early March through April. Breeding sometimes is observed at this time.

Calves usually are rambunctious but stay close to their mothers as they become more coordinated and develop an insulating blubber layer. Calves are at least a month old before they migrate north with their mothers. Mothers and calves are the last to leave the lagoons and move somewhat more slowly, passing Oregon and Washington from late April through June.

During the spring migration, if the weather is good, you can see whales within a few hundred yards of coastal headlands.

The full round-trip migration from the Baja calving lagoons to the Bering Sea and back is 10,000 miles (16,000 km), the longest known for any mammal. Other whales also are known to migrate between summer high latitude feeding grounds and more temperate low latitude breeding and calving areas. However, researchers know more about the gray whale because it moves so close to shore. This near-shore movement has led to speculation that gray whales navigate by staying in shallow water or keeping the surf noises to one side or the other depending upon their direction of travel.