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RAMBLING LA: AT SEA AND AGOG

Posted on September 16, 2009 | 2 Comments



By [Ilsa Setziol](#)

THE DINOSAURS are gone. So too the mammoths, saber-toothed cats and short-faced bears. Even California's mascot, the grizzly, no longer roams the state. Megalopolis has replaced megafauna. Yet the largest animal ever still graces the California coast. This summer, I went looking for it.

In Long Beach, I met up with Michelle Sousa, senior

mammalogist with the [Aquarium of the Pacific](#) in Long Beach. We hopped aboard the Christopher, one of the 60-foot yachts used by the cruise operators [Harbor Breeze](#) for whale-watching tours.

Sousa and I are giddy at the prospect of seeing a blue whale. "It's the most magnificent animal in the world," she says. "They average 80 feet in length, but they've been known to get up to 108." (That's three times the size of the largest dinosaur.)

As the Christopher put-puts out of Rainbow Harbor, Sousa tells me that, at first, the blue whale's size protected it from hunters. "But when they invented the pneumatic harpoon gun [it could penetrate the animal] and then explode, so people were able to kill them. And we went from a population of 350,000 to now we have less than 15,000 worldwide."

It's a gorgeous day. Ahead of us, ringed with mist, Catalina rises from the sea. Above us, clouds look like waves cresting in the Wedgwood-blue sky. Sousa explains that of those 15,000 blue whales, less than a third live in the northern hemisphere. Fortunately for whale-watchers, some have been feeding closer to the Los Angeles shore in recent years. "We've been seeing a lot more lately," Sousa says, "we think it's because their food is here. All of a sudden there's a lot of krill."

Krill are tiny shrimp-like crustaceans usually found in cold, nutrient-rich water.

Sousa is well informed, but she can't make up for the fact that scientists don't

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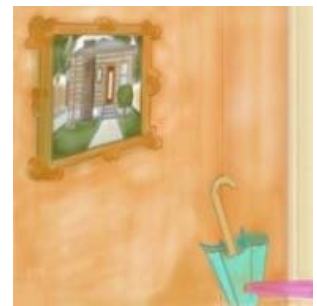
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know all that much about blue whales. This much can be gleaned: In the northern hemisphere, grey whales are known to migrate south in winter, and back north in summer. Blues may be doing the same thing, but scientists aren't sure; to find out, they've recently begun tagging the whales and tracking their movements by satellite.

The captain turns the boat north, accelerating as we swing around the Palos Verdes Peninsula. The boat slaps down on five-foot swells, tossing passengers — and sodas — around the deck, thrilling the preteens aboard and nauseating the adults. A group of bottlenose dolphins swims over to race at the boat's bow.

Bottlenose dolphins are only one of the types of hairless, spouting marine mammals known as Cetaceans native to Southern California's stretch of the Pacific. The bottlenecks are common, as are Risso's and Pacific white-sided dolphins, most of them resident. Grey, finback, humpback, Minke, and Sei whales are frequent visitors. Even pods of orcas pop down to snack on sea lions.

Orcas are the wolves of the sea. "They are the only natural predator of the blue whale," Sousa informs me. "Fifteen to 25 orcas will attack the blues in three or four strike groups."

* * * * *

THE BOAT slows. Over an intercom, Angelina Komatovich, an educator from the Aquarium, tells passengers to start scanning the pewter-blue sea for large sprays of water: "What we're looking for is their blow. They come up to the surface and take a nice big breath. And their breath can shoot up about 20 feet high in the air. When they come up to the surface, they have water on top of their blowhole and they blow that water off."



After about 20 minutes, someone sees a spout. We're in luck: It's a blue whale. The boat lurches toward it. It's *two* blues!

A mother and her baby slide up to the sea surface, then arc back under. They alternate brief traveling dives with longer (six to ten-minute) feeding dives.

In krill-rich spots, hungry blues simply open their massive mouths; pleats on the underside of the jaw expand as water flows in. "They use their tongue to push all the water out," explains Sousa, "but all the krill is caught." For adult blues, that would be up to 8,000 pounds of krill a day.

Every day a baby blue will drink about 100 gallons of milk, gaining 200 pounds. "So every *hour* it's gaining eight or nine pounds," says Sousa.

Blues are basically solitary animals. They live in same-sex pairs or trios (excepting mom and baby boy blue). To communicate, they unleash eerie, low frequency moans that travel hundreds—even thousands—of miles across the ocean.

At a maximum volume of 188 decibels, blues trump howler monkeys for the title

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world's loudest animal. Noise from busy ports and other human activities at sea, can disrupt the communication of blues and other cetaceans, interrupting breeding and feeding. "Sound under water travels so much faster, so much further than in air," says Sousa. "It can have longer lasting effects."

Whales are also vulnerable to being struck by large ships, which simply can't swerve in time even if they spot the animal.

The long-term future of blues and other marine animals is uncertain. Global warming is heating the oceans and turning them more acidic. It's hard to know how blue whales will be affected as the trend accelerates.

* * * * *

THE BLUE whales are likely to stick around for another month or so. In October or November grey whales turn up en route to breeding grounds off Baja. The more abundant greys are easier to spot, allowing for a shorter, smoother ride aboard a [Harbor Breeze](#) boat.

We don't have long with the blue whales. After three and a half hours, the boat has to return. But for a moment, with the distant city looking like a toy set, and the big blues gliding, I feel far from civilization and deep in the prehistoric past.

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You can learn more about marine life on the websites of the Channel Islands site of the [National Marine Sanctuaries](#) and the [Aquarium of the Pacific](#). Aquarium visitors can get a discount on whale-watching cruises.

Click [here](#) for Ilsa's website [Rambling LA](#) dedicated to family activities in the outdoors.

This post has been updated.



Category: [Rambling LA](#)

Tags: [Aquarium of the Pacific](#) > [blue whales](#) > [chance of rain](#) > [Ilsa Setziol](#) > [NOAA](#)

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2 RESPONSES TO "RAMBLING LA: AT SEA AND AGOG"

1. [Watershed weekend | Chance of Rain](#)

September 19th, 2009 @ 1:01 pm

[...] if you missed it, click here for Ilsa Setziol's account of her day on the bay in search of blue whales. She didn't [...]

2. [el Rio Charter School » Blog Archive » Friend of el Rio Ilsa Setziol blogs about urban nature](#)

September 28th, 2009 @ 10:05 am

[...] a break from talk of charter Schools and public education, here's an article on the largest animal ever—right off the So Cal coast by friend of el Rio, Ilsa Setziol. This is her first installment in her new web column on urban nature at [...]



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RAMBLING LA: TO TAKE A BACKWARD LOOK

Posted on October 14, 2009 | 2 Comments



These are the days when Birds come back —

A very few — a Bird or two —

To take a backward look.

— *Emily Dickinson*

HOPE is indeed a thing with feathers, *writes Ilsa Setziol*. In a landscape entombed in cement, the sight of a wild bird soaring — circling over the freeway, alighting on the towers of high-tension power lines — offers a sudden thrill.

If it's a majestic bird, it's probably a hawk.



In urban Southern California the two most common are the lithe *Cooper's hawk* (*Accipiter cooperii*), which lurks in yard trees and jets out to nab little birds, and the larger red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*). The latter is the one you see coasting around in lazy circles, buoyed by upwelling currents of hot air called thermals.

Wanting to know more about these birds, I called conservation biologist Dan Cooper, the consultant behind *Cooper Ecological*. Cooper has been observing LA birds since he was a teen. He'd know where to find a red-tail.

He took me to the *Angelus-Rosedale Cemetery*, which dates back to the 1880s. As we strolled among century-old gravestones and towering pines, Cooper pointed out that the *West Adams* area is one of the most densely populated parts of the city. "This cemetery is one of the few big green patches. Any one who's been down here knows it's solid urbanization."

It's not a place you'd expect to see a lot of wildlife, I said.

"There's not a lot here," he agreed, "but a few things that have adapted and we just saw one, the western bluebird. The common birds here are going to be house

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finch, mourning dove, and [European] starling.”

But as we drove in, Cooper had spotted a red-tailed hawk perched atop one of the pines. So, binoculars in hand, we went looking for it.

“They like tall trees to place their nest,” said Cooper. “And they’ll often roost in tall trees, sitting right at the top. But when they hunt, they hunt by circling and soaring around, diving down on things; they’re not sit and wait predators.”

How do they hunt?

“The adults will circle,” explained Cooper. “When they see something, they nose dive. Just before they hit the ground, they’ll pull up, stick out their feet and land on their prey and squish it on the ground, and kill it with one hit—they land on it with their talons extended. After they land, they’ll fan their wings out a bit, take off to a perch with the prey in their feet and start pulling it apart with their beak.”



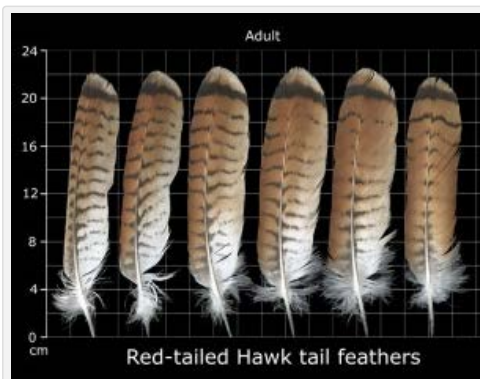
In addition to favoring cemeteries and other places where tall trees skirt open areas, red-tail hawks also seek out trees rooted on hillsides or even slight rises like the one the Rosedale Cemetery blankets. “You think of LA as being flat,” said Cooper, “but there are actually these old ridges and little hills all through the city. And birds still do select

for this topography. In the depressions, where you have a lot of sycamore trees, you’ll see riparian species, like red-shouldered hawk, are still there.”

Cooper can identify birds flitting by so fast that most people barely see them. He pointed out darting swallows and a black phoebe perched on a headstone (a stand-in for the boulders the bird evolved with). But the hawk was eluding us.

Red-tailed hawks are native to the LA basin. Some are resident; others drop in for the winter. Before the ranch era, nesting and roosting trees were far less common in the area. “The hawks may have nested in sycamores where Echo Park Lake is or MacArthur Park is,” said Cooper, “then foraged here on the plain.” As people planted eucalyptus and other large trees, the hawks moved in.

As human development proliferated, so did introduced species such as the eastern fox squirrel, rock doves—a.k.a pigeons—and possums. “We’ve have garbage all over the city, squirrels eat our garbage,” said Cooper, “So we have this inflated prey base. If every one fed their cats inside, we wouldn’t have possums, squirrels, and rats everywhere. We’d have a lot lower population of prey for hawks.”



An echoing “CHEEeeev” pierced the sky above us. A brown bird with broad wings spanning four feet glided past, its rust-colored tail fanned. “That’s a red-tailed hawk,” said Cooper. The bird circled, cutting in front of a distant airplane, then disappeared behind a tree.

A few minutes later the hawk was back in view—with a mate. It folded its wings into its body and plummeted, headfirst. Then the bird pulled up—as if that death dive was just a

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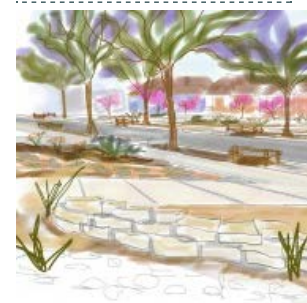
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joke—and joined the other

hawk. The two zigzagged in unison, yellow legs dangling, giving the impression of a pair of hang gliders.

“That’s their courtship,” said Cooper.

“What’s the deal with the dangling legs?” I asked.

“It means I like you,” Cooper guessed. “I like your style.”

It was spring, the birds were courting, so we searched for a nest. No luck.

A couple days later, I met Cooper on a suburban road in [La Habra Heights](#). A large bowl of sticks was nestled in a two-story eucalyptus. Squinting into some binoculars I saw two motley young hawks—downy heads and partially feathered bodies—preening their newly sprouted wing feathers. (A sibling lay in the nest.)

One of the juveniles tottered to the nest’s edge, gingerly unfurled its wings, and looked down.

Cooper told me that a red-tail’s first flight is really a hazardous jump. “They’ll sort of flop to the ground,” he said. “At that point really vulnerable to being eaten by cats and coyotes, or just killed in the fall. But they do have a little foliage between them and the ground so they may hit the crown of one of these [native] walnut trees.” The fledglings will flap and crash around nearby trees until they learn to fly.

The young hawk apparently thought the better of it and stepped back from the edge. A good decision considering its parents soon returned. The big babies plead for food with a breathy calls sounding something like pweese, pweese, pweese!

As the female—the bigger of the two adults—wheeled around the nest, Cooper told me, once the young birds fledged, they would leave the area. “They might stay a few weeks, but eventually they’ll disperse,” he said, “find their own mate, and set up shop somewhere else—maybe in the Puente Hills, maybe somewhere far away. It’s pretty amazing where these birds will make a home.”

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* For an earlier version of this story on KPCC, [click here](#). Ilsa also writes on gardening and outdoor activities at her personal blog [Rambling LA](#).

Recommended reading “[Raptors of California](#)” by Hans Peeters and Pam Peeters (UC Press)

CONSERVATION NOTES: Although it’s illegal to kill birds of prey, people still harass them. The La Habra Heights homeowner on whose property these red-tailed hawks were nesting told us he has scared off people who tried to scale the eucalyptus in an attempt to capture the birds, presumably for pets.

Teresa Savaikie, a conservationist who lives in the Santa Clarita Valley, says raptors are becoming less common in the valley, in part from habitat loss, but also, she thinks, from the wide spread use of rat poison. “It’s an awful way to die,” she says, “and it is one of the leading causes of barn owl mortality. There is not a new development in town that doesn’t have rodent bait stations placed behind the mini-malls and stores right along the [Santa Clara] river. There are even rodent bait stations placed not far from river trails—feet away!”

The Audubon Society Los Angeles has a [list of sources](#) to call if you find an injured bird.



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2 RESPONSES TO "RAMBLING LA: TO TAKE A BACKWARD LOOK"

1. **Teresa Savaikie**

October 14th, 2009 @ 3:40 pm



Dear Ilsa,

Great story. It is true that Red-tails are disappearing from the Center of the Santa Clarita Valley where so much development has taken place along the river and in the hillsides.

It is interesting to note that New Yorker's celebrate the bird named Hope, who took to the city streets and yet so many of us here in California don't seem to see the loss of this raptors and other even more sensitive species. In Santa Clarita just a very few years ago, it was common to find several birds of prey sitting on old utility poles but now those raptors have been replaced with crows and ravens which make a good living off of city trash.

Quite sad! I enjoyed reading your piece and hope that more people take time to celebrate and protect what they have in their own back yards.

Teresa

2. **jane Tsong**

October 14th, 2009 @ 4:49 pm



thanks for this great article! amazing to know the connection between the hawks and urban life! why don't bird books have this kind of info?

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