

# Rare 90-foot blue whales spotted in Monterey Bay - and humpbacks are jumping, too



Tom Stienstra

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A blue whale in Monterey Bay.  
Courtesy Mike Kauffman / Monterey Bay Whale Watch

In a rare spectacle last week, a boat of sightseers on Monterey Bay spotted 90-foot blue whales as well as a large pod of 40-foot humpbacks just a short boat ride from Monterey Harbor.

“Most people have never seen a blue whale,” said Nancy Black, marine biologist and owner of Monterey Bay Whale Watch. “In past years you had to be lucky. Blue whales were not very predictable. But right now they are here, and we know why.”

In the past 10 days, huge masses of krill, a small, shrimp-like crustacean and the favorite food of blue whales, arrived on the edge of the Monterey Submarine Canyon, the deep underwater formation that extends out from Moss Landing. That brought in 10 to 20 blue whales to gorge. On Sunday, the sightings included a pair of blue whale calves, estimated at 35 to 40 feet long.

At the same time, mammoth schools of anchovies along the southern edge of the canyon attracted roughly 40 humpback whales, most ranging 40 to 45 feet long, known for spectacular jumps, pirouettes and lunge-feeding. The humpbacks often work as a team, swimming in circles and blowing bubbles to create an underwater curtain to corral the baitfish. The whales then take turns diving and surging up through the prey.



A blue whale spotted in Monterey Bay.  
Courtesy Mike Kauffman / Monterey Bay Whale Watch

“The ocean currents push along the wall of the canyon, so there is lots of upwelling,” Black said. “That makes for lots of plankton.” The plankton then draws in the krill, anchovies, squid and other baitfish, which in turn draw the whales.

Blue whales are twice as long as a city bus and recognized as the largest animals that have lived on the planet. They can live 90 years and reach 110 feet.

Seeing blues and humpbacks on the same trip within close range of shore is a key reason why Monterey is considered the No. 1 whale-watching site off the Pacific Coast. While blue whales and humpbacks are the stars of the show, whale-watching trips out of Monterey in the past week have also sighted a nursery group of 30 Risso’s dolphins, 10 Dall’s porpoise, minke and fin whales, and four killer whales.

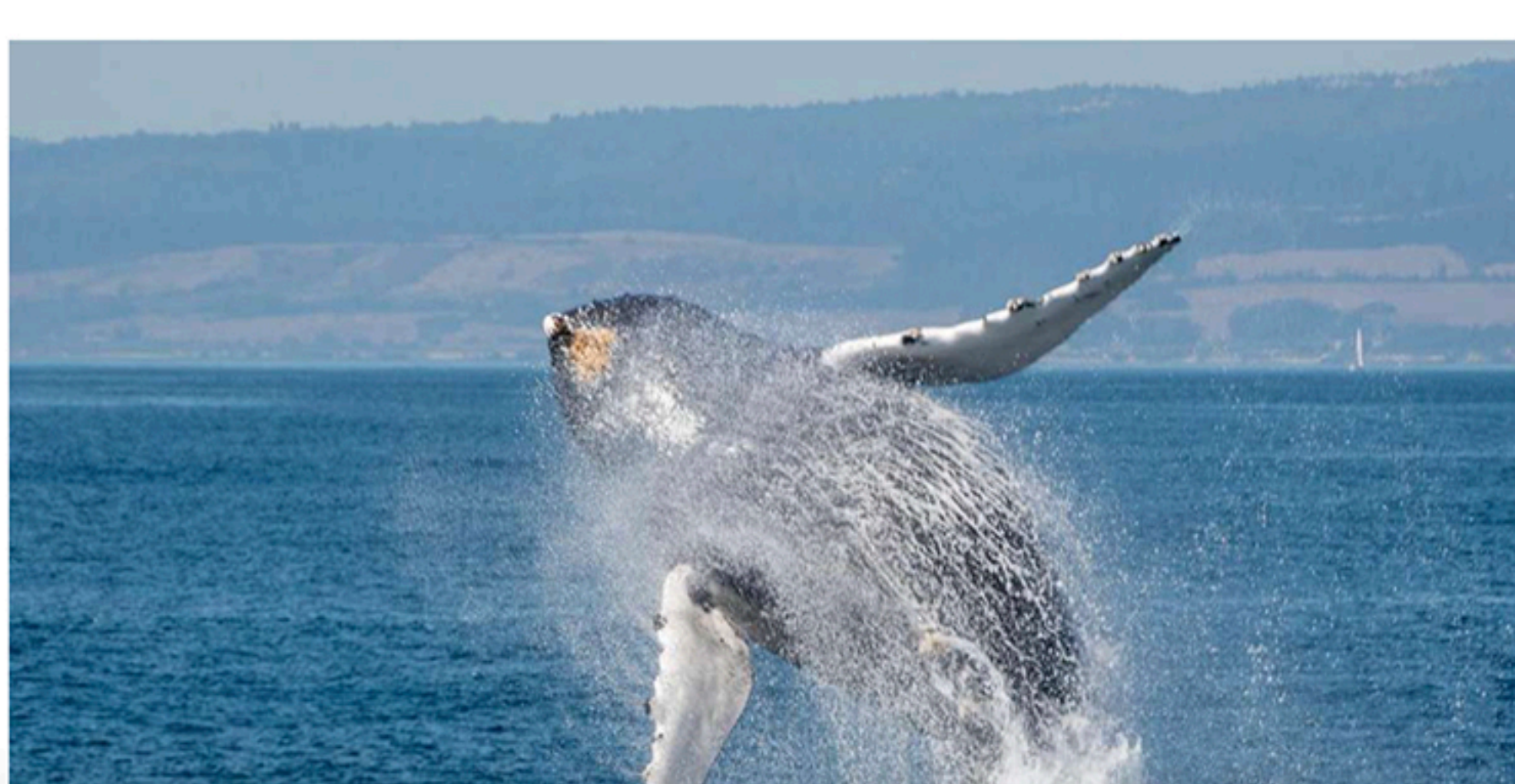
Unlike San Francisco and at most harbors on the California coast, whale sightings out of Monterey don’t require expensive, all-day boat trips.

Within a half-hour boat ride out of Monterey, the ocean floor drops off a shelf from a few hundred feet deep to the canyon floor at 5,000 feet. That allows Black to run 3- to 4-hour trips that depart multiple times a day, usually 9 a.m., 10 a.m., 1:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. Trips start at \$60 per person, with discounts for children, for 3-hour afternoon trips. For more ambitious watchers, longer trips are available.

Last Sunday, it took only 35 minutes to reach the blue whales.

“Out of Monterey, they’re pretty close to shore,” Black said.

The humpbacks, located to the east along the southern edge of the canyon, were easy to locate. From a distance, their spouts look like puffs of smoke rising from the sea surface. Looking closer, you can often see their flukes as they raise their tails high above the surface to help propel a power dive. Other times you can spot them rocketing into the air, spinning and landing on their backs with tremendous splashes.



Most captains, as they approach the whales, will put their vessels in neutral and float free — the whales often choose to swim right up and put on a show.

Three boats run daily out of Monterey: the 65-foot Black Finn, 70-foot Sea Wolf II and 55-foot Point Sur Clipper. Because of social distancing guidelines, trips are limited to 60, 35 and 24 people, respectively — about half capacity.

For the best chance to see blue whales, the best boat is the Black Finn, where you can pay a bit more, another \$10, for upper-deck seating. From a higher perspective, you can best see the outline of this rare animal. Unlike humpbacks, they almost never breach, but rather cruise forward, occasionally letting loose with their mighty blow hole on the surface, using their giant mouths as a seine-like fish trap as they swim through schools of tiny krill.

*Tom Stienstra is The San Francisco Chronicle's outdoor writer emeritus.*

Email: [tomstienstra2021@gmail.com](mailto:tomstienstra2021@gmail.com) Twitter: [@StienstraTom](https://twitter.com/StienstraTom)

## If you go

**Location/check-in:** Monterey’s Fisherman’s Wharf No. 1 (near end of dock, walk right at Crab House Restaurant; check in a half hour prior to departure.

**Morning trips:** Depart at 9 a.m. and 10 a.m.; 3.5- to 4-hour trips, \$65 weekdays, \$71 weekends, discounts for children; premium seating available on 10 a.m. trips for up to 22 available on upper deck, \$79 weekdays, \$85 weekends; 8-hour trips, \$140; 12-hour trips, \$190.

**Afternoon trips:** Depart at 1:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m.; 3-hour trips, \$60 weekdays, \$65 weekends, discounts for children; premium seating available on 2:30 p.m. trips available on upper deck, \$74 weekdays, \$79 weekends; sunset trips, \$65, discounts for children.

**Contact:** Monterey Bay Whale Watch, 831-375-4658, [www.montereybaywhalewatch.com](http://www.montereybaywhalewatch.com).