

Hawaii offers exciting whale-watching

Wild Watch

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Islands have always held a powerful attraction for me and traveling among them has provided me with many an opportunity for observing wildlife. Each year, as many times as I am able, I take the ferry which plies between Tokyo and Kushiro in east Hokkaido. It is more than just a way of traveling between Honshu and Hokkaido, it's a way of watching albatrosses and petrels, shearwaters and auks, flying fish and dolphins.

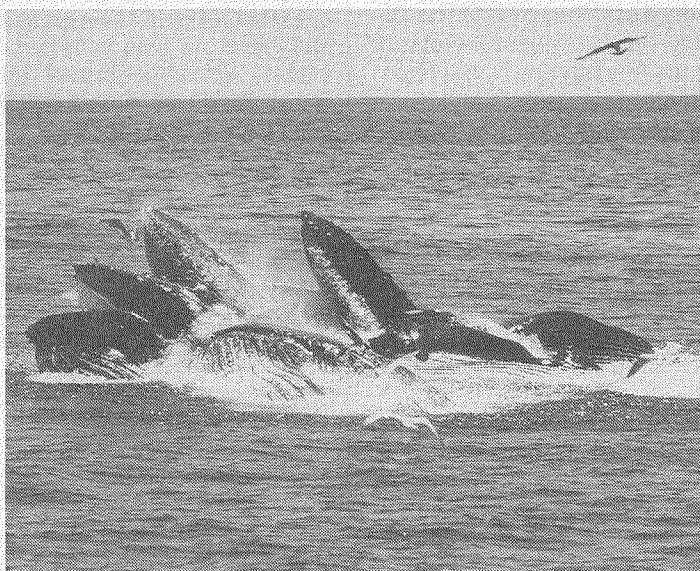
Pacific white-sided dolphins seem by far the commonest of the sea mammals, though during winter northern fur seals can be very common, too. Yet despite traveling that route scores of times, only three times have I sighted those most exciting of the sea mammals, the larger whales, and only once have I felt confident enough to put a name to the species.

That was during a Friends of the Earth Ecotour when what were almost certainly Baird's beaked whales were sighted and became the largest animal observed yet on any of the trips.

Whether it is of the gray whales off the Pacific coast of the United States, or of the Southern right whales off the Valdez Peninsula of Argentina, a sighting of just one of the great whales, surfacing to breathe from its ocean environment, comes as a brief magical insight into the life of one of the largest creatures on Earth.

With so many of the species with which we share the planet, whether plant or animal, we are able to watch them, to study them, throughout their daily, annual or even lifelong cycles, but the sea mammals give us just brief glimpses, seconds here, minutes there, and then they are gone once more into an environment into which most of us cannot follow, and none of us can share.

Only at certain places where they regularly feed, or where they bask and breed, can we hope to watch them. Even the briefest glimpse of a leviathan is a moving experience, but when luck conspires



HUMPBACK WHALES at play off the coast of the Hawaiian Islands. PHOTOS BY ROGER TIDMAN

toothed whales, including the sperm whale, and many more dolphins which could, even should, occur, but understandably, given Japan's recent activities, relatively few now survive or venture into Japanese waters and so, despite enormous amounts of time spent watching for them, sightings are highly unlikely.

There is one place, however, luckily relatively accessible from Japan, where it is possible to combine the excitement of visiting islands with whale-watching, and that is in Hawaii. There the attitude toward whales is a very different one. Rather than being seen as a potential source of meat they are instead admired and attract many visitors to watch and photograph them.

The Hawaiian Islands, de-

plete, no native reptiles, amphibians or terrestrial mammals.

What life is there has colonized across the sea, and much of the extraordinary life now native to Hawaii evolved there from relatively few immigrant species. Many of the species, which had evolved there in isolation from the predators and diseases of their mainland origins, have disappeared in the face of human pressure and competition with other species introduced by humans, but a number of fascinating species, notably among the unique honeyeaters, remain.

The remoteness of the Hawaiian Islands lend them further significance though, for they are not just home to a range of unusual endemic

these creatures to be seen off the shores of the Hawaiian Islands are the humpback whales. Weighing in at up to 30 tons, and measuring up to 13 meters long, these are true behemoths, yet despite their great size they sustain their bulk on small fish such as herring and sardines, and also on shrimplike krill.

The humpback's underside, from chin and throat to navel, bears enormous longitudinal pleats, enabling it to take on board a whole room full of water. This enormous swollen pouch then bulges with the water it has taken on board until it has all been squeezed out through its baleen filter plates, which enable it to extract its food and help it along to its one-ton a day diet.

The Northern Hemisphere summer, in the cold polar waters, is a time of plenty when sunlight encourages phytoplankton growth, which fuels massive fish stocks that in turn support the few remaining great whales. During the northern winter the whales are driven by other urges and so they head south, feeding less and less in the poorer, warmer waters of the Central Pacific.

Some reach the Hawaiian Islands, and there it is possible to watch these magnificent creatures from close quarters as they bask and sing in the warming waters.

Whale-watching is a hit-and-miss affair from Japan with perhaps the most regular sightings of humpbacks being made off the Ogasawara Islands. Those islands, however, take a long time to reach and whale sightings are by no means guaranteed.

Thus Hawaii offers the best in whale-watching destinations for naturalists in Japan who want to see them. With that in mind, Friends of the Earth Japan and I have decided to try an exploratory trip to the islands to watch the whales, the birds and the wildlife, and to escape the late-winter blues.

So if you are a flexible traveler with an interest in nature and in whales, and fancy some fun and sun, then why not join me between March 5-11. The main purpose of the visit is not just to see humpbacks and other whales, but