

phins 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.

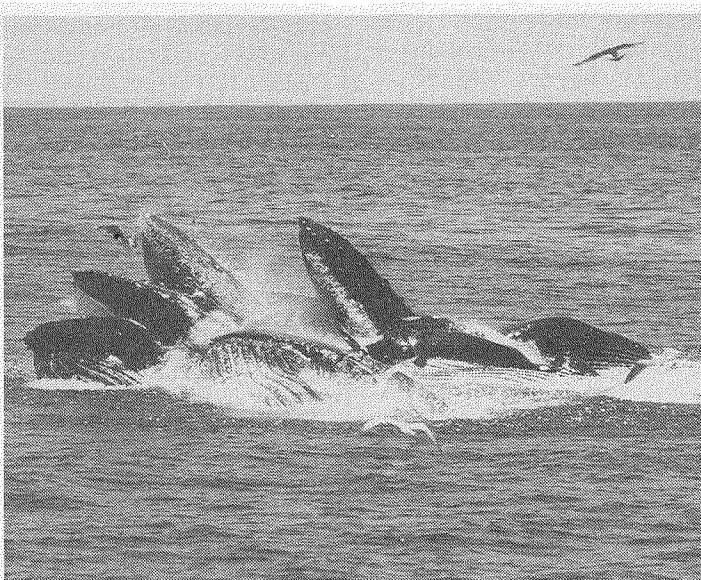
Whether it is of the gray whales off the Pacific coast of the United States, or of the Southern right whales off the Valdez Peninsula of Argentina, a sighting of just one of the great whales, surfacing to breathe from its ocean environment, comes as a brief magical insight into the life of one of the 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 in to 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 to provide a prolonged view, there are few things on Earth to beat it.

Theoretically at least, Japanese waters are still within the range of a wide range of whale species; the great right whale, the bowhead, gray, fin, blue, minke, sei, Bryde's and humpback could all occur, and that is only to list the baleen whales of the order mysticeti.

There are also the many



HUMPBAC 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, despite their ready access by air from major airports in the U.S. and Asia, are what you might justifiably call really remote. They are, after all, nearly 3,800 km from the nearest continental land mass.

The islands emerged as volcanoes from the sea and as a consequence their terrestrial life is, like that of most other small islands, limited in its variety. There are, for exam-

ple, 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 birds. A number of sea birds, particularly the albatrosses and tropic birds, breed there in impressive colonies, and more significantly still the remote islands are the target of groups of animals which migrate annually from the chilling waters of the northern parts of the North Pacific, searching for warmer waters in which to winter, mate and to bear their calves.

The most magnificent of

tract 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 to spend time watching them again and again.

In addition to the regular whale-watching excursions by boat, there will also be time to explore on land, in search of some of the strange life forms unique to these isolated volcanic islands, and to soak up the relaxing atmosphere. If you would like to join us, please contact Friends of the Earth-Japan at (03) 3760-3644 for details.