

# **Field Observations of Gray Whales in Boundary Bay, British Columbia 1996-2012.**

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Boundary Bay is an expansive sand and mud beach forming the southern shore of the Fraser River Delta in southwestern British Columbia. Gray whales have been reported using the bay since at least 1984 (Baird *et al*, 2002). These whales are likely from a few hundred whales that remain on the Pacific Coast in summer rather than travel to the Bering Sea with most of the herd (Calambokidos *et al*. 2002). Not much is known about the seasonality of whales in Boundary Bay. Whales migrate along the west coast of Vancouver Island between February and June with the peak passage falling in late March (Darling 1984). Gray Whales that occur after the peak are possibly members of the Southern Feeding Aggregation (Frazier *et al* 2011).

We made periodic visits to Boundary Bay for a variety of research and recreational reasons since 1996. We made trips in all months of the year but mostly in April and May to coincide with the period when whales were present. We circumnavigated the bay from east to west along the drop off returning to the Nicomekl River mouth inshore in shallow water. We made between 1 and 8 trips each year between 1996 and 2012 with the exception of 2001, 2003-04 and 2008 when no visits were made. Most trips were made in April and May to coincide with the time of greatest regional occurrence of Gray Whales. We also included sightings and reports of whales in the bay from local biologists, naturalists and the media.

Between 1 and 5 gray whales were present at one or more times in every year. There were 27 sightings in April, 10 in May, 3 in June and 2 in August. The earliest record was on 2 April and the latest was 25 August. The whales used the entire bay including Semiahmoo Bay, Kwomais Point, the boat channel to Crescent Beach Marina, and off Lily Point and Centennial Beach. The made shallow dives, stirred up the bottom and surfaced at about 2 minute intervals that we assumed meant they were foraging in the soft bottom sediments.

Our observations suggest that a few gray whales use Boundary Bay every year mostly in April and May although their presence on any particular day is sporadic. The peak northward migration of Gray Whales off Vancouver Island occurs in late March. Our observations fall after this peak movement. However, we rarely saw whales after June. Resightings of whales identified by unique pigment markings in photographs suggest that these whales remain on the Pacific Coast of Canada for the summer (Calambokidos *et al*. 2002).

## **Literature**

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