



Superintendent Statement

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Boaters reminded to give distressed gray whales a break, maintain 300-foot buffer zone

NOAA's Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary is reminding boaters and other watercraft users to give whales detouring from their normal migration path into San Francisco Bay a break by keeping 300 feet of separation between themselves and the whales. This includes boaters in Tomales Bay and the north-central California outer coast.

From March through May, gray whales make a 6,000-mile northward migration between Mexican and Southern California breeding grounds to Arctic feeding grounds. In spring they swim near shore, and cow-calf pairs may pause in the surf and small bays to rest, nurse, and avoid killer whale attack.

When whales enter the bay the risk of a whale-vessel collision increases. Most of these whales have not fed significantly since last fall, and collisions – even with small watercraft -- can injure, disorient, and create physical stresses that these whales cannot afford. Gray whales will be in our area through late spring and early summer.

Federal guidelines prohibit approaching any whale within 300 feet -- the length of a football field. Boaters should be on the lookout for the gray whale's blow -- a heart-shaped exhalation like a puff of smoke 10 to 15 feet high. Whales may surface and blow several times, at three- to six-minute intervals. Boaters should also avoid cutting across a whale's path; making sudden speed or directional changes; and getting between a whale cow and her calf. If separated, the calf may starve.

All whales are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Other local species, such as humpback and blue whales, are additionally protected by the Endangered Species Act.

To report a dead, injured or stranded marine mammal, please call the West Coast Marine Mammal Stranding Network: 1-866-767-6114. For law enforcement, harassment, and other violations, please call the NOAA Enforcement Hotline: 1-800-853-1964.

Maria Brown, Superintendent
Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary