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Farallones Marine Sanctuary Encourages Bay Area Boaters to Watch Out for Whales

The Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary advises San Francisco Bay Area boaters to steer clear of whales, which migrate through the San Francisco Bay Area in large numbers during the spring. Gray whales are at a particularly high risk of collisions with vessels, as they often travel near shore and may even wander into the bay itself.

Boaters should use caution year round, but springtime presents a higher chance of coming into close contact with whales. From March through May, thousands of migrating gray whales make their way north from breeding grounds off Mexico to feeding grounds off Alaska. Many of these whales travel directly through the busy shipping lanes off San Francisco in the Gulf of the Farallones sanctuary.

While they also migrate south through the sanctuary in the winter, gray whales — including mothers with newborn calves — swim closest to shore in the spring. Cow-calf pairs can sometimes be seen from shore, and may even pause in the surf zone for the calf to nurse or rest. Humpback and blue whales are also at risk.

Boaters should watch for the gray whale's blow, which looks like a puff of smoke about 10 to 15 feet high, since very little of the whale is visible at the surface. A whale may surface and blow several times before a prolonged dive, typically lasting from three to six minutes.

Boaters should *not*:

- Approach within 300 feet (the length of a football field) of any whale
- Cut across a whale's path
- Make sudden speed or directional changes
- Get between a whale cow and her calf — if separated from its mother, a calf may be doomed to starvation.

Each year, thousands of ships and smaller vessels pass through the Golden Gate. Even small craft collisions with a whale can have disastrous results for both whale and vessel. All whales are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Some local species, such as humpback and blue whales, are also protected by the Endangered Species Act.

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On the Web:

Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary: <http://farallones.noaa.gov>

Farallones Marine Sanctuary Association: <http://www.farallones.org>