

Karen Telleen-Lawton: A ‘Gigantor’ of Blues

Try these collective names for whales on for size

By **Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist** | Published on 10.19.2010

For a half-mile in any direction they arc toward the boat — dolphins’ sleek bodies leaping rhythmically through their breathe-swim cycle. Encountering hundreds or thousands of dolphins is like watching Olympic-level synchronized swimming. A large group is called a megapod of dolphins, but it could just as well be called a dance of dolphins.

Animals’ official collective names are very curious. I sometimes wonder how the appellations came to be.

A congregation of plovers seems a bit odd. Its intent perhaps is to evoke that shoreline bird’s classy but not flashy markings. A smack of jellyfish reminds me of that moment when an approaching wave brought a floating jellyfish squarely into my bare belly. I hate to think of being smacked by a whole smack of them. A turmoil of porpoises, a siege of herons? The namer of collective names must have had some mighty strange marine encounters for those names to be appropriate.

Whales are a whole other category. Since Santa Barbara has a reputation for nurturing the largest diversity of marine mammals in the world, I believe we have the right or maybe even the duty to search for more descriptive collective whale names. Roget’s suggestions — gam, mob, pod, run and school — just don’t do it for me. Here are a

few of my choices.

Notwithstanding their common name of “killer whale,” a group of orcas is a beautiful sight: graceful black-and-white shading and a powerful presence. They seem almost royal to me, so I’d call them a court of orcas.

Gray whales are passers-through, whose mission, besides avoiding orcas, is high-tailing it to their Baja birthing grounds and then back to their Arctic feeding grounds. Their predictable pathway, scheduled for Santa Barbara beginning in December, leads me to call them a lane of grays.

Humpbacks treat our Channel like an almost year-round picnic. They’re here for the food, but they enjoy themselves as well: breaching, tail-slapping, spy-hopping, and generally entertaining themselves and their enthralled whale-watchers. A group of humpbacks could logically be called a playgroup.

The first time I spied a blue whale, the largest animal ever to have lived on Earth, I was on the [Condor Express](#) in the middle of the Channel. That day we saw five blue whales, one of whom approached the boat so closely we could see his entire glistening turquoise-blue body beneath the surface. He sank under the boat and then emerged in front of it, nostrils flaring on the top of his head like huge tubas. As his whole size became visible, a word from my distant past surfaced in my mind.

As a child swimming in the surf with friends, we’d occasionally freeze

at the approach of a huge wave. This kind of wave was so enormous to our pint-sized bodies that it simply couldn't be ridden. Our only avenue of escape was to "duck and cover" until it washed over us or we were tumbled into the wet sand.

In these instances, we'd look at each other in mock terror and yell, "Gigantor!" This is what I propose for a group of these immense creatures: a *gigantor* of blues.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*