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[Have a whale of a time on the West Coast](#)

By margo malcolm
Special to the News

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Photo courtesy Glen Werkman

Grey whales are front and centre in Vancouver as they continue their 13,000-kilometre migration from Mexico's Baja Peninsula to Alaska's Bering Sea.

You could easily call it a mass migration of "snow mammals" — the yearly 13,000 kilometre-journey more than 20,000 grey whales make every year from Mexico's Baja Peninsula to the Alaska's Bering Sea.

It is a clear sign of spring on the West Coast of Vancouver Island, and in Ucluelet and Tofino they celebrate it with gusto during the Pacific Rim Whale Festival.

This year is the 21st annual festival and it takes place from March 17-25 with over 75 events.

It is one of the largest whale festivals in North America and kicks off the whale watching season. The Pacific Rim Whale Festival educates the young and the young-at-heart about whales and coastal life with a week chock-full of fun.

"If you love whales, the West Coast of Vancouver Island is the place to be in March," said Abby Fortune, event co-chair for the festival. "It is truly an extraordinary natural spectacle and a remarkable celebration."

Grey whales are large, measuring around 14 metres (46 feet) and weighing approximately 32,000 kilograms (72,000 pounds). The whales travel close to land and excellent viewing locations to see the whales are found almost anywhere from the shore.

There will be high quality scopes available free of charge at the Amphitrite Point Lighthouse on Ucluelet's Wild Pacific Trail and at the Wickaninnish Interpretive Centre in the Pacific Rim Nature Reserve. For an even closer look, there are whale watching excursions by boat or seaplane offered from either Ucluelet or Tofino.

The region's two towns, Ucluelet and Tofino, come together with the local First Nations for the festival. The festival opens on March 17 with the Blessing of the Boats at the harbours of both towns, and the opening ceremonies are held at the Wickaninnish Interpretative Centre. Many events are free with a festival events button.

Other events are spread over the week long celebration and include a Chowder Chowdown in Ucluelet, a Whale of a Tale children's fair in Tofino, and First Nations Culture workshops. Artist Roy Henry Vickers hosts a Story-Telling event, and Valdy, the island's favourite folk singer, headlines the Barnacle Bash on Thursday in Ucluelet. On March 24, Tofino hosts the Parade of Whales and Pet and Doll Parade that the children will love.

Closing day on March 25, be sure not to miss the closing ceremonies and the traditional Nuu-chah-nulth bannock and salmon barbecue featuring The Khowutzun Tzinquaw Dancers, located at the Tin Wis Resort.

Preceding the festival on March 15 is the Wickaninnish Inn's annual winemakers' dinner and silent auction — a festival fundraiser presenting the finest in multiple course cuisine and west coast treasures.

The Pacific Rim Whale Festival is a great place for families during spring break. But if you cannot make the festival, there are many grey whales that reside in the region from February to October and many opportunities to go out and observe these magnificent creatures.

If you go:

More information about the Pacific Rim Whale Festival and recommended accommodations can easily be found at , and questions may be directed to .