Kayaking in Haida Gwaii is an amazing way to experience the diverse surroundings and the raw beauty of this magnificent island archipelago. In this blog we will highlight the connectedness of this nutrient rich highway that soaks the shores of Haida Gwaii, a place that we call the ocean. We will pay specific attention to a couple of the mysticeti, or ‘mustache whales’ - the Humpback Whale and Grey Whale (known as mustache whales for their baleen). Both these two marine mammals can be seen frequenting the waters off Haida Gwaii, during varying times of the year. The Grey Whales can more frequently be observed during the early spring, when they come into Skidegate Inlet in May and early June. Humpback Whales have a more widely dispersed range around Haida Gwaii, from the Southern tip at Cape St. James to the north at Rose Spit. The entire northwest coast of British Columbia and stretching up into Alaska is some of the coldest and most nutrient rich waters of the North Pacific Ocean. These rich waters account for one of the largest biodiverse eco systems in the world! Kayaking in the scenic landscape isn’t just about the beauty above the surface of the ocean. It is also about the amazing life beneath us, and it truly is a whole other world down there!

Spotting any type of wildlife from a kayak can be exhilarating. The low profile and self-propelled approach allow for an intimate connection to the natural surroundings. For example, when kayaking through Houston Stewart Channel, be sure to always have a look along the horizon to spot any blows, “Thar She Blows”! Look for any disturbances on the surface of the water. It is also important to have your ear’s tuned in, as hearing a
whale’s blow on a peaceful and clam day is just as exhilarating as seeing the whale. A whale’s blow is a combination of an exhalation and inhalation of air, hearing the blow inspires a connection; after all these beautiful marine giants’ breath the same air that we do! All cetaceans begin their exhalation just below the surface of the water, which forces a spray of moisture into the air when they surface. The size and shape of this distribution of moisture and air is a fantastic indicator that assists us in identifying the species of whale. There is some variability in the blow that can cause identifying to be more challenging at times. However, for the most part Humpback Whales will have a medium to large size blow that is quite bushy in width. In comparison a Grey Whale will have a medium sized blow that can vary in height and width, occasionally being low and bushy, often being columnar and narrow.

On occasion a Humpback Whale can have a V or heart shaped blow, which can be confused for a right whale. Therefore, other indictors can assist us in identifying which species of whales we may be observing. When you are kayaking, and hear the sound of a blow, keep scanning the horizon all around to try to locate disturbance on the surface of the water. Continually scanning can help you develop a keen eye for any glimpses of the wildlife that might be in the area. If you think you spot a whale, look for shades of coloration, definite body features and size (i.e. dorsal fin, pectoral fins, arching back, tail fluke). A Humpback Whale will have a very black back, with a varied yet distinguishable dorsal fin. Despite being very similar Grey Whales, have a few characteristics that separate them from Humpback Whales such as, a very narrow head leading into a distinguishable mottled grey back. An obvious identifiable feature is the much shorter pectoral fins on a Grey Whale in comparison to the rather large pectoral fins on a Humpback Whale. ‘*Megaptera Novaeangliae*’ is the Latin name for Humpback Whale, which means ‘the great wings of New England’, in reference to the plentiful Humpback population in the Atlantic, and their gigantic pectoral fins (~1/3 of their body length). A Grey Whale dorsal fin is much less distinct than a Humpback; it appears to have a row of knuckles trailing down its tailstock to the fluke.
If you think you’ve had the great fortune to spot a Humpback Whale, keep watching, eventually you may see them execute their signature move. Humpback Whales are known for their tail fluking, when they dive deep they will sometimes flick their tail up in the air, exposing their unique tail fluke. Each Humpback Whale has distinct markings on the underside of their tail. For researchers, this acts as an individual thumbprint when identifying whales. There are whole whale catalogues available for identifying individual Humpback Whales of British Columbia.

While observing these majestic beasts, behavior can also assist in identifying the specific whale. Grey Whales are unique when in comes to feeding techniques among the baleen whales. The Grey Whales are predominantly bottom feeders, occasionally skimming the surface for zooplankton, usually they are found in shallow areas swallowing up amphipods as they skim the ocean floor sucking up sediment and filtering it out as it searches for the food source. Grey Whales can sometimes be seen along the shores filtering through eel grass beds looking for herring roe. Comparatively so, Humpback whales have a variety of feeding behavior’s, some of which are present in the Humpback Whale population around Haida Gwaii. Humpback Whales are ‘Gulp’ feeders rather than skimmers, they will lunge through schools of prey, enlarging their throat pleats, taking a large mouthful of water and nutrients before pushing the water throughout their mouth. Their baleen acts like a sieve, straining out the krill and other nutrients from the water. Humpback Whales feed primarily on krill, although they have been known to have a more diverse diet of copepods, Pacific Herring and Pacific Sand Lances.
The nutrient rich waters of Haida Gwaii provide an abundance of life under the Ocean’s surface. Not only is it an area visited by some of the largest mammals on earth, but it also is abundant in tiny details from barnacles to hermit crabs. Kayaking in Haida Gwaii offers the unique opportunity to slow down and connect with the natural surroundings – finding beauty in abundance of life all around Haida Gwaii!

Written by Ocean Sound Kayaking Lead Guide Abbey Weisbrot