

Day 32, Voyage 2, July 9, 2011

Ouch! Today started early. I had finally, finally found a deep sleep-my first on this voyage- when Sandy came down the hall screaming like a Banshee "Whales, whales, whales!". I stumbled out of bed in a fog. I could hear Johnny complaining "How far? How Far? When you call whales you need to say how far!!!"

His point was true- distance tells us how fast we have to move. A few hundred yards is a bolt to the deck. A mile means there is time to dress and grab a snack. Two miles means come and get me later as the whale will likely fluke before we get there. No distance was called so I rapidly dressed and raced up bleary eyed.

In the pilot house they told me the call was 1/2 a mile; somewhere between bolt and take your time. I guess I'd call it "hurry". I went outside to look to decide how much to urge my biopsiers to move. I couldn't see the whale - anywhere. I asked Bob. He estimated maybe 2 miles. The students were off as they were using binoculars to gauge the distance. Things are, of course, much closer in binoculars.

I went back in for juice. Another whale call. 1/4 mile this time. Bob said "more like a mile". But close enough and indeed we had our first sample of the morning.

Second sample was at 10 am a glancing shot; collected all but blubber. We thought maybe it would be a busy day. Then it got quiet. Ian and I discussed strategies. We would see whales 2 or 3 miles off, but rarely closer. Every once in a while we'd get close enough for everyone to man positions, but always a fluke before we were quite there. The team was very frustrated.

Then the clock hit 6:40 pm, a fateful moment in our quest. Most of us were in the salon and Ian was at the helm. I was sitting at the foot of the stairs just below the helm. Ian told me it was time to assemble the team for the whale was close. I called whales and told everyone to move it. They did.

There up on the bow was a whale spy hopping to peek at us. We approached. It dove-standard pattern for the day. Bob and I discussed how the whales were unusually skittish in the Gulf - likely due to all of the shipping traffic. The whale surfaced again. It checked us out with lots of loud clicking, clearly curious as to what we were.

I asked Bob to keep the slow speed we were doing as when we ramp up the speed the engine emits a high speed whine. I figured that was making them skittish. Bob agreed. We approached and the whale remained. The approach worked. We had a sample! It was 7 pm.

Suddenly, someone saw three whales- then four- then 5 (picture of approach to 5 whales attached). Work became frenetic and complicated. Radio batteries died forcing communication from the deck and mast with the captain to pass verbally through me. Much like olden days- Ian, the first mate, would shout instructions from the bowsprit and I would repeat them in a shout to the Captain. The Captain would ask me a question. I would repeat it in a shout to Ian. He would shout the answer to me and so on.

It is at these times that my role becomes busy as many pieces require positioning and communication. I had: Two of the crew in the lab working samples; Two of the crew on the midlevel platform spotting whales; Two of the crew in the bow/whale boom sampling; One of the crew taking pictures; One of the crew on the helm; and Two of the crew racing between recording data, collecting arrows, cleaning and preparing arrows, collecting buoys and taking pictures.

All were taking all at once about different and similar things! Wow! We were busy, working, yelling and laughing all at once; having great success and the time of our life. At one point we had so many buoys and rings in the water- it looked like we had our own ocean golf course (picture of the 2nd and 4th holes attached ;)).

It was crazy busy with whales, arrows and buoys everywhere and crew racing back and forth. One second on port, the next racing to starboard, no wait back to port! and so on. We were the Keystone cops of whale biopsying!

The urgency was simple- we had little light and little time and had to launch arrows and buoys and then collect them, process them and clean them while we had so many whales and chances.

One hour and 15 minutes after the first sample the light was gone. We had collected 9 biopsies in an hour and 15 minutes and retrieved all arrows and buoys! We were tired, thirsty, and hungry, but we were jubilant for such a successful and memorable day!

The day ended with music, laughter and a recounting of favorite moments of two hours with a bunch of whales accompanied by a tasty spaghetti dinner.

Our biopsy total on this leg is 32 and our overall total is 36 sperm whales and 1 Bryde's whale.

Photo of sunset attached.

John

P.S. We are off Louisiana finding sperm whales. Our current location is 27 degrees 38.4 minutes North and 91 degrees 05.8 minutes West, for those who want to track us as we go. For Google maps (not Google Earth - but maps) use (include letters and comma): 27.384 N, 91.058 W

For those of you who are new to this email diary - the previous days can be found at: <https://cms.usm.maine.edu/toxicology/dr-wises-voyage-leg-summaries-2011>





