

Day 48, Voyage 2, July 26, 2011

Six biopsies today! It is difficult to decide which one(s) to write about as they all have their moments. Should it be the one where the team worked like an oiled machine with the sample taken, collected and cultured as if choreographed. Perhaps, it is the unusual looking whale. Today, we had one with a split dorsal fin (picture attached). She was accompanied by a tiny juvenile. One that was about half the size that sperm whales are normally born (we did not try and sample the tiny juvenile). We imagined mom's dorsal was injured protecting the little tyke from predators like killer whales, but upon inspection of the photo- it looks grown and more like an odd dorsal-mutation. Perhaps, it is the time we sampled two whales simultaneously. Or maybe the first whale of the day. All memorable and exciting experiences. Too many to fit in to one email.

I think my favorite biopsies are the unpredictable ones, when chaos on deck ensues and you feel like you're on a sailing vessel from the 1800s battling the elements and trying to succeed. We had a sample like that today.

Bob Kuech called down from the midlevel platform and asked the helm if it intended to sail into the oncoming rain storm. John Bradford replied that he try to avoid it and I headed to the pilot house to look. Bob's concern, and rightly so, was that we did not want the camera up there with him to get wet. I looked at the storm, it was avoidable. Still, better safe than sorry, I asked for a camera raincoat to be delivered up to Bob (yes we do have specific raincoats that were made for these cameras - thanks Chris!). I also changed into my bathing suit as I had a hunch, I'd be getting wet.

The boat turned from the storm, but then Bob spotted a whale. Needless to say, it was right between us and the storm. I called whales and the team assembled on deck. It turned out to be a pair of whales! We approached with the wind picking up and blowing in our faces. The water was becoming increasingly choppy with whitecaps everywhere. We neared the two whales and noticed a third just a few yards beyond them swimming opposite them. It was getting busy as we moved closer and closer to the storm.

We reached the pair of whales and sampled the first one. Brady tossed in a buoy to mark the location of the arrow and we turned to sample the second whale. Only that whale was not in clear view. The wind was sufficiently blowing that it was hard to distinguish between whale, whale blow and whitecap. Bob and Rikki were up on the mast, but keeping low and out of the wind, Ian, Sandy, Cathy, Ariel and Johnny were in the bow area and John Bradford was atop the pilot house, all searching for some sign of them. Communication was a challenge as the wind blew away our shouts.

I was alongside the pilot house looking and conveying messages to Captain Bob who was in at the helm. He mentioned to me that we needed to be mindful that the wind was

blowing hard and we might lose tracking of the arrow and buoy in the water. Knowing there was a biopsy in that sample, I agreed and we went to collect them. No sooner had Brady scooped the arrow into the boat with the net, than we saw the lone whale just ahead! We left the buoy and went to sample him.

We approached. I saw one arrow fly and then another. I called out that both were clear misses. Both right on target, but the swells rose and the arrows met water not whale. Then chaos ensued.

The wind was blowing. Rain was starting to fall. I yelled to the bow for confirmation there were two arrows in the water as Brady began to collect the first one. My concern was no buoy went in and in wind like this days, we'd likely need the marker. Captain Bob and I both saw two, but we wanted confirmation. I was told "1", no "2", no "1", no "3" all simultaneously in shouts carried off by the wind. I dropped a buoy in on the starboard side where the attempt was taken to be safe. As I did that, I saw Captain Bob leaning over the port side helping retrieve the arrow. I figured I just wasted a buoy as 2 arrows were now in.

But Cathy came over concerned that there was a third arrow in the water with no buoy! That would be hard to find in this weather. She explained that the arrow they had just collected had a sample and the original 2 arrows were misses. Turns out there was a port side attempt right after the 2 starboard misses- 3 arrows had been in the water!. I assured her all was fine as I had indeed dropped a buoy for that second arrow.

The chaos continued. I had Rikki keeping me posted on the location of the pair of whales so we could possible sample the remaining whale. Others were sighting the buoys in the water. All talking at once. All with the wind blowing away the shouts and stirring up the water. All with rain bearing down on us. We raced against the storm.

Finally, with the last buoy in, we turned again for the third whale. The rain now fell heavily. Some of the team retreated to the dry of the pilot house. The rest of us kept a rain-soaked watch though we never did find the third whale. It was too windy and rainy to see much. But, it was an adventure!

A very productive day. Picture of sunset attached with tanker in the distance. Also, a picture of the team later in the day in better weather. Johnny is on the whale boom as Cathy delivers him an arrow on it. Ian is standing on the bowsprit. Brady is in the hat and yellow shirt. Ariel is looking for something atop the salon. You can see the water is still quite choppy.

John

P.S. We are on the Gulf off of Louisiana. Our current location is 28 degrees 21.4 minutes North and 89 degrees 06.3 minutes West, for those who want to track us as we go. For Google maps (not Google Earth – but maps) or Bing maps use (include letters and comma): 28.21.4 N, 89.063 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>





