

Day 66, Voyage 2, August 13, 2011

It was a quiet day of searching, but no whales today. We are now well within Bryde's whale territory. Maybe tomorrow we will see one, though it is a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack.

The highlight of the day was when a plane flew by. No, wait, I don't mean a jet 20,000 feet overhead. I mean a twin engine plane flying at about 200 feet. With a mast sticking 70 feet in the air- that is quite close.

I was sitting in the salon when Captain Bob came in. He said "John, you might want to come up here, there is a plane flying quite low over us". Indeed, there was. It flew over us at about 150 to 200 feet several times getting a clear look at us and what we were doing. Of course, at that time, what we were doing was looking at them! It was a bit of a gasp as they would turn to come back around at us as the plane looked lined up with the mast. I was a bit worried that one wrong move and Andy and Johnny up on the midlevel would get more plane than they wanted.

Technology being what it is today, Sandy got the plane's id number with the camera and I Googled it on the phone. It turned out to be a plane out of Homer, Alaska with Bald Mountain Air Service. That was a surprise; I emailed them to a generic address and then found an 800 number so I called on the boat phone.

They were quite pleasant and nice. From the website, I could see they did marine mammal surveys. I told them we had seen their plane and they confirmed that they were in the Gulf. I asked when they were doing-research or pleasure. I kept the question vague so they would not have to violate customer privacy. I was a bit surprised at the answer - "Oh that's a contract flight. I can't tell you. It's top secret". Top secret! I responded- "Oh, I guess it's some of NOAA's NRDA work [NRDA is National Resources Damage Assessment- which is the umbrella for their oil crisis-related work]. She did not reply to my comment.

Later in the day, another of their team called. Again he was very friendly and pleasant. He gave me the number of the lead NOAA scientist on the flight. I agreed to send him pictures of the plane. I called the NOAA scientist and left a message. He has not called back yet nor has he emailed me.

Attached are pictures of the plane. Note the woman waving and smiling in the door of the plane.

We were emailed later that these flyovers of us were not merely fun. They were part of NOAA's work assignment. Go figure. I thought we were being as transparent as one

could be. Guess they needed a looksee. I am guessing the NOAA scientist will not be contacting me.

The other big curiosity of the day was a river of white stuff floating on the surface of the water. Pictures of it are attached. We are not sure what the heck it is. Our current guesses are that it is biological as under the microscope it looks like it has cells. It is what and firm. Captain Bob thinks it feels like ivory soap shavings. We've seen and sampled it before. In fact, when Laura came on she let me know the land lab was none too happy with me for sending back three tubes labeled "white stuff". I guess they felt that was insufficient information. So, when we encountered it yesterday, I asked her what she would have called it. She agreed "white stuff" was it.

We googled around and could find nothing on the internet to match. It's very thin, almost like a fish scale, and seems too hard to be a fish egg and too soft to be a plant seed. If you have seen this stuff before, please let us know. We are circulating pictures now to marine colleagues to see what they think.

The sunset was so so tonight, but there is a nice silhouette of Johnny on the whale boom and the moonrise was great- lots of blue. Pictures attached.

John

P.S. We are in the Gulf. Our current location is 29 degrees 19.2 minutes North and 86 degrees 05.7 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): 29.192 N, 86.057 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>

















