

Day 12, Voyage 2, June 19, 2011

Father's Day.

It was a very quiet morning. Seas were relatively calm. Air was warm with a gentle breeze blowing. Sun was shining brightly. Team was going about its busy routine, interspersed with students trying to call home with Father's Day wishes (our internet phones were not working). It felt as a Father's Day should warm, pleasant, quiet and relaxing. It didn't last.

It was about 1 pm when the first wrinkle in the day came. An ocean sunfish or mola swam alongside the boat (picture attached). An odd looking fish it moved slowly through the water and mesmerized us. As the fish left, the sun was really hot and I decided that we should have a team swim.

We had left sperm whale territory and were in about 600 feet of water closing in on prime Bryde's whale space. We had sampled 4 sperm whales and seen 10 of them, which is a pretty good sampling ratio, particularly on this side of the Gulf where there are fewer whales. I was also pleased that we now knew the sperm whales were back in waters off Florida again. Last year, after the oil spill, they were not.

Searching for Bryde's whales in the Gulf of Mexico is no easy task as the population is estimated to be only 15 whales. This small number makes them at even greater risk to pollutants. Moreover, the sounds they make are poorly understood so we cannot track them with the array. It is strictly a visual search, which means a lot of hot tiring work for the team. So swimming seemed a good way to start and swim we did.

After swimming for a bit, our deckhand Alyssa asked me to stop clicking in the water. It was an odd comment and no one was quite sure what to make of it. A while later, Johnny had gone back on deck to dive in again and then called out to me: "Dad, you're not going to believe this but there is a sperm whale clicking on the array!" Alyssa exclaimed "See, I wasn't kidding". So we had sperm whales around somewhere (but not near us).

Indeed this development was odd as we were in much shallower waters now. But, while unexpected, there is nothing that prevents a sperm whale from swimming in shallower water. Now, I had a dilemma, the team needed this swim that was clear, but a whale was on the array and work was calling. What to do?

Well, knowing that sperm whales stay down to generally 45 minutes (or 70 minutes in the one whale's case). and given that it was Sunday and Father's Day, I opted to finish

the swim. It was a roll of the dice, but the right decision as there would be many whale watch hours to come.

It paid off. As I ended the swim, I dashed into the pilot house and there indeed was a sperm whale clicking on the array. Remarkable. I rinsed off with the hose and checked again. The clicking had stopped, which meant we had a whale at the surface. I called out to the team and they went right into action mode without hesitation. About 15 minutes later, Rick called in from the midlevel platform "Whale blow, 1 mile ahead at 1 o'clock!" and we were on our way.

As we go closer, the calls became erratic. "Whale is at 2 o'clock!" "Whale is at 11 o'clock!" "Whale is at 12:30!" All came within minutes. Captain Bob was at the helm and thought someone on our team needed retraining. I thought for a moment and asked Bob if anyone had a visual on the whale itself yet. He thought maybe, but was not sure. I walked to the bow to ask the biopsiers if they had actually seen a sperm whale. They said no, it was too far, but it probably was a sperm whale. I told them I was not so sure it was.

I went back to the pilot house and told Bob that no one had a clear visual of the whale itself and that I did not think it was a sperm whale. Rather, based on the erratic location reports, I thought we were looking at our first Bryde's whale sighting. If so, I said we will be busy for a while as these guys are fast and erratic and rarely above the surface. The call came in that the whale was closer. I headed to the bow.

A few minutes later, sure enough, there was the whale and it was no sperm whale. It was sleek and had a very "falcate" dorsal fin, which means sharply hooked (picture attached). Johnny guessed maybe a fin whale. I said "No, it's a Bryde's". It was still a hunch for me as the best proof in the number of ridges going from near its blow hole to the tip of its nose- Bryde's have three. We could not get a clear view of the head.

We began following the whale and so began Mr. Toad's wild ride at sea. The whale went port. We turned to port. Oh wait, the whale is now on starboard. We turned to starboard. Where is he now??? No visual. Wait. Wait. Whale blow dead ahead 1 mile away. Yep, 1 mile. Bryde's whales have a top speed of 12 miles per hour and the Odyssey? -6 miles per hour in these conditions. We launched the dingy with Rick and Ian.

Mr. Toad's wild ride continued for an hour and a half with both boats trying to get close enough to sample. Johnny managed one attempt, which came close, but the whale was simply too far and the arrow fell short. It was the closest we would get. Finally, having had his fun with us, the whale dove and left. Given how sleek they are and their ability to turn quickly and swim at high speeds for 20 minutes underwater, once he was bored

with us, we would not find him. We had no way to know which way the whale went. We looked for an hour and never found that whale again.

We also never saw the full head. At one point Alyssa called down that in looking at Shanelle's pictures of the whale, they had counted three ridges. But, they misunderstood what the ridges were and when I showed Shanelle later in the salon, she had no clear pictures of the top of the head and the ridges could not be counted. It will be recorded as a baleen whale uncertain species. I remained convinced and hopeful, it was a Bryde's as there are so few.

The day ended with the best sunset of the trip (pictures attached), a nice Father's Day gift on what was a peaceful and then frenetic day. I have also attached a picture of Shanelle, Cathy, Nora and Rick on sunset watch. If you zoom in you can see their faces. Shanelle is on the left (brown hair) and Nora the right (blonde hair) with Cathy in the middle.

I have also learned I need to clarify yesterday's story and record. It was Cathy who spotted the 1,000th whale and earned dinner for her and Rick. Rick radioed it in so he got dinner too.

Happy Father's Day to all you father's out there. Nice Facebook post James- thanks for the support!

John/Dad

p.s. Our current location is somewhere off of southern Florida in the Gulf. 28 degrees 16.5 minutes North and 85 degrees 10.5 minutes West, for those who want to track us as we go.





