

Day 49, Voyage 2, July 27, 2011

It was, as they say, a banner day, today. It didn't start out that way. In fact, as far as whales go, it was quite a quiet day. I was up rather early as is becoming more of the norm and no whales were really heard or seen. It appeared like finally the newbies would experience a day at sea with no whales.

Then, early in the afternoon, Johnny radioed in that a whale breached a few miles ahead. The distance was such that I was doubtful we would reach the whale in time for a sample, but the prospect of seeing a breaching whale was enough to head out on deck and look. Sure enough, there on the horizon, like 9 miles away, a whale leapt completely out of the water and splashed back down.

I am always awed and amazed by these leaps as it's a rare glimpse of the full whale and it illustrates just how big and powerful they are that 9 miles away you can see and hear it splash. It did it again and I could see the water glistening on its back in the sun. Breathtaking sight really.

As we approached, we could see a second blow and realized there were two whales. Closer and closer we came and finally reached a distance where it was time to assemble the team. "Whales" I called. "Everyone on deck". The team assembled. I was quite surprised that these whales had stayed on the surface so long and allowed us to catch up to them.

The boat pulled into position. The biopsiers readied their aim. Everyone hung on the moment for sample... and just as we were about to release the arrows, both whales fluked and dove deeply right at Johnny's feet! We were seconds too late for a sample. I have attached two pictures of the whales diving just as we pulled within range. Remarkable images. Disappointing moment.

But, I promised you it was a banner day, and it was. Low and behold no sooner did those whales dive than a few minutes later another whale was sighted and then another pair. These three were interesting because they swam mostly just under the surface of the water. But they were not far under the surface, and with the light on the water we were easily able to follow them and collect samples from each one. Three biopsies on the day!

I know what you are thinking. Three is our average, not much of a banner day. Ah yes, that is true these days. But, these three samples were different. For you see they were our 98th, 99th and 100th sperm whale biopsy. Yes, we have actually managed to collect 100 sperm whale biopsies over these two voyages. I can hardly believe it. It seems like just yesterday when I was watching the oil gush into the Gulf and telling Iain Kerr- "We have to go".

Now the oil has stopped, and we are in the possession of a truly unique and valuable sample set that will not only inform us about the oil crisis, but also tell us about this important body of water and ocean pollution in general. There is still much more to do and many more biopsies to collect over the next few years to fully understand the story. But for today, with smiles, backslaps and congratulations all around, we bask in the glow of a job well done, a milestone well earned and the knowledge that no one has ever done this sort of thing before. We are the first to have such a 2-year sample set in a free-ranging whale population.

Picture of sunset attached.

John

P.S. We are on the Gulf off of Louisiana. Our current location is 28 degrees 00.4 minutes North and 89 degrees 35.9 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): 28.004 N, 89.359 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>





