

Saturday, April 15 – Day 5 by Johnny Wise

Today we circled Isla San Lorenzo, encountering many fin whales in Canal de Salsipuedes. The water here appears to contain a lot of detritus that shrimp and krill love to feed on... which is exactly what humpback and fin whales love to feed on. The Canal is situated between the mainland of Baja California and a series of islands varying in size, the largest being Isla San Lorenzo.

Because we encountered so many of fin whales, Captain Fonch and I launched in the dingy again – aptly calling ourselves the Mosquito Task Force. Our tactic is to approach the whales, first taking photos of their dorsal fins so we can identify each individual in a group, then going in to collect biopsies from each individual which we quickly retrieve and deliver back to the Martin Sheen. A couple times it felt a little chaotic – Fonch and I would wait for the whales to start surfacing again, and as soon as we saw one we would zip over. A couple times we had to adjust course on a dime because other whales would come up in our path, apparently not noticing our presence and I would find myself standing up in the dingy with a very large fin whale tail a few yards in front of me! Quite the adrenaline rush I must say!

During our intervals while the whales were below the surface – presumably gorging themselves on the schools of small fish and crustaceans that are their delicacies – I found myself stunned again by the natural, wild beauty that the Sea of Cortez has to offer. There are no villages along this large expanse of desert coastline (the last one being Santa Rosalia) and we encountered no other boats. Despite the desert coast, the water is rich with life! We were always surrounded by thousands of sea birds of half a dozen species – one small species in particular I noticed would typically be congregated in flocks of a few hundred birds, the composition of which was constantly changing as individuals would hop from group to group. It was almost as if there were several large bird parties going on at the water's surface, and the birds couldn't decide which party had the best music or the best atmosphere. Sometimes as we sped past the bird parties, several of the birds would take off in flight, matching our speed and direction – almost as if they were inviting and escorting us to their party.

We ended our day in Bahia San Francisquito, a very quiet bay with an incredible amount of bioluminescence. Rachel, Mark and I tried for a long time to catch a glow worm to look at under my pocket microscope that I brought along – but to no avail. We've all been reading John Steinbaeck's *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research* – and Rachel joked about how we were following Steinbeck's leadership. In this journal, he reflects that scientists must get out of the lab to better study their animals of interest...that a healthy education must consist of field research and lab work – something which I can very much attest to. I have learned key insights about whales in the last seven years from observing them in the field that I would not have learned from studying their bones or cells in the lab – quantitative observations such as diving patterns, and qualitative observations that one might use to describe the personality of whales between individuals and across species.

The night sky in this part of the world is likely the most stunning I have ever seen. There is no light pollution, other than that which comes from our boat. The stars closer to the horizon twinkle actively as though they wish to grab our attention before they dip below the horizon, while the ones directly overhead remain steady and firm knowing they will remain visible until the rising of

the waning gibbous moon or until the sun. The water is so calm and smooth, that even some of the less bright stars are reflected on its surface, adding to the unspeakable beauty that comes with a body of water twinkling with bioluminescence.

Johnny











