

Sunday, April 16 – Day 6 by Johnny Wise

Happy Easter! We started off our day with a humpback whale at sunrise! Apparently it also decided to stop in Bahia de San Francisquito to rest. Have you ever wondered how whales sleep? They typically take a breath, then allow themselves to sink for a couple minutes, resurface for another breath, and sink again...so they really only sleep a couple minutes at a time. Unfortunately, I do not know how long they typically repeat this (probably varies from whale to whale).

We passed through Canal de Salsipuedes again, encountering a group of five fin whales in exactly the same place as yesterday – three of which we had already encountered and biopsied. I guess the food here was quite delicious! A few hours later, we encountered another group of four fin whales about a mile north. I spotted these on my watch. Rick and Mark took positions in the bowsprit to biopsy the whales, allowing me my first opportunity to view the activity from above. What a treat! I was graced with a full view of all four whales alongside the boat, surfacing and diving lazily in between deeper dives to gorge themselves on whatever food was in the area. Being in the crow's nest, I have the best view of the whales – and as I directed the biopsiers, photogroaphers and the helm the direction of the whales, I must say I felt like a master conductor. “The whales are moving to port...the closest one is coming up...the furthest one is coming up....and so on.” Having been in the seat of the biopsiers hundreds of times before, I greatly appreciate precise directions for where the whales are and how they are moving, and I am certain Rick and Mark were silently grateful for the directions I provided them – they carried out their duties superbly and with the help of Carlos and Andrea as our photographers to determine which whales we biopsied, we succeeded in biopsying three of these four fin whales. Then the whales apparently decided they were done with us and wouldn't allow us to get close enough to biopsy the fourth. I descended long past my watch was over, and we launched our Mosquito Task Force. Fonch and I each reviewed the photos of each whale's dorsal fins so we knew which whale we were missing. In the dingy, fully loaded with equipment, we quickly got to the whales and scoped out each dorsal for the one we were missing. The first one came up – nope, not that one – then two more came up together. As I was checking one, Fonch pointed to the other and excitedly shouted “That one! That one!” I aimed and released my arrow just in time to collect the last biopsy we needed as the whales continued on their way. We were back to the boat within five minutes, all whales biopsied, a seamless successful team effort!

By now I was pooped, and decided to lay down for a nap instead of writing yesterday's log. A couple hours later I was awoken to the excited reports of another whale – this time a sperm whale! My favorite species, and the Wise Lab's specialty – we spent three summers between 2010-2012 biopsying sperm whales in the Gulf of Mexico, so we've seen hundreds if not thousands of these whales. They typically spend 10-15 minutes logging at the surface before diving to the deepest depths of the ocean to hunt squid, easily spending an hour or more at depth. Again, I was in the crow's nest on our first approach and we weren't able to get a sample with our first attempt. After the whale did a deep dive, waving its huge black fluke to us on its way down, pops and first mate Mike considered the whale's direction, speed and the topography of the ocean floor to decide on a direction to anticipate where the whale might resurface. Here in Canal de Salsipuedes, there is an 800-meter drop-off underwater – that's where we figured the whale would be hunting. About 55 minutes later, the sperm whale resurfaced within 200 yards of us, 1 mile

south from our last sighting. I took my position in the bowsprit with Mark behind me, ready and eager to get his first sperm whale biopsy. The whale held a steady course, appearing not to notice us as Mike steered us gently toward the whale. Being very well acquainted with sperm whale surface behavior, I waited for my opportune moment – when the whale was ready to dive, it would arch its back slightly before it took its final breath and make a grand arch, raising its fluke high out of the water and diving straight down. When it did this “pre-arch” we were within range, and I released my arrow – a glancing hit off its back. Not ideal for a good blubber sample, but excellent for a skin sample! The whale dove, and we began looking for its companion, who apparently stayed down longer during the previous dive and hadn’t resurfaced yet.

As we searched for this second whale, a large pod of bottle-nosed dolphins eagerly approached us...maybe 100 individuals. Delighted with the playful company of the dolphins, we all ceased looking for the sperm whale and leaned over the railing to watch, laugh, gleefully shout, and wave at the dolphins – who also appeared to be excited for our company. The dolphins rode our bow, and jumped high out of the water, showing off their athleticism and enjoying our applause. After awhile I began searching for the sperm whale again, just in case. ..about two miles away to our stern, I spotted the two (who had regrouped). Realizing they were too far away for the *Martin Sheen*, so the Mosquito Task Force launched again – but the whales dove for another deep-water hunting long before we could get to them. Unfortunate that we couldn’t biopsy our second whale, but a hell of a good day on the Sea of Cortez!

We anchored for the night in Ensenada el Alacrán (scorpion), where there is an eco-friendly resort with 8 yurts called Las Animas Wilderness Lodge. After sunset, I spent some time on deck for stargazing, listening to the sea lion rookery...lo and behold two whales had followed us into the bay! Mike was astounded that I was spotting whales at night!

Johnny















