

Tuesday, April 12 – “Rough Seas” – Johnny Wise

We motored through the night to get closer to Cabo and some whale hotspots. During the night the wind and the swells picked up – nothing crazy or dangerous, mind you, just enough to toss me about in my bunk in the bow of the boat. As we were motoring all night I also offered to take the sunrise helm watch to help relieve some of the crew’s work load. Due to the swells, though, I woke up at 3am instead of 5am and couldn’t fall back asleep. The swells (which were 6-8 ft at the largest) and the wind (18-23 knots) continued throughout the day – and as day broke it became clear that it would not be an easy day to find whales. Mostly due to the wind speed – for one, it creates a lot of white caps on the sea surface which the whale blows blend in with (try spotting a yellow butterfly in a field of dandelions), and for two, the wind disperses and reduces the size of the whales’ blows.

Hours passed by without any whales spotted. As this was our last full day searching for whales, I spent as much time as possible on top of the pilot house or on deck to find a whale. By 10am (7 hours after I woke up) I decided it was time to try for a nap. I have a long history of trying to take naps while at sea looking for whales, only to find that as soon as I’m about to doze off I hear someone shouting a whale. It has happened so often, that I always have an internal debate about whether or not it’s worth attempting. This time I was sure it was worth it – my exhaustion and the sea state led me to believe a whale would not be spotted today, or if one was, then we wouldn’t get close enough to biopsy it. I was wrong, and just as I was about to doze off, I heard my pops urgently shouting “Whale! Whale! Whale!” That means it’s close!

I emerged on deck to learn it was within 50 meters of the boat – it was at our 3 o’clock, apparently stalled under the surface. We turned to get closer to it, and as I got settled in the bowsprit it took off at an alarming speed – the fastest I’ve seen a whale accelerate. Over the next 15 minutes it would slow down, speed up, swim left, swim right, and rolled around in the water. It was most certainly a Bryde’s whale (pronounced Broodah’s, it’s a Swiss name), and appeared to be trying to play a game with us – like it was testing how fast we could move and how quickly we could maneuver. Then it swam back over to us, rolled over and showed us its belly. Meanwhile, Mark and I are bouncing around in the

bowsprit, waiting for the whale to be close enough in range and for its back to be above the surface – the sea was not going to cooperate with us. After showing us its belly, the whale rolled back over and came up for a breath. Its back was barely out of the water, we were bouncing in the bowsprit, and it was impossible to predict how the whales were going to wash over the whale or when it might roll again. I had a clear view of the area of the whale's flank that was my target, and just as I was about to release an arrow before the target was gone, I saw Mark's arrow fly true and bounce off the whale's flank. A very difficult opportunity handled with perfection by a novice biopsier! Not wanting to risk losing the arrow in the sea, we turned around quickly and retrieved the sample. Bringing us to a total of 24 whales and 6 different species.

We anchored in Bahia San Jose del Cabo.

Johnny