

Sunday, April 3, 2016 – Day 2 at Sea

I have already lost track of my days. I was surprised to discover it was a Sunday! Oh my, what a day it was...

The day started early again with Johnny's alarm waking us before the sunrise. I was so worn out last night that I fell asleep around nine and slept the night through not even waking when Johnny went to bed. Turned off the light and the next thing I knew his alarm was going off. I slept through it until mine went off about 30 minutes later. The rest was awesome.

We anchored last night in a remarkable little cove with rocks and cliffs all around. One was a rookery for sea lions who made quite a ruckus as sea lions do. We set out from there in search of whales with the sunrise. It wasn't long before there they were – fin whales! I mentioned the challenges they present in yesterday's email, but with our one success the day before – we were undaunted in our quest. Fin whales you see are an important comparison point for us as we have been sampling fin whales in the Gulf of Maine so this group would give us important insights into that population and vice versa. So off we went!

What emerged was a day so busy and grueling it's hard to keep track of the details and tell the story. There were fin whales everywhere. The pattern began. See the whales. Head towards the whales. Watch the whales dive. Keep heading towards the whale. Repeat. Until...see the whale surface near. The release the arrow. Toss in a marker buoy. Then see the whales. Head towards the whales. Watch the whales dive...and so on. This pattern was only interrupted by periods of "Wait! It's been a long time. Let's go recover the arrows." Sometimes there were samples in the arrow. Sometimes not. But, we repeated this pattern over and over and over for about six hours straight. At one point Rick looked at me and said "I feel like I've run three miles". Indeed, we were soooo tired for while the boat is not large, we were continuously focused and at the ready and often running circles around the boat as we sought arrows and buoys. Finally, I insisted the science team eat their lunch and pause on activities. The boat crew had already eaten at noon so they were all set. As we sat down to eat- we realized we managed 8 fin whale biopsies by lunch – a truly excellent achievement given the speed and low above-water profile of these whales.

The afternoon found us in what we dubbed “fin whale bay”. The bay was loaded with fin whales blowing everywhere. When the wind is still, as it was in this bay, you can recognize a fin whale by its blow, which is a strong, straight column of mist just like you see in a cartoon. Sperm whales, by contrast, how an off-center, low bushy blow. There they were, everywhere you could see. The bay itself was also remarkable as by the look of the shore – it looked like we had just landed on Mars (except of course there is no blue water sea on Mars. The shore was a red mountainous soil devoid of plant or obvious animal life. It looked hot and dry. It was surreal and as hard as we worked to get the first eight biopsies – we looked forward to eight easier ones.

The whales had other ideas.

It turns out this bay was feeding grounds. The Captain offered us the use of the Zodiac dinghy so Johnny, Mark and I hopped in with our first mate Mike to try it. My experience with whales had always shown me they ran from the sound of the outboard motor, but it was worth a try. Rick and Carlos stayed on the main boat to try from there as well.

There were whales everywhere and we marveled at their majestic size and grace. However, try as we might – no strategy could get us within sampling range. We returned to the boat with no samples and no attempts. We were surprised to learn they had had no luck sampling either. We gave it another two hours as a complete team on the main boat – but still no success. Perhaps, indeed these whales were from Mars. Really, I just think they were eating and didn’t want to be bothered with us much as we would be if a kid came up to us with a supersoaker squirt gun while we were eating.

Our time with these Mars whales was not entirely for naught. They were fantastic to watch and treated us to all sort of lunge feeding behaviors. Lunge feeding is a baleen whale capture technique. Baleen whales in case you’ve forgotten are whales with baleen instead of teeth that acts as a kind of strainer. Thus, they lunge through the water, take a huge gulp of water and then let the water strain out leaving the prey behind. We could see whale after whale break the surface of the water with a huge mouthful – kinda like a kid with cheeks full of food like a chipmunk from too big of a bite. It was awesome to watch.

We broke for dinner and the day came to a quiet close – everyone tired from the hard work, but satisfied with excellent progress.

I have attached pictures of the sunrise, the sea lion rookery (you can see the sea lions), Mark and Carols in the morning light, Johnny on sunrise watch, two fin whales in the water and what we called fin whale bay - note the Mars-like terrain. All pictures are taken with my iphone. When we sort through the lab camera photos - I will send some of those as well.

John









