

Sunday, April 3 – Whales on Mars - Johnny Wise



Today was long, exciting, and exhausting.

We anchored for the night in Porto Refugio. We arrived a couple hours after sunset, so we were unable to get a chance to get a view of the bay before bed. I woke up around 5:30 am again (this time with an alarm), and emerged from below deck to a stunning view of the bay and the sunrise. The bay was much larger than I expected from the maps. On the shore nearest us was a short beach that wrapped around a significant portion of the arc, with a 30-40 ft cliff where the rugged hills/mountains looked like they had been cut off. The entrance of the bay is protected by a long, skinny island with tall rugged hills dotted by sparse cacti – this island is also a sea lion rookery and I could start to hear their barking as they woke up. Pictures attached of the bay and the sunrise.

I helped First Mate Mike to haul in the anchor before climbing up to the crow's nest to begin my whale watch. As I settled in, pops and Mark emerged on deck to enjoy the view.

Last night Mark and I had joked about stealing the zodiac to bring a sea lion back to the boat. Our plan was to befriend it and train it to fetch our arrows, and she would be named stormy. This fun little joke led to a day filled with exclamations about stormy doing all kinds of favors for us – retrieving arrows, herding whales, underwater video with our GoPro...and Mark shouting “STORMY!!! Where are you Stormy?!?” Every time we saw a sea lion or Mark had an idea for what she would do.

My whale watch was uneventful – I spotted whales, but they were many miles in front of us. Mark was up after me and I pointed out to him that we would find whales on his watch. Sure enough, within an hour we were chasing a pair of fin whales. The chases were exhausting and frustrating – remember, these whales are fast! The sea state was rough – 6 ft swells with wind speeds pushing 30 mph. Difficult conditions for biopsying, but manageable. Normally when we are with a group of whales, we stay with them as long as we can to biopsy each of them and throw in buoys or life rings as visual markers for where they are. Due to today’s rough conditions, many times I decided to abandon the group of whales in order to turn around and collect our arrows – which often had samples! By lunch we had 8 more biopsies! When Shannon rang the lunch bell, we had two arrows in the water (known misses), and I had decided to stay with the whales this time to try and get the biopsies. By the time the lunch bell rang, I regretted my decision. The visual markers were nowhere in sight, and there were white caps everywhere due to the intensity of the wind. With the lunch bell, most of the Sea Shepherd crew retreated below deck to eat – leaving the four of our crew, Carlos, and Captain Oona (at the helm) to search for the lost buoy, life ring and arrows. Mark searched from the crow’s nest, Rick stood in the bowsprit, Carlos and pops searched from the top of the pilot house, while I climbed up the ladder and searched from a few rungs below Mark. The sea was choppy and the wind strong while our eyes scanned the ocean near and far in between the myriad white caps in search of our bright red life ring and little white buoy. After about an hour of searching we spotted the ring – almost a kilometer away. By now the ring had surely drifted far from the arrow and it seemed like a lost cause to search, but the wind had been strong and steady so we set a course upwind from the ring. Fortune favored us – we found the arrow and returned for the ring! That left the white buoy and another arrow, Sean climbed up the other ladder to help us search. After another exhausting (for me on the ladder, at least) hour of searching we called it lost and retreated for lunch.

The boat returned to our original course and reset to find whales – Mar relieved Mark in the crow’s nest, and I quickly put together a plate of cold lunch (some kind of veggie

pancakes with home fries and a salad). A few bites in, and we had found another whale. I stuffed my face and shuffled up to the bow still chewing my mouthful of lunch. Mark and Rick were already manning the crossbows, so I took over the data clipboard (Mark successfully biopsied his first whale earlier in the day!). No shots. The whales dove before we could get close enough. I returned to lunch, and encouraged Mark and Rick to do the same – we should have 10-15 minutes before they resurfaced. As they climbed down into the galley (which is truly under the water line), I continued to stuff my face when I hear Mar report another whale sighting close by. Without saying anything to Rick or Mark, I shuffled back up to the bow – I wanted them to eat, and it was only one whale, I could manage it. Again, no shots, no chances. This time we retreated to the salon again for lunch – all four of us – and were able to finish our lunches. Pops raised a toast to our success so far in the day and thanked us for our hard work. Then we had another call for whales – 4 this time. Rick and I took up the crossbows and got into position. For their third breaths they were just out of range and the boat turned to move closer. Two whales were slightly too far in front of us for a good angle, leaving Rick and I the other two to aim. I told him to take the near one, while I aimed for the far one. They came up for their last breath, but a big wave washed over my target. Rick released his arrow and it struck true. Another sample! Without hesitation I called to retrieve the arrow – the whales would be down for awhile. This sample was unusual. Somehow it managed to pull some extra blubber which was dangling loosely from the tip – fortunately there were no seabirds around looking for an easy snack!

After those whales, I decided to turn in and take a nap. From past experience I know that attempting a nap is usually futile – almost always without fail as soon as I'm on the brink of being asleep someone finds a whale. Today, as I reached that point, I heard some excited chatter from the deck but no one shouted down to me, so I chose to ignore it. An hour or so later Mark woke me up and told me to come on deck. We were entering a wide-mouthed bay and there were at least 10 whales lolling about in it (can you see the whale blows in the two photos attached?). The coast looked like a Martian landscape – desolate brownish-red rocks and sand, a long, gently sloping beach that expanded from the base of the mountains to the water. "Where's Mark Watney?" I asked in jest. After taking in the serene Martian landscape with several groups of whales spouting every few seconds, I convened with Captain Oona, First Mate Mike, and pops. We decided to try something new. We already had 9 biopsies in the freezer (one from yesterday, 8 from today). The plan was to split our team to cover more distance and hope to biopsy more whales. First

Mate Mike, Mark, pops and I went out in the zodiac (we also were nervous about the water's depth), while Rick stayed on board with the rest of the crew.

It took us about 20 minutes to get in the area of the whales closer to shore from the *Martin Sheen*. We quickly discovered the whales didn't like the high-pitched whining of the zodiac's engine at full throttle – they ducked under and swam away before we could get in range. My range for biopsying was also significantly hindered; (1) due to being lower on the water, and (2) due to being in a little zodiac that bounced on the waves much more than the comparatively huge *Martin Sheen*. We tried several different tactics to get closer to the whales – which were swimming much slower than usual in this bay. One idea was to steer ourselves in a course that would intersect theirs, without them feeling like we were chasing them, no luck. The next idea was to place ourselves in front of them, with the hopes that they would surface near enough to us for an attempt – no luck, the whales either dipped under the water and appeared far on the other side of us, or they would roll on their sides and make a hard turn to change direction. Finally we figured out something that seemed to work. We would track the whale from behind after a dive, zig-zag its course with the engine as “baritone” as possible and wait for it to surface near us. Unfortunately we only had a couple windows of opportunity where the whale was just on the edge of my comfort for biopsying, but I was usually hindered by the bouncing of the zodiac on the waves combined with a smaller target area (the whales weren't arching as much as they did in the open sea). I tried several different positions to keep myself as stable as possible – sitting on the pontoon, kneeling in the bow, standing with my feet secured under the pontoon, half kneeling-half standing, but the whales were always just too far away and our motion just too much for a good chance. It was extremely frustrating for me – the window of opportunity to have a good target lasts like 3 seconds with these whales, and a lot of factors have to be just right or close to right for an attempt to be good. After that missed opportunity, Mark pointed out to me that even if I missed, it would be easy for us to retrieve the arrows because of how low on the water we were – I followed his logic, but was unmoved because (1) we didn't have any floats to use as visual aids for arrows, and (2) tracking the whales was difficult enough without having to change course or turn around for an empty arrow (and perhaps my pride in my aim played a small part in not wanting to take risky shots on tricky whales). The four of us spent maybe an hour or two (I really can't tell time on the water!) chugging along after whales in the zodiac before Mike decided it was time for us to return – the whales were too difficult to maneuver around, the zodiac too bouncy for good biopsying condition, and we were now out of radio range of the *Martin Sheen*. So we chugged the mile or so back to the boat and rejoined

the rest of our crew. We had seen them close to the whales a few times, and what looked like good opportunities, but had also come up short. Furthermore, they were looking for a lost arrow (which we helped them find within about 30 minutes).

We resumed our efforts as a whole crew to biopsy whales in this bay, but to no avail. It turned out the whales were swimming so slowly and irregularly because they were feeding. Several times we saw the whales surface, mouths open and gullets swollen with water and krill (presumably), then roll on their sides and filter their meal from the seawater. We attempted to join a group of three whales as they circled and fed, but every time we got close and chose one to follow something shocking happened. The one whale we followed began to lead us away from the other two, and after moving away from the feeding area about a quarter mile or half mile, the whale dipped under the surface and disappeared. After 5 or 10 minutes it reappeared behind us, headed back to the feeding area. We followed, got close to the three whales again, chose one to focus on, it led us away, disappeared, and reappeared behind us returning to where we started. Suddenly I felt like the whales were treating us like a troublesome child – like they were leading us away from an adults-only activity or conversation, and telling us to stay put or stay out of their business. About an hour before sunset we decided to call it a day, having spent the majority of our afternoon in this bizarre bay surrounded by what looked like Martian landscape and full of hungry fin whales that didn't want a toy boat to muck up their meal. Rick commented at one point that the scene was something out of a movie – like Melville meets Spielberg – and we were the crew of oddballs set out for an impossible task.

The day ended with the sun setting behind the mountains of the bay, with gulls and pelicans dotting the evening sea and calling all around us – they sound like an odd cat, something like “aorw aorw” (if that makes any sense). While the remaining daylight faded to night, pops and I sat on the aft deck talking about life, the rare and unusual opportunities we've had together, all the pieces that fell into place to make this happen (again, thank you to everyone!) and the important aspects of love and a deep, meaningful relationship. My body was physically exhausted – especially my core muscles from balancing on the ladder, maintaining my aim in the bow in rough seas, and maintaining my balance in the zodiac – but the joy I felt from such a successful day, an opportunity, and our rich conversation is hard to beat. Both of us commented the only way things could be better was if our loved ones were with us to share in the beauty of all of it.

Tonight we anchor behind Isla Estanque.

Johnny















