

# Monday, April 4 – Johnny Wise

## Mini Adventures in Our Grand Adventure

From Isla Estanque we headed south through a deep channel between the mainland Baja California and a few long islands – Isla Salsipuedes, Isla Las Animas, and Isla San Lorenzo. The channel is 600-1500 m deep with a 400 m underwater cliff on the island side. According to Carlos, our local expert on whale territories, this is seasonal sperm whale territory (though they are usually here in May).

Around 10am the water was still too shallow to put the array in the water (it usually tows 100-200 ft deep). So we took an opportunity to use our directional hydrophone. We stopped the boat, Pops dipped it over the side while I listened through headphones for any sounds of whales. I heard only the engine and the generator – they were too close, and the directional was too shallow to get below the boat from the deck. Time for a new approach. Fortunately, Sea Shepherd has a lot of equipment – on this boat they have a 1-person kayak and an inflatable paddleboard. Our new plan: I would go out on the paddleboard away from the boat, while Mark came along in the kayak. Mark carried the equipment, and we went out about 50 yards from the boat. The engine and generator were turned off, Mark dipped the 10-ft directional into the water until only 1-2 ft were about the surface, and I adjusted the settings on our acoustic box while I listened. ... Very quickly I could hear dolphins whistling and chattering in the distance. The sea state was completely flat – only the slightest breeze was causing a rippled surface, otherwise it would be like a mirror. Acoustically, that means sound can travel a very far distance underwater. My guess is these dolphins were at least 5 miles away. I continued listening....

After about 5 minutes of listening, I decided it was time to head back. There were no whales to be heard, just a pod or two of dolphins that were far away. We packed up and paddled back to the boat. Pops was very excited about the news that I heard dolphins and that I could pinpoint their direction from us – that meant the directional was working for us. We planned to repeat this exercise every hour on the hour, with our whale watch shift change until we were deep enough for the array.

Before our next planned directional hydrophone exercise, we had reached deeper water. Pops and Rick put out the array while I got the acoustics up and running. Immediately

after turning on the speakers I heard a rapid series of loud clicks! Then First Mate Mike and Captain Oona started laughing and I knew something was up – Oona made the clicks to prank me! I had to admit she fooled me better than anyone has in a long time (I'm usually the prankster) – but I warned her that she opened a dangerous can of worms with me. In reality, there were no whales on the array, and none sighted for the rest of the day.

The day passed pleasantly. We kept up our efforts to look for whales from the crow's nest, while those off whale duty spent the hours reading in the salon (i.e. living room of the boat) or chatting animatedly in the pilot house. Sean (the engineer), originally from Massachusetts, lived in Penobscot, Maine for three years before joining the Sea Shepherd crew – so he and I have had a lot of stories to share about life in Maine. First Mate Mike has a wide furry grin and a quick wit (like myself). Between the three of us it seems like the jokes and the laughs never end.

After lunch I asked Oona (who was on helm watch) how long until we would reach our anchor point – about 2 or 2.5 hours, or 3pm. I thought about an opportunity to swim at our anchor point vs. swinging out trajectory out a little closer to the underwater cliff. Oona was happy to comply with either option. The crew, however, wanted to swim! It had been a hot and slow day, after all.

We anchored near Punta San Gabriel, in Bahia San Francisquito in early afternoon. Within the bay is a narrow inlet that leads to a small resort town with a handful of houses and a road that leads to...somewhere. Shortly after dropping anchor, we started jumping overboard with snorkel gear. The water was still a forest green (I suspect due to lots of phytoplankton), which significantly reduced visibility. When I was in about 20 ft of water I started to see the shadows of the bottom, diving down I found the shadows to be blankets of sea lettuce and other types of algae. Among the sea foliage were dozens of small stingrays about the size of a dinner plate, some fish I couldn't identify, and the occasional angel shark (pictures attached). Another thing I encountered was a very harsh thermocline 3 ft below the surface – the water temperature dropped by 10 or 15°F, and it was around 65 at the surface. A handful of us made it to shore one by one by swimming – Sean, Mark, pops and myself – while Rick and Carlos drove the zodiac in to shore, Oona went out on the paddleboard, and the rest of the crew remained on board to tend to their duties or relax. The beach was a bright white sand to the north and heavily pebbled with fist-sized speckled rocks to the south. Beyond the beach was a red-orange desert littered with cacti and brush that looked like a scene straight out of a Western film. While

pops and I combed the beach for treasures, Rick, Carlos and Sean went out into the desert to explore, and Mark went to explore a cave we saw from shore.

As I made my way to the pebbly end of the beach I was excited to find various marine mammal bones – initially just vertebrae, but then ribs and limbs, and then lower jaws! I had the early makings of a dolphin skeleton. It didn't take long for my hands to be overburdened, and I returned to the group who was sitting in the sand at the water's edge. Mark became the most excited about my discoveries and went back with me to collect more bones. As we collected, we soon realized even four arms wasn't going to be enough, and found a plastic basket that had washed ashore to carry all our bones in. By the time we had reached the end of the beach, the rest of the beach goers had returned to the boat and sunset was approaching. We laid out our collection on the beach. We weren't able to complete a single skeleton, so we decided to create a monster! It had the lower jaw of a dolphin, the skull of a sea lion, about 50 vertebra (in an illogical sequence), and some limbs that seemed to have too many joints and disproportionate parts.

Rick picked us up in the zodiac just before the sun set behind the desert hills, and when we arrived back Oona told us there were two dead dolphins on the beach near the resort town (where she had gone to explore). Intrigued, pops, Mark and I got back into the zodiac with Oona to head back to shore and check out the carcasses. By the time we reached the dock, the sun had completely set and the stars were starting to fill the sky. The first carcass was easy to find – though it was decayed beyond recognition and wouldn't be of any use to us to collect tissue samples (it was only bones with some skin remaining). The second one, which was supposed to be smaller and fresher was much harder to find. We found another rib cage further inland, then another very decayed carcass that was very difficult to identify. My guess was it was a huge leatherback sea turtle – the shape of its head was not like any cetacean species I'm familiar with and resemble the stout head of a turtle, but if it were it would've been a similar size to a prehistoric turtle. Mark thought it was a beaked whale, but the shape doesn't seem right...possibly a pilot whale...

On the way back the sky was clear and full of stars, while the water was speckled with bioluminescence. Before long, the bioluminescence was so strong that our zodiac had a halo of light around it and a 30-ft tail. I'm sure from underwater we must've looked like a comet flying across the surface. Again, I find myself blown away and humbled by the beauty of it all.

Johnny













