

Tuesday, April 5 - Johnny Wise

I emerged from the boat to a chilly morning early before the sunrise, the first one awake on the boat. As we got underway, I saw many many large islands all around us – leaving me to wonder how far inland this bay was from the open sea. Each island held massive dry deserts with patches of scrubs and low brush dotting the sides – and each had its own thing to offer to the beauty of the scene. Captain Oona and I had discussed our plan for today's sail yesterday afternoon before dropping anchor – we would sail across the deep underwater canyon we came down yesterday, over the underwater ridge to the other side of the island, then head south to Isla San Pedro Martir. No whales all morning.

In the afternoon, Mark spotted a small whale that Carlos verified as a pygmy sperm whale – the first one I've ever seen! We tried to follow in for a biopsy, it would take 3-4 breaths, then dive for 20 minutes – very difficult to follow. Right when we seemed to get on track with it and were ready to anticipate its resurfacing, someone spotted another whale close by. This one turned out to be a small humpback – the first of this species we've seen in the Sea of Cortez. After several approaches and following it for awhile, it was just within range (range was long today due to the still water and low wind). This whale was also taking three breaths then diving, but was only down for 3-5 minutes at a time. The whale was about 50 ft away from our port bow and swimming away from the boat – not the best angle, but just enough that I could see a clear line to my target. Confident, I let loose my arrow...it flew true and bounced off the flank of the whale – a clear hit! But no sample. I think a combination of the sub-optimal angle and the whale's tendency to roll as it dove caused the tip to miss the whale, and the yellow buoy (behind the tip) is what hit the whale. As we waited, pops, Rick and I conversed in the bow on the lookout and waiting for another sighting. In mid-sentence, the humpback resurfaced 30 ft off our starboard bow behind me. I swiveled, quickly took aim, and released another arrow with its second breath – just a foot short with a splash in the water, and a dramatic tail flick from the whale!

By now more whales had been sighted. While we set a new course for the other whales, pops, Rick, and I continued our conversation – about our observations from biopsying whales, how each species has different behaviors and reactions to the biopsy dart and the boat's presence. We also found some amusing comparisons between ourselves,

people we know, and those whale behaviors. To review the highlights: we unanimously decided Mark is a humpback due to their flamboyant personalities with singing and dancing, and dramatic reactions to a biopsy dart (typically a tail flick with a large splash regardless of whether or not it touched them); Rick is a Bryde's whale (pronounced broodahs) because he's quiet, usually hard to find, and difficult to biopsy; pops is a blue whale, they are mysterious and impressive, and he has a big presence wherever he goes; and I am a sperm whale, which is the deepest diving of the whales, battles giant squid, and doesn't care about a little nick in my side.

Our next biopsy was a minke whale – usually very difficult to biopsy due to their small size, tendency to be shy, and their speed. Captain Oona did a phenomenal job piloting the boat to position me perfectly – I commented later that the whale was almost on a silver platter for me to biopsy! Two more fin whales followed – both biopsied. Then we were tracking a sei whale with the fading daylight – another first sighting for me. We were unable to biopsy that one. While we were pursuing the sei whale, pops came up and asked us if that was the same island we were next to earlier in the day – it was! Isla San Pedro Martir – lots of rorquals around it. A very successful day on the sea for our crew!

Johnny















