

## **Wednesday, April 6 – Mythical Creatures of Lore – Johnny Wise**

We motored all night, and when I emerged from below decks we had arrived outside of Santa Rosalia. The crew needed to resupply provisions – Shannon, Mar, and JP went ashore for the day, while the rest of us set out to find more whales.

It didn't take long until we were surrounded by dolphins – hundreds of them in all directions – porpoising, tail slapping, and riding our bow. Meanwhile, I continued to search for whales. As I searched, I noticed one of the pods was creating small spouts whenever they surfaced – entirely uncharacteristic of dolphins. A spout comes from a whale exhaling a deep breath and is a mix of mucus and seawater, but dolphins take shallow, rapid breaths and hence don't produce a spout (at least not one that is visible more than a few meters away). Upon closer inspection with the binoculars I realized they were pilot whales! I radioed down, then climbed down to get ready to biopsy – neither Mark or Rick had biopsied pilot whales before, so I had to train them. There were four whales in this pod, and another larger pod within a kilometer. Pilot whales present a different challenge from the great whales. They are usually in larger pods, are constantly swimming around each other, and frequently change direction. Hence, they require a lot of patience and a little bit of stubbornness (both of which I have a lot). As we approached the pod, I pointed out to Mark and Rick where the targets are – right below the dorsal, then nothing for a second, and finally another flank target just before the fluke. Furthermore, the trick to managing so many animals is to choose one and track it – ignore all the others, even if they surface very close to the chosen whale. It sounds simple, but in the heat of the moment with the frustrating changing direction and excitement of so many whales, it's easy to forget oneself. Mark and I started with the first four – both found our targets perfectly. Rick replaced Mark for the second approach. Even though there were 4 whales, 3 of them looked very similar in size and lacked distinctive markings, so I decided we would focus on the one distinct whale (with a much larger dorsal than the other two) and call it good with 3 of the 4 whales before heading to the larger pod.

I processed the samples while we sailed over to the second pod. I had just finished when we reached them – Mark and Rick both with crossbows in hand in the bowsprit, clearly nervous and excited about these whales. As any good coach should, I reminded them of

the targets and my tips for focusing on one at a time, and let them take their pick. This pod had 20-30 individuals. Insanity for a biopsier. After several approaches with the whales surrounding us then turning away, then surrounding us, and no arrows released – pops and I had to go prod Mark and Rick not to be gun shy. After all, Mark had already biopsied one pilot whale, and Rick was a seasoned biopsier. On the next approach, both released their arrows, but both missed by inches. We collected our arrows, but lost sight of the whales. Our plan for the day was to sail around a big island, Isla Tortuga, near Santa Rosalia – we pushed on.

We completely rounded the island without another sighting, and had accepted we weren't going to see anything else today. Mark was in the crow's nest for our last whale watch, while Rick, Mike, Oona and myself were in the pilot house. Conversation was carrying on casually, drifting from topic to topic as easily as a jellyfish drifts on the open sea. That's when I spotted it – a blow, about 2 km away, but unmistakable. In one fluid motion, I hopped out of my seat, left the pilot house pointing and directing where to turn the boat while I watched for more. Everyone probably thought I had gone crazy for a moment given how far away it was and how many whitecaps there were – plenty of room for error. Mark couldn't see it from the crow's nest, and no one else had yet spotted it from the deck. I kept my eyes sharp where I had seen the blow. I saw three more, then saw a fluke like I've never seen before. There are only three whale species in the Sea of Cortez that lift their fluke out of the water when they dive – humpback, blue, and sperm whales. I have seen hundreds of sperm whales and dozens of humpbacks – this fluke was nothing like theirs. Blue! The next time a blow was spotted, we had closed most of the distance, and now everyone else could see it! Three more dives and it resurfaced close enough to get within range. Blue whales are not actually blue – they're more of a light gray color – but when they're below the surface, the water makes them appear light blue in color. This was the first time our group and most of Sea Shepherd crew had ever seen a blue whale, we were all thrilled. As we approached, it looked like a giant ghost below the surface – like a myth come to life. It gave us little regard as it swam along, appearing as though it were completely unaware of our presence or completely unphased, as an elephant might regard a stray dog.

Our approach to biopsy the big blue was less than ideal. It was turning as we were turning, and I ended up with its tail a couple meters below my feet – no angle for a biopsy. As our boat ungracefully danced around the giant whale like a toddler learning to waltz, the majesty of the whale overtook me and I dropped my aim for the first time since I started

biopsying. The whale had glided below the surface in front of me such that I was able to see its face, the breadth of its body, and finally I was floating above its tail. Rick, meanwhile, had moved further back in the bow to do his best to get some kind of an angle. I drew up my aim again, but realized I had zero chances – my angle was impossible. That's when I saw Rick's arrow fly and bounce off the whale – he got a biopsy!!! Our first blue whale sample! We collected our sample as the whale swam away from us and returned to its mythical realm of marine mystery. When we finally looked at each other, you could see it in everyone's eyes – we had all just encountered a living legend, the largest animal to ever exist on the planet, and it left a huge impression.

We stayed in port at Santa Rosalia for the night, and the eight of us who were on board for the day went to shore to celebrate – and I was able to satisfy my cravings for a burger and a beer. After dinner we stayed at the bar for an hour or two playing pool and darts, and all living in the moment after such a momentous experience at sea.

Johnny















