

## **Saturday, April 9 – Soaring Humpbacks – Johnny Wise**

One thing that always amazes me is the rush of excitement I get when I spot a whale blow. It doesn't matter how long it has been since the last one, but whenever we don't know where the whale we're pursuing is or are looking for a new whale – I imagine the rush I get is comparable to that of gold miners during the gold rush when they found the first flakes or small nuggets in a stream bed, or to that of an oil driller finding a small leak.

Today we biopsied four more humpback whales. The last one was the most amazing. By now the water is a blue-gray color with a metallic appearance from the sun's reflectance on the surface. The water is also much clearer, allowing us to see down to about 50 ft below the surface. We followed the last humpback whale of today for close to an hour through a wide channel before we started to get close enough for a biopsy. During that hour, a pair of humpbacks that we biopsied earlier were following behind us through the channel. I suspect those two were a male-female mating pair (one was noticeably larger than the other). So, as we pursued the last whale, I was standing at the top of the ladder to the crow's nest (harnessed and strapped to it of course) while Mark sat in the crow's nest and we looked for the whale. As I kept watch behind us, the pair of humpbacks started an amazing display as humpbacks do – breaching, tail lobbing, and fin slapping – about half a mile behind us. As I watched, I kept telling Mark I was going to lose it if they breached together (and kept my fingers crossed that they would!). Then Mark spotted our last whale – 100 meters in front of us – time to climb down and get ready!

In less than a minute I was down from next to the crow's nest and in the bowsprit, crossbow in hand, keeping track of the whale's movements. Oona radioed in that we were short on daylight, and wouldn't have much more than 20 minutes to biopsy this whale; that may sound like more than enough time when the whale is only 100 meters away, but whenever it dives we lose track of it for 5-10 minutes and typically have no idea where it will resurface. This was not one of those typical times. The whale dove just out of range, and we thought we had lost our chance. Oona steered the boat to the whale's footprint – when the whale swims at the surface, its tail leaves a trail of disturbed water that we can use to track it when it's just below the surface (picture attached). We arrived to its last footprint and turned in the direction it was last seen swimming – then Mark shouted, "What is that thing?!? Johnny, right in front of you under the water!" Two bright white things,

seeming to glow about 30 ft under the water's surface – Mark had found the whale! As we followed the whale, watching with amazement at the sheer size of it and the two glowing whit fins that looked like the wings from an underwater angel, the whale glided left and right and we followed its path close behind. At one point the whale was like 10 ft below the surface directly below the bowsprit – leaving me with one of the whale's glowing white fins below each foot. We tracked the whale like that for about 8 minutes before it resurfaced, and had the easiest time being in position to biopsy it – all within the time limits Oona had given us. Also, by this time, Oona (and everyone except for Mike who stood at the helm) had joined use in the bow to watch the whale glide underwater below, next to, and in front of us, apparently not noticing or not caring that we were so close to it.

After that we turned back about half a mile and anchored near San Evaristo for the night.

Johnny





Whale shark!



Humpback tail lobe







Whale footprint



Sunset