

Day 101: October 25, 2010

No this time for real! The 25th is 100 days.

One of the really difficult things about land life to maintain on a boat is a sense of time. Our days, for the science team anyway, start at sunrise and end at sunset, with a helm watch sandwiched in at night. We travel thru time zones and our clocks don't notice so we are never certain what the actual time is. Worse is dates and days. We don't use them at all on the boat and so before you know it- you have no idea what day it is and no conception of date. I have kept track largely through these emails, but today I realized I was off.

I thought today was the 26th for most of the day. Then I realized that it was the 25th making today our 100th day. Sigh.

Today was a better 100th day. The water was calmer and the sun was bright. It was a reasonable day for whale watching though Rick, our whale whisperer, told me that whales said that "there would be no broohaha for today". I told him to tell them we had no need for any broohahas just 1 whale calmly alongside the boat would be fine. Alas, they didn't listen and again no whales today. Krill again which is great as the Bryde's whales eat krill, and before we could not catch any, but sadly no whales.

I was kept quite busy with work from home. Never really took a break just writing and writing and writing. Phew! Then about 6 pm an unexpected email caught my eye. It was Kait from Scripps who had been with us in September, but was now with NOAA on the Gunter. She said she could see me from the deck and wished us well. I sprang up and told the team. They scanned the horizon for her and yes eventually the Gordon Gunter (our competition) came into view.

We hailed them on the radio, but they refused to acknowledge us. Finally, when we began to creep into their safety zone- they called us asking us what our intentions were. We thought about claiming we were going to ram them and reclaim our student, but instead, we just asked to speak with her. Kait is doing well, but bristles under the tight rules and scrutiny of NOAA. I guess one cannot even take pictures from the boat. They have been out here for almost three weeks and have seen 1-2 Bryde's (maybe- which I take to mean they could not get a good enough look to identify them) a few sperm whales and a bunch of pilot whales. Beyond that, rules forbid her from saying anything more.

Remarkable.

So much for the open communication and shared information NOAA was insisting on when we started. She asked about our success. We said "No comment". She chuckled and pointed out that all she needed to do was look on the web as we are indeed open with our communication and sharing our information. But the point was made.

The pilot whales were interesting to hear as we have seen none.

I tried to get a picture of the Gunter while it was light. Look at the boat on the horizon if you can see it. I also attached a web photo of it.

The Gordon Gunter was named after Dr. Gordon Gunter who founded the Gulf Coast Marine Laboratory at USM that we visited. He pioneered Gulf marine studies. The Gordon Gunter is 225 ft long and 43 feet wide and sleep 35 people to our 93 feet long (with bowsprit) and 18 feet wide sleeping 12. But we are more nimble and able to get near the whales. Plus we are more fun!

This Bryde's whale thing had puzzled me and so I studied it more. The one whale we saw was headed towards deeper water than we were told they were in, which puzzled us. The published data show them in a narrow band along the 200 meter depth line. NOAA has told us they are at the 200 meter depth line. As I dug deeper into the text of the data, I realized that was true as the whales were reported at 650 feet or 200 meters. But it was also true that their depth ranged to 990 feet. Thus, we have been on one extreme end of their range! The scale is such on the maps that it looks like they fall right along that 200 m depth line. But, it's an artifact of scale!

I then found GPS coordinates and further realized that they are compressed in a narrow longitude bands of about 2 degrees (roughly 85-87 degrees longitude). We just passed through there. Next year I will know to spend about a week sailing from 85-87 degrees going along the 650, 850 and 950 depths (there is no canyon line at most of these). But what about this year? Well, we have 1 Bryde's whale, which as I said is about 10% of the population. We want more. We have a forecast for 3 days of flat water, which should make visual search possible. Only 1 thing to do...turn around and go back again and this time we will search along a track that brings us through the middle of their range. Then we will turn and go deep and finish with a focus on sperm whales.

I am energized by the new information and the new plan. Let's hope it works.

Again a beautiful sunset caught with my iPhone. Photo attached.

John



