

Day 16, Voyage 2, June 23, 2011

Wow! What a gorgeous day today was. Sunny, not too hot with a nice breeze blowing over the deck. The team was dragging. After days of not seeing or hearing a whale, focus was slipping and the doldrums were setting in. There were not a lot of options to fix this particular situation, beyond simple grit and determination.

For me, the day was going well. I was getting a lot of technical reading and writing accomplished, further some important collaborations and so on. The weather looked great. The next leg was outlined and prepared. I was working on the computer on deck in a nice summer breeze. I was just troubled a bit as to how to improve morale.

By evening, I had moved my work into the pilothouse and was busy multitasking with a conversation with the team, someone talking to me over email about some experimental details, another person discussing science with me on instant messaging and a phone call coming in – all while I was still writing a proposal. As I said- the height of productivity on a gorgeous day. Sandy answered the phone and just at that moment I heard an unbelievable report. Whale blow! Cyndi radioed down from the aft platform. It was just after 6 pm.

By the time Sandy said hello, I was shouting whales and assembling the team. Nothing cures malaise on a whale expedition like a whale sighting! We had not heard clicks for days so unlikely this animal was a sperm whale. We moved within sight and saw the falcate (i.e. hooked) dorsal fin and knew it was not a sperm whale. I checked the clock and I checked the sun. This effort was going to be interesting as if it was a Bryde's whale we only had about 2 hours to collect a sample. Not a lot of time given how fast and erratic these guys swim.

I started to think about our collection strategy. Or to put it another way, I had to decide whether or not to deploy Rick and Ian in the dinghy. I pondered the options.

I decided against it. Based on my vast experience with Bryde's whales, having now encountered two (I know, right.) I formed a working hypothesis (or in other words made a scientific guess) that this species of whale is a shy but curious species. If we just stayed with the whale long enough, it would either allow us to approach or would approach us. But, I had the impression the whine of the dinghy engine scared the whales and would cause them to leave us altogether.

We continued to follow. The whale behaved in true Bryde's whale fashion, appearing for a few minutes, disappearing for more and then reappearing in a totally random place. It showed up ahead, and then disappeared. It showed up behind, then disappeared. It showed up on starboard, then disappeared and time slipped away.

There was no predictable pattern to the movements, but I felt like I was developing a sixth sense for it. At one point, I told Ian, who was at the helm where the whale would

surface next. Remarkably, it did. Cyndi radioed down and suggested we deploy the dinghy. Ian looked at me and I said "no".

He radioed in "no" and then looked at me. He said "Is the water too choppy?"

I said "no" and explained my thinking about the whale eventually letting us get close enough. He nodded. Then I looked at the water and said "Besides which, yes the water is too choppy. You'd probably be hitting air on the swells sending Rick flying out of the boat. With the way things go, Rick would probably accidentally shoot the crossbow in the air and it would sample the dinghy pontoon leaving you on a sinking boat and Rick in the water. Then where would we be? So definitely no."

We continued on.

After an hour of following, it happened, the whale allowed us to pull right up to it just as it was diving. That is the moment we can sample as we need the whale to arch its back out of the water and they do that as they dive. The arrows flew and we had our sample. Now, my hypothesis is based on three whales.

We never saw the head clearly and so we are uncertain if it's a Bryde's. But given the location and the behavior and the general look, we strongly suspect so. We will eventually get a specific determination in the lab when we can do the karyotype of the whale.

Morale soared! We stopped and had dinner and the day continued.

Attached are a still beautiful, post-sunset picture (I was so busy I missed sunset) and the picture of the day - Nora and Cathy retrieving the dart and me telling the bow there was a good sample in it.

John

p.s. Our current location is somewhere off of Florida in the Gulf. 28 degrees 11.8 minutes North and 85 degrees 07.0 minutes West, for those who want to track us as we go. For Google maps use (include letters and comma): 28.118 N, 85.070 W



