

Day 23: August 8, 2010

Day 2 of the second leg and still essentially nothing to see. Lots of flying fish though and some jelly fish. The flying fish are really quite fascinating though. The smaller one's resemble dragonflies or perhaps flying grasshoppers when they fly. They launch through the air wings all aflutter. Flying fish everywhere. They travel about 100 yards and the splash back into the water. It is really quite elegant and amazing. But try as we might, we saw nothing though for the second days the seas were calm.

We did have one funny moment when Iain called in from Massachusetts. He asked if we were hearing anything on the array to which I replied "no". He then expressed concern that the array was not working as we should be hearing dolphins. Given that the morning had yielded no animal sightings, I asked him why we should be hearing dolphins. He explained that we had dolphins riding on the bow. This news was in fact news to me and I was prepared to be amazed at how Iain had some connection to something on the boat that allowed him to see something the rest of us missed. His explanation was that Sandy had just posted a video of dolphins riding on the bow and Facebook and thus, we must have had dolphins riding on the bow. Alas, I assured him that there were in fact no dolphins riding on the bow and had not been any such events since we started the second leg. I also conveyed my belief that the array was fine. It turned out the video was taken by Cathy a week or so ago and was only able to be uploaded later. One of the aspects of this expedition that both Iain and I marvel at is the speed with which material goes from my iPhone to the Facebook page - often minutes. Thus, I think I would have made the same conclusion Iain did- but nevertheless, it was humorous.

At 6 pm, we found ourselves in Key West, the southernmost point of the US. Having been up in the Lubek area, Johnny and I have now done the Easternmost and Southernmost points, while Sandy who has been to Barrow, Alaska has done the Northernmost. I am not sure what the Westernmost is... We had 3 hours in Key West and the students and I wandered around like typical tourists. It was a small town and reminiscent in some ways of Bar Harbor, though there were street acts, which you don't often see in Bar Harbor. The number of shells in the gift shops were remarkable, all kinds and all in excellent shape.

By 9 pm we were back on the boat and waiting for Roger Payne to arrive. Roger if you don't already know was the first to identify whale sounds as songs and is responsible for most of the whale song recordings you here. Many will recall the issue of National Geographic in the 1970s that held a small plastic record of whale songs- that was Roger's. Roger's work inspired the "Save the Whales' movement. In whale circles, Roger is a rock star. It is truly remarkable to see.

But in my world, Roger is simply a kind, enjoyable and insightful scientist with a quick wit and an excellent sense of humor. I enjoy his company and look forward to having this time to research together. Some have described this period as a transition period

with Roger the senior whale statesman steeped in field work and population studies passing the torch to me the new whale scientist steeped in laboratory work and cellular and molecular studies. I am not sure our working together is that profound nor do I expect to have the impact on whale conservation that Roger has. I just know the next several days will be fun and informative and two geeky researchers and their students seek answers about the health of whales.

At 11:00 pm, we started. Captain Bob, Roger and I at the chart table with Iain on the iPhone speaker phone, pouring of charts and data and formulating plans on how to approach the Gulf of Mexico. That's right, tomorrow we will begin our work in the Gulf itself- finally! Cathy will ascend the main mast first at sunrise with Johnny atop the pilot house. By 9 am, it will be Greer on the main mast and Ryan atop the pilot house with Cathy at the helm. The adventure continues!

The whales appear to the 4 of us to most often be at the 1000 m depth line. There is a steep drop off there so we will follow that line into Mobile, AL. There Roger will get off along with his brother-in-law Peter who is along for the ride. Captain Bob figures were are 140 miles from that point so we should be there in about 20 hours or roughly 10 pm. Much will depend on currents and how fast the boat can go.

In Key West, we said goodbye to John Atkinson as he began his trek to Canada. John's a long time Ocean Alliance member and Iain's oldest and closest friend. He will drive a dingy Ocean Alliance acquired to Massachusetts and then spend a couple of weeks home in Canada before heading to the Ocean Alliance whale camp in Argentina for another field season.

Now for us, it is onto the Gulf to see what we can learn!

John