

Day 25, Voyage 2, July 2, 2011

The whale call was early again about 9:30 am. Little did we know we would be on deck for virtually the rest of the day. But, we learned a lot.

The first whale was a good sized juvenile playing in a huge mass of Sargasso weed. It played hide and go seek with us for quite a while. There was only one possible sampling attempt when a few inches of its back were above the water (we always sample by the dorsal fin, never the head). Johnny released an arrow, but it sailed just high and missed. Then another arrow fell from its holder into the water. We tossed a buoy in to mark where the arrows went in and continued on.

We followed whales for while collecting one biopsy. Shortly before lunch, we were treated to an astounding sight. A whale executed a full breach out of the water. For those of you who have not seen one, this behavior is when a whale propels itself out of the water and into the air. A full breach means the entire whale was in the air! The splash was enormous. One that might be recreated by 130, two hundred pound people all jumping in the exact same spot of a pool at the exact same time, but even that might not do it. We all stared mouths agape and stunned.

But, the whale was not done. It then performed a jaw clap. This behavior is when the entire head of the whale emerges perpendicular to the water and it opens and closes its mouth. In a sense, it is a more extreme version of spy hopping behavior where the whale peeks its head out to get a better look. But, in this jaw clapping behavior we could see the whale's teeth and gums and wow what a sight! Picture attached taken just as the whale is coming up and before the whale opened its jaw. It would rise up and we could see its whole mouth agape!

Not everyone saw the breach as it was totally unexpected. But, we all got to see the jaw clap as it was right after the breach. Then as if on cue, with all of us watching, the whale again performed a full breach and another jaw clap! Truly an amazing exhibition of power and grace. One we will not soon forget.

The day was hot and long grueling hours searching for arrows and buoys. We have a new buoy system this year - basically a lobster buoy with a weighted pole and flag on it (not lobster traps). They usually work well and are easy to see. Today, we learned the hard way that the buoys ravel well with wind and currents. Most of the morning and the afternoon were spent looking for buoys in the blazing sun. Simply put, looking for buoys is not fun. Now, we know to not let them drift for more than 30 minutes.

I did start a swim call and a lunch break for all about 12:30 pm. We decided that since USM does not have a swim team, we were it – though we only swim in waters 3,000 feet deep or more. We did get 2 biopsies and we did see the amazing aerial acrobatics

a sperm whale can do. I think we all would gladly take the heat and frustration of the buoys for the privilege of seeing the breaches and jaw claps.

All in all – a challenging but successful day.

Photo of awesome sunset attached.

John

P.S. We are now off Louisiana finding sperm whales. Our current location is 29 degrees 03.9 minutes North and 88 degrees 01.7 minutes West, for those who want to track us as we go. For Google maps (not Google Earth - but maps) use (include letters and comma): 29.039 N, 88.017 W



