

Day 98: October 22, 2010

It's funny the behaviors you acquire while working at sea. The one that continues to surprise me is how I continue to wake from a deep sleep merely because the boat slows down. Today, was no exception. It started early in the morning. I was sound asleep and the boat slowed. So I launched myself out of bed. Ran up to the pilothouse and asked Captain Bob what was up. Balloons. A bunch of giant balloons were in the water. Sandy was retrieving them with the gaffe, while Shouping was on the midlevel platform and Matt was in the crow's nest. We had not slowed for whales. I smiled at the balloons- they were large and red and white. But dejected, I returned to eat breakfast and try and catch up on my sleep.

Breakfast was a bowl of Kellogg's corn pop cereal, actually quite a treat and one I have not had in a long time. I pondered our plan while I ate. A population estimated at 15-20 Bryde's whales lives around here somewhere in the Gulf. Estimated. Boy, there is a word you don't like to hear on a whale search. These whales are infrequently seen and poorly studied. They might vocalize. They might not. If they do, no one really knows what they sound like. We are going to have to see them to find them. It's a daunting task, but I have a good team so surely we can and will find some of them...eventually. Breakfast was done and I could feel my need for sleep pulling at me so I laid down for a power nap.

Just as I slipped into a peaceful nap- the boat slowed. I launched myself up from the bench and dashed up to the pilot house. "Captain Bob, what's up?!" I said, hopeful for whales. "Some kind of float" he said. "Or more balloons". By now we had had a shift change. Rick was on the midlevel platform and Johnny in the crow's nest. Balloons it was. This time, Happy Birthday and Smiley face balloons. But no whales. I have attached a picture of both sets of balloons.

I commented that these balloons may be the highlight of our day. Rick shouted down from mid-level that nope, we were going to find a whale. I smiled at the optimism and continued to hope. I went to work on lead scientist stuff, writing emails, working on papers and grants and busying myself with the business of leading a science team and an expedition. Then, I could again feel the pull of needed sleep. I decided to nap on deck. But first, I yelled up to Rick..."Well" I shrugged. He smiled and told me nothing yet. "Find me a whale" I yelled and then off for my second attempt at a powernap.

I had just started to sleep, when... the boat slowed down. My mind raced to yet even more balloons and I struggled with bouncing up or trying to sleep. No good sleeping, I had to know. I sat up and Rick yelled out he saw a whale off the starboard side. Now, I know what you are thinking, Rick was just messing with me for demanding he find a whale. But no, one thing we never do is joke about whether or not a whale was seen. He assured me he had seen its back so it was either a whale or "one big-assed dolphin". Never having seen such a dolphin species, I figured we had our first whale sighting.

I called up the team and everyone assembled. Rick in the bowsprit and Johnny on the whale boom both with crossbows in hand. Shouping had the data. Sandy had the camera. Bailey went to the crow's nest and Ian drove. Matt made himself available for whatever needed doing. Bob and I climbed to the pilothouse. I explained to the team that these whales were different than what we were used to. Sperm whales will dive for an hour and then surface for 10 minutes lolling about. These whales would dive for 15 minutes or so and never really loll about at the surface. No one had seen anything yet.

Then I spotted a blow just off the port side. That certainly convinced me. A few minutes later Sandy saw a blow. We began a routine of seeing the whales (there was either one or two) blow and their backs and then nothing for 15 minutes. We could stay with them, but get no closer. It was thrilling and maddening all at the same time. Each person on the team at different times would spot the blows and the backs of the whales so it was great training. But never were we able to get any closer to collect a sample. We timed the blows at about 16 minutes apart. So we knew about when to focus.

I can't really remember why, but I left the pilothouse to talk with the team in the bow. Rick asked me to come closer to discuss a technical detail when suddenly the whale surfaced completely unexpectedly under his feet! "Rick its right there!" We all shouted. But alas both shooters had their safeties on as we were not expecting the whale for another 10 minutes (and safety always comes first). We were exasperated at what looked like our best and maybe only opportunity for a sample without an attempt.

But this whale was not done with us and Bailey was in the crow's nest. The whale turned around and came back. The water was so flat and so clear that Bailey was able to describe the whale's movements perfectly. It went to port and swam parallel to the boat. The only challenge was it was fully underwater. Fortunately, I had not moved from the bow and I too could see it, though Rick could not. I called out to Rick and apprised him of its location and movement. In a few minutes it surfaced for 30 seconds right under Rick. He was ready, aimed and took the sample. We turned the boat within minutes Matt had netted our first Bryde's whale sample. He and I then teamed up together to process the sample and hopefully will get the first Bryde's whale cell line.

We saw blows again and followed them around for another hour or two, but we never clearly saw a whale again. Eventually, there were no more blows as we resumed our planned course. Tonight we drift as we do not want to pass by whales in the night. I did ultimately get a powernap as the boat did not slow again until I called time for dinner. We were also treated to a amazing sunset (see picture) complete with green flash!

We are in great spirits as we now have sampled almost 10% of the estimated Bryde's whale population ...1 whale. But we got the first one and even if we don't see another 10% is a high number for sampling, which shows the hurdles we face. We now know more about these whales. They are fast, hard to see and very little of them ever comes out of the water. They will be hard to sample. I attached a picture of Captain Bob when he was with me on the pilothouse looking for whales.

We learned during our work in Barrow that the native hunters, who rely on whale meat to survive the brutal and long winters there, believe the whales make a gift of themselves to the hunter. It is a very spiritual aspect of their culture. That point really struck home with me today as this whale came to us and gave us a sample and then left. I say it this way because we could not get near that whale and it came by us twice to give us a chance. We greatly appreciate it and will never forget it. I'll be curious to see what that particular sample tells us.

What a great day! We now feel complete with this last species sampled.

John





