

# Johnny Wise's Reflection for Leg 1

My name is Johnny Wise. I am an undergraduate at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, Maine. I've been residing on board the Odyssey for two weeks now, as part of the crew that is headed down to the Gulf of Mexico for 3-6 months to study how oil and chemical dispersants are affecting whales, their prey, and their environment. We have sailed from Portland, ME to West Palm Beach, FL. After these first two weeks (hardly anything compared to what's coming) I've learned quite a bit about myself, crewing a boat, and the ocean -- in addition to seeing and experiencing many many rare occurrences that are sure to make some people jealous, I will do my best to relate these to everyone in a reflection every two weeks (our voyage plan is to sail for two weeks in the Gulf, then dock for 4-5 days, and repeat for the 3-6 months that we will be voyaging).

A note that everyone should be aware of:

When I mention "the crew", here's who I mean...

Captain -- Bob Wallace

First Mate/ Safety Officer -- Eric Carr

Engineer -- Rick Walter

Cook -- Kyle Schumm

Science Director -- Dr. John Wise, Sr.

Student/Crew -- Johnny Wise

Student/Crew -- Matt Braun

Student/Crew -- Catherine Wise

Student/Crew -- Kellie Joyce

First of all, while sailing upon the open ocean, my sense of time and order of events is lost. The only times are: sunrise/morning, midday (hottest and no shade), evening/sunset, and night. Since we don't have weekends off (because we're always sailing and looking for whales), there is no sense of what day of the week it is without looking at a calendar, watch, or cell phone -- thus, days are no longer Monday, Tuesday, etc, they are "Stellwagen Bank Day", "Shark Day", "Dolphin Day", "Thunderstorm Day", "Sperm Whale Day", and the like (and sometimes one day will have more than one of these names).

## Day 0 -- Saturday, July 17, 2010 -- Departure Day

After a crazy crazy week, and moving onto the boat on Thursday evening, I finally find I have a day of rest. The craziness of the week used up the majority of my energy, and I wrapped up a few last minute things before we left Portland -- i.e. getting a pair of polarized sunglasses, acquiring a notebook, getting on and off the phone with family and coworkers who are gathering what the boat is missing before we depart. Some of the Ocean Alliance crew mistake my exhausted silence for moping, since my signature laugh was not heard as frequently as other days. There was a small gathering of loved

ones on the dock as we left (mom was trying very hard not to cry, but couldn't hold it back after we were off the dock). There was a buzz of excitement, fueled by the crew's energy as we began our first evening of sailing down the Atlantic seaboard -- not expecting to set foot on solid ground for at least two weeks. After the sun finished setting, some of the green crew's faces started turning green... At this point I can't remember if anyone did lose their dinner, but I do know that Matt and Kellie were feeling the worst, while Cathy, John Sr, and myself were handling ourselves. All five of us applied some Motionease medicine to ourselves before we went to bed (if only just as a precaution).

### **Day 1 -- Sunday, July 18, 2010 -- Stellwagen Bank Day**

Today was my first experience biopsying whales. There were a lot of whales throughout the day, but we can only biopsy when there is no other boat within binocular visibility of us. Stellwagen Bank is a marine preserve where humpbacks are very common, so this is where a lot of the whale watching boats from Massachusetts, Maine, and Rhode Island come. Nonetheless, it was a very successful day. We acquired 6 biopsies from humpbacks (two or three were mine), and sampled water and krill. This was the first day that we had our whale watch shifts -- each student spends an hour in the main mast observation deck, looking for whales or whale blows. When they spot something, they radio to the pilot house # of whales, orientation to the boat (clock figures), and approximate distance.

To give you a sense of what happens when we spot whales...

Typically the person in the main mast observation deck (~25ft high off deck) spots a whale or a whale blow. That person comes down, and Kyle goes up -- he's in charge of keeping track of where the whales go when they dive or when we're retrieving an arrow. He also helps with coordinating the boat alongside the whales for a good shot. Two of us (myself and Rick) are the biopsiers. We use crossbows and arrows with a stainless steel tip (the tip is the size of a pen cap) to collect samples of whale skin and blubber. We can only sample each whale once. One of us gets up on the bow (not secured to anything), sits down on the railing and is the primary biopsier for that whale or pod of whales. The other is about 10ft down the side of the boat. We both have instructions on where to biopsy so we don't hit each other, the boat, or anyone else. Also, the part of the whale we are aiming for is the whale's flank just behind the dorsal fin. There is no chance of us hitting it in the head -- and the best time to try to get a sample is as they are diving.

Thus, we can usually only get 2-3 attempts off per pod (if that). Each attempt is recorded by Eric on the data sheet what arrow, who the biopsier is, sample or miss, where it sampled, lat and long, and what time it was taken. Matt or John Sr. tosses out a floatation device to mark where the arrow is, Kellie gets a photo of the dorsal fin and/or fluke. After we have sampled all the whales we can in the pod, Capt Bob turns the boat

around to retrieve the arrow(s). Matt picks them up with a net, and the floatation device with a gaff. Cathy takes the sample down to the lab to start processing, and the rest of us are looking for more whales or the same pod for another chance.

This sounds very technical and straightforward, and doesn't delve into the inspiring aspects of it. My first time on the bow, we were tracking a pod of five whales. I was sitting on the bow as we got up to the pod, and could see their backs as they surfaced for breaths of fresh air every now and then. As we got closer, I started to see their tails working underwater, and slowly the rest of the whale. There were 3 whales lined up right next to each other, and a fourth that was crossing across the bow behind them when I made my first attempt at a sample. I was actually shaking with excitement (which I can't say about anything else in my life to this extent). My first attempt was exactly what we were looking for -- it hit the whale about 2ft behind the dorsal, and filled the tip about halfway with skin and blubber. My second attempt was not as good, and a little bit lucky. It hit the right spot just under the water, as the whale was diving. No blubber sample, but some skin. My third and last attempt of the day was a miss, sadly.

After we finished with the whales, Matt and I took a water sample and did a krill tow as the sun was setting. We caught 5 krill (which is nowhere near the mass that we need for analysis), so we tossed them back. As we were stowing the krill net and gear, we took a moment to look at a funky looking cloud in the sunset, when a fully grown humpback whale did a full breach about a mile away directly in front of the sunset. We were both stunned with what we had just seen. People dream about such a scene all the time, or paint a picture from their imagination -- a picturesque moment of a whale breaching in front of a beautiful sunset -- but no one ever actually sees that!

## **Day 2 -- Monday, July 19, 2010 -- Thunderstorm Day**

Halfway through my first whale watch shift of the morning, a thunderstorm rolled in that prevented us from searching for whales. I had heard some low rumbling from the clouds for about 20 mins before I was told to come down -- I couldn't tell if the rumbling was from a storm or from planes, so I didn't worry too much. We then entered Long Island Sound, where there are no whales. Thus, we passed the time playing card games and watching Finding Nemo.

## **Day 3 -- Tuesday, July 20, 2010 -- New York City Day**

Iain Kerr joined us at the beginning of Day 1, but had to get off in New York. Around midday on Day 3 we entered the New York Harbor, similar to how immigration boats from Europe used to enter the city. Sailing into NYC reminds me how much I dislike the city -- there were a lot of run-down buildings, construction, noise pollution, and too much

concrete. However, it was cool to pass under bridges that we have driven over so many times, and to sail past the Statue of Liberty.

#### **Day 4 -- Wednesday, July 21, 2010 -- Hammerhead Shark Day**

Today we spent along the Hudson Canyon drop-off. The water was 400 ft deep on one side of us, and 4,000ft deep on the other. This is where we expected to encounter our first sperm whales. We continued with our whale watches throughout the day. During my second shift, sometime between 9:30 am and 10:30 am (my first shift was 5:30 am), I reported seeing two whale blows about a mile off the bow. I radioed down the news, just as everyone was starting to doze off from the heat and exhaustion of the day. Immediately, everyone scrambled to their stations. Kyle replaced me in the observation deck, and I positioned myself on the bow with Rick right behind me, as Matt brought up some of the arrows he had just prepared.

As we got closer, we realized there were 3 fin whales. We weren't planning on sampling fin whales, because of their speed. Nonetheless, we followed them with the hopes of getting close enough to sample. As we are tracking the whales, they tend to shallow dive every so often, causing us to lose track of them (if we aren't right on top of them).

During one of these shallow dives, I noticed a fin not too far off. Associating fin with whales, I quickly turned myself for a better shot, but realized the fin was much too small to be a whale. Looking closer, I then realized that it was actually a hammerhead shark (about 10 ft in length) that was roughly 10 yards off the bow. Suddenly becoming very aware of how insecure my bow seat was, I pressed my knees against the railing a little more, pushing me against the jib sail more firmly. I hollered back to everyone else, but no one else got to see the cool shark that had just passed right next to me.

When the whales resurfaced, they were only a few hundred yards off the bow, making it easy to catch up to them. All three fin whales were lined up neatly. We came in between two of them (one on each side of the bow). I made the first attempt, at a rather sharply low angle, and was somewhat shocked to see the arrow bounce off the whale and back into the boat. John Sr and Matt were frantically looking for the arrow in the water -- they couldn't see the shot, and no one reported where it was. It was only after everyone started laughing (though me a little more nervous laughter than anyone else, as I was a little lucky it didn't bounce back in my face) that they learned it had bounced back in the boat. The arrow was retrieved, and the tip given to Cathy to start the cell culture process. Rick and I swapped places, and Rick got a biopsy from whale number two. After that, the whales dove, and Matt and I began collecting water and krill samples -- but alas no krill.

In addition to the few amazing moments of seeing the hammerhead, biopsying the whales, we also saw a couple pods of dolphins and a few schools of rather large fish.

But the most spectacular sight is the cobalt blue water that is splashed with white caps that look silver over the blue -- and seeing all the marine animals in it!

### **Day 5 -- Thursday, July 22, 2010 -- Sperm Whale Day and Swim**

Today the seas were rougher than they had been (we were going through 8 ft swells today), so Matt and Kellie were too seasick to do their shifts for whale watches. To compound this problem, I had broken three of the ratlins (steps on rope ladder in rigging to get to main mast observation deck) over the last couple of days -- only the very top one didn't get fixed. As a result, Cathy also was unable to do her shifts (being too short to overcome the distance). In addition, Rick was manning the helm. Bob was sleeping after a long night. Thus, I was the only one who was able to do any shifts -- though Cathy, Matt, and Kellie were able to do shifts on the lower observation deck (the difference being less visibility).

Due to the fact that we were in large swells, and there were a lot of white caps everywhere (which disguise whale blows very well), we weren't expecting to see any whales today. After 2-2.5 hrs in the observation deck, I radioed down that I had run out of snacks and water and needed to come down for a break. Captain Bob took over for me, and gave me about a 1.5 hr break for lunch and relaxation. I went back up for my second shift shortly after noon, with more provisions packed than I had for the morning - there isn't a way to hoist up supplies to the observation deck.

The sun was glaring hot, and there is no shade in the observation deck. As we were swapping places, Capt. Bob was telling me that there was little use going up, as the swells and white caps were too big and too numerous to be able to see anything -- and made it too difficult to look through the binoculars. Nonetheless, I went up, hoping to spot some whales and make the day more interesting. Capt Bob then told John Sr. the same thing; this is what John Sr. had to say about this -- "Bob informed me that the midlevel platform was of limited use because one had to sit and hang on to handle the swells and it was hard to see with all the whitecaps. I looked up and there was Johnny still standing and scanning. This watch would be the last one of the day and we would have to hope the lowest level platform would yield some evidence of whales. Feeling totally exhausted myself, with no escape from the heat, I figured a brief nap would help."

After another 2 hours, I was low on water again. Just before I was about to come down for a resupply of water, I spotted two whale blows at one o'clock. There were less white caps at this point, but the swells were still very large. Not being sure whether it was just another whitecap or I was hallucinating because I was getting exhausted and dehydrated from the heat and sun, I waited until I saw three more blows before I radioed down the news, just as everyone was starting to doze off. The blows were much lower and "softer" than the ones we had previously seen. I quickly learned that they were sperm whale blows! As people started emerging from their napping places, Capt Bob noticed something quite remarkable -- he could hear the sperm whales clicking away on

the headphones plugged into the acoustic array from across the room -- confirming that I had spotted our first sperm whales.

Seeing how the whales were 1-2 miles away, I refused to come down from the main mast observation deck until we had gotten closer and other people could track them more easily. I came down just in time to get in position for biopsying, but the whales dove just out of range of the crossbows. The problem with sperm whales diving is they don't resurface for about an hour. However, since we could hear many sperm whales on the array (at least 6) and we could hear them very loudly, we remained in our positions and kept our eyes on the horizon. We followed sperm whales for three hours after that, all the while I'm sitting on a very uncomfortable spot on the bow. Rick and I were able to make three attempts each, but due to the swells, the wind, and the distance, we were unsuccessful with all our attempts.

We were very frustrated as we watched our arrow fly directly at the whale, and miss by inches as the whales' tail disappeared under the surface. The most frustrating moment for me was when I was on the bow, we were headed directly at a sperm whale calf, which was also headed directly at us. Just when it was in shooting range, it did a shallow dive and swam a few feet under the water 20 ft off our starboard side! Gahhh!!! After three hours of tracking whales, we were instructed that we were stopping for the day. Reluctantly, Rick and I got off the bow, uncocked our crossbows and returned the arrows to their storage spot. Capt Bob then lowered the swim platform, and we all went for a swim 80 mi offshore, in water that was 4500 ft deep and 72 degrees F -- it was blissful after the heat of the day. When I went back inside, I had been out in the hot sun from noon until 6:30ish. I was exhausted from the heat, and found the main salon (which was 85 degrees F) to be very cold.

## **Day 6 -- Friday, July 23, 2010 -- Exhaustion Day**

The swells were smaller today, so Matt and Kellie were able to resume whale watches. Luckily, I was not scheduled to be on watch until 7:30, so I was able to "sleep in." After Day 5, I was exhausted and slept straight through my alarm 5 times. Cathy had to come wake me up to relieve Matt on the lower observation deck 2 min before I was supposed to be there (at this time we had two people on watch at all times -- one person on the main mast observation deck, and one on the lower observation deck, just above the pilot house). I quickly ate some breakfast, gathered what I needed for my watch and replaced Matt 10 min after I was supposed to. Being a good friend, he didn't put up any fuss about my tardiness, and went to relieve Kellie on the main mast. After my shift on the main mast, I went back to sleep. Again, I was woken up a few minutes before my shift. Luckily, though, Rick said he wanted to go up, and I resumed sleeping off the exhaustion from 2 shifts of 2 hours in the main mast observation deck in large swells and hot sun the previous day. No whales today (for which I was somewhat relieved), but lots of dolphins. We would hear them on the array, and they would make a beeline for

the bow of the boat to "ride the bow". Then everyone would rush to the bow to watch the dolphins swimming 3-10 ft below us as we went up and down on the swells.

We had our first minor disaster today -- we were going through some swells and everything in the incubator spilled out and onto the floor. The incubator is where we are growing the whale tissue into cell lines after we collect some samples. Thus, Cathy and I had to clean up the mess and find a better way to secure the shelves, racks, and flasks in the incubator to prevent that from happening again. We lost two flasks, which were shattered. But we were able to safely secure everything inside and the door -- I'm happy to say that in the last week nothing else has fallen out.

### **Day 7 -- Saturday, July 24, 2010 -- Rough Waters Day**

We rounded Cape Hatteras last night, which is infamous for rough waters and high winds. We started by experiencing 25 mph headwinds and the Gulf Stream pushing against us, which was stronger than the engine and the sails -- so we went backwards for a little while and moved to shallower water. The winds became so strong that we began keeling in the middle of the night -- meaning the boat was leaning way over to one side. So, instead of sleeping in my bed, I found myself sleeping on the wall next to my bed. Finding this rather uncomfortable, I climbed out of bed (which was uphill), and unrolled my sleeping pad, which I then placed against the wall. This gave me a 1.5in padding to sleep on. I found this much more comfortable, but was still tossing and turning because of the waves (which were tossing me every direction). So, to fix this, I wedged myself between my foam mattress and the wall, which kept me in a very snug position and I stopped rolling around.

When morning came around, I found out that just about everyone else had moved to the main salon for the night -- and some people were unable to sleep completely. The seas were too rough to do any whale watches today, so we spent the day inside the main salon. For the most part, we passed the day reading, playing cards, playing Quelf, sleeping, and watching movies. The first movie we watched was over at 9 am... It was a rather long and boring day, since we didn't have any work to do, but I found the high rises and falls from the boat going over the swells momentarily exciting. Every now and then I would let out a "woohoo!" when we went over a big swell. A couple times we found ourselves lifted a couple inches off our seats, and then watched as a wave crashed over the bow or the side of the boat. I found it very exciting to watch a wave crash over the bow, then cover the windows of the main salon, making it impossible to see out them.

This may sound scary, but I would like to remind everyone that this boat has made a 5-year circumnavigation of the world and has been kept in prime condition for sailing. Also, Capt Bob has done several circumnavigations of the world (one on this boat) and has 20+ years of experience with this boat. Before becoming a boat captain, he was a boat engineer, so he is the old man of the sea.

## **Day 8 -- Sunday, July 25, 2010 -- Land Day**

Due to the high seas and a passing tropical storm, we docked in Beaufort, NC for the day. It was 104 degrees F when we arrived, and remained that way for the majority of the day. Beaufort is a very small town -- if anyone has been to Bar Harbor, it's like a mini version of that. There is a lot of piratey stuff (much to my pleasure), because Blackbeard use to raid and pillage off the NC coast back in the day. This was our first time stepping on land in a week; both Matt and Kellie were commenting that they still felt like they were on the sea (and they were swaying a little in their chairs at breakfast).

Everyone spent the majority of the day on the phone or on the computer, catching up with friends, family and co-workers. Kellie did a laundry load of all the boat's towels and sheets (and my Vibram's Fivefingers, to everyone's relief). I took the chance to purchase a bunch of postcards to send home to friends and family, but realized my postcard mailing list is longer than I remembered (if you want to join the mailing list, send me your mailing address).

At some point during the day I was informed that John Sr. and Eric would be leaving the boat -- Eric for good, John Sr. until Florida. Eric was feeling seasick all the time, and felt he could not go on. John Sr. had to take care of an issue he discovered in our permits to biopsy whales -- he was not permitted to supervise us biopsying the whales, and the people who were couldn't be on the boat. Thus, between NC and FL we were not going to be biopsying whales. John Sr. took his leave after dinner, as a friend of his happened to own a house in Beaufort and happened to be in town when we were there. Eric left early the following morning.

## **Day 9 -- Monday, July 26, 2010 -- Training Day**

Since there isn't as much work for us on the boat, we spend most of our time playing card games, playing Quelf, reading, or napping. Cathy, Matt, Rick and I became known as the "Cardaholics" over then next few days.

Cathy and I are both recording our time at sea, as we are interested in obtaining our captain's licenses. In addition to some exams and training, we are required to have 365 days of sea time logged. She and I learned how to man the helm and did our first shift in the late afternoon.

When Cathy took over for me, John Sr. had given me the task of measuring the array -- quite a task considering the array is 300+ ft and the boat is only 93ft stern to bowsprit (so we weren't able to use all 93 ft of it). So, Matt, Rick, and I uncoiled the array and it's cord and wrapped it around the boat several times. It was a very frustrating task, as it was very easy to lose track of which part of the cord we were measuring and how to measure it. I'm sure it was quite a sight to see us walking round and round the boat trying to figure out a proper way to measure the friggin cord. Cathy was manning the helm while we were doing this, and at one point said something along the line of "round

and round the boat they go. when they stop, no one knows." Which was a very accurate statement. After we had finished taking several measurements, I had to play with the numbers a bit to give John Sr. the measurements he wanted (which were kinda funky and very specific).

### **Day 10 -- Tuesday, July 27, 2010 -- Gale Force Storm Day**

Again, not much happened today other than games and reading. Cathy and I took more shifts manning the helm. At one point, Capt Bob found a flying fish on the deck of the boat (which had clearly been on the boat for a few days). He showed us the fish's anatomy and described how they "fly". We saw a bunch of more dolphins which were riding the bow, and we got tons of footage from our bow cam (an underwater camera on the bow of the boat) in addition to all of our photos.

Much to our delight, Kyle made some delicious brownies for us. He added chocolate chips to the mix, then covered them with nutella and sprinkles. I'll have to teach him how to add marshmallows or oreos sometime soon MMMMMM!!

As the day ended, a thunderstorm approached and Capt Bob asked us all to help lower the main sail so it wouldn't get damaged. We got it down just in time -- not 10min after it was down, the wind picked up to gale force (30-40mph). Matt, Capt Bob, and I stood on the aft deck to experience some of the storm and watch the some of the wave caps getting blown over the boat. Someone commented that she could smell pine trees from the mainland. Matt and Capt Bob agreed, but I have a terrible sense of smell as it is and was sad to miss it.

### **Day 11 -- Wednesday, July 28, 2010 -- Glass Water Day**

The storm passed, we woke up the next morning to find the water like glass. Imagine a glass sheet with gentle ripples across it, and that's what the ocean looked like. As a result (I think), we saw tons of animals that we most likely wouldn't have seen otherwise. I estimate that we saw close to 50 dolphins (just today), and all of them were riding the bow. The most we saw at one time was 15 -- though only Matt, Rick, and I saw them as we were watching the sunset from the bow, and they came shortly after. Earlier in the day there were 12 riding the bow for about an hour, and everyone was able to get a good look at them.

At some point a yellow warbler landed on our vessel -- 30mi offshore. It must've been exhausted, as it didn't seem as skittish as most songbirds are in the presence of people.

We saw a Portuguese man-of-war, which is similar to a jellyfish, but floats on the surface and dangles its tentacles underneath it. Its sting is strong enough to kill a man.

Nonetheless, Capt Bob swiftly turned the boat around, grabbed a bucket, and carefully scooped it up to give us a closer look at it. It was about the size of my two fists (the part on the surface was), and its tentacles dangled about 3ft below it (but I later learned that they can get up to 30 yards, and they usually contract them). Part of its tentacles got caught on the rope attached to the bucket and broke off. Nobody noticed this until after Capt Bob had brushed his arm against it and his arm immediately blistered up where the tentacle bits touched him.

We saw our first couple of sea turtles today -- two loggerheads. They are very skittish and deep dive if the boat gets too close or if someone yells to point it out to everyone else.

Since it was so calm, Capt Bob lowered the swimming platform and we all went for a swim. Then a few of us tried jumping in front of the bow cam, until we learned it wasn't recording. Then I took a turn as Matt watched. I climbed onto one of the cables that runs alongside the bow, dangled upside-down by my feet and let myself drop. Matt told me that he saw me hit the water and was chuckling about how I fell in. Rick took this opportunity to jump off the bow for the first time, but misjumped and ended up doing a belly flop (probably because he had flippers on) -- I watched in agony as he hit the water completely parallel to it.

As the day came to a close Matt and I watched the sunset from the bow (we do this a lot). We found ourselves enjoying watching the flying fish take off every now and then when the boat spooked them. When the school was large enough (as it often was), there would be between 30-50 of them that would take off almost at the same time and in different directions, looking like a tommy gun across the water. Very cool.

After the sun set, Capt Bob lowered a painter's lamp over the bow to "see what's around." We were mystified to see a bunch of little squid attracted to the light. The largest being no longer than the length of my hand, and the smallest (that we could see) being the length of a pen cap. After watching them for 15 or 20 min, Matt, Cathy, and I tried to catch some with our krill net. When we pulled it up, it didn't seem like we had caught anything, and most of the squid were intimidated by the net (probably thinking it was the mouth of some large predator). We did our best to fool them, and they kept returning to the light despite the net being there. Most of everyone else had left at this point, but came back after we had pulled the net up (probably hoping for the prospect of some calamari). Unfortunately we didn't catch any squid, but we caught a bunch of phytoplankton and zooplankton that we looked at under magnifying glasses.

## **Day 12 -- Thursday, July 29, 2010 -- Crow's Nest Day**

We're finally off the coast of Florida (which is a VERY flat state). Since the water was still calm, I was given permission to climb up to the crow's nest (about 80ft above the deck and much more difficult to get into). It's a more technical climb, as I had to climb

around certain cables properly to avoid getting tangled, but I didn't do a very good job of it, so when I had gotten onto the stay next to the crow's nest, I had to take a seat, unclip myself from the rope, untangle the clip, and clip back in without falling off. Obviously I didn't have any problem, because I'm writing this right now. But I know some people will not be happy to hear this, and are probably glad they weren't there to witness it (but I just had to tell you!). I climbed into the crow's nest and indicated to Capt Bob and Rick that I was all set, who were watching me climb.

I spent 3 hours in the crow's nest and saw a lot of cool things. Shortly after I got settled, Cape Canaveral was visible on the coast -- this is where NASA launches their rockets into space. James called me at some point, and as I was talking to him a huge group of sting rays came into my sights. At first I thought it was a bunch of sea turtles, but noticed they weren't quite shaped right and weren't swimming like turtles. For a split second I thought they might be some kind of jelly fish (I couldn't see their tails), but then realized what they were and excitedly yelled to everyone else what was surrounding us. But by the time everyone got up from their dozing, the sting rays were falling behind us. I saw a couple more groups of sting rays, but resisted yelling out to everyone, because I was harshly criticized for not giving better directions for where they were (but they were all around us!).

I saw a total of 8 turtles while I was in the crow's nest, but most dove before anyone else could see them -- sometimes deep dives, sometimes shallow dives. I found it very cool that I could still see them swimming under the water, when no one else could. The last turtle I saw was a huge leatherback. But I didn't see it until I was climbing down and explaining to Matt how to climb up without getting tangled. My phone camera was stowed, and Matt didn't have as good of an angle as I did (but he did see it!).

### **Day 13 -- Friday, July 30, 2010 -- Florida Day**

Matt, Cathy, and I woke up to watch the sunrise together, but from different points of the boat. Matt went up in the crow's nest (as I did the previous day), Cathy sat on the stern, and I on the bow. Rick was also awake, manning the helm. It was a very intriguing sunrise! A few hours later we docked in West Palm Beach, Florida. Matt, Cathy, Kellie, and I walked into town looking for some food and to get an idea of what's around. We found a very good burger place that was apparently decorated by a butcher (the light fixtures were on meat hooks). Then we found a really good place to get Italian ice. Seeing how it was the day before my 21st, I asked the waitresses where to go and got some really good suggestions. After our Italian ice, Kellie left to return to Maine. As we waited for my parents, James, and Greer to arrive, the three of us continued to walk around and decided to find a nearby beach. The closest one we found was a 2mi walk away (note: we are docked in a protected inlet that is lined by seawall, so there's no beaches on it. Around dinner time, family and Greer showed up and we went to a Cuban restaurant for dinner. Since everyone told the waiter that my 21st birthday was tomorrow, he brought me a mojito along with one for James, mom, and dad. We

returned to the boat for a long game of quelf, and at midnight Kyle returned and insisted to bring me out for my first drink. He apparently had asked if I could get a drink after midnight, since it was technically my birth date.

### **Day 14 -- Saturday, July 31, 2010 -- My 21st Birthday**

Seeing how Cathy, Matt, and I hadn't found anything intriguing to do when we wandered around -- and my parents told me that there were no good places to go snorkeling or beach combing (which is what I wanted to do on my birthday), I spent the morning surfing the internet to find something to do. I found a zoo, a couple of water parks, and a couple of nature centers. The nature centers intrigued me the most, so my dad shuttled 8 people in a 5 seater car back and forth (about a 30min drive one way).

It was the Gumbo Limbo Nature Center, and they focus on sea turtle rehab and research. Greer, James and I were the first to arrive, and spent about 40min walking the boardwalk trail which was less than a mile long (we were trying to waste some time before everyone else arrived). On the trail, we took in as much as we could. We saw lizards crawling around every now and then, banana spiders sitting in their webs EVERYWHERE, some crabs crawling on the roots of mangroves, and a Cuban knight anole on the side of a tree next to an observation tower. It was a very cool walk (but very hot too). Afterwards, the rest of our crew still hadn't shown up, so we ventured to look at the outdoor salt water tanks and the gift shop. They showed up an hour later than we expected, and then we went to see the turtle rehab tanks and research lab. It was a very interesting place to visit, but it was lacking as most nature centers do (in my opinion).

Allow me to digress real quick:

Most nature centers are designed to give you a walk through a local ecosystem, then show you a couple animals that need rehab or are being used for research. To people who want to see animals, this isn't a very attractive setup. In addition, there is a lot of educational material and advertisement for educational opportunities -- also not very attractive, unless it's your thing. I think to improve this, and to attract more people, nature centers need to illustrate the importance of different animals in their ecosystem and the uniqueness of nature centers. Hopefully such a setup would provide people with a deeper appreciation for the inter-relatedness of all living things and their environment. Gumbo Limbo had a sign that illustrated this very bare-bones -- it demonstrated that the crab eats the leaf litter, the fish eats the crab, and the birds eat the fish -- blehh. I visited another nature center in Vermont earlier this summer with a friend that did a much better job at this (if you took the guided tour that was a 1-800 number). It seemed cheesy at first, but was a lot of fun and made us step outside our own world and into the ecosystem that was surrounding us.

Now back to my birthday...For the evening, we went to a tequila bar for dinner, where James bought me a shot of tequila reposado (I don't know what brand). Then my mom

bought me a beer that was mixed with lime juice, tobasco sauce, and some other hot pepper sauce (upon request). Everyone thought it was gross (it kinda was), but I drank most of it (I was also VERY full from dinner). After dinner I went to an alternative rock block party Kyle had found out about with him, Cathy, Matt, James, and Greer. There was free drinks and pizza, because two bars were celebrating their 23rd anniversary. The two bars were a gay bar and an altern rock bar, which brought a very strange crowd. After spending an hour or two at the block party, we headed back to the boat.

On the way back, we ran into Rick and Capt Bob who took James and I to the Cuban restaurant's bar for a round. Rick, Capt Bob, and I were interested in going to the Cuban lounge upstairs, but Rick and I weren't dressed properly, so we had to return to the boat first. When we got in, there was a really good meringue band playing, but not a huge crowd. After an hour we decided to come back in an hour or so hoping to find a larger crowd. When we came back, there wasn't much more of a crowd, but we were able to find a couple of girls to dance with. They were very excited to find out that it was my 21st birthday. Around 2:30 am, we left to go to a happening club called Dr. Feel Goods. Rick left after an hour, but I stayed to end the night dancing with the girls. Last call for drinks in FL is 3:45 am, so I got back to the boat around 4:30 am. Not the 21st birthday that I was expecting or planning for a couple of months ago, but I had fun nonetheless. (I woke up at 9 am the next morning, before most everyone else).