

Tuesday, April 11 – Day 1 - Dancing with Humpbacks by Johnny

I woke up today to the sound of coffee being brewed above my head.

“Good morning!” said Mike, our First Mate (same as last year’s voyage). The time was 7 am, and we were due to cast off at 8. Pops, Rick and I went into town for a quick breakfast – Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is a vegan organization, so we were eager to get our last meal with meat. We ate at a small shack around the corner run by two sweet ladies that spoke no English and a mustached cat that wanted everyone’s attention (photo of cat attached).

After casting off, filling up on gas, it came time to begin our search. These last three months have been incredibly busy for me...writing grants and papers, training students, getting trained on new techniques, attending conferences, planning for conferences, fundraising and planning for this voyage...I reached the crow’s nest, offloaded all the gear that would be needed for the day...seat, binoculars, walkie talkie, camera, snack bag, water bottle...and...felt...the world...start to melt...away....

Dormant senses gradually started to kick in as the sun sparkled on the blue water like millions of diamonds. My eyes found their natural rhythm, well honed after thousands of hours of searching: they scanned across the water, focusing on subtle disturbances in the gentle rolling waves, and honing in on the horizon as far as they could discern. A couple sea lions lounging at the surface seemed to wave us as we sailed by, wishing us luck on our voyage, frigate birds glided on the sea breeze overhead. Life began to slow down to the peaceful speed of sea life...I didn’t know what time it was...I didn’t need to know. I just needed to find a whale. Boy does it feel good to be back!

Mark Martin Bras, a family friend and colleague from Vieques, Puerto Rico, took over after my watch.

Some time after I descended, the call for whales came! Two humpbacks together and a third heading in a different direction. We pursued the pair. Excitement overtook some, patience set in for others. Humpback whales can be tricky...if they are feeding, they often swim in circles...if they’re travelling, they generally stick to a straightish line, but may weave. Gradually and methodically we learned they were travelling in a south-east direction, but their speed and course seemed to alter a bit. I often refer to humpback whales as the most flamboyant of the whales, as they are known for their song and majestic displays of dancing and breaching. After 3 hours dancing with these whales, the moment came for our first attempt. The whales were about 200 ft away from the boat...they took their last breaths, I took aim, they arched for a dive and I released my arrow and watched it find its target – the flank of the whale, just below the dorsal. Success! I casually reclined back into the boat’s railing as we turned around to retrieve the arrows, the whales would be below the surface for at least 12 minutes. The arrows were retrieved, Rachel Speer (a PhD student in dad’s lab) took the biopsy below deck to process while we continued to search for the whales.

Another 2 hours of dancing with the whales and our moment came for the other whale. This time they were a little further away. I released my arrow when the moment came...this time there was

a splash where my arrow hit, maybe a biopsy? I wasn't 100% confident, so I insisted we try to follow the whales a little longer. No luck, they were below the surface and out of sight. We returned to collect the arrows...lo and behold – a second biopsy! This time Rachel was in the crow's nest, so I took the sample below decks to process. Processing is pretty simple – first we cut the biopsy in half, one piece for us and one for our Mexican collaborators at UABCS. Our sample we further divide – first we separate the skin from the blubber, then divide the skin in half. One half of the skin will be used for genetic analysis (to determine gender), the other half will be used to measure levels of heavy metals. The biopsy is about the size of a Bic pen cap.

By the time I was done, we were en route for a new whale sighting. This one turned out to be a Bryde's whale (pronounced "broo-dahs") – notorious among our crew as a difficult whale to biopsy. They're not much for dancing, but love to play games with us. After our first hour we thought we had an idea of how this whale like to play...it would surface, we would turn toward it...2-4 regular interval breaths later it would dive a little longer, then resurface at a complete 180° redirection – a nightmare of a maneuver to make in an 80 ft boat. We repeated this game a dozen or so times before we finally gave up – the time had come for us to get to our anchorage.

24°19'13'' N, 110°20'2'' W ß you should be able to enter this into Google Earth/Map to see where we are. My phone also says I'm -20 ft elevation sitting in the main salon...I think I'm actually like 5 ft above sea level... with that, the sea lions around us are reminding me its late and we have an early start tomorrow. I bid ye all goodnight!

Photos attached of the whales, Mark and I ready to biopsy, and a mobilus ray that tried to help corral the Bryde's whale (whale is just to the right of the flying ray)

Cheers,

Johnny