

NORTH PACIFIC RIGHT WHALE SURVEY 2002: NOAA SHIP McARTHUR WEEKLY REPORT

15 August 2002
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SCIENCE SUMMARY: Thursday, 8 August - Wednesday, 14 August

Leg 3 of the project began on Saturday, 10 August, when we pulled away from the shipyard in Seward at noon. For the previous week, repairs in and out of drydock, were ongoing. There followed 9 hours of sea trials before the ship was pronounced ready for sea and we set out for the study area some 2.5 days steam away. (No one likes an unscheduled port call of this kind; science thanks go to the officers, crew, and contract engineers for working to get us back to sea as soon as possible.) During the transit we passed through Shelikof Strait, the Shumagin Islands, and Unimak Pass - all harbored many, many humpback and fin whales, loosely clumped and often in mixed-species aggregations. Dall's porpoise made regular appearances and one small school of killer whales was sighted. Alas - we passed up the opportunity to try for photos or biopsies on all of them in the interest of time - the study area is in the Bering Sea and only a surprise right whale could have slowed us down.

On Tuesday, early afternoon, we sailed out of Unimak Pass and into more hopeful right whale habitat. Survey in closing mode at 10 knots with regular night operations and potential small boat sorties began. Our strategy for this leg will be to search the shelf break and slope area to just northwest of the Pribilof Islands, then head back to "the box" for one more try. At this writing we are two days into the search along the shelf break and slope and fast approaching the latitude of St. George Island. The water is positively green with productivity and our two evening Tucker Trawls have yielded gobs of tiny euphausiids with a myctophid here and there thrown in for good measure. No wonder the sea surface is thick with birds - two kinds of puffins, Short-tailed Shearwaters, Common Murres, Fork-tailed Storm Petrels, Northern Fulmars, three kinds of jaegers, and Red-legged Kittiwakes flying here and there and everywhere, puffin parents heading back to their colonies with fish lined up cross-wise in their beaks, kittiwakes chirping at each other as they follow the ship and vie for a roosting spot atop the outside vegetable refer, and a pair of newly minted puffin chicks floating on the water with their outrageous red bills looking dazed and confused (...is this where we find food?). And yes, we also have whales, though not nearly as many as in the passes and around islands - fin whales, humpback whales, killer whales, ... but still not the right whale.

A major factor out here and in our minds is weather. (But so far we have been graced with a high pressure system, low winds, and patchy but ephemeral fog...) Two additional notes: our lead acoustician has to date deployed four expendable sonobuoys, all fully functional, and one recoverable, fully recovered. With a record like this, how can we lose? And the food out here is worthy of mention - cold weather, big appetites, good food - gaining weight.

SIGHTINGS AND EFFORT SUMMARY FOR MARINE MAMMALS:

Date Start/Stop Time Lat Long Total NM Av. Beaufort

081102 0659 N58:50.74 W151:17.19 146.5nmi 2.3
1917 N57:33.81 W154:56.22
081202 0711 N55:48.13 W157:53.93 140.3nmi 4.3
2200 N54:22.85 W161:47.65
081302 0752 N54:13.64 W163:40.08 129.7nmi 2.7
2145 N54:15.70 W167:51.75
081402 0821 N54:11.10 W168:20.52 105.8nmi 2.5
2224 N55:51.86 W169:52.18

Code	Species	Tot#
37	killer whale	4
44	Dall's porpoise	48

70	unidentified rorqual	1
71	minke whale	1
74	fin whale	11
76	humpback whale	20
477	unidentified porpoise	1
78	unidentified small whale	1
79	unidentified large whale	8
	OTHER	1
	TOTAL	96

BIOPSY AND PHOTO-ID:

No small boat ops for photos or biopsies this week. In too much of a hurry, and then too focused on right whales. Maybe we'll do better next week.