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IN THE COMPANY *of* GIANTS

SNORKELING WITH ATLANTIC HUMPBACKS

By Michael Lawrence

I knew I was in the right place at the right time when the head of the young humpback calf broke the surface not five feet away, eyes swiveling from side to side staring at us while it blew water from its blowhole (also known as whale snot) and took a deep breath. Massive and majestic, it hung in front of us and then, suddenly and without warning, its mother broke the surface, showering us again and displaying the full breadth of her 35 foot bulk. Mother and calf stayed with us for a few moments and then slowly sank below the surface leaving us stunned, thrilled and hanging in suspense for their next appearance. None of us were properly prepared for the pure majesty, size and glory of these animals, much less the intensity of the moment. Truth is, that was only the beginning. It gets better.

Upwards of three to four thousand Humpback Whales migrate from the nutrient rich summer feeding grounds of the Northern Atlantic to the Silver Bank and the adjacent

Mouchoir and Navidad Bank for one distinct purpose. Here they will give birth to their calves, nurse them, train them in the fine art of survival, mate and then begin the long journey back to their summer home to begin the cycle anew.

One of my friends, a veteran dive operator on Grand Turk, told me an archetypal, life-changing story. After over a decade running a dive operation in the islands, he had taken a vacation to his hometown in the mid-west of the US, revisiting old friends and comfortable old ways of life. Shortly after arriving back in Grand Turk, he had dropped a few divers in the water. While sitting in his Carolina Skiff waiting for them to surface, he contemplated his future. 'Should I stay here, should I go home, what is up next for me?'

Suddenly, without warning, a massive Humpback Whale breached less than 50 feet from his boat. Launching itself from the depths, it threw nearly its entire body out of the water, twisted, turned and slammed back in, soaking Mitch,



Photo by Jonathan Bird



Photo by Cesare Naldi

rattling his boat and leaving him with a farewell tail wave to boot. After the creature disappeared and the water calmed, Mitch sat there stunned for a minute or so and thought, 'Oh yeah, oh yeah, I just might be able to hang in here for a little while longer.'

Take that story, multiply it by a hundred-fold or more, and you have an inclination of what happens on the Silver Bank from January to April each year. While they do move from area to area, there will likely be well over a thousand individual Humpbacks on the Silver Bank at any given time during the season.

Located about 80 miles north of the Dominican Republic, Silver Bank was designated a Marine Mammal Sanctuary in

1986, expanded in 1996 to include the Navidad Bank to the east, Samana Bay and all deep waters surrounding them, formally known as the Sanctuary for the Marine Mammals of the Dominican Republic.

The only access to the Silver Bank is aboard a live-aboard dive vessel, and in-water interaction with the whales is done on snorkel only. To avoid disturbing their natural behavior, diving using scuba or rebreathers is not allowed. There are very distinct rules in place as to how the whales may be approached, rules designed to protect both the animals as well as the guests. Remember, we are only visitors to their world. In order to reduce potential stress on the whales, only

three live-aboard permits are issued annually. This means there is a maximum of about 60 people in the water per week, a total of 500 people in any season. This translates to one simple fact. When you are there, you have accomplished the privilege of becoming part of a very exclusive club.

The term Whale Expedition deserves a short explanation. While this should be obvious, these are wildlife encounters in the open ocean and, while some elements can be predicted, there are going to be long periods of waiting for that spectacular moment. For me, the process of searching for the whales comes down to four words – Patience, Boredom, Exhilaration, and Satisfaction. On the water, I drew inspiration

from the Chinese book of wisdom, the I Ching. One phrase reappears frequently in the hexagrams, Perseverance Furthers. These are wise words to heed while waiting for the ideal humpback moment.

Rest assured, you will see whales all day long. Some may be breaching in the distance, slapping their massive pectoral fins on the water, lobtailing or simply cruising by on their way to an unknown destination. The behavior falls into several distinct categories, each of them equally impressive in their own way. Everyone has their favorite, but the consensus on the boat is that a resting mother and a calf is the ultimate encounter. These are referred to as Soft-in-Water encounters.



While primarily observational, there is a great degree of potential interaction with a curious calf. As with most children, they are exploring the world around them, interacting with other creatures and learning as they go. A resting mother and calf are referred to as sleepers. In the very best of these encounters, the mother will gauge the comfort zone, the calmness of the snorkeling observers, and will give her calf a great degree of freedom. If there is any threat, overactive observers or people free-diving down (a potentially predatory act), the mother and/or her escort will move to another location. This is why it is essential that visitors follow the advice of their guides. They have seen it go right and have seen it go wrong; they really want to maximize the positive experience, so follow their advice.

Other whale actions include groups of males pursuing and competing over a female, trying to work out who will have the privilege of mating with her. They are known variously as the Rowdies, the Rowdy Boys or the Rowdy Gang. At one point, our tiny inflatable was surrounded by males, two on one side and two on the other with one swimming directly underneath. When I asked Amanda (Captain of the T&C Aggressor II) if that was aggressive, she said, "No, that's pretty normal. Just wait 'til they start slapping the water next to the boat with their pectorals, that is when it gets a little strange." While I suppose one could get in the water with them in the midst of this action, it is the equivalent of standing in the middle of an arena while watching a monster truck rally, not really the smartest thing to do.

You will see whales leaping out of the water (breaching), demonstrating their power by slapping their pectoral fins or tails on the water, or simply raising their heads out and staring you down. It will be different every hour of every day and, just like Forrest Gump said, '...like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get.'

And then there are the Valentines, a male and female who have found a fondness for each other, are courting and are having an incredibly gentle exchange, particularly for creatures weighing in at 35 to 40 tons. While it is possible to have a comfortable in-water interaction during these periods, it does seem a bit intrusive.

Let us close with a true tale taken from the final hour of the final day of my time on the Silver Bank. The guests happened upon a pair of Valentines, approached closely and, while waiting for the right moment, an unusual thing happened. The female broke away from her suitor, angled toward the inflatable and fell in love with the boat. She settled underneath it and gently raised it out of the water on her back. Not once, not twice but three times. The guide was telling the guests to get in the water and, after placing herself on the edge of the inflatable, one guest looked at him with a confused, quizzical look on her face. "I really want to but if I jump in now, I'll land on this whale beneath me. What should I do?"

Now that my friends, that is a Close Encounter of the Whale Kind. All I can say is this; get thee to the Silver Bank during whale season, it is a trip you will never regret.



ABOUT THE TURKS AND CAICOS AGGRESSOR II

The Turks & Caicos Aggressor II provides an ideal platform for Humpback Whale Expeditions. The Aggressor fleet is known for a high level of service and the T&C II is no exception. Expect clean and comfortable cabins, excellent food, a very accommodating crew and, most importantly, a high level of knowledge about the experience.

These folks have been doing this for years. Captain Amanda Smith has eight whale seasons under her belt and her expertise is invaluable. The same is true of every other member of the crew. They know what they are doing, they understand the behavior of the whales and,

for a maximized experience, I highly advise paying close attention to their advice.

The Aggressor boat itself stays anchored in a reasonably sheltered spot for the week and all exploration is done from two 16-foot inflatables. The comfort level changes with weather conditions. High winds and rough water conditions will make for a wet ride, a factor photographers need to take into account. As topside images are a big part of the experience, I suggest a flexible Ewa-Marine housing or some other lightweight splash protection for your land cameras.



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DAVID DOUBILET

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Lionfish Control Studies

Belize

- May 26-June 2, 2012
- *Sun Dancer II*
- \$1995 - \$2195 pp/dbl (\$250 REEF Fee)
- Led by Lad Akins, REEF Director of Special Projects and Peter A. Hughes

Dominica

- July 14-21, 2012
- Anchorage Hotel
- *Dive Dominica*
- 20 divers maximum
- \$979 - \$1,106 pp/dbl (\$300 REEF Fee)
- Led by Lad Akins, REEF Director of Special Projects

Field Studies on Northwest Fishes and Invertebrates

Hornby Island, British Columbia

- September 26-30, 2012
- *Hornby Island Diving*
- \$857 CAD pp/dbl (\$150 REEF Fee)
- Led by Janna Nichols, REEF Outreach Coordinator
- Contact Amanda at info@hornbyislanddiving.com or 250-335-2807 to book your space or for more information

Field Studies in the Caribbean and Pacific

Nevis

- April 21-28, 2012
- *Oualie Beach Resort*
- \$1,558 pp/dbl (\$300 REEF Fee)
- Led by Dr. Christy Pattengill-Semmens, REEF Director of Science

San Blas Islands, Panama

- June 9-16, 2012 and June 16-23, 2012
- *Coral Lodge*
- \$2,417 pp/dbl (\$300 REEF Fee)
- Led by Paul Humann, Author/Photographer and Chairman of REEF's Board

San Salvador, Bahamas

- July 28-August 4, 2012
- *Riding Rock Inn and Marina*
- \$1,462 pp/dbl (\$300 REEF Fee)
- Led by Paul Humann, Author/Photographer and Chairman of REEF's Board

Sea of Cortez/Baja, Mexico

- September 22-29, 2012
- *Rocio Del Mar*
- \$2,295 pp/dbl (\$300 REEF Fee)
- Led by Drs. Brice and Christy Semmens, REEF Scientific Advisor and REEF Director of Science

Bermuda

- October 6-13, 2012
- *Grotto Bay Hotel and Triangle Diving*
- \$1,929 pp/dbl (\$300 REEF Fee)
- Led by Ned and Anna DeLoach, Authors/Photographers and REEF Board Members

British Virgin Islands

- November 11-17, 2012
- *Cuan Law*
- \$2,200 pp/dbl (\$300 REEF Fee)
- Led by Heather George, REEF Expert Instructor

Cozumel, Mexico

- December 1-8, 2012
- *Safari Inn and Aqua Safari*
- 16 divers maximum
- \$653 pp/dbl (\$250 REEF Fee)
- Led by Tracey Griffin, REEF Expert Instructor