



EXPEDITION DIARY Azores 2009

By Ronald Seipold

2 April

Hello everyone and welcome to the Azores 2009 expedition. I'm Ronald, your expedition leader, and you will be receiving a diary from me regularly over the next few weeks. At the moment I am preparing all the equipment and organizational needs and leaving for Horta to set everything up for you.

Lisa and Chris (our scientist and skipper) just reported blue whale and dolphin sightings over the last two weekends. What a promising start to this year's season.

I look forward to meeting you all in Horta soon. My Azores mobile number (FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY OR IF YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE LATE FOR ASSEMBLY) is +351 96 2338060 and I'll see you latest at 16.00 at the Azores Ecolodge on Saturday (please see dossier page 18 for details). Please remember not to turn up before 13.00 as you may find the place empty and locked up or us frantically running around trying to get things ready ☺

And for any last minute swatting up, more information and published reports from previous expeditions are available via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports.

So long & see you soon

Ronald Seipold
Expedition leader

5 April

Here's a first brief sign of life of the first slot at the Azores. Everybody has arrived safely on the island. We are not missing any luggage and even the weather turned better on Saturday. (For those who have to stay at home and like to get an impression on what the weather looks like in Horta, see the webcam on www.climaat.angra.uac.pt/WebCams/main.htm and click on Horta).

We have finished most of our training sessions and after a last heavy shower during the night, we left the harbour today around midday with a bit of sunshine and just low wind and waves. Our first (half) day out at sea is to get us all used to the different jobs and to the boat. Barely out of the harbour, a lookout on land sent us north of Faial where he spotted blows of several sperm whales just some miles away from the coast line. On our way Lisa was able to catch a glimpse of a masked booby, a bird species that has only been seen once around the Azores in 2008 – so today with this second sighting we were able to prove conclusively the presence of this species in the area! Afterwards we spent quite a long time following various sperm whales whilst we all learned to use the hydrophone (a tool to listen to underwater noises such as the diagnostic 'clicks' from sperm whales). In the end we were able to identify six different individuals. We saw a calf suckling, some head outs and side flukes.

On our way back we had three more random sightings of common dolphins – two smaller schools and a huge one with over 200 individuals.

Wasn't that as a perfect start? And the weather forecast for the next few days looks promising...

9 April

Monday morning we surprised Lisa (our team member) with a cake in the shape of a whale. It was her birthday! Stuffed full of cake and with even more cake for the afternoon at sea we left the harbor in the morning, still on time. The weather was nice again but the sea, compared to yesterday, a bit choppy. Tessa and Mona had to fight some seasickness but in the end noone had to feed the fish within this slot – well done ;)

It was a sperm whale day again! As the day before, the lookout sent us to almost the same spot. On our way we ran into a big group of 80 – 100 bottlenose dolphins. But we couldn't stay that long because the sperm whales are our main target. And it was more than worthwhile: several different individuals including a calf and big males! Males are much larger than females and the much harder to follow too. And as a special 'hello' to Lisa one male breached twice not too far away from the boat!

On the way back we had another encounter with a very large school of common dolphins who felt like performing for Lisa. We took some time to watch them playing around - jumping, chasing the boat, bowriding. So Lisa, I hope it was a day to remember.

Next day – same procedure: the vigas spotted sperm whales south of Faial. Was this to become our third day in a row? On our way along the coast line Lisa (team member) spotted common dolphins that were later on joined by striped dolphins and a shark. Still behind "our" sperm whales we continued all the way down to the new volcano area when we finally found the whales around midday north-west of Faial. And again we came across different individuals, which gives us a high number of IDs. Lisa (the scientist) has already started to work on finding matches with sightings of former years and the first results look pretty promising.

More unusual sightings on the way back too: a second shark, a school of 100 common and about 200 striped dolphins close together as well as a random sighting of sperm whales – and this really does not happen often at all. Finally another group of bottlenose dolphins playing around. With a lot of good photo-IDs and a little bit late we finally returned to Horta harbor.

Lisa (scientist) got in touch with some bird specialists to confirm the masked booby. Unfortunately the photo shows a gannet – so we have to take back the previous announcement ;(

After some excellent days out at sea we had to put up with two days onshore. The weather was not totally bad but the waves were up to 3.5 m, which is too high to spot animals or have a comfortable ride in our catamaran. So Wednesday was a day off, time to sleep in a bit and to explore Horta including some of its museums. The forecast towards the end of the week is looking better, so keep your fingers crossed for us.

13 April

Despite the lack of decent weather over the last three days and the scarcity of sun, we still managed to head out and get some work done. It has been a very special week for sperm whales. We came across a group, spread out and surrounded by whale watching boats, which meant the sperm whales did a lot of shallow dives and are not really "cooperative": no flukes – no photo-identification, no other data of interest. So it was time to release our hydrophone again to follow the clicks. We kept on going and going until we were almost west of Sao Jorge. For 90 minutes no whale showed up but we finally spotted the first one and stayed with several more for the rest of the day.

On Saturday we began to follow a male sperm whale. As before, this one was not really cooperative. The day was calm and around midday we observed a group of about 30 Risso's dolphins close to the coast (good protection for the calves), south of Pico. This species of dolphins is very different from the others. They are larger (up to 3 to 4 meters) and their head is almost round, which gives them a kind of permanent smile. Dark when young, they become increasingly white because of all their marks and scratches. Often the dorsal fin stays darker than the rest of the body, so the scratches and other marks give them a unique pattern that can appear as a kind of 'artwork'.

Back at the harbour we all appreciated the sun coming out. We spent extra time outside Peter's Cafe to drink galao and warm up.

No one could believe our last day at sea had arrived. How time has flown! Chris decided to leave the harbour in a northerly direction. After leaving Pico and Faial behind us, a viga called to inform Lisa about sei whales south of Faial (close to the airport). We had to go all the way back through the "channel" and around Faial. It was more than worth the effort, though. Our first baleen whale of this years' expedition was indeed a sei whale within a group of about seven different individuals. To ensure the best spot for photo identification, Chris maneuvered the catamaran alongside of the whale to enable pictures to be taken of the dorsal fin. It's important to show the length between the dorsal fin and the blow hole. The whales gave us plenty of time to obtain really good photo-IDs.

Towards the afternoon the wind strengthened and the sky became increasingly dark. Time to return a bit earlier. Soon after we arrived back at the harbour, the group went down to the next pier to continue a Biosphere Expeditions tradition. They started the 2009 edition of our mural in the Horta harbour. A spot was chosen next to the other BE drawings and a part of the ground was prepared with the first layer of paint. Over the past few days the group had already worked on hundreds of ideas and was now keen to get the final design on the ground. And because no team member had to leave on an early flight on Monday it was decided to continue with this work the next morning.

And finally here is the summary of our encounters during the first slot:

Bottlenose dolphin: 5 / 310 (encounters / no. of animals)

Common dolphin: 11 / 696

Striped dolphin: 2 / 140

Risso's dolphin: 1 / 30

Sperm whales: 44 / 68 (!!!)

Sei whale: 1 / 7

On the numbers front, there were an impressive amount of encounters and animals: (63 encounters in total with approx. 1251 animals). That is one of the reasons we were not bored on board at all. I hope there will be more memorable moments for all of you. Thanks to everybody for your contribution, enthusiasm and your excellent work. Please don't forget to use our pictureshare service www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare.

And as promised: I will upload some photos about our BE drawing in the harbour so that you will be able to see the final result of 2009!

We are now preparing for the next slot and Lisa, Chris and I look forward to meeting the new team members on Saturday.

If travel plans permit, we would like to start in the early afternoon. I will be at Peter's Café between 12:00 and 13:00 for lunch, so please join in if you wish. If you prefer to have your lunch individually please try to be at the lodge no later than 14:00. And: if you are interested in exchanging photos while still in Horta, please bring along a personal USB stick – it's easy and worthwhile!

19 April

All team members of the second slot have arrived safely on the island, unfortunately Jodi without her luggage which finally arrived on Sunday afternoon. Yesterday and today we worked through all the training sessions. The weather outside was less than desirable: visibility is poor (we haven't been able to see Pico mountain since the start of the second slot) and the sea is pretty choppy. But after some safety instructions on board we left Horta harbor today about midday to see how all the theory works out in practice.

We headed north to the shelter behind Faial. Because of the rough sea we had to stay close to the coastline and so we couldn't use our hydrophone to detect sperm whales. It took some time until we had our first encounter: a small school of common dolphins crossed our way. Later in the afternoon we had another random sighting. This time we had a school of about 60 common dolphins that stayed with the catamaran so everybody had enough time to watch them bow riding or jumping.

I don't want to forget to mention that nobody got seasick despite being out at sea the first day under rough conditions. Well, that gives us hope that nobody will suffer over the next few days.

As I write this, everybody is joining one of our evening sessions. Today the team members are listening to one of Lisa's talks on cetaceans (whales and dolphins) and how to identify them and everybody is looking forward to the next few days.

23 April

On Monday we spent eight hours at sea! As we didn't receive any call from the vigias, we headed north to the area where we had all our sperm whale sightings during the first slot. It also meant we could use the natural shelter of Faial to avoid high waves.

During the day we had several sightings of common dolphins – one school of about 300 individuals – and bottlenose dolphins as well. With the help of our hydrophone we were able to locate sperm whales far to the north-west of Faial, about 20 miles away from Horta. We spent the afternoon following two females with calves, a huge male sperm whale and we had two or three additional encounters. Unfortunately we just had two flukes for photo identification as they kept on shallow diving for most of the time. But still it was a satisfying day out at sea. As it was a really long day all team members felt pretty tired in the early evening.

Tuesday the weather started to change, a front was expected to come through. As it still looked not too bad in the morning we prepared ourselves to leave for a half day out at sea again but as no vigias spotted any cetaceans we decided to stay on-shore. Most of the team members went for trip to Pico island.

The weather forecast was very accurate – overnight the bad front came over us. Wednesday it rained all day long. No visibility and the wind made it impossible to leave the harbour. The group split up into a variety of activities throughout the day: sleeping, going out to explore several museums of Horta, data entry and some hours of computer work such as cropping and matching photos, In the evening Bryan worked hard on preparing a marvelous dinner at our home base including a fantastic desert. Thank you Bryan! Afterwards half of the group went out to a handball match to support the local team.

Thursday morning the weather looked really promising, so we prepared ourselves to be out at sea again. Unfortunately Chris then realised that one of the engines was completely out of oil – a leakage caused this major problem. Therefore Lisa organized an alternative for us: friends of hers offered us the use of their boat instead but we had to wait for them to come back from a diving tour. As we were ready to go we had to face the fact that the wind had picked up again and it was too choppy to leave the harbour. A bit disappointed we walked back to our base to listen to another presentation of Lisa's about the Europhluke programme. After lunch, sitting in the sun, we all hoped to leave with the boat but it was not to be because the waves were still too high. So, the afternoon was used to drive up to the dramatic caldeira (1031 m), a famous volcanic crater at the heart of Faial with a stunning view over Horta. A second group decided to go for a longer tour to have a look at Capelinhos on the far western side of the island where a year long eruption extended Faial 1975 by 2.4 km of newly formed land. The volcano ejected more than 30 million tons of ash and lava and even today the black layer of ash appears like a moonscape.

The weather forecast for the next days is much more promising – we live in hope!

26 April

It was "just" a gasket that caused the problem with the engine of our boat. Bad luck, but Chris spent a whole day until late evening in finding and solving this problem. Thank you Chris! Being patient sometimes pays off and we were rewarded on Friday, our first day out at sea again after three days of on-shore time. By midday we had sighted common dolphins, Risso's dolphins, a shark and a group of sperm whales. As we spent several hours with the sperm whales we managed to obtain ten different photo-IDs. We also had six sperm whales together at the surface and all pretty close. And there was this very exciting moment when a big male sperm whale turned around to approach the catamaran up to just about five meters. Wow ! Then we had another encounter with a big school of common dolphins and a small group of Risso's dolphins. Lisa spotted a sunfish too (Molidae family, molas or ocean sunfishes, unique fish whose bodies come to an end just behind the dorsal and anal fins, giving them a "half-a-fish" appearance. They are also the largest of the ray-finned bony fishes, with the ocean sunfish *Mola mola* recorded at up to 3.3 m in length and 2 t in weight.)

On Saturday it was mostly sunny with low wind. We headed south of Pico where we had been the day before. On our way to an area where a vigia had spotted whales and dolphins, we came across a group of Risso's dolphins, very likely the same ones we had seen on Friday.

Then we came across a huge group of about 300 bottlenose dolphins, spread out widely around the boat. At times we could see about 30 to 40 dolphins close together causing splashes all over – really impressive. Good fortune seems to be with us after our on-shore days as we had another afternoon with many different sperm whales and good fluke photos. But the highlight of the day was a sperm whale that breached four times in a row just in front of the catamaran! Believe it or not, the last jump was just about 30 meters away from the boat! Just overwhelming. Later in the day we had a big group of bottlenose dolphins again, some of them close to sperm whales. This time the dolphins were much more active, so we were treated to high jumps, loops and lob tailing.

On our way back Jodi spotted a shark during 'turtle time' and Tim detected a blow in the distance, so we got a random sighting of another two sperm whales. A day that probably can't be surpassed. For the last day all team members had baleen whales on their wish list.

In the late afternoon all team members helped to complete and finish our Biosphere Expeditions drawing at the pier.

Sunday was the nicest weather during this year's expedition: sunny all day long and almost flat seas. Of course we didn't expect anything better than the day before, but besides several encounters with common dolphins (one group with an exceptionally pale young calve – probably an albino) and even more sperm whales, we notched up a "new" species: pilot whales. A group of 35 to 40 individuals let us stay with them for while to observe these majestic cetaceans.

And, believe it or not, we saw four (!) loggerhead turtles, although not during 'turtle time'. Unfortunately they seemed to be aware of us trying to catch them for measurement and tagging. It's astonishing how fast they can dive if they get chased. Great to have such a memorable ending of an expedition.

Despite of the bad weather in the middle of the second slot, the number of encounters/animals is pretty impressive:

Bottlenose dolphin: 3 / 506 (encounters / no. of animals)

Common dolphin: 13 / 1057

Risso's dolphin: 3 / 41

Pilot whales: 1 / 40

Sperm whales: 65 / 108 (!!!)

I can't believe that another year of our Azores expedition is already over. It was a pleasure for me to work together with Lisa and Chris again. Thanks to everybody for all your excellent work, support and contribution. Hope to see you again on one of our other expeditions.

Bye for now – Ronald

Please don't forget to use our pictureshare service www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare. And as I promised slot1: within the next few days you will find some photos on pictureshare of the final result of our BE drawing on the pier. Don't worry, it's all good...