January 17, 2012

Whale Watching Adventures

Misirlou went whale watching twice during the Martin Luther King weekend. On Saturday we had very light winds and smooth seas, and it was just Barbara and I on the boat. We got underway about 10 AM, and headed for Arch Rock with plans to circumnavigate Anacapa in a clockwise direction. Our 5.5-knot cruising speed meant that this trip would take at least 6 hours. We saw a large pod of common dolphins about half way to arch rock, and on the back side of Anacapa we saw the same small pod of three Risso's dolphins on two occasions. Risso's dolphins have a large dorsal fin and from a distance they look like small killer whales. Up close their rounded white heads can be distinguished.

We have seen gray whales in the past on the south side of Anacapa, and Jim McWaters had advised us that whales seem to follow the 300 foot depth contour. We consulted our depth sounder as we paralleled the island, and on the south side this put us about a mile offshore. Logic told us that we would have a greater chance of seeing a whale if our direction of travel was opposite of that of the whale, but this logic did not pan out and we did not see any whales on the south side.

Somewhat disappointed, we rounded the west end and decided to rhumbline it back to Channel Islands Harbor. At depths of over 250 feet, my sounder displays the depth only occasionally. While a couple of miles from the west end I happened to be looking at the sounder when I saw it display 314 feet. Immediately afterward I saw a whale. We altered course so as to make sure that we were not on collision course with the whale. We watched it rise three or four times and soon felt confident that we knew its course and speed. We soon realized that it was a mother and a calf. We shadowed them for a few minutes it from a distance of about 200 yards. We weren't sure how close we could approach, so we carefully watched their behavior, and promised ourselves that we would break away if we saw any perceptible change to their speed or course of breathing pattern. We saw none. The calf's breathing interval was exactly half that of the mother's, and when the mother surfaced the calf would always surface right next to her and they would breathe together. Their speed was about 3.2 knots according to the GPS, and never varied.

So thank you Jim, your 300-foot advice was the ticket.

Recovery of a Kayak in Windy Lane

On Monday, we had a total of nine people on the boat with many experienced hands including new member Mike Ross. Nine is a lot of people on a 30-footer, and our crowded cockpit may have contributed to the troubles we would experience later. We planned to duplicate our previous trip. My check of NOAA in the early morning predicted 8-12 knots in the area of the channel that we intended to go. Unfortunately, the wind was already at about 12 knots at the time of our 8:30 AM departure, and although it

did not seem to be building, “windy lane” added the usual 50% to the wind strength that we experienced near shore. The #4 jib ended up being a good call.

I had noticed strong currents near arch rock on the previous trip, and I expected this to kick up nasty localized seas, so we passed Arch Rock two miles to the south. The seas immediately smoothed out after we passed Arch Rock, but unfortunately there was still about 12 knots of wind on the back side and this kicked up enough white caps that we knew it would be difficult to spot any whales. We spotted none. We tacked at the west end and headed home with speeds in the 7s.

We often tow a kayak when we day sail because I believe that it would make it easier to recover a man overboard. I’ve never had a kayak tip over, but on this day it flipped right in the middle of windy lane, and the added strain caused the towline to snap. My gut feeling was to write it off. It took my crew at least two minutes to convince me that we should attempt to recover it, so we had gone quite a distance before turning around. The most experienced members of the crew are very enthusiastic, and looked forward to the challenge of attempting to recover the kayak. They expressed their desire to learn a new skill, which they felt would make them more competent at man-overboard recovery on their own boats. When they framed it in those terms, I agreed to go back, but made everyone promise that there would be no heroics. Winds were about 18 knots and seas about three feet.

I estimated that our true wind angle was about 135 degrees, and therefore estimated that if we sailed close hauled on the opposite tack we would pass near the kayak. This proved to be sound logic. We ended up passing it while sailing upwind. We sailed another quarter mile or so before turning around. I will now describe everything we did that didn’t work, and then describe what finally did work.

Our first plan was to get directly upwind of it, and pull both main and jib in to centerline so as to minimize the speed of our approach. I would attempt to hit it and Mike would attempt to flip it over with a boat hook so as to make it easier to grab when we approached from downwind. As it skidded down the port side, Ken managed to get hold of a small line that was tied amidships on the kayak. He was unable to hang on, but this gave us all hope.

On our first approach from downwind, we approached close hauled on port tack, and when we reached the estimated “layline” at a distance of about 30 yards, I tacked onto starboard, and we left the small #4 jib backwinded. I expected this to cause the boat to heal to about 45 degrees, burying the rail, and to stop the boat quickly. It worked almost as I expected, and as I expected the rudder eventually popped out of the water and I lost all control. The rail remained buried for about five seconds, which is about what I expected.

I have theorized that this would be a good technique for recovering a MOB, because with the rail buried it seems as if it would be easy to drag the MOB aboard. It very nearly succeeded on the first try, but unfortunately the boat stopped just a few feet too soon and

the kayak slipped past the bow as the bow fell away to leeward. I felt reasonably confident that if I made another pass I could time my tack so that we would stop just to windward of the kayak and be driven down upon it. Given the lack of control in the final seconds, everything would depend on the placement of the final tack. I believe the technique is suitable only for light boats and only for "skimming dishes" (not "lead mines"). With a heavy boat I believe that it would be much more difficult to determine the optimum spot to tack. (Misirlou is 30 feet and weighs 5500 pounds). I believe that a good skipper with a light boat would tack in exactly the right spot on the second or third attempt.

We did not make a second attempt because the maneuver scared some of the crew and got Mike wet up to his knees.

Plan B would necessarily involve dropping the mainsail and firing up the motor. Misirlou's main is big, and uses a boltrope, so it would difficult to manage once it was on the deck. The crew did a great job on getting it down quickly and getting it under control, but unfortunately, someone fell and hit the tiller hard enough to damage it, but not so hard that anyone noticed it was damaged.

Once the main was down, we sailed downwind past the kayak, tacked, and approached it on starboard tack from almost DDW with the small jib backed. I had plenty of control on the approach until I cut power on the final approach, and at that point the bow was blown down and the kayak passed to windward of the bow. The second attempt was similar but a little better, and I just missed it. The key to success was knowing when to cut the power and how far to leeward the kayak should be when power was cut. On the third attempt the kayak struck the boat amidships on the port side just as the boat was coming to a stop and as the backed jib was turning it perpendicular to the wind. Without the large mainsail and with only the very small backwinded jib, the boat was heeled about 15 degrees. The gunwale was therefore only about a foot above the water. Most remarkable was the amount of stabilization that the small jib provided. The boat seemed to roll very little even though it was side on to the waves, and it was remarkably easy for Mike and Ken to grab the kayak. Each of them was able to grab onto something solid, and it did not appear to me that either of them took a significant risk in making their grab. We soon had a line tied to the undamaged stern loop, and prepared to tow it stern first. I put the engine in gear, grabbed the tiller, and the tiller came off in my hand.

A fragment of the tiller stuck out about six inches from the rudder stock, and this was enough to control the boat under power. The small jib probably made the boat easier to steer. Eventually we sort of jammed the broken tiller into the tiller bracket, and this made steering a bit easier. The kayak did not tow well at all stern first, but the line held. By the time you read this, I hope to have laminated up a new tiller, and I have an idea for a design that will be less prone to being damaged. I also have an idea for a spare tiller which will be bonded to a wooden woodworkers clamp whose faces will be carved to fit snugly over the tiller bracket.

by Steve George