Wind to Whales/CIMT Sighting Report 3 May, 2005

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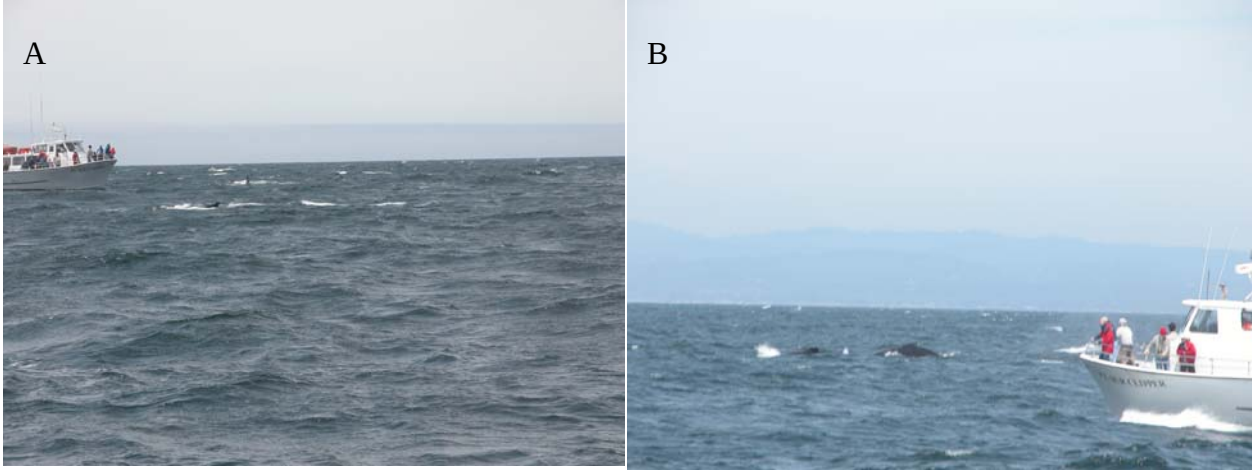
Wind to Whales/CIMT observers are trained to identify marine mammals by looking for particular body cues during surveys in Monterey Bay. For example, the size and shape of a blow may indicate whether the cetacean was either large or small. The presence or absence of a dorsal fin and its size, shape, and color are identification cues. Occasionally however, we are only able

A

B

A). Carol Keiper observing for marine mammals on board the R/V John Martin. B) Orca's surfacing with blow on May 3, 2005..

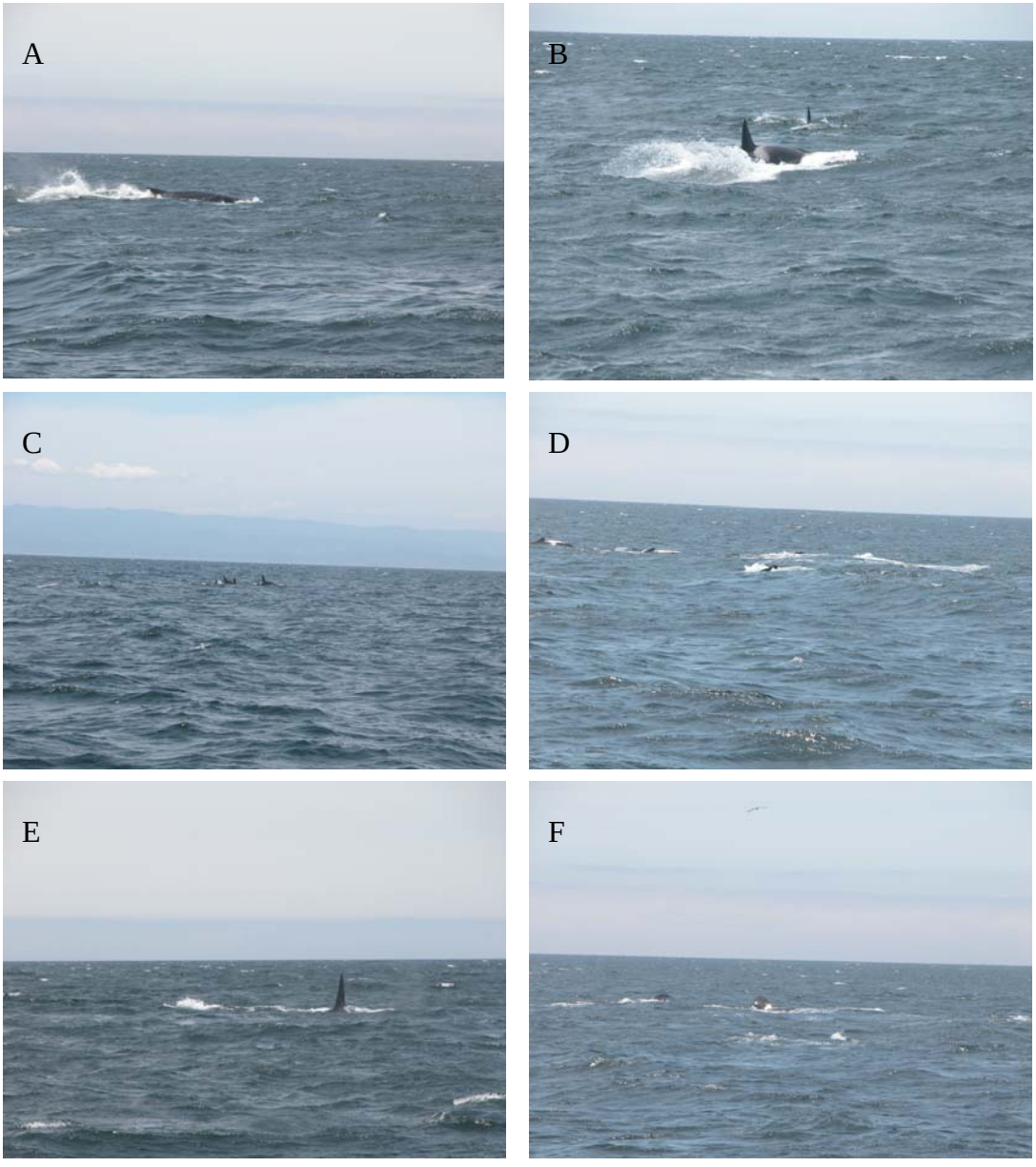
to see a few blows and may not be able to identify the cetacean from our current location. Under these circumstances it is common to break off the transect line, go off effort, and try to get a positive identification. This is exactly what happened at about 12:30 P.M. on Tuesday, 3 May while aboard the RV John Martin. Sea conditions were windy and choppy (it was a Beaufort 4, indicating wind speeds were about 18 knots). When these conditions prevail, it is often difficult to get a glimpse of any more than the blow. Kelly Newton (our CIMT survey coordinator) made the decision to go investigate what the Point Sur Clipper, one of the local whale watching vessels in Monterey Bay, was watching.



A). R/V John Martin approaching the Point Sur Clipper. B) The Point Sur Clipper orca and humpback whales.

As we made our turn and proceeded towards the animals we were able to get better views and suddenly realized there were several Humpback whales about 250 feet from a group of Killer whales! The observers, Scott Benson, Carol Keiper, Melinda Nakagawa, Katrina Kendall, and Tanya Graham collectively have over 20 years of at-sea experience. This was the first time any of them had seen killer whales in such close proximity to humpback whales engaging in apparently assertive and unusual behavior. There were a total of 4 Humpbacks in the group, one of which was smaller than the others (probably a juvenile) and a group of approximately 12 Killer whales, comprised of female types, several calves, and a large male. We could all sense the power of these two species of cetaceans as they would turn and face each other, swim towards each other, and then break away, roll, and powerfully surge in line-abreast formation. It was a breath-taking sight to see these great top-predators of the sea, swimming side-by-side and surfacing in unison, like a chorus line. The lone male orca was observed hanging back, away from the rest -of the orcas while others in the group repeatedly split up to surround the humpbacks, then came together to charge the great whales. As the Killer whales surged towards the Humpbacks we all held our breath preparing for what could possibly happen next. The Humpbacks, however, appeared to stand their ground and did not back away. In fact, the humpbacks swam directly towards the Killer whales, charging these potential predators head-on.

The groups then broke off. The group of orca dissipated, regrouped and the whales repeated these maneuvers. Although we all wished we could linger longer to witness the progression of events, alas, we had to get back to Line 3 and get on with our work. So, unfortunately we have no way of continuing with this story, however, who knows, it may possibly be continued another time…….



A). Humpback whales; B) Orcas; C) Orcas; D). Humpbacks; E). Orcas; F). Humpbacks