

Voices in the deep

by Wade Hughes FRGS

It was an unusual, eerie, encounter. In cold, greenish water, clouded by plankton blooms, and the tiny pulsing invertebrate salps, feeding on them, the sperm whales were milling round. Slowly, ponderously, some were sinking head-first and disappearing into the haze beneath me. Others were rising from the depths, rejoining those on the surface, then dissolving away into the distance. Two drifted in from behind me, so close that their sudden bulks, appearing at my shoulder startled me. Constant chattering – strings of clicks and creaks – passed between the whales. One phrase, if such a human term is appropriate for describing sperm whale communication, seemed to be recurring. ‘Zzzzzzz...tuc tuc tuc’, is the best I can do at replicating it on paper. Louder and more sharply defined, it was, perhaps, emanating from the largest whale, a cow close to 11 metres in length. This cow appeared to be the centre of attention. The others, females and adolescents of both sexes, began aggregating around it.

Earlier, from the boat, we had observed a single large cow lob-tailing; raising its flukes to the sky and repeatedly bringing them down to bash the surface of the sea. On a whale this size, those flukes can weigh around two metric tons-about as much as a large four-wheel drive SUV. And so, each impact of flukes on water generated a resounding whoomp! that would have been audible for long distances underwater, and sent shockwaves of white spray flying into the air.

We had watched through the morning as small



Two adolescent sperm whales travelling in company towards the lobtailing cow whale.

Photo Robyn Hughes: Canon 7DMkII. Canon EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II USM

All the underwater shots were taken by Wade Hughes free-diving, using available light with Canon 5DMkIII in Nauticam housing with Zen mini-dome and Canon 8-15 fisheye zoom and Kenko 1.4x extender.



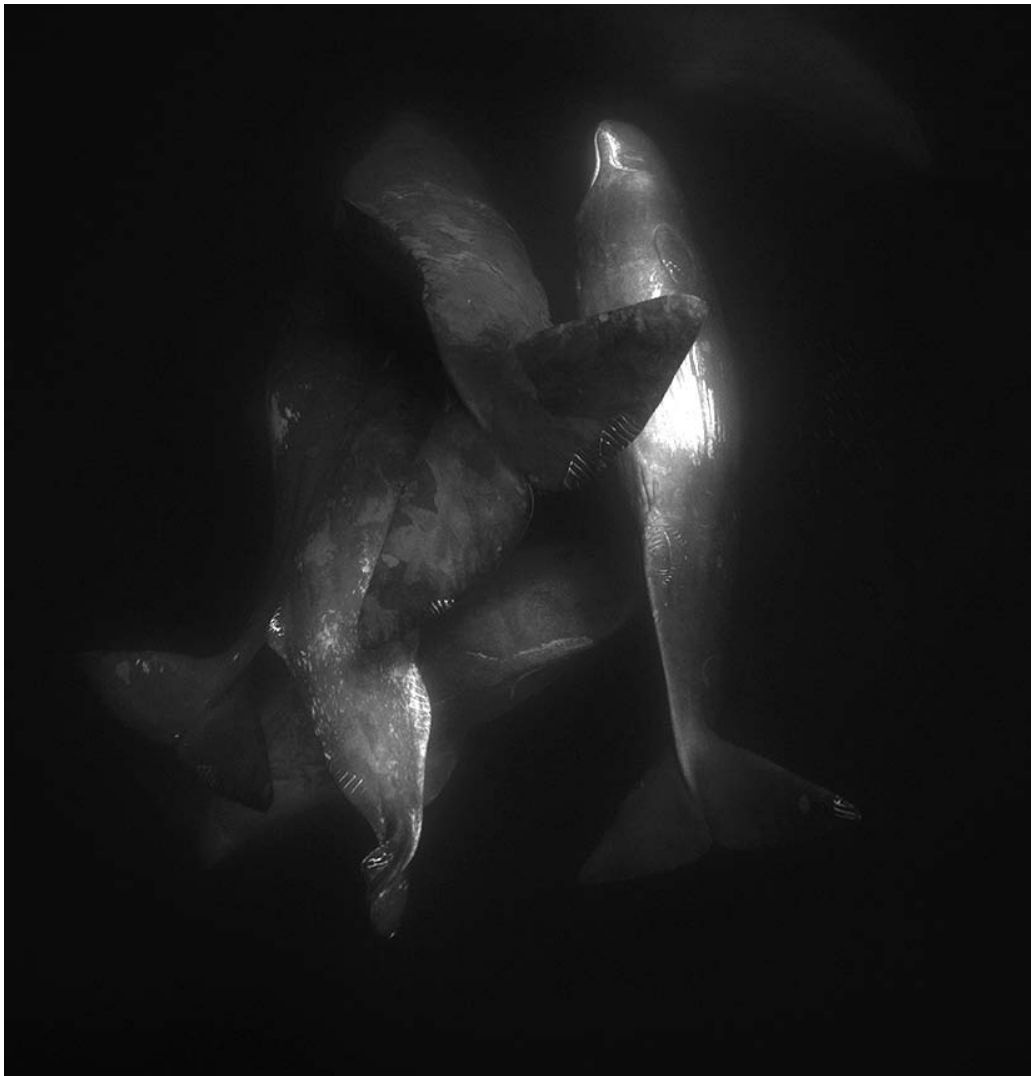


Sheets of dead skin fray from the flukes of the lob-tailing cow whale.

Photo Robyn Hughes: Canon 7DMkII. Canon EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II USM



Adolescent sperm whales swim on the surface accompanied by adult cows. One of the cows, swimming inverted, perhaps to maintain a clear view of activity on or near the surface, reveals the species' iconic white-rimmed lower jaw.



groups of whales had congregated on the surface, off the Azores. Sperm whales typically spend ten to fifteen minutes on the surface between foraging dives. On this day, in calm seas, under low cloud, numbers of them were laying on the surface for hours, side by side –“logging” as this

behavior is called. At one time, we could count seventeen whales in one group.

Now, snorkeling in the water, I could see the flukes of this largest whale clearly. It was the same cow we had observed from the boat. After swimming past me, it sank quite



Constantly clicking and spraying burts of probing sonar, sperm whales emerge from the depths to gather as a group.

Whales milling around.

Something is clearly attracting their collective attention.

A tight-knit group forms around the larger cow whale...

...and sinks from human view,

quickly, head first, until it almost disappeared.

This was not a dive. There had been no final head-raised breath that characteristically signals the beginning of a sperm whale’s profoundly deep descent. They’ve been recorded reaching depths of around 3000 metres in their hunts for squid, octopus, and fish.

We don’t know how they

regulate their buoyancy. There’s certainly no gush of bubbles issuing from their blowholes as there is when a scuba diver sinks by dumping air from a buoyancy vest. Nor do they have the scuba diver’s reserve of compressed air for re-inflation. But, by one imperceptible means or another, they seem to be able to control their orientation in the water with ease, and, as I watched, the large

cow arrested its descent.

Other whales began to cluster around it. They remained in this formation for some minutes. Two or three individuals peeled away. Others moved in.

Eventually the assemblage sank further than I could follow by free-diving and disappeared from view. The water around me, more than a thousand metres deep, was empty. Only the distinct static that is the so-far unbroken code of sperm whale... conversation...if that's what it is... continued unabated.

Later in the afternoon, with the clouds now lifted, a group of whales wallowed on the surface, up sun, not far from the boat. In water clouded by those dense blooms of plankton and salps, and against the strong light, it was difficult to identify individual whales. But one unmistakable feature was visible; the curled and floppy flukes of an infant whale, recently emerged from the womb of its mother.

So, was this what the day had been all about? Had we witnessed some form of ritual surrounding the birth of a sperm whale? Had the lob-tailing cow been summoning the clan for the event? Had far-flung individuals gathered to greet the newcomer? Were they now dispersing to relay the news?

We don't know.

We had observed comparable events some years previously, some 250 nautical miles west of this latest encounter: a large lob-tailing cow whale; a brief but intense gathering of whales; new-born whales in the area within hours of the lob-tailing.

Writing in the late 1700s, French scientist Rene Lesson ruefully said "What an impenetrable veil covers our knowledge of cetacea!. Groping in the dark, we advance in a field strewn with thorns."

It is still true today. The observations



Part of a group of seventeen sperm whales. They "logged" on the surface like this for hours. The distinctive bushy blow of the sperm whale, issuing from the single blow-hole, low and to the left, is clearly visible.

Photo Robyn Hughes: Canon 7DMk11. Canon EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II USM

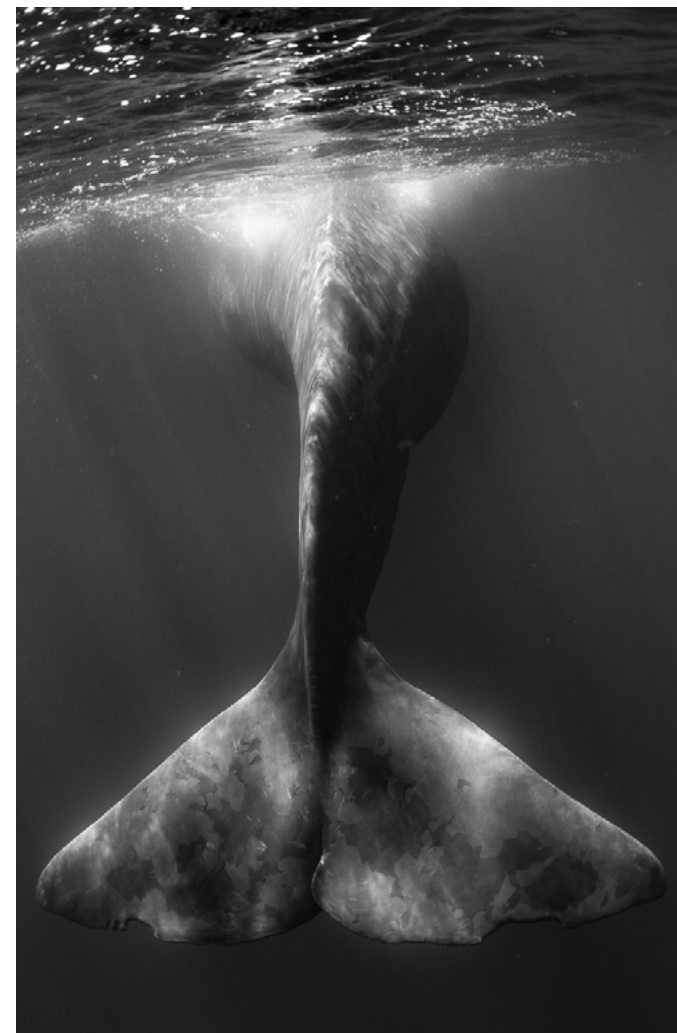
Two-tonne flukes propel the larger cow whale .

described above might be connected. They might not. In providing us glimpses of their lives, these enigmatic animals, the world's largest toothed predators, leave swirling in their wakes, not just sheets of sloughed skin and detritus, but hosts of unanswered questions.

Some notes on the photographs:

All the underwater shots were taken free-diving, using available light with Canon 5DMk111 in Nauticam housing with Zen mini-dome and Canon 8-15 fisheye zoom and Kenko 1.4x extender.

The water was clouded with plankton blooms and small salps and lacked the startling blue transparency often seen in open ocean. This resulted in low contrast, and greenish-tinted colour



files.

Conversion to monochrome enabled better contrast, and allows the behaviour of the whales to be more clearly expressed. These whales spend most of their life in the eternal gloom of the abyss. So, if viewed with a fertile imagination, the deep blacks of the conversions can also conjure aspects of their environment denied to mere human gaze. One of the great joys of photography is its capacity

to interpret and inspire, as well as record.

And some notes on working with whales

All the photographs are taken in strict accordance with guidelines laid down by the Secretaria Regional do Mar, Ciência e Tecnologia, which is the sole body authorized to permit entry into the water with cetaceans in the Azores. It is illegal to swim with whales in the Azores without written permission of the Secretaria. Their guidelines are soundly based and offer the best framework for approaching the difficult photography of these animals. But it is the whales themselves that dictate the terms of any encounter. They will approach, or not, as they choose. After several hundreds of encounters it becomes possible to judge, broadly, their mood from the boat. If whales appear unwilling to engage, we stay out of their way. There's no shots, nor satisfaction, to be had from dropping in and surprising whales.

On the other end of the spectrum, persistently curious whales, or whales that seemingly go about their business knowing full well that we are in the vicinity, afford us wonderful opportunities and experiences.

Working with wild whales, that have not been habituated to human presence, I think, dispels any notion

of “bonding” between whales and humans. Targeted sprays of whale sonar, frequent eye contact, and sometimes close and intense scrutiny, confirm that the whales are observing us, as we observe them. But I think that's as far as it goes. The whales have complex relationships of their own, they live in constantly threatening environment, and, in my opinion, have no reason to view human encounters as anything more than just another data point in the vast array of information that they have to collect and analyse every day and night to survive. I'd expect them to bond with their own kind, not with humans who likely appear to the whales to be some bizarre dwarf alien life form bobbing along inelegantly on the surface.

From my own side of the encounters, though, it's different. Every encounter, every opportunity to observe and record, is a privilege. And, hopefully, the observations and photographs might eventually contribute to pruning out just one of those thorns strewn in the path of greater understanding of these enigmatic whales.

To that end, the conditions of the permit issued by the Secretaria require that copies of all photographs taken must be lodged with the Secretaria for its own use. In addition, all the photographs we take are made



Later, a group reappears near the boat. An infant whale, floppy and uncoordinated, swims at the side of a large cow. It is the very beginning of a life that could span seven decades or more.

available free of charge for any non-commercial uses related to research, education, or conservation. We routinely share them with whale and cephalopod scientists in various parts of the world. For access to these shots, write to us at wadeandrobynhughes@gmail.com,

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Photographs taken under permit issued by Secretaria Regional do Mar, Ciência e Tecnologia with precautions taken to avoid disturbance to the animals. Swimming with whales is forbidden in the Azores without written permission of the Secretaria.

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Email: martin.abela@hotmail.co.uk [Ref:c145]

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