

Whale Of A Tale - Outer Banks Field Course Provides Chesapeake Bay Governor's School Students with a Once In A Lifetime Opportunity

September 10, 2012

For several CBGS students and faculty members, an early morning beach run in Nags Head, NC turned into more than a chance to stretch their legs. Instead of seaweed and other flotsam washed up on the beach, they found a deceased 5 meter (a little over 15 ft) long female Beaked Whale (*Mesoplodon mirus* – *True's Beaked Whale*). CBGS biology instructor J. Daniel Maxey reported the stranding to the local authorities, explaining to the students the strict laws protecting marine mammals (dead or alive). The group took some rough length measurements along with pictures and video that will be used in future lessons at CBGS. While the sighting of this rare marine mammal stranding is exciting alone, this experience was about to provide all CBGS students in the field a unique educational opportunity. At breakfast the next morning, CBGS instructors were fortunate enough to recognize the University of North Carolina at Wilmington marine mammal stranding response team by a graphic on one of the members' T-shirts.

Pouncing on what was to be an extraordinary educational opportunity, the CBGS faculty and students moved to the beach to witness the scientific data collection from this rare whale stranding. "While we had originally planned other data collection activities for the morning, the opportunity for our students to witness the necropsy (scientific autopsy) of a marine mammal was something that we faculty members couldn't pass up," CBGS Marine and Environmental Science instructor Bethany Smith noted. Immersing students in close-up, unique opportunities to see science in action as well as interactions with scientific experts is a central part of the CBGS mission. The students watched in awe, making detailed notes and drawings as the scientists processed the carcass, taking body measurements and blubber and organ samples. Early on, the

stranding team determined the beaked whale was pregnant, and students were able to view the fetal beaked whale before it was carefully wrapped up and packed away for future studies. “You are part of a small, small percentage of people who have ever witnessed the stranding of a True’s Beaked Whale,” CBGS Marine & Environmental Science instructor Jim Beam told the students afterward. CBGS student and Rappahannock High School Senior Megan Knight came away from the experience with affirmation of her future plans. “I’m sure now that I want to be a doctor. Seeing the necropsy made me confident I can handle medical school.” For teachers and students, the educational experience didn’t end when they walked off the beach. CBGS faculty are in contact with Dr. William McLellan, the marine mammal stranding coordinator for the state of North Carolina, and Dr. Ann Pabst of the marine mammal stranding program at UNC-W, and have already received data and additional information about this stranding. CBGS faculty hope to continue this partnership, allowing the students to see how data collected from this whale can advance scientific knowledge of a very cryptic and poorly understood species. For the students and instructors on the trip, this is one whale of a tale that will be told for years to come!



A Marine Mammal Scientist carefully examines the stranded whale while CBGS seniors look on



A Marine Mammal Scientist explains the unique adaptations of beaked whales while CBGS students (L to R - Haley Balderson, Carrington Balderson, Sam Friday, and Bradley Hudson) carefully record notes.



CBGS seniors (foreground) with Marine Mammal Stranding Team and stranded Beaked Whale (background) in Nags Head, NC.