

Spirit: A Tale of a Humpback Whale

By Sierra Goodman

Having conducted marine research in the waters off Drake Bay, Costa Rica for almost seven years now, we have come to know many individual dolphins and whales in the area. We give names to the dolphins and whales we are able to positively identify, like “No Fin,” for a dolphin who lost his dorsal fin, probably to a long line, “Blondie,” for a bottlenose dolphin who’s skin color is blond instead of gray, “Villa,” for a dolphin that has a distinct “V” on his back behind his dorsal fin and “Mr. Hand” for a humpback whale that has the image of a hand imprinted on his tail. It is always fun and exciting for us when we see a dolphin or whale that we know, and it helps us to track migration, social and feeding behaviors and even compare notes with researchers from other countries.

For almost two weeks, we had been seeing the same mom and baby humpback in the very shallow waters of “El Jardin” at Caño Island, 12 miles offshore from Drake Bay. We always knew we could stop for our snack break or lunchtime there, turn off the motors, and within minutes we would spot them somewhere nearby. This baby, whom I have named Spirit, was probably born here in the waters of Drake Bay and was about three weeks old. I was able to take many photos of Spirit and his Mom, whom we have named Mother Teresa, as they slowly swam and played close to the island. I was hoping to get a photo of Mother Teresa’s tail fluke that would allow us to positively identify and track her and her baby in the years to come. That fluke shot eluded me for many days because Mother Teresa would never lift her tail out of the water when she dove.

I finally got the fluke shot on August 2, 2005 when Mother Teresa and Spirit went into slightly deeper waters and Mother Teresa took a dive. I did get some photos of the dive, but from the side, so the



Spirit In Flight

full fluke was not visible. Then all of a sudden Mother Teresa breached full body out of the water and I lifted my camera in time to catch her falling back into the wa-



ter, finally getting a good ID shot of her tail fluke. As Mother Teresa fell back into the water, Spirit started a full breach of his own, allowing me to catch the series of shots seen here. When I got home and looked at the photos on my computer, I realized how special they were, and had no idea how special they were about to become. I sent the photos to some of my friends and family and also to A.M. Costa Rica, an online newspaper. Spirit’s photos made a big splash with everyone who saw them, and they were also printed on the

front page of the Friday, August 5, 2005 edition of A.M. Costa Rica. So now thousands of people got to enjoy Spirit’s photos and meet this beautiful humpback baby.

On our August 6, 2005 tour, we encountered a group of six adult humpbacks. Normally when you find several humpbacks traveling together, it is several males competing for one female and you will see lots of breaching, tail and pectoral fin slapping and rowdy behavior. Then, one of the males wins the competition and they all go their separate ways. Rarely will so

many adult humpbacks stay together for long periods, especially in a peaceful manner. At the time, I thought it was strange that they were just slowly traveling together, often diving and letting me take tail fluke ID’s of five of them. They traveled together for at least three hours as we visited them on and off during our tour and were still traveling together when we left them.

I commented to our captain that I was almost positive that one of the whales we were seeing had had a baby with her earlier, but I would have to check tail fluke shots to make sure.

On August 8, 2005, we got a call from Jinetes de Osa, a hotel in the area, that a dolphin had beached itself on the rocks in



Spirit Playing by the Island



front of their hotel and was alive at first, but now dead. We went over to measure, determine the sex and possible cause of death and to photograph the dolphin. It was a male Pantropical Spotted dolphin, and had a large infection in his mouth and broken teeth from a fishing hook, either a long line or from a sports fishing boat. We did our data collection and then took the dolphin out to sea and let it sink, so it would not come up on the beach again and left for our tour.

As we returned from our tour that same day, we came upon the body of a dead baby humpback. I had this terrible feeling that it was Spirit and we took video and photos of the body so that we could confirm my suspicions.

When I got home, I first compared the tail fluke ID shot I had of Mother Teresa with the ID shots I had gotten on



Mother Teresa diving among five other humpbacks on Aug. 6

Maybe there was a reason his mom kept him so close to the island, always in such shallow waters.

I watched the video of the day we saw Mother Teresa with the other humpbacks and now knowing that Spirit was dead, I watched with interest the interactions of the whales with each other. Mother Teresa was almost always being escorted by the other whales, almost always in the middle of all of them. I did some research and found that whales and dolphins have been known to show sympathetic and comforting behaviors to mothers whose babies have died. Humpback mothers have even

been known to beach themselves to die because they are so grief stricken at the loss of their babies. Perhaps these other five whales were comforting Mother Teresa and keeping her from swimming to the shore to beach herself. My heart went out to Mother Teresa and the loss of her beautiful baby.

It made me think about the circle of life, and how that very day, the day we found Spirit's body, we had seen two

other humpback moms with tiny babies, only days old. Life ends. Life continues.

It made me think how grateful I am that I was able to capture a part of Spirit's short life and even his death through photos. I tell Spirit's story here so that he may live on through my words and photos. As a marine researcher, you do get to know certain individuals and you would have to have a closed heart to not become emotionally attached to them. Spirit certainly had captured my heart and I felt a special closeness with him, especially after gracing me with those incredible breach shots. And even in his death, he brings me joy as I look at that seemingly healthy, happy baby flying through the air. Now Spirit is flying with the Angels.

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Spirit and Mother Teresa Swimming by the Island

August 6th of the six adults traveling together. Sure enough, Mother Teresa was among these whales, and without baby Spirit.

I then compared the underside markings of Spirit from the breach photos with the underside markings of the dead baby humpback, and to my great sadness, confirmed that the dead baby was indeed Spirit.

We could not find any sign of damage to his body, such as from a boat,



Spirit as we found him on August 8, 2005