

Scientists to Study Humpbacks With 'Schooner Dog' For Luck

By Laura J. MacKay
Bureau Chief

A group of scientists from the Provincetown-based Center for Coastal Studies set sail Sunday for the West Indies, where they will resume an unprecedented international study of humpback whales.

This year, the second in a three-year project, the winter-long trip is all the more exciting because the scientists' home away from home is the 67-foot Rachel B. Jackson, a handsome, 1890s-style wooden schooner.

Chances are, the group will also enjoy the company of the ship's crew, whose captain is a fast track drop-out living a dream and whose mascot is a sweet, semi-famous black lab whose mission in life is to do as much swimming as possible.

There was an air of excitement on the Rachel B. Jackson last Friday as scientists and crew made last-minute preparations for the journey. The deck was littered with equipment, the rails hung with wet laundry, and the hold laden with two months of provisions for nine researchers, a crew of four and "Schooner Dog."

By now, the Rachel B. Jackson is somewhere between here and Beaufort, North Carolina, where it will rendezvous with the center's own 44-foot ketch Sirius before setting a course just after Christmas for the West Indies for two solid months of whale research.

The YONAH Project (Years of the North Atlantic Humpback Whale) is an international effort that entails two years of fieldwork in waters from Norway to the Dominican Republic, followed by a year of analysis.

The project is significant because it represents the first attempt to gather information essential to a comprehensive understanding of the whale population inhabiting an entire ocean basin, according to center scientist David Mattila.

The Rachel B. Jackson research team consists of Mr. Mattila and center scientists Irene Seipt and Lisa Baraff, plus three other American scientists, two Canadians and a Dane. Center scientist Phil Clapham is part of another international group also working in the West Indies on the Sirius.

The scientists will study humpbacks at four sites in the West Indies, the most important of which is the Rachel B. Jackson's destination: Silver Bank, a limestone platform reef about 65 miles north of the Dominican Republic where as many as 4,000 humpbacks gather to breed each winter.

The schooner will be anchored in a "coral garden," Mr. Mattila said. That sounds nice, but it is the coral that inspired the reef's name, he said. Once known as "The Thorns," the reef became so famous for sinking Spanish galleons that it was named "Silver Bank" after the precious cargoes it claimed.

The reef takes its toll today, too — the researchers will be storing some of their gear on a freighter that was wrecked in 1982.

The center team expects to see some old friends on Silver Bank, Mr. Mattila said. Some of the whales that feed in Cape Cod Bay migrate to the West Indies each winter, meeting with whales from all over the North Atlantic.

Scientists from around the world will also be conducting research in the Gulf of Maine, Gulf of St. Lawrence, Newfoundland and Labrador, southwestern Greenland, Iceland and Norway. The center, a key player in the project, is coordinating the West Indies and Gulf of Maine segments.

When this winter's research is complete, scientists will compare the first and second year data, consisting of information such as identification photographs and DNA samples, according to Mr. Mattila. At the conclusion of the YONAH Project, the North Atlantic humpback will be the most studied and, it is hoped, the best

'Schooner Dog' -continued

groupies" and others who longed to escape mundane or stressful lives. "I'm embarrassed to say I started getting fan mail," he said. "They're just people trying to crawl out from under the laundry basket of life."

Even more famous is "Schooner Dog" Sadie, an energetic 11-year-old pedigreed lab who made the front page of USA Today after a brush with death, according to Mr. Crafts.

Back home in Southwest Harbor, Sadie likes to go swimming between sightseeing trips. One day last May, she apparently got stuck under a dock when she came up for air and spent 52 hours in 40-degree water, Mr. Crafts related. She never barked for help, but a golden retriever spotted her beneath the planks and refused to budge from the spot until someone rescued Schooner Dog.

She lost 10 pounds in the ordeal, Mr. Crafts said, yet as soon as she was extricated from the dock she leaped into the harbor for a refreshing 20-minute swim.

Sadie will face new perils in the West Indies — sharks. Captain and crew plan to keep a close eye on the intrepid paddler.

Sadie views gulls as "sea kitties," Mr. Crafts said. What will she make of the humpbacks?



Captain Jeff Crafts of the schooner Rachel B. Jackson and his dog, Sadie, are among the crew headed for the West Indies with an international group of whale researchers.

Staff Photo by Laura J. MacKay

understood of the great whales.

"It gets very wearing," Mr. Mattila said of the winter research, "but it's also incredibly exciting.

"This will be home," he said, surveying the decks of the Rachel B. Jackson, which was tied up at MacMillan Pier being readied for the expedition.

The Rachel B. Jackson was built 10 years ago in Jonesport, Maine, by an 80-year-old boat builder who based its design on a set of 1890s plans, according to Captain Jeff Crafts. Originally commissioned by the Mystic Seaport in Connecticut, the schooner was later bought by a Texas oceanographer who sailed it around the world for three years.

There's a story behind Mr. Crafts, too. He was a civil engineer charged with designing the controversial third Boston Harbor tunnel when, last March, he fell in love with the Rachel B. Jackson and quit his job to begin a new life at sea.

After seeing the schooner for sale in a boating magazine, Mr. Crafts traveled to Houston, Texas, to see it. "Six days later I had the vessel at sea and with a green crew," he said Friday. "It was the right boat and I was ready."

More than ready, in fact. He was fed up with tunnel politics, and the sailing life was a natural, if unconventional alternative for the 39-year-old Maine native, who has held a captain's license since age 18.

Now, he's making a living chartering the Rachel B. Jackson for summer sightseeing and as a floating bed-and-breakfast out of Southwest Harbor, Maine, not far from Bar Harbor.

Mr. Crafts' story appeared in the Bangor Daily News and he became a minor celebrity among "schooner

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