The morning began early at Snug Harbor. Everyone awoke with an eager anticipation to see the whales, as we had the previous day. A breakfast of kings was prepared (cinnamon rolls, scrambled eggs, and orange juice), courtesy of Phinn, while me (Rachel), Dana, and Jamey took turns listening to the Lime Kiln and Orca Sound hydrophones to see if the whales had traveled south to a point where we could intercept them. It was rainy, and Jamey reminded Bre that we would indeed see whales because every time it rained while we were on the water, we saw whales as soon as it stopped. A report from 5 Star told us that there had been no reports of the whales anywhere, but we needed to pump out, so the news worked in our favor as we headed to Roche to rid the Gato of our waste.

While in Roche, Captain Todd received a 5 Star report of killer whale sightings near Tsawwassen, headed south. Excitedly, we retrieved the Beam Reach chart and devised a plan to somehow reach the whales on our last full day out on the water. Not surprisingly, as we ventured north, it stopped raining. We needed to make it back somewhere close to San Juan for the evening to be able to arrive at Friday Harbor Labs the following day at 8:00am to clean the Gato and say goodbye to Captain Todd, so our time looking for the whales was limited. We decided to head past John’s Island, where Jamey works as a camp counselor during the summer, and voyage into Boundary Pass, hoping that the whales would venture at least as far south as Patos so we could gather more hydrophone and behavior data, and say our final goodbyes to the beloved residents. On our way, Phinn had us use the range finder on different things in the water (birds, buoys, boats, etc.) to train us in judging distances, so we would be well prepared when we encountered the whales and had to shout out behavior data with distances. As it turned out, we actually weren’t too shabby at guessing distances. I was, however, the worst at it.

As we neared East Point, one of our waypoints that we had been collecting data at since our journey on the Gato began, we heard radio talk from various whale watching boats that informed us the whales were spotted in the area. We took shifts sitting on the bow looking for the whales and Bre was the first to spot them ahead of us. We quickly prepared the behavior and phonation sheets and readied the hydrophone array. The whales were moving quickly, traveling with the current, like us, but there was little chance we were going to catch them. Just as our disappointment peaked, I looked out of the stern of the Gato and, lo and behold, there were blows in the distance! The approaching whales were far away, over 1500m, but they were headed our way, putting on a show for us as they approached. There was a lot of surface activity from them, but their distance didn’t allow us to view the number of whales, nor exactly what they were doing. We decided to slow the Gato to a speed at which we could deploy the hydrophone array and try to record calls and clicks of the approaching whales. Unfortunately, the whales were not being very vocal, but they were quite active as they speedily caught up with and passed the Gato. There ended up being approximately 5 focal groups, the initial one we saw in front of us, and four spread out off the starboard stern of the boat. The whales continued to head South, followed by us and an additional 7 whale watching boats.

We spent a good amount of time with the whales on our last day at sea and were able to enjoy them until we changed course for the afternoon to arrive at Jones to dock for the night. On our way back, we read Boat Green aloud to learn more about sustainable boat practices, and Robin discussed with us what was expected from us when we arrived back at the labs to end our journey. After docking at Jones, Captain Todd gave us a sailing lecture about what makes the Gato Verde special, informing us about things like the Gato’s batteries and what additions could make the biodiesel catamaran even greener. The lecture was followed by dinner (Cous Cous with Tempeh and veggies, made by Bre and Jamey), dessert of leftover brownies, and a trip to shore to stretch our legs. The evening finished with lots of data analysis and many happy hearts from our epic adventure with the whales.