

Carl's Bahama (Mis?) Adventure of 2011

The 230 Mile Odd Sea

Day 2 (Mon 5/23): The second try and successful crossing

Total Mileage: 79 nautical miles

Tuesday started calm and beautiful, the anchorage had been very still in between the small islands, with just a few mosquitoes biting Rose and I over night in the v-berth. The girls had a better time of it in the cockpit bed as it had the advantage of a breeze that kept them cool and the bugs away. As I came groggily awake, I remember wondering if last night should have been our weather window, the seas seemed to calm down as we came back, and the night had a gentle breeze, as opposed to the night before when the wind was blowing pretty hard. Listening to the weather report while Megan made a pancake breakfast, I remembered Bill W. had crossed at night, and was thinking considering the report was that the winds should be moderate today and lower tonight, this may be what would work for us as well. First on the agenda was to get more gas, I had computed how much fuel we needed based on our lake sailing experiences and it was quite evident that fighting a headwind and waves would use considerably more gas. We started motoring back to Homestead, picking our way through the shallows, then sailing in as the wind picked up. Discussing my thoughts with the girls, they agreed the best course of action was to refuel and pick up a few odd and ends and try again tonight. When we pulled into the dock, I checked on how much gas we had burnt and decided we needed another 5 gallon jug, so I had Rose pick up another one while she was shopping, this would make a grand total of 16 Gal capacity. I figured this would probably be a huge overkill for just a crossing, but better to be safe than sorry as the saying goes. As the girls went to town, I tidied up the boat and tried to think of what last minute things I could have them get that I would regret not having later. One thing I am glad I had them get was a set of lithium batteries for the GPS (it takes AA, and we had a bunch of rechargeable ones, but I thought it would be nice to not have to change them mid stream).

When the girls got back, we filled all the gas cans and packed everything in its place, we were ready to brave the stream! Just before we left, a pelican swam up to the boat, it was so sad, somehow it had gotten a hook with fish line attached to it all tangled around its beak and leg, making it paddle around with a limp. We all wished there were something we could do to help.



After looking at the charts again and remembering all the running aground in the shallows when we went to angelfish creek, I decided to try going through the barrier islands at Caesar creek

Heading back out into the bay with full tanks and high hopes, we motorsailed towards the well marked channel. As we approached the barrier islands of Biscayne bay, we were looking for a place to anchor out to eat dinner as it was still a bit early to start out for a night crossing. Rounding the corner of Adams key we saw a nice dock with what looked like a national park sign on it, so we went in to check it out. This place turned out to be one of the most pleasant places we went to on our entire trip, the accommodations were sparse, consisting of basic toilets, and a really neat picnic pavilion, which we ate dinner in. The grounds however were beautiful, rolling lawn with coconut trees swaying in the breeze. As we toured the facility we met Deb, the wife of one of the rangers living on the island. She told us about some of the history of the island we were on. It seems this was the location of the coco lobo club, an exclusive resort\club that catered to politicians and the upper crust of society from the 30's till somewhere in the 80's (I think). Deb also informed us that normally this time of year, the clouds of mosquitoes and biting flies would nearly carry you away. At times the only way they found tolerable in dealing with them was to don beekeeping hoods and gloves and limit trips to basic necessary functions, staying inside as much as possible. She seemed very concerned that we were braving the gulf stream in such a small boat and suggested we try the keys if it proved too rough. While this sounded like a great backup plan, we were Bahama bound!



Rose getting picnic supplies



mmm



Brooke on Adams key

We left the dock about 6:45, heading out between what turned out to be a really long channel heading out into the Atlantic. This time, everyone took some Bonine as we were leaving, seasickness was an experience we knew for sure we did not want to have again. The conditions seemed much milder than yesterday, with wave swells about 2-3 feet and about a 10 knot wind directly on our nose as we were headed directly east. My thought was that I wanted to head directly into the wind and come in to the islands a bit south rather than miss them to the north.



Looking pretty placid at this point...



Building swells, they don't look it, but were about 3-4 ft somewhere around here.

Initially the wind died down as evening approached, which was what I had been hoping for but the waves seemed to be just the same if not bigger. Even though it was somewhat rough, I was confident a crossing could be made that night. Nightfall never really seemed to come, things just seemed to become harder and harder to see till finally the lights of Miami were the only plainly visible landmark and even they began to dim somewhat the further we got from land. I noticed a couple lights in the distance from freighters and was thankful they were not close. Although even as I was thinking that, Brooke brought my attention to a particular set of lights off our starboard stern that seemed to be getting bigger. I told her to just keep an eye on them (I was pretty sure there was no danger of them getting too close, but I figured it would give her something to occupy her time) how wrong I was! After she told me a couple times that they were indeed getting bigger, I started paying closer attention and tried to figure out which direction that boat was headed. Looking at the lights, I could see a red light on the left and a white one on the right. I explained that this meant the ship she was looking at was going in the same direction we were, the red light in the front let us know that we

were seeing the starboard side with the front pointed away from us, or at least parallel. The problem with my theory was that if this was true, the ship should be going away from us, the lights getting dimmer, however the opposite was true. The lights continued to grow till I could make out the shape of the ship, and hear the low rumble of the engines. Two things I brought away from this encounter, container ships look really, really big from a 22 ft sailboat, and their lights are the reverse of small craft, with the white light in the bow and the green or red lights in the stern. Later in the night we also found out that cruise ships generally were brightly lit, especially in the front, creating a rectangle of light above the front navigation light that made it easy to differentiate between them and the cargo ships. Fortunately none of them got as close as the container ship, but altogether we saw 8 cruise ships and 4 freighters, this was truly a busy night!



Freighter as it was going away, hard to get a good focus at night at that distance, from the deck of a pitching boat.

As we continued the relentless pounding across the gulf stream, I brought out the autopilot and tried to use it to relieve the stress of constantly maintaining the same heading, which was proving to be a lot more of a chore than I had anticipated. I had bought it on e-bay about 2 months before this trip, but had been so busy getting the boat shipshape, there was no time to take it for a shakedown cruise,

so the trial would be at night, with building waves, in the middle of crossing the gulfstream. I can think of many better circumstances to verify the operational status of an essential piece of equipment, but nevertheless, the autopilot performed quite well! As the waves rose from 3 to about 6 ft, and the wind to around 20 knots, it became essential to keep our heading precisely to the west, any deviation would result in the waves overpowering the autopilot, widening the gap in our intended and actual heading with each successive wave.

One of the unforeseen challenges I now faced was filling the gas tank in the back of a wildly pitching boat. This involved almost standing on my head in the lazarette, pouring from a 5 gal. jug to the 6 gal boat tank, having to stop after 3 gal or so, because with the pitching, this was as full as I could get it before the gas started to splash out. I really did not want to spill any, having experienced how awful that was to live with when we first got the boat. Other than the acrobatic gas filling every 2 or 3 hours, fighting to stay on course and watching out so ships would not run us down, the night passed without too much drama, with the exception of Megan dropping the GPS, which promptly stopped working. This caused me a bit of concern till it started up again, I have to hand it to Garmin, their e-trex line of GPS is really tough! Mine has been though a LOT, that's a different story though.

As we went into Monday, the score became; Gulf stream -1 us - 1/2, we were actually going to make it!