

Cold Water Kayaking

If you read last year's account of the trip on a deep draft, former trawler (the Bear-with a big double kayak on board) through much of South East Alaska, don't expect something similar here.

It was back to basics this year...a "grunt trip," but with a twist. The twist was a warm, dry bed and roof in the evenings, but hard kayaking in cold (mid-40s) water, among ice bergs in a glacial bay with plenty of rain and wind waves as well as a tidal change of up to 18 feet from low to high tide.

As it turns out, the U.S. Forest Service has built wilderness cabins throughout much of the Tongass National Forest, the largest National Forest in the U.S. and entirely within South East Alaska. That's the piece of Alaska that extends down from the mainland of Alaska along the coast of British Columbia, Canada almost to Prince Rupert, B.C. It's about the size of PA only spread thin and long with many islands large and small.

The place was Spurt Cove Cabin about 18 miles north of Petersburg, AK, but on the mainland in a glacial bay...Thomas. The reasons for this location were multiple and included isolation in a remote bay and cove, brown bear, black bear, moose, deer, eagles, orca, sea lions, seals, whales, a glacier within reach by a combination of sea travel and walking, open bay fishing for salmon and halibut, and trails leading to mountain lake fishing for trout. There are many cabins located throughout South East. This one had it all.

On the morning of August 1st we left Petersburg, AK in the rain in a speed boat with all our gear plus two big Eddyline doubles, arriving about an hour later across Fredrick Strait at a small, hidden cove (Spurt) in Thomas Bay. As we turned in to the cove at low tide, we could see the white wall of Baird Glacier to our north and our home at the end of the thin, long cove sandwiched between rocky headlands looking to the west...Spurt Cove Cabin. Amazingly there was some blue in the sky. A good omen?

Spurt Cove Cabin from the front porch.



By the time we were settled that first day and had explored the berry patches, stream, and an outhouse at the end of a graveled walk, nestled between giant western hemlock and sitka spruce, a short kayak trip up the bay towards the glacier was hastily begun. The

word “hastily” is key here.

There was no real planning for this first day trip...just maps, wet suits and away we paddled along the west coast of Thomas Bay, heading north towards the glacier. It seemed so close. After several hours paddling, the glacial wall of snow still seemed close...but no closer. We realized it was literally a mountain of snow and we would probably need a whole day to get there...maybe. We turned south and paddled back towards our cabin, looking out towards Scenery Cove to the east, a deep channel with huge cliffs going straight up from sea level to over 3300 ft. at Jenkins Peak only about 2.5 mile from us. Beyond that was snow and rock at over 5000 ft. The vastness was stunning. In fact...so stunning that we sat riveted to those scenes as we passed our cove some time later (without realizing it). By the time we began looking for our little cove we began to question how far we had come. How could we have passed it? We continued south and then west until we were certain we had come too far as now we could actually see the entrance to Thomas Bay and the vastness of the Strait beyond it. By about 7 PM we found our way back. I had actually contemplated sleeping in the kayak that night. It was humbling and perhaps a good lesson on our first day in this huge, open, cold

environment with ice bergs floating past. We wanted wilderness and that is what we had gotten.

One of the things that drew me to this wild place was the high lakes with fish, and trails from sea level. We knew we would get all the kayaking we could



Janet –looking at Scenery Cove

handle here, but we also wanted to hike the mountains surrounding us. Coastal Alaska in these latitudes is temperate rainforest and just about impossible to travel very far in unless someone...sometime...has bush wacked a trail. Here we knew there were at least two good fishing lakes with what the Forest Service described

as “trails.” We knew these trails would not be like most trails in managed areas of National Forest. There was a reason that folks in Petersburg recommended high rubber boots (Janet came to love them).



doubles

The next AM, in the rain, Keto and I carried one of the big down to low tide about 100 yards

from the cabin (high tide was several ft. from the cabin) and set off for the trail just north of us, that would take us from sea level to Spurt Lake. On his GPS he noted that we were at -8 ft. or so in elevation at shore before we beached the kayaks above high tide and began to climb in what was a muddy morass of rocks, lichen, moose and bear prints and droppings, and assorted huge fallen trees.

We made it to Spurt Lake through a veritable jungle several hours later through coastal forest that began in huge, virgin sitka spruce and ended in dwarfed, bonsai species barely over our heads in a peat and lichen floor that rippled with our footsteps. Keto caught several trout as we pushed our way through underbrush and moose trails around the lake. The trip back was all downhill...literally.

Trout and Shrimp for Dinner

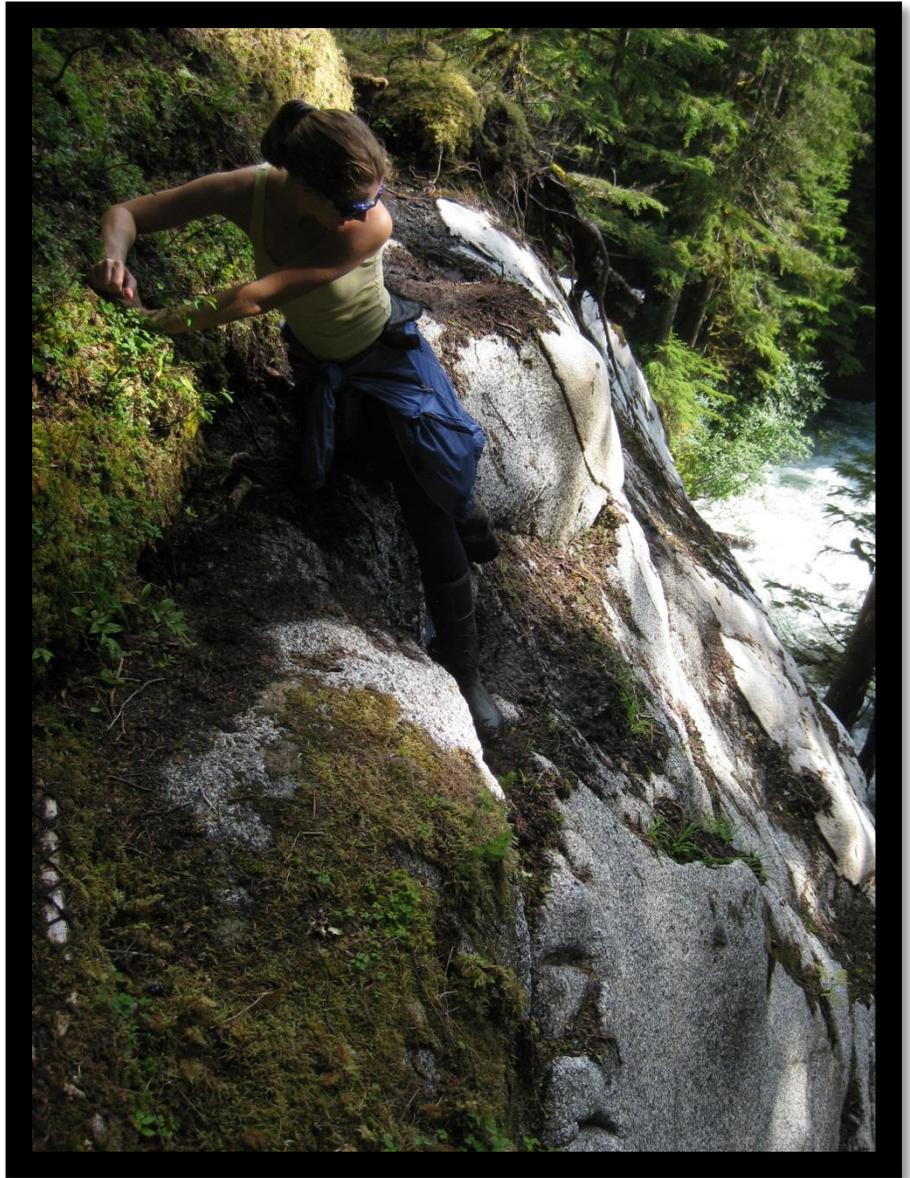
The next day was solid rain and cold. This is where the “twist” applied.

We stayed around the cabin, fed the fire, picked blueberries, admired the outhouse, looked out at the big bay with ice bergs floating by and planned a trip south to Cascade Creek the next AM.

It dawned early that next day with lots of light and blue sky instead of dark, ominous clouds. The bay was fairly quiet with good conditions to go across the 2.5 miles or so of open, exposed water to reach the headlands on the east, with elevations again straight up from the water to 4,000 ft. or so. We had our salmon rigs set up and ready to go.



About 5 miles later, down along these headlands (and no apparent salmon run) we spotted the mouth of Cascade Creek, a wild, fast descending crush of rapids and mist producing falls. We beached and carried the big doubles to high tide and beyond and began our trek. The beginning of this trail really was managed, developed trail with boardwalks and wooden steps above the crazy-steep falls. Once past the mist of the falls, that all changed pretty dramatically to mud, rock, huge boulders, and virgin timber. Some of that timber lay across the trail. Apparently the tourists stopped near the bridge high across the tormented water below. **Katie on the "Cascade Trail"**



We figured it would be tough and it was more than that. It was dangerous, with many places where a slip could send you into that torrent below. Ma and Pa (Janet and I) made it about an hour up the trail (maybe one-half mile or so at the best). Keto and Katie continued. We had realized that to get to Swan Lake

At over 1500 ft. in elevation, we would need to go at least 6 miles and over a pass of at least 2000 ft. before descending to the lake. At one-half mile per hour on this “trail,” it would be an overnighter at least to get there. As had happened that first day, we needed to recalibrate our expectations with the vastness, steepness, and ruggedness of this place. I ended up catching some trout at the mouth of Cascade. Keto and Katie came in about an hour later, having realized also that our estimations needed to be adjusted to reality. It was still a great day. No rain, some fishing, and unbelievable surroundings.

The next morning dawned with a light drizzle. It was not unexpected. The goal this day was to fish for halibut at the bay entrance where glacial moraine had produced a small area of shallow seas, perhaps one thousand years or more in the past when the glacier had extended to that mouth. We knew it would be a trick to go out there in the wide open sea, in the wind and waves, and fish in one spot from kayaks with heavy tackle and hopefully reach the bottom feeding halibut and pull them into a boat that could weigh just a bit more than them. We also knew we would need to cut our lines on the big ones.

We had examined the tides by this time and were far more calculating in where and when we attempted something here.

We knew that our only chance was to hit the bay mouth at slack tide. This would give us about an hour to fish as the out-going tide slowed and it switched to incoming. This would



also help us get home that evening as the tide rolled in about 18 ft. and brought us (theoretically) to the door of our warm cabin.

We got to the spit on the west entrance to the Bay and kayaked out around it into Fredrick Strait amid, gulls, sea lions, seals, and a family of orcas. This obviously was the spot. We beached on the Strait side, checked out the tides briefly, baited up, and headed out to the south along the Bay entrance to a spot between ocean buoys meant for large ships. We dropped our heavy tackle amid wind waves and an ever shifting tide. Keto almost immediately got hits and pulled up a sculpin and reset the hook and dropped it again with the heavy weights. Almost immediately again he had hits as we attempted to maintain our position amid rising seas. The wind, waves, and current were making it hard to maintain position here. At this point in time, we heard a motor very close and turned around to see a commercial sport fishing boat pull up close by and then, almost immediately gun their engines, pulling away while waving at us. Their wake produced some pretty big waves that we turned into to avoid capsizing. It was an interesting experience. I do not know if it was ignorance or perhaps something else. I did know that we were in a pretty tough spot with high wind and waves and little ability to control our drift. I also knew that if one of our boats went over out here, we would have limited time to get back in the kayak at 40+ water temperature. I pulled in close to Keto and Katie and we discussed it briefly. They agreed. It was time to get out of this wind and the building waves. We headed north back into Thomas Bay. Within a mile or so we were



out of the “fetch” or wind tunnel and calmer water prevailed. Keto caught a flounder outside our cove that evening. It was the best of that species we had ever tasted. Again we had learned that we were dealing with pretty extreme conditions in this northern sea.

The next day was a break day for Ma and Pa Kettle. We just cruised around in the sun and let it soak in. The two young’uns took off down south of Cascade Creek to the large delta of Patterson River, fed to the south by another glacier hoping to hit a salmon run and see some resident brown bears nabbing them. Ultimately the cold water and weather had slowed the local salmon runs. Keto and Katie came back without salmon after more than 15 miles of kayaking and a full day in the sun. Still a fantastic day....just no fish dinner.

That night we pulled out the two-way radio and listened to NOAA weather broadcasts. After every area report, the robot voice said, “rain.” We had begun to mimic it. Almost every day we heard this at the end of each broadcast.

Anyway, we had a big decision ahead of us. We had never made it to **THE Glacier** and our last day was going to be wet, cold, and long to get there. At the end we did not know what we would find since this was not a tidewater glacier. It did not calve into the sea. On the aerials and maps, we could see rivers coming down from big ice wall, but we had no idea how we get up those fast rivers among the ice mud, wind, tide, and current. Both

shortwave



the
would
bergs,

gals basically said, “you guys do it.” They knew as we did that it would be tough and having two big doubles to carry over barriers, paddle up rivers; into the wind and waves was a pretty big unknown.

That last morning of our last day and night in the bay, Keto and I set out in heavy, rain tight dry tops and wet suit gear as well as neoprene gloves and big rubber boots. We knew it would be a cold, windy day especially as we approached the ice wall and the weather it created. For the first several hours we hugged the west coast of the bay to avoid the wind and waves. Even though we rode with the early morning, incoming tide, the weather created by the mountain of ice at the north end more than offset it. This time we pretty much knew what we were facing.

Somewhere near the end of that second hour of travel as we looked ahead at the glacier wall and what appeared to be several channels and an area of moraine in front of it, I realized I needed to make a quick stop. The problem was that the west shore was not really much of a shore. As we came north to the Glacier, we were seeing a change to steep cliffs which had been cut by that glacier earlier in its life.

Why a quick stop now? Well, I guess I need to make a confession. Before



flying in to South East Alaska the previous week, I had had two kidney stone operations and now had a stent in me keeping the ureter open.

Beached in the Moraine above high tide looking south to the rivers from the glacier

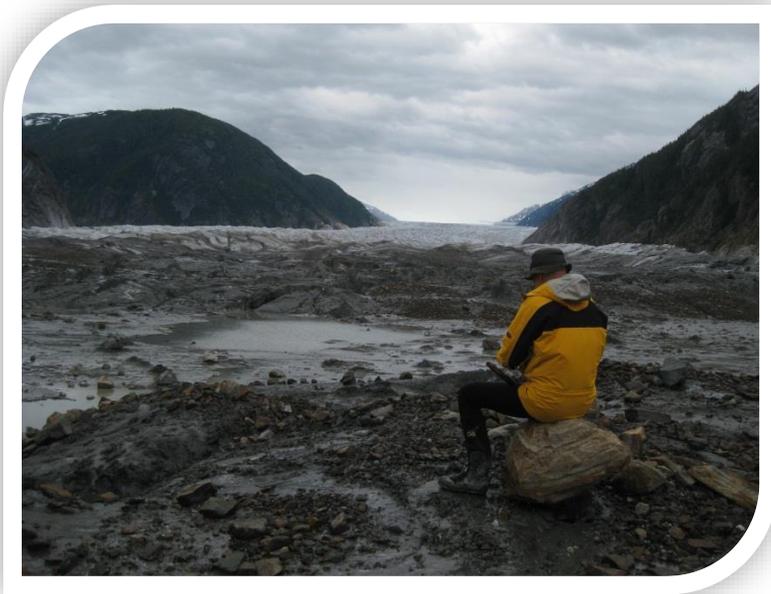
I needed to relieve some pressure before we got to this big unknown ahead and all we could see was cliffs except..... ahead in one spot was a tiny beach which the high tide was quickly erasing. We got there with about five feet to spare as the water backed up to the cliffs behind it. It was enough.

Now we were in the final approaches, with several channels appearing to lead to the higher ground of moraine in the middle and the white wall of the glacial ice further back. We tried the channel closest to us near the western shore. It led nowhere. We retreated out towards the center of the channel, looking for another way in while grounding in the silt laden waters. All around us sea birds, seals, and sea lions watched. It was apparent that there was a pretty good food source here in these shallow, swift waters.

Finally we were able to find a channel which appeared to go all the way to the terminal moraine above high tide. We could see low shrubbery there. It had to be above high tide so that we could leave the kayak and hike to the glacier. It was not so easy. This passage, really a river created by the melting glacial wall ahead, was swift. In some places we sat still, not progressing at all. In other places we grounded and waited for the tide to rise enough for us to continue. We were able to make headway by staying in the eddy line of the current, where wind and revolving currents allowed us to progress. Finally we got to what we believed was the closest point to the moraine and beached the kayak, carrying it up over a large gravel bar, into a high tide channel and then up an embankment to a new world...literally. We were now in a place with enough elevation to be safe from the tide and in a new land on the moraine with Sitka spruce five inches high scattered among lichens and flowers...a place created relatively recently by the receding glacier. Now, unencumbered by ice, the land was literally rising.

Looking around us there were several miles of open ground with small plants. No real chance of the brown bear hiding here...or at least not much.

We began to walk towards the white wall through high areas of seedlings and lichens as well as lower areas which were barren and rain swept. Within an hour of this we stood on black ice...a mix of rock, dirt, and ice, with crevasses everywhere. Here we stopped. Going any further could have made us a permanent part of the surroundings. It was a strange feeling, standing there looking at something many thousands of years old and standing on something only several years into its creation. It was also a wake-up call for humans



Sitting in the “Black Ice looking at the headwall of the Glacier

Getting home that evening was easy. We rode the outgoing tide, this time with the glacier created wind and waves. Surf City. The next day, by mid-morning, the motor boat appeared and we loaded boats and gear and headed to Petersburg in the rain. It had been 1 week in a temperate jungle surrounded by mountains, glaciers, and the sea. We had stayed in one place and had gotten to know that place fairly well...another kind of wilderness experience.

