



2006 Snettisham Adventure #7: Small Mammals and Big Waves

September and the summer was closing in. Suddenly I realized that my adventures this season had yielded much fun but little improvement to the lodge project at Snettisham. Although I'd ventured south seven times already, the stays were brief and generally involved more play than work; furthermore, the dismally rainy summer had prevented my staining the two unprotected buildings which was my priority for the work season. Other weekends were taken up in Denali, St. James Bay, up the Taku, or recovering here in Juneau. In short, I was feeling guilty.

So I planned another work party over a five day period, meant to bring some friends down for the first time, get some work done, stay a little longer than usual, and button the place up for the winter. Marcy agreed to come down Wednesday through Friday and Travis Friday through Sunday. It all fell together over the last week of September.

And speaking of September...September in my book is still squarely summer! A little fallish, perhaps, and a bit more blustery, but the tourists still trickle in most of the month and rainy August has given way to some of the most spectacularly clear days of the season. Although sunny days may be outnumbered by stormy ones, September is known (in my mind) for glassy water, blue sky, crisp air, orcas, and lots of whales (oh, and nagoonberries). It's quite possibly my favorite month of the year.



Marcy and the Ronquil ready to go, Aurora Harbor

But after a summer like this one, I suppose it was a bit much to hope that September would yield pleasant weather just because it wasn't yet October. When the forecast called for 20 knot winds and four foot seas all week, I shrugged and chocked it up to your standard Juneau forecast for that time of year; after all, you never really know what the water's up to until you're out on top of it. Waiting for a better forecast would likely mean waiting until spring or foregoing any company.

So Marcy and I headed south at 4:15 pm Wednesday September 27. I finished my obligatory first beer just in time to hit the first swells entering the channel as I approached Taku Inlet; I'd forgotten to dump a little in the water, so perhaps that was the source of my later troubles. In any event, the trip across Taku Inlet gave us 2-3' seas--not comfortable, but in no way dangerous. Actually, Marcy disagreed with my height assessment and determined that they couldn't have been more than 18"; I could see her point, but as captain of the vessel, I made the executive decision that they were 2-3 feet tall. We found this quarrel highly amusing about two hours later.

Expectedly, the seas picked up as we left the shelter of Grand Island and crossed Stephen's Passage to Taku Harbor. With a long unobstructed stretch of ocean, the seas here were building to four feet and my little skiff skirted up and down on the swells, bobbing me around like a little toy boat. Marcy spotted a pair of whales a few hundred yards away just south of Grand Island but there was no way I was venturing away from shore to check them out. They blew a few times and dove, followed by another pair, all heading north. As I gazed longingly in their direction (while I wasn't busy maintaining control of the boat), I told Marcy about the September Stephen's Passage group-up, a phenomenon I've been honored to experience for the last eight years. For whatever reasons, the stretch of Stephen's Passage between Juneau and Snettisham/Tracy Arm is typically rather barren in terms of whale activity for most of the summer. In late August/September, however, a whale food source evidently erupts in this region, attracting whales into huge loose groups of 50 or more to feed. To be near one of these aggregations is a thrill—multiple blows in every direction, a constant flow of flukes lifted high in the air, lots of small groups feeding together, and often breaching. You can sense the intensity of the activity as whales breathe and descend all around with evident purpose, gorging and gaining weight for the impending fall migration. The crisp salty fall air carries the explosion of whale breath from all directions.

I'd hoped, even expected, to find the September group-up this year too but, as with much of nature this summer, the pattern was off. I heard few reports of whale aggregations in the area, and my own explorations yielded nothing. So as we rocked and slammed our way south, I joked to Marcy that this must be the great Stephen's Passage group-up, four whales on a stormy sea in late September.

We toyed with the idea of holing up in Taku Harbor for the night, but decided we'd rather head south. The seas were tolerable close to shore and Marcy and I chatted pleasantly as we passed Limestone Inlet. Then two things happened: the light began to fade very rapidly and the seas picked up. We bucked our way into steady four footers (kicked about on top by a brisk wind) and started getting hit by tight pairs of five footers (this time Marcy agreed with my height assessment). A single five footer is easy enough to manage, but as we rose up one and plunged into the trough on the other side, the next swell was right there towering over our heads and curling down on us in the wind. The boat was barely able to nose up the side of it before it took on green water. Furthermore, the swells were coming across Stephen's Passage from the Admiralty side, forcing us to turn away from shore and our route to nose into the larger ones and not get hit broadside.

As we slowed down to deal with the weather, the distance Seal Rocks (near the entrance to Snettisham) began to fade in the gathering darkness.

Then in a fit of stupidity I lost one of my favorite hats. I rarely wear it, but maybe I thought the embroidery on the back (“Allen Marine Crew”) or the whale watching logo on the front would serve me well if, respectively, the weather kicked up or there was any chance for whales. I’m a little superstitious that way. But, as I stood up from behind the salt-sprayed windshield to survey the scene, my hat flew off over the back of the boat. I made a quick donut in the swells, but picking it up proved impossible. Very grumpy at myself, the boat then ran out of gas. (Well, we didn’t run out of gas exactly, but I did need to switch tanks.) I clambered over our sundry gear while the boat rolled and turned in the swells and hastily connected the hose to the other tank. Then we headed on, the white caps in Stephen’s Passage flashing in the gloom. The hairiest part of the trip was the last mile or so before we hit Seal Rocks, the boat creeping slowly along, losing its momentum every time we had to turn into a swell to ride it out, every big wave possessing the potential to roll us, the haven of Snettisham seeming to get no closer and ever darker. Ordinarily I would swing wide around the Seal Rocks to avoid the surrounding reef, but I was seriously scared in those swells and desperate to get into the shelter of Snettisham; refusing to go too far from shore, we cut between the rocks and the mainland through the shallower passage. Big patches of bull kelp loomed everywhere, frightening me in the dark, but there was no way to avoid them and we plunged on, longing to turn the corner into Snettisham to escape the wind.

Suddenly a high pitched alarm sounded from my console, shrieking at me to do something. Already at the very edge of my nerves, this sent a jolt of adrenaline down my legs. I shut down the engine and the noise stopped, but that left us powerless in big swells dangerously close to a reef in the twilight. None of my gauges gave me any clue as to what the problem was and, scared to be dead in the water any longer in case the swells crashed us against the reef, I cranked the engine back on and charged away, just hoping it would get us to a place where starting my kicker would be a safer endeavor. The alarm screamed and I crashed and pounded into those waves and through the kelp in an effort to round the corner, not caring about anybody’s comfort, whether the windshield fell off, or how many beer bottles broke behind me. Finally the alarm went off and we slid up the sides of a last few swells before we were able to turn and put them behind us as we entered the entrance to Port Snettisham. (Our theory is that the alarm indicated a temporary kelp blockage in the seawater intake hose that cools the engine; if nothing else, it made the loss of my hat quickly become insignificant—plus I figured the hat sacrifice might have made up for the lack of beer earlier).

There was no rest, though. Three and four footers followed us in, raising up our stern and driving us down into the next swell as we raced for the homestead. By this time, Sentinel Point was only a dim smudge in the distance. I got another jolt of adrenaline as the sea seemed to disappear in a sharp line in front of us where the dark ocean water met pale river water. In the near dark it looked all the world like the edge of the earth. Although I knew what it was I felt genuinely anxious as I crossed the line and some relief that we didn’t plunge suddenly into space.

At long last, 7:15 pm, we rounded Point Sentinel and entered the flat calm of Gilbert Bay and then the river. Standing in the dark on the beach, we could barely make out the outline of the lodge 40 yards away. I think I have never been as stressed in my life. Marcy went to work hauling our gear while I set an anchor on the beach and called it good.

Inside, slowly relaxing, we put out a spread of snacks for dinner and then went to bed.

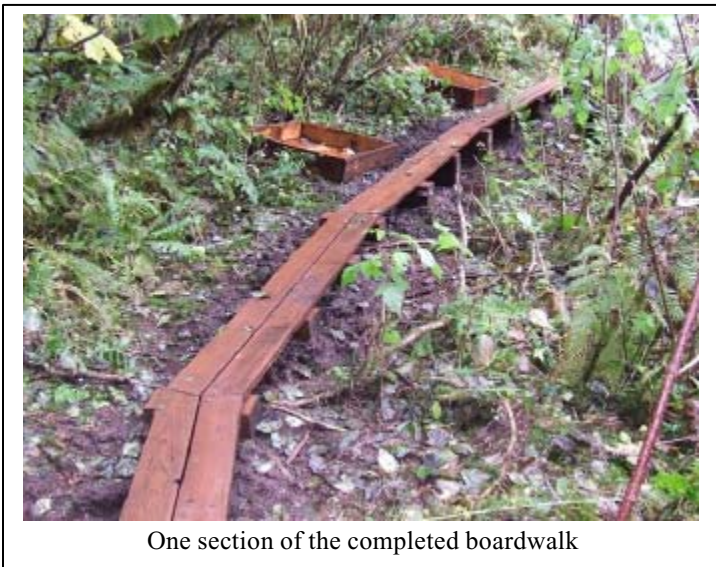


Debbie and Marcy starting the boardwalk in the rain

Somewhat recovered, I woke the next morning and got to work hauling kitchen supplies from the cabin on the point (where we used to do the cooking) closer to the lodge. Then, after a quick breakfast, Marcy and I got to work building a boardwalk. For those of you unfamiliar with the property, the lodge building lies on one edge of the homestead, separated from the four residence cabins by a path through a low, wet wash. The wash isn't so wet that it doesn't flourish with dense alders, elderberries and devil's club, but the least bit of rain turns the path into black mud. I've been compelled to cover the trail with discarded plywood to help with the muck, which is both unattractive and slippery.

As an alternative, I've been intently studying the planked paths on the Juneau trail system for some years. I'd originally intended to use rounds from several downed trees on the property to support a

pressure treated lumber path off the ground, but when we spotted the leftover 6x6 pressure treated posts, we decided that was the better way to go (the scraps were left from the posts that support the lodge building). We cut the posts just over a foot long with my chain saw, then set three of them in the muck about four feet apart at one end of the trail, leveling as we went. We looked through the pressure treated lumber left from construction and found a supply of 2x4s, 2x6s, 2x8s, and 2x12s. A few years ago I'd noticed that the Windfall Lake Trail in Juneau has two narrower boards set side by side rather than the standard single 2x12 board for the path; I liked the added traction and the drain in the middle of the path, so I used as many smaller combinations of boards as I could. We estimated the angle that the next section of the path would take, cut the boards accordingly, and nailed them down. We were both tickled at our first attempt. For the rest of the day we added to the path little by little, keeping it level over most of the trail, joining the ends of the planks as best we could with minimal tools and the chain saw, and creating a bridge-like effect over the low section in the center. By the time I called Marcy to see the complete boardwalk it was coming on dark and we used a flashlight to get the full impression.



One section of the completed boardwalk

All day it had poured on us relentlessly and we were grateful for the wood stove when we finally turned in for the evening (carefully tended by Marcy all afternoon). We hung up our wet clothes and prepared a feast as reward for the day's efforts. Marcy made dill king salmon wrapped in foil in the stove and we dug out more snacks from the night before as well as delicious biscuits, cookies and pound cake generously provided by Marcy's boyfriend.

As the dark closed in, our uninvited guests began to stir. Not yet sealed from small creatures, the lodge is now home to a colony of deer mice who managed to eat an entire box of Costco chocolates (s'mores makings) since I'd last been there. They seemed to have little fear of us as they raced around the room, playing tag and squeaking delightfully. They ran up the walls, across the rafters, in the garbage and around our feet. While Marcy and I sat sipping rum and cherry cokes after dinner, we placed crumbs between our feet while they snuck in from under the couch, often unobserved by us, to steal them away. My readers may find this all unnerving or aggravating (mice can be quite destructive), but since there is absolutely no way to discourage them until spring, I found them rather charming, and good company. They certainly seemed to be having a good time.

The next morning I spent a few hours cleaning and organizing the lodge. All summer long, random leftover lumber, tools, and boxes of supplies from Juneau had been stashed

haphazardly throughout the building, contributing to a growing clutter. After a few hours, all was in order and tidy enough for spring. Marcy and I agreed to get an early start to the trip home so we didn't run into darkness again in case the weather was rough. By this time I'd canceled the notion of coming back, so we packed up, locked the cabins, wrapped up the outhouse in its winter tarp, mouse proofed the food in the lodge, boarded up the picture window, and hauled our gear to the beach. I kayaked out to the boat (now anchored in deeper water) and pumped the water out of the bilge from 40 hours of solid downpour and salt spray. The one foot chop on the river coming in from the southeast was probably indication that the weather hadn't improved, but we decided to check it out anyway.

When we hit Gilbert Bay just outside the river we ran into a smooth two foot swell coming across from Tracy Arm; this area had been flat calm on our way down and I tried to take the change as a good sign. As we rounded Point Sentinel and crossed to the west side of the entrance, the seas picked up. Mist Island offered some protection along the shore, so we made tolerably good time through much of the entrance. A recent mudslide littered the water with flotsam. As soon as we came around Mist Island, though, we got hit by the onslaught of swells from Stephens's Passage. Steady four footers again, interspersed with those pairs of frightening five footers; ahead of us, the water was an angry mess of wind-whipped confusion. It was no calmer than it had been two days before. Still tense from battling it the first time, we puttered on for another 15 minutes before I finally made the call and turned back. The goal for the trip had radically changed from productivity at the homestead to just getting back alive with the boat. I was unwilling to go back into that mess in my skiff, yet the possibilities for the seas laying down in the near future seemed slim. Having already left in the middle of a rather busy time at work, I couldn't simply wait the weather out if it took more than a few days. This all sounds dire now, but ongoing foul weather seemed a real possibility at the time and the fright I had on the way down was lingering. A plane or helicopter could certainly pick us up, but abandoning the boat at that time of year meant either its destruction on the beach or certain sinking in the river (the skiff has no automatic bailer so a few days of steady rain could put it under).

Exhausted, tense, and frustrated, I dropped Marcy off on shore to haul our gear up once again to the cabin and anchored out the boat. I decided that a cigar was in order, so Marcy and I sat on the porch getting slowly chilled by the willowaw winds whipping about the lodge and looking out over a not un-stunning view of the inlet while I enjoyed a sweet cigar (the rain had finally stopped). It was already



Whiting River Inlet and Gilbert Bay from the lodge

afternoon so we pried off the plywood over the picture window and eventually went inside, ate some lunch, and broke out the scrabble game. All weekend long Marcy and I contemplated Fate's purpose in keeping us at the homestead. Was it that beer I never poured in the water? Was it the mirror that broke on the way down? Was it that we hadn't eaten the shrimp yet? Was it that we hadn't played scrabble (which was part of the plan)?

So we tried the scrabble route. Marcy is a scrabble wiz, but this was only the second game I'd played in my adult life, so not surprisingly I came up with words like "is" at the

end while Marcy filled in whole blocks of exotic interconnected words. I did learn a new word for an old female horse, but I can't remember it now. As evening came on we had another feast, this time featuring the last of my Snettisham shrimp boiled in dill and Sweetheart Creek smoked salmon. We eagerly awaited the waking of the mice while we played; when they began squeaking from behind the tarp, we decided to share our spoils and try to catch them in adorable acts of scavenging. We began to recognize different mice and an evident hierarchy among them.



Feasting on shrimp, etc.



Mouse feast

Suddenly a shape swooped past the picture window, then again. I stepped outside to witness a bat hunting in front of the lodge in much the same way the swallows had earlier in the summer. As I stood on the porch, this bat (and occasionally a companion) flew erratically through the edge of the forest and over the meadow in front, always returning to make a pass by the porch, sometimes only a few feet from my face. I grabbed the camera and shot photo after photo in the dark as he passed. Several times I heard



Bat!

him squeak as he flew. I was totally enraptured. We figured that the candles and oil lamp inside were attracting insects onto the porch. I had no idea there were resident bats. So, maybe Fate was keeping me at the homestead to photograph mice see the bats. It was a thought, anyway.

So despite my attempts to sabotage Marcy's scrabble skills with offers of more rum and cherry coke, I brutally lost the game and we eventually called it a night. Next morning I called my parents (via satellite phone) who reported calm winds in Juneau and a forecast of 3' seas. They encouraged me to get out as soon as possible before the winds picked up later in the day (which is typical). I roused Marcy and we nailed the plywood back over the picture window. She packed and hauled gear to the edge of the water while I kayaked out and readied the boat. I ignored the willowaw winds that were still rustling around the beach, but when I got to the boat I was hit by a steady, sharp wind from Gilbert Bay and the rock of 1' swells. It looked a lot like it had the day before when we made our aborted attempt. I took my time pumping the water out and letting the wind convince me that I wasn't going anywhere; with the heavy seas on the way down and our trip the day before, I had enough fuel to make it home but not enough for another failed attempt, so we needed to be confident that we'd make it in one go. After kayaking back to shore, Marcy agreed that the weather wasn't any better. Things were not looking good. Marcy and I took off the plywood over the picture window again and sat on the porch watching the play of light over the inlet for about half an hour before we decided to charter a plane to take her home. She had a new job on Monday to get ready for; I elected to stay with the boat and hope for better weather.

After the plane flew away with Marcy, I needed to warm up. Chilled since I'd gotten up that morning, there seemed only one solution: hard labor. I ran through the list of other tasks I'd planned to accomplish that weekend and settled on scrubbing Hermit Thrush Cabin, (Cabin #4). Not yet stained, the mildew was showing up in places where water

dripped on the sides. So after I took the plywood off the picture window again, I grabbed some super cleanser, rubber gloves, a brush, a ladder and some buckets and set to work. One trip carrying water from the creek up the steep slope to the cabin and I was already stripping off clothes. The task went remarkably well and most of the mildew stains came off along with some of the muddy hand prints from construction. Thinking that after all that work I should protect the wood from the winter wet, I went one step too far and decided to pull a tarp over the



The plane taking Marcy away

back half of the building where the mildew was worst. Alone this is a tricky task and I won't describe how I did it lest I alarm my family. Long story short, I wound up falling off a ladder and simultaneously breaking a window.

Truly downtrodden at this turn of events, I tromped back to the lodge and found a scrap of plywood to nail over the window. I didn't even go inside to pick up the pieces. In fact, I'm fairly sure that my hammer is still sitting in the moss where I threw it down in defeat. Although I had other plans for work that afternoon, I headed back to the lodge instead to drown my frustrations in a bottle of wine. Serendipitously, I found an overwintered bottle of Shiraz with a cork that was nearly out and took that as a sign to drink it. But, only one glass into it and it quickly became apparent that the wind was finally dying. Maybe I'd worked through my bad karma for the weekend. I boarded up the picture window one last time, locked the doors, hauled my gear down to the water, and kayaked out to the boat. After bringing the boat to shore, I drug the kayak back up the beach to its home under the lodge and left the bottle of wine on the edge of the porch. I figured either I'd be back soon enough to drink the rest of it, or it would be my last offering of the season in the hopes of making it home. My mother sent several jugs of fuel with the float plane, so I had plenty to spare. I took off, dumped a whole bottle of beer in the water, and thought to myself how odd it was that I hoped I wouldn't see the place again until next year.

Entering Gilbert Bay, I found the seas mild; as I came around Mist Island and close to Stephen's Passage it became clear that the swells were residual from the days before and that the wind was calming. Steady three and four footers rolled in, easily handled by the skiff, and there were few white caps. I quickly found two pairs of whales at the entrance, their blows sparkling in the brilliant shafts of sunlight escaping through holes in the cloud cover. Behind me a bright rainbow crossed Port Snettisham. I watched both pairs of whales fluke, then was surprised to notice another blow a little farther away, and another, and then a pair, and suddenly as far as I could see to the south more whales were



Rainbow over the entrance to Snettisham



One member of the group-up fluking

blowing. I counted at least a dozen individuals as I rocked around on the seas, suggesting there were at least a dozen more. I'd finally found the Stephen's Passage group-up, right where they should be at the mouth of Snettisham, on the last day of September. With the seas as they were, I couldn't go to visit them, nor did I have any success with photos. I watched for about 20 minutes before I turned for home, catching as I did so a huge splash to the south which could only mean a breach. Reluctantly, but grateful to be heading home, I put the whales behind me and rode the swells north, watching dramatic plays of light over Admiralty Island. About 5:30 pm I pulled into my parent's boathouse, unloaded my gear, and went home for a very long shower.

And so the Snettisham adventures end for 2006 and I can't wait for April!



Bat with the river/Gilbert Bay and mountains behind