



Debbie's 2006 Snettisham Adventures 4, 5 & 6

Adventure #4, June 23-24: S'awdaan Kwaan

The first of the three trips to Snettisham was a brief one night stay which, though quite enjoyable, offers little to share with the broader audience. I brought down an old charming wood stove that my parents donated along with smoke stack supplies, though didn't manage to get it installed. The water was flat calm on the way down and back. Half a dozen whales fed near Fanny Island just inside the entrance to Snettisham; some lunged close to shore, and others moved about in the inlet to the Whiting River, visible from the homestead.

Saturday morning we did go for a rather long kayak, landing for the first time on Sentinel Point across from the river inlet. Some sources suggest that the local Tlingits built a fort there to protect the Whiting River trade route from trespassers. One section of the beach about 15 feet wide appears to have been artificially cleared of large rocks, a typical Tlingit adjustment to the landscape to facilitate canoe landings. The homestead lies within S'awdaan Kwaan, the traditional Tlingit territory that encompasses Port Snettisham and Tracy Arm. According to one Tlingit elder I've chatted with, the word "s'aw" means "green" in Tlingit, so one of the interpretations of the territory's name (lost to antiquity) references the aqua green color of the sea where glacial silt is mixed up in saltwater. This phenomenon is more prominent in Tracy Arm where the territory's winter village was located. The Whiting River was never as prominent a trade route as the Taku River or the Chilkoot Trail, but was still an important connection with the interior through the mountains and ice fields. The location of the homestead within this territory was one of the reasons for choosing my business name—*Emerald Sea Wilderness Tours*. A little obscure, perhaps, but a nice connection with a Tlingit place name. That and the fact that divers refer to Pacific Northwest waters as the "Emerald Sea" and I hope to have divers as clients.



Sentinel Point haulout

Adventure #5, July 1-3: Engines and Low Tide

The next trip was for my high school friend Kellee who was in town for a week and had yet to visit the homestead. Launching the boat Saturday morning I quickly discovered that the engine refused to tilt up (necessary to release the feet that support the engine while it's in the upright position and allow it to tilt into the water). After some snooping around, my parents, Kellee and I were all at a complete loss as to the cause. The engine would tilt down but not up; the battery was not dead. After some time we took off for home to retrieve the trailer and the manual. The manual (thank the gods for manuals) indicated a manual tilt screw on the engine mount. Unfortunately, when we got back to the harbor, we discovered that the only screwdriver we brought with us was too wide to



Kellee heading south

make it deep enough into the hole to find the head. We were just about to go home to scrounge up some more alternative screwdrivers when some folks launching a boat offered first a leatherman (too delicate) then another screwdriver that didn't flare out so much at the end. This last offering made it all the way to the head of the screw, but the hole was underwater and the screw very tight, making it impossible to get sufficient leverage to move it by balancing on the back of the boat.

Thankfully, we had the trailer right there and pulled the boat to the top of the ramp and into the parking lot where we manhandled the screw loose, lifted the engine, tilted it into position and locked it. We permanently traded our screwdriver with the boat owner's (in case it came in handy again), launched the boat again and my folks took off, leaving us to depart four and half hours late.

The ride down was flawless and gorgeous, summer evening light all over Stephen's Passage. I took Kellee on the scenic route along the back side of Grand Island and on to the homestead. Arriving late we had a quick dinner, clipped down the grasses around the sunny campfire on the beach, and relaxed.

Next day Kellee and I took advantage of a low tide to walk up the river to Ox Point and lounge around on the rocks, sitting in the big, smoothed out grooves worn by the glaciers dragging rocks along the wall of the fjord 10,000 years ago. On the way up we watched a mink duck in and out among



On the rocks near Ox Point

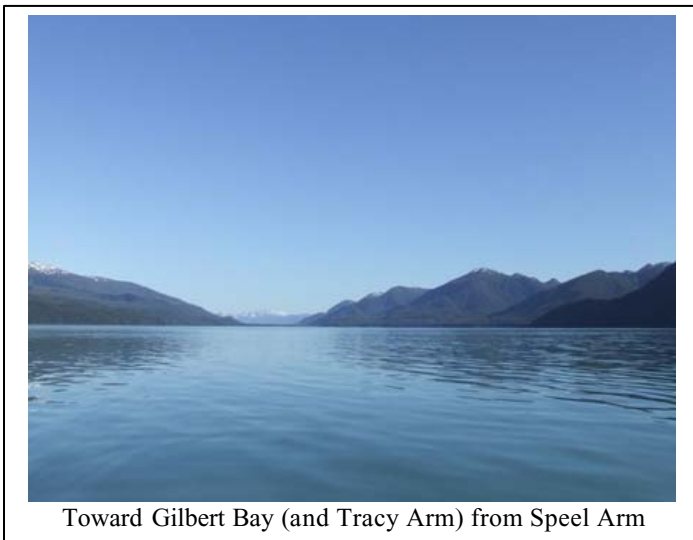
the rocks and bushes. Kellee wanted to work her way farther upriver but the main current cuts across the channel there and prevented our crossing.

Later in the afternoon I took advantage of the stunning sunny weather (the first such weather for me at the homestead this year) to stain the cedar on the porch. My carpenter friend had suggested last summer that I finish the roof of the porch in rough cut cedar to add a little charm and class to an otherwise mundane building. I purchased the lumber from Icy Straits Lumber in Hoonah, a small family run mill that uses local timber. The beams came rough cut, but the panels for the roof were finished cedar and the whole thing looks gorgeous. I secured a tarp over the porch for the winter in the hopes of staving off discoloration or graying. One way or another, the wood was in perfect condition this spring and I was anxious to protect it. Unfortunately, my paint sprayer was malfunctioning so I wound up staining by hand. With such a slow pace, I finished half the roof before more adventures drew me away.



Staining the cedar roof

Before dinner, Kellee and I took a quick kayak toward Gilbert Bay, then brought the kayaks aboard the skiff and went for a pleasure cruise down Speel Arm (Speel Arm is the other section of Port Snettisham that ends at the mouth of the Speel River and the



Toward Gilbert Bay (and Tracy Arm) from Speel Arm

Snettisham hydroelectric facility). The scenery is quite beautiful, with Tracy Arm-like waterfalls and valleys. Drifting around the river inlet, two common loons appeared. As I struggled to take a picture, the closer loon (characteristically) dove, only to appear but 30 feet away, warbling a little loon song to draw our attention.

Arriving back at camp, Kellee and I feasted on a dinner of Sweetheart sockeye (2005), stuffing, and sautéed zucchini.

On Monday I was anxious to finish staining the roof of the porch so I got an early start to it. Kellee came down for some breakfast, then took off upriver for a kayak adventure on her own. Ever the explorer, Kellee wanted to see what was on the other side of Whiting Point. Two and a half hours

later she returned full of tales of big waterfalls, herds of curious harbor seals, and a brown bear walking along the beach.

Then we had to go. It was low tide, which, though never ideal for an arrival or departure, further complicated things since my engine wouldn't tilt up. The river in front of the cabin is a plain of sandbars at low tide. We hauled our gear a hundred yards from the beach to the edge of the muck. Normally I'd pull the boat in as far as it would go, bring up the engine, and walk the gear out to it. However, the engine in running position ran aground another hundred yards from "dry" ground in water too deep for my boots. After touching bottom several times, I finally let the boat drift into deep water, anchored and took the kayak back upriver to the gear. Kellee and I split the gear between the kayak and herself; I kayaked back to the boat, dropped the gear on board, then took the boat to the rocky shoreline well down river of the sandbars. Kellee met me in deep water, worn out with hauling gear. She held the boat while I drug the kayak up behind a log in the bushes and secured it. On the way out we ate candy bars and stopped to watch a whale lunge feeding in Gilbert Bay. Thankfully, despite strong chop in Snettisham's entrance, Stephen's Passage was almost flat calm under a blazing July sun.



Marbled murrelets in the Whiting River

Snettisham Adventure #6, July 14-16: Shrew Whispering

The next trip to Snettisham was the first (and perhaps only) major work party of the summer. For the first time, more people volunteered to come than we had room in boats. Friday afternoon, Dru, Rob Carpenter and I headed down in Rob's boat (I thankfully left mine behind in the shop to get the tilt fixed). Later, Travis, Torsten and Sarah joined us in Torsten's boat. Again, the weather blessed us with flat calm water and pleasant skies.

Saturday morning started with one of the strangest wildlife experiences at the homestead yet. As I approached the lodge in expectation of a raspberry jelly donut (because what kind of a camping trip would it be without raspberry jelly donuts for breakfast?), a wee little shrew appeared near the stack of spare lumber, squirreling about in the duff. Hoping for a photo, I grabbed my camera and slowly inched my way closer. The shrew remained oblivious as I snapped pictures, allowing me to crouch right next to it and eventually reach out and pet it! It was only about an inch long, with soft brown hair and a pointed nose all twitching in expectations of grubs, his tiny pink feet braced as he shoved his whiskers into little holes in the ground. I spent some time in astonished contemplation of the little fellow. Several more times over the weekend he appeared from beneath the blue tarp over the lumber (he must live down there) and each time let me approach and touch him as he dug around for food. Hard to believe he's still alive!



Shrew



Travis securing the stack

The rest of Saturday was a mixture of work and play. With comparatively little to accomplish all weekend we made sure to enjoy ourselves. Travis and I installed the wood stove and Torsten and Sarah cleared trails while Dru and Rob put siding up over the gable ends and installed the picture window. In the afternoon, Travis and I kayaked out to a whale that was feeding just off the sandbars in deep water. He fed in a big

circle, breathing just once before sounding without fluking. His blows were lost in the eerie fog that surrounded us, obscuring the nearby homestead. Once he lunged about 50 feet away, the closest we saw him. While we played with the whale, Rob and Dru pulled shrimp pots from around the corner, coming home with enough side stripes for a feast. Gathering for dinner we cranked the wood stove for the first time, gazed out the stunning new picture window, and listened to Travis and Dru play guitar while the shrimp and the rice boiled. The heat and the good food quickly sapped our energy and we headed in for an early night.

Sunday morning Torsten and Sarah took off early and the boys went for another shrimp run, returning with enough to take home for another meal. Travis and I walked upriver with my rifle and his shotgun to fire a few rounds into the sandbars (I was pleased to shatter a beer bottle with my first shot at 50 feet). After lunch we cleaned the area between the lodge and the beach. Just under the front of the lodge porch fresh water seeps from the earth, making it a black mucky mess. I've been throwing scraps of plywood and particle board down to walk on, turning the area into something like a red neck scrap heap—quite depressing. However, with the help of the boys, I replaced all the ugliness with a makeshift two-tiered porch made from two of the pallets that the cabin kits came on. Each pallet is a solid 4'X16' platform. In front of the new porch system, another pallet now makes a ramp across the deep ruts dug in by the four-wheeler that delivered the kits three years ago. Rob and Travis started to level off the ground, and hauled in several large flat rocks from the beach to start a patio around the campfire. We ended the afternoon with a final beer and a stogie before heading back to town.



Beer and stogies on the new makeshift porch