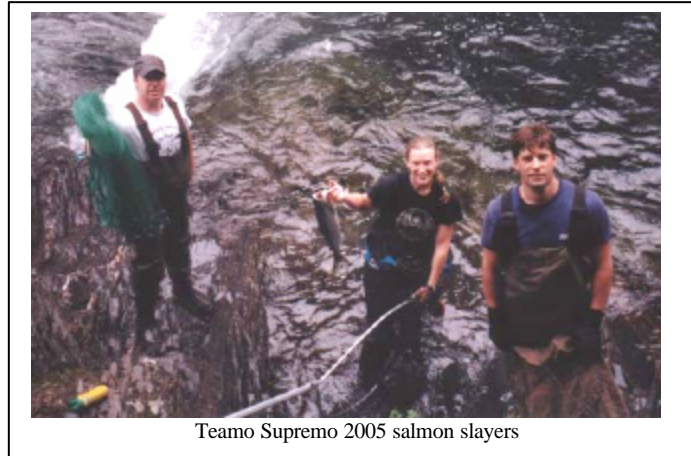


Sweetheart Creek 2005

August 31 – September 1



Teamo Supremo 2005 salmon slayers

A Little Background (see the map at the bottom for reference):

Tucked among the steep mountains between the Whiting River and Tracy Arm Fjord, Sweetheart Lake is a cold, clear mountain lake drained by a rushing creek/waterfall. Salmon hatcheries turn loose young sockeye (red) salmon in the lake that were incubated in captivity. After a year or two in fresh water, the fingerlings slide their way down the creek and out to sea. A few years later, the survivors turn back for home and run through a gauntlet of commercial fishing boats waiting to snare them (which is the whole point of the process); those that escape the nets wriggle their way to the mouth of Sweetheart Creek and swim up a few hundred yards over a series of low rapids before they hit an insurmountable falls and are stuck. Being no place for a sockeye to spawn, the Alaska Department of Fish & Game encourages locals to net the sockeyes (up to 25 a day). Being algae and krill eaters, sockeyes are rarely caught on a hook and line, so Sweetheart Creek is an unusual opportunity to harvest them.

In 2004, Sweetheart's Teamo Supremo slaying team was led by a somewhat experienced guide--Skiff--who showed us the trails and the basics of fishing the creek. I was grateful for the guidance. Glenn and Dru (friends and co-workers), Glenn's brother Rob, and Skiff's friend Kevin made up the rest of the team. The excursion kept me in salmon for a year, (and was a blast), so I was anxious to return; unfortunately, few people were able to attend this year on the dates that we picked at the height of the run. In the end, Glenn, Dru and I made the trip again, accompanied by our VISTA volunteer Melissa who, being a non-resident, was relegated to bear patrol and unable to assist with fishing or filleting (or hauling).



Glenn, Melissa and Dru on the way

Sweetheart Day 1:

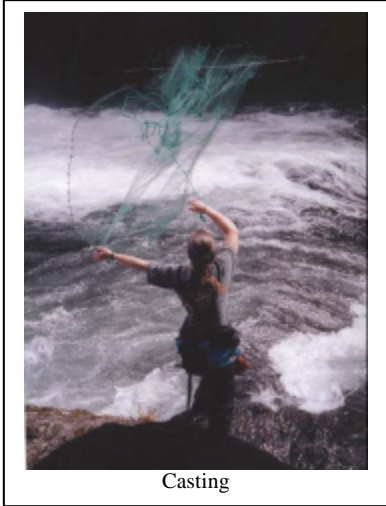
On Sunday, July 31, Glenn, Dru, Melissa and I loaded up my parents' 22' Hewescraft, the *Kathy M*, and made our way out of Aurora harbor at 10:30 am. From the 35 knot winds and 5 foot seas predicted on Monday, the weather forecast mellowed all week until it called for under 2 foot seas; in the end, the sun was shining and the water nearly flat calm.

After a pleasant ride to the homestead, we dropped off our gear, picked up a kayak and a few other items, and headed for Sweetheart. Three or four groups were fishing when we arrived on site at about 2:00 pm, but

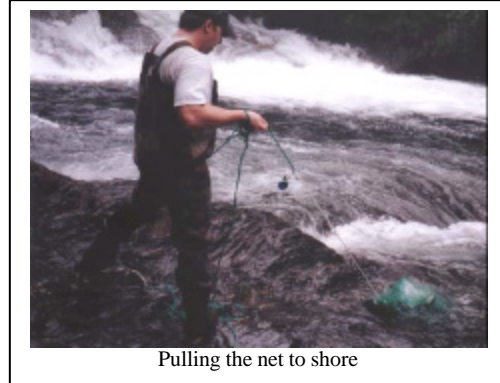
we found our desired spot deserted (a sunny locale where we'd had much success the previous year). Being the net owner, I took the first cast, expecting to pass it around the group every 20 casts or so. I tossed out the net and as soon as I tugged it back to shore, I could feel the massed wriggling of the salmon inside--two sockeyes, and several pinks. The next cast brought more, and the next, and Glenn and Dru

were busy with the sorting, bonking and bleeding. There were more pinks than sockeyes, to be sure, but the sockeyes came in at a rate that made Glenn and Dru scramble to keep up. We easily landed a good 20 fish before the others began their turns.

The three of us traded positions while we fished--one casting and dumping the contents of the net into a dip net to be sorted and the other two tossing out pinks, bonking sockeyes, cutting the gills on the sockeyes to live-bleed them, cutting tails (to prove they were "personal use" sockeyes and not commercially caught), and cleaning them. We brought along several burlap bags to store the fish in the creek and haul them out.



Casting



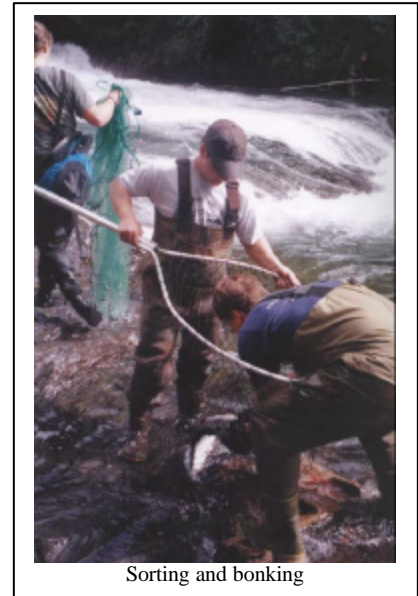
Pulling the net to shore



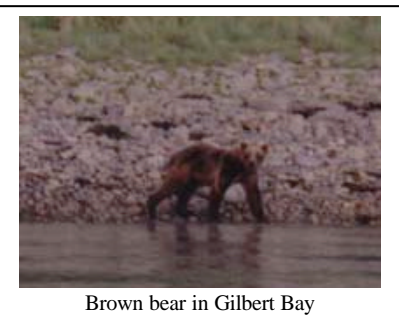
Dumping the salmon into the dip net

The creek was packed with fish, schools forming dark shadows in the calmer pools, and individuals taking flying leaps at the falls upriver. As the afternoon wore on, the ratio of sockeyes to pinks

diminished. The week before, another fisherman had suggested that he caught 30 pinks to each sockeye, and this became an increasingly realistic figure. Many casts returned with eight or more wriggling humpies, and not a single sockeye. At 4:30 or so, the last of the other fishermen took off; we heard a gun shot from down stream as they disappeared and wondered if there were bears about. Twenty minutes later, the fishing spot directly on the other side of the river was occupied by a young brownie munching on the remains of a dipnetter's catch (about 40 feet from us). We weren't too worried about him/her, being on the other side of a rushing creek and happily eating. A few minutes later, though, Melissa pointed out that another bear was now feeding upriver from us--a mother with two young cubs. This made us a bit more wary, so we took advantage of the fact that the bears left us an open passage back to the boat. I snatched a few pictures, told Melissa to dig out the bear mace, and we hustled to gather our fish and get out of there. In the excitement I managed to lose one of the burlap bags with three sockeyes inside. We split the 40 remaining fish into two bags (a dry bag backpack worked well for this), and one must have weighed close to 100 lbs. Glenn carried it most of the way, though he relinquished it to Dru and myself briefly after we reached flat land.



Sorting and bonking



Brown bear in Gilbert Bay

Back at the beach, I kayaked out to the *Kathy M* and brought her to shore. As we pattered along the edge of Gilbert Bay toward camp, we spotted a skinny, shorthaired brownie wandering the shoreline. He looked goofy with his blond head and lanky legs, and let us approach quite close to the beach while he waded into the water. Rob Carpenter and his wife Stacey met us there on their boat and we tied up alongside them near the homestead to fillet fish. Glenn and I gutted while Dru and Rob filleted. By 6:30 everything was on ice on Rob's boat and we were ready for supper. Having no fathometer, Rob pointed out a spot for me to anchor in 27 feet of water, then

went to check his shrimp pots. Though they intended to join us for the evening, Rob checked back an hour later to let us know that Stacey was in some pain and needed to head back home. She flew to Anchorage a few days later to have kidney stones removed.

The remaining four of us settled in to a campfire back at the homestead and a dinner of hot dogs (for me) and beer boiled bratwurst for the others. Melissa introduced us to the succulent luxury of banana boats, (bananas stuffed with marshmallows and chocolate chips and roasted in tin foil) though I think they were a bit overheated and anomalously crunchy in spots. Delicious nonetheless.



Dru and Melissa around the fire

Having captured significant fish the day before, we decided than the original 5:00 am wakeup was unnecessary and got up at our leisure around 7:00. Coffee, bagels, and cream cheese for breakfast. As the others relaxed and munched, I bustled around camp, cleaning up, washing dishes and preparing for our departure. Glenn offered his assistance as I buttoned up the cooking station, so I suggested that he dump the gray water in the river. A few minutes later I heard him shout “Debbie--come here” from down by the shore in a voice that distinctly lacked Glenn’s typical light-heartedness. As I arrived on the scene, Glenn said simply “the boat is gone.” Sure enough, the *Kathy M* had evidently pulled anchor and was nowhere to be seen. The river was stunningly beautiful under a clear sky, but just beyond the inlet a white fog bank lay against the water.

“Want to go for a kayak?” I asked.

The Kayak Adventure:

While I gathered a few things, Glenn pulled out the double kayak *Keet* and tied on a line. I added the scupper plugs, a new paddle and an extra seat. With the barest of explanations to Dru and Melissa, we headed out onto the river. Two years before, my parents’ 38’ boat had drug anchor in the night and wound up in the middle of the water where Snettisham divides between Gilbert Bay and the Speel Arm. I suspected that the *Kathy M* had followed a similar route. Between 6:30 pm when I anchored it and 10:30 pm when it got dark, we watched it rest at anchor, so we decided that it must have lifted off at high tide around midnight. Glenn sat in the back steering and we made good time cruising down the shoreline. Glenn was concerned that it might have strayed upriver in the tide, but it was not in sight. As we neared River Point, the fog closed in around us suddenly, reducing visibility to about 150 feet. Wary of venturing away from shore, and expecting the boat to have turned the corner, we came around the point and paddled north toward the Speel Arm, just keeping the shore in sight through the fog. Visibility was poor, giving us no more than a few hundred yards at most. A seal kept us company here and there, and a loon, and some of the mysterious fog larks--but no boat appeared. We paddled for 40 minutes, seeing boat after boat materialize in the fog before us, illusions of our hopeful minds. We wanted to fish that day, but Glenn was expected in town at 4:30 and we were anticipating running out of gas on the way back, so time was of the essence. Myself, I felt like I was on a sailing ship in a thick, windless fog, looking for salvation out of the mist.

Eventually, we decided that the boat probably had not traveled so far north and we might have more luck away from shore in the center of the channel. We could hear gillnetters in the entrance to Port Snettisham (going after our sockeyes), so we turned with resolution from shore and headed toward the noise. Glenn was steering. Within minutes, I was sure that we were heading in the wrong direction. After losing sight of land, we had only the waves, sounds, and (as Glenn pointed out) a faint sunny spot in the fog to help guide us. We argued on and off, trying our best to orient ourselves toward the engine noise. As we headed farther and farther out, I imagined the article they would write in the *Boat Broker* or some other publication about our demise where they would list what we did wrong as a warning to others:

- 1) Didn’t tell anyone our itinerary or expected return time
- 2) Didn’t take extra clothes (expecting physical exertion and sunshine, we were both in t-shirts)
- 3) Didn’t take provisions
- 4) Didn’t bring a compass or any other safety equipment

5) Left sight of shore in a thick fog

6) Wore chest waders/dry suit rolled down (an invitation to drown, though we had life jackets on)

And so on. It was high adventure to be sure. Half an hour later, still in a thick fog, I was more than a little haired out and impressed with Glenn's fortitude. I was half afraid that we'd entered the mouth of the inlet, far from camp, and were heading toward Stephen's Passage. As we traveled further in the whiteout, the wind picked up and the water turned choppy, adding to my anxiety. The goal became not so much finding the boat as finding shore again. Finally, the sky above brightened and the hundredth mirage of land became a real mountain a quarter mile away. We had nearly crossed the waterway to the west shore, but had not yet reached the entrance of Snettisham. After some debate about the best route, we decided to turn back toward home, check out Gilbert Bay in case the boat had turned south instead of north outside the river, and then take it from there. Our prospects of finding the boat, let alone fishing again, seemed slim. I had troubling visions of confessing to my parents that I had lost their boat and hiring a pilot to search the area from the sky.



The *Kathy M* materializing out of the fog

And so we paddled for Gilbert Bay. The fog began to dissipate rapidly, revealing sparkling blue sky over the bay in front of us, and moving in sweeping clouds through the entrance. Soon I saw the silhouette of a boat in the distance, emerging from the fog. Glenn bet it would take five minutes to reach, I suggested twelve; seventeen minutes later we pulled alongside, embarrassed to find that it was right at the mouth of the river, now within sight of the camp. It must have been just inside the impenetrable fog bank as we entered it. Watching from the porch of the lodge at the homestead, Dru saw the *Kathy M* emerge just as a little blue kayak appeared inching towards it.

Two hours after embarking, we returned to shore,

ready to continue the day. Dru and Melissa had finished packing up camp in our absence, so we soon set off for Sweetheart Creek, determined to fish again.

Sweetheart Day 2:

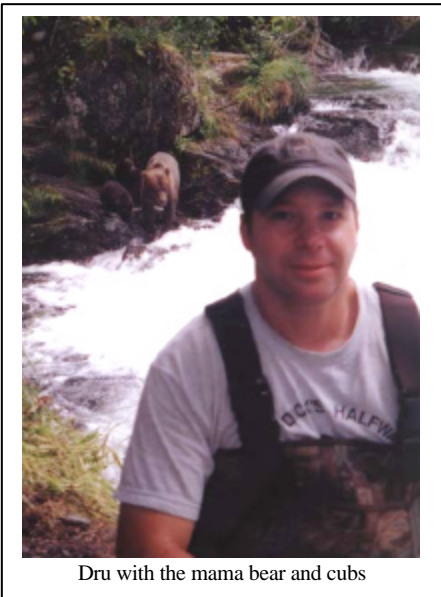
Moving slowly to keep the kayak afloat (which had a tendency to flip at high speeds), we arrived at the end of Gilbert Bay to find no other vessels moored. Despite our late arrival (11:00 am or so), there was no one else at the stream. We quickly reclaimed our spot and got to fishing. Luck was not with me, and I came up with few sockeyes. Dru became the sockeye slaying hero of the day, nailing them in the fast water at the edge of the creek. Glenn, too, had some success, pulling in casts with only sockeyes inside (as opposed to drawing in a dozen pinks with only one silver sockeye).

We'd arrived on site to discover the mother and cubs in their same place, fishing alongside the four-foot waterfall 30 feet upriver. When we showed ourselves, she stared at us with intensity, urinated, and disappeared into the brush. A minute later she returned with her cubs and went back about fishing. An accomplished hunter, she put her nose to the creek and caught salmon as they ran the falls, ripping into some and passing other, still wriggling, to her cubs. It was most amusing to watch them struggle to subdue an energetic salmon. A few hours later, when we left, she had a mound of pink flesh beneath her legs.



Mama bear and cubs fishing

Melissa was on serious bear patrol. Half an hour into fishing, a single bear wandered down into the mother's fishing spot and was angrily chased away. He wandered past us and appeared 30 feet below at another fishing hole. Melissa now had to watch both sides of us. The solitary bear moved back and forth



Dru with the mama bear and cubs

across the river and all around us. Once, as it approached our cleaning area, we had to yell it away.

By 2:00 pm, the bears were making us sufficiently nervous, and we'd caught another 30 fish. This time we divided the packs more equitably and humped them without incident back to the boat. Glenn and Dru iced the fish in the two remaining coolers while we idled back to camp where we dropped off the kayak and took off for town. The weather was very pleasant and Dru spread out a hearty sandwich meal on the back deck. Having skipped lunch, paddled hard for two hours, fished and packed gear, I was ravenous and ate my cheese sandwiches and beers with relish.

Running out of Gas:

As we passed Grand Island we were feeling very pleased with ourselves. Suddenly, and with no dramatic sputtering or stalling, the engine stopped. We were out of gas. It was not unexpected and I found myself giggling uncontrollably at the situation. I

dug out the satellite phone and called my parents, but they were unable to help. Larry was not at home, so I called our friend Mark who has a super cub on floats (one passenger airplane). He agreed to fly us jerry jugs of fuel. Plan B was to kicker (on an eight hp engine) to the gillnetters around Point Arden and beg for fuel. By the time we arrived at the point, though, we decided to save our pride and wait the extra 40 minutes for Mark to appear. My father called to suggest draining the fuel filter of water, but to no avail. Amazingly, the kicker moved us along and by the time the cub arrived, we were already at Point Salisbury. By this time, we'd exhausted paper, rock scissors (which didn't take long) and sung *Row Row Row Your Boat* in a round. We watched plane after plane emerge from the channel and head up the Taku River, then finally saw a cub circle around us, drop abruptly, and land 30 feet from the stern of the boat. With some effort, we managed to pull the boat up to the plane where Larry and Mark handed over three jerry jugs full of fuel. The heroes then took off for home.

So there we were on the back deck getting ready to fill the fuel tank. We unscrewed the brand new jug caps/nozzles, turned them around in our hands, and found ourselves completely at a loss. Not one of us could figure out how they worked. There did not appear to be any way for the fuel to get out. Laughing at our ineptitude, we finally swapped out the nozzle from an empty jug on board and poured ten gallons in the tank. Twenty minutes later we pulled into the boat harbor at 7:00 pm, unloaded, and agreed to meet at Glenn's house in an hour to process our catch.



Emergency fuel delivery

(In my defense, we should not have run out of gas. Based on previous expeditions, the *Kathy M* should have burned no more than 40 gallons round trip. A 50-gallon tank should have been sufficient, but we brought extra just in case. When we ran out of gas the first time down at the homestead, we added an additional 30 gallons. By the time we reached Grand Island on the way back, we'd burned 80 gallons of gas to go 60 miles. Something was wrong).

Finished Product:

After picking up vacuum bags at Fred Meyer's, I headed over to Glenn's house for lessons in vacuum packing and the beginning of a very long night. Dru filleted, Glenn trimmed, and Melissa and I portioned, rinsed and vacuum packed. The vacuum packer periodically failed to work, and as the night wore on, we grew increasingly frustrated, with Melissa and I abandoning the machine to the other more and more frequently. At midnight, Dru went home. We three finished up and I drove Melissa home, more than a little exhausted, at 1:00 am.

The next day we spread out our wares on the trampoline in Glenn's back yard and distributed it between the four of us and those who made the trip possible: Mark for flying fuel to us; my parents for supplying the boat; Rob for traveling with us, lending a cooler, and helping fillet; and Glenn's brother Rob for the vacuum packer. The value of our salmon (at \$8/lb. for fillets, we each gathered hundreds of dollars of product) may not do much more than pay the fuel and beer bill, but the high adventure and self-slaughtered fish is priceless.

