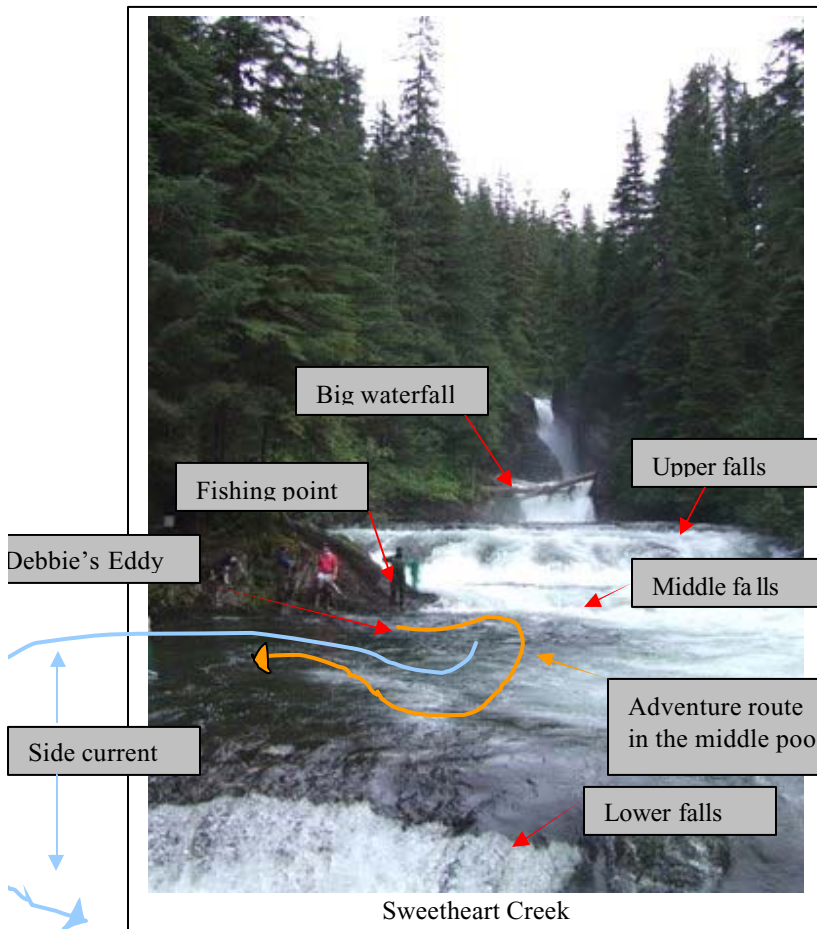




Getting started (most of the Team fishing in the middle pool), photo by Mindy Lobaugh

## Sweetheart Creek 2006, August 3-4: *Debbie's Eddy*

**Preamble (Preramble?):** By now Teamo Supremo expects adventure while sockeye slaying! In 2004 most of us were new to the whole Sweetheart experience (I recall flailing with the cast net in Auke Lake and over the gravel in my driveway). The whole thing was an adventure, the thrill of feeling those wriggling salmon in our nets for the first time. In 2005 three of the original team came back (with a guest) as seasoned vets and weathered brown bear surprises, lost boats, and running out of gas. In 2006 Teamo Supremo arrived to a Sweetheart Creek swollen and rushing with the overabundant rains of the summer and in store for a more harrowing type of adventure. But more on that later.



For those of you new to the story, Sweetheart Creek is an annual pilgrimage for many locals in the Juneau area. Hatchery reared sockeye return each summer hoping to make their way home to where they were released some years prior in Sweetheart Lake. However, a big waterfall stops their journey and they are forced to pool up in the lower portion of the creek, separated into three fishing holes by navigable waterfalls. Fish & Game encourages locals to catch the sockeyes with nets or spears, one of the few ways to catch our own sockeye (which do not normally bite on a hook and line). Luckily, perhaps, Sweetheart Creek is only a mile or two from my homestead.

Our team tends to favor the cast net, not unlike those thrown off the beaches in places like South America.

Casting takes a little practice, but even poor throws are often quite effective. The circular net (surrounded by lead weights) hits the water and sinks around the fish underneath. After letting the net settle, the fisherman pulls on a line attached to the center of the net which purses the bottom closed and captures the fish. He/she then pulls the net to shore and typically dumps the contents into a dip net. Pinks are thrown back and sockeyes stunned and bled, if they aren't immediately cleaned. Throws can provide from no fish to as many as a dozen or more if we hit a school.



Travis casting into the upper pool from the point

**The Start:** Thursday August 3<sup>rd</sup> we met at the Douglas boat ramp at 8:30 am. Teamo Supremo noticeably swelled this year and included some of the original members from 2004 (Skiff, Mindy, Rob, and Kevin), some newcomers (Travis, Dick, and Amy), as well as the core group (Glenn, Dru and myself). Glenn and Dru had kayaked out to some ice bergs in Mendenhall Lake the day before and stocked coolers with glacier ice for chilling the fish. Skiff and Mindy took care of food for the gang, and Rob, Skiff and I supplied the transportation. Juneau was locked in a dense rain as we pulled away from the harbor, hopeful that the dismal weather and impending Salmon Derby would discourage competitors at the creek. As we raced down Gastineau Channel we saw the clouds break in front of us and by the time we reached Port Snettisham (on a flat calm ocean) we were rewarded with a bright blue sky. Things were hopeful.

After a quick stop at the homestead to drop off gear and pick up supplies, we headed back to Gilbert Bay and Sweetheart Creek. Rob, Glenn and Dru dropped shrimp pots on the way over and I busied myself ferrying captains from boat to shore, kayaking in myself after anchoring the Ronquil. We trekked through the woods over the point and into the black slimy mudholes, vertical rock faces, fallen logs and tangled branches that pass for a trail alongside the creek. We arrived at the center pool to find most of the prime fishing spots occupied and the creek raging noisily. We broke into loose groups and wound up in some haphazard confusion as to where to fish and how best to execute the casts. I threw the net in once and immediately picked up a fish before the current swept my net around a corner in the rapids and nearly took me with it. Not a good omen.

Some of the group wound up working in a deep crevasse in a cliff over the bottom pool, just below the lower falls. The rest of us spread out in the center pool (see the photo at the top of page one), trying to cast from within the river. One cast net was left at home, so we had only two cast nets, a few dip nets, and ten people to occupy. We could see schools of fish in the calmer spots (far too wary to catch), but we cast into the turbid



Dick, Rob, Amy and Glenn fishing in the crevasse

water where they couldn't see. At one point Glenn and Dru suggested that I don my dry suit fully (I had it up to the waist to act as makeshift chest waders) and stand in the middle of the creek to cast. I put the dry suit on, but was unable to balance on the slippery rocks and execute a respectable cast from waist deep in the water. Frustrated, I pulled the drysuit back to my waist and decided to take my net to the point below the second falls and beg the occupants to let me fish alternately with them.

**The Adventure:** At the edge of the middle pool where I was, the water was about thigh deep over jumbled, football sized rounded rocks. A side current pulled away from the main creek there and took a detour through a narrow gorge, creating a little island where we'd been fishing before rejoining the main current below the lower falls (see the map on page one). I walked over the rocks where the current broke away, heading for the fishing point as I'd done several times before. But, I was hasty this time, frustrated, and cut a little closer to the main current than I'd done previously, a little closer to the point of land I was heading for. I inched my way through the water, over the rocks, bracing myself against the current, and was just lifting my foot onto the bedrock and toward dry land when the current behind me gave just a little extra tug and unbalanced me for a split second. I swayed, suddenly unable to connect with the shore in front of me, the current in the eddy strengthening as I fumbled to regain my balance, my steps unsteadied by the rush of current beneath them. My control swiftly diminished until the current sucked my feet from under me and into the creek. As the front of my dry suit was pulled under water I was faced with the horrifying realization that I was at the river's mercy. The current was absolutely unstoppable at that point and there was no ground beneath my feet. I think my head ducked under briefly as I passed beneath the middle falls and was swept downriver. Gasping for breath I realized that I was still holding my cast net (weighted with lead) and managed to drop it in the river. Flailing my feet to no avail in my flooded dry suit, I paddled madly with my hands, facing the rest of the gang watching from shallower water. As I was pulled inexorably toward the rapids below, my fear quickly merged with embarrassment for my error and deep chagrin at ruining the trip for everyone if I happened to die or need serious medical help. I looked up helplessly to see Glenn moving in my direction, only his head and shoulders above the water as he gallantly, if fruitlessly, came to my aid. The look of determination on his face quickly faltered as he was hopelessly drawn into the same current.

Suddenly I found myself pulled back toward shore, inexplicably sucked into the side current channeling off the middle pool. I managed to thrust my feet out and skid to a halt

in thigh deep water right where I'd started, astonished that I'd avoided the falls. My attention quickly turned to Dru who was holding a dip net toward Glenn at the edge of the current. As his footing faltered he called for help holding the net. Amy and I reached out and grabbed the handle, but too late. Dru dipped in the water, and Amy and I were swept back out into the current. Meanwhile, one of the guys fishing the point managed to grab hold of Glenn, who grabbed Amy, who grabbed me and we all struggled to drag ourselves onto the rocks. Below us, Travis managed to save my cast net before it disappeared in the raging creek.

I think it's difficult to understand the power of water until you're caught up in it, and it's easy to forget. Two years ago I went scuba diving from shore in four foot swells north of Juneau; the entry was rough, but manageable, and the dive was pleasant. On the way out, though, the waves crashing against the jumbled rocks on shore made all balance impossible and flipped me on my back like a big neoprene turtle before I could take off my fins. The waves battered me helplessly on my back, knocking me around on the boulders and pushing me up the beach until I finally managed to turn over and crawl beyond their influence--not before scratching up my gear and camera. The pull of those swells was well beyond anything I could fight against, as was the current in Sweetheart Creek. I came away from both experiences with a healthy respect for the power of water. This time my confidence was more than a little shaken and I found myself more careful than usual balancing on the slippery rocks and navigating the creek.



Dru, Rob and Skiff fishing the point



Brown bear across the creek

**The Rest of the Day:** Wet and cold, the four of us who had gone in went about changing and getting back to the business of fishing. I'd left my clothes in the boat and went back to the beach with Travis to have a change; the others put on what dry clothes they had and managed the rest of the afternoon. Most of the other fishing groups were packing up for the day, so we were able to take over the prime fishing spots, among them the coveted point I'd gone swimming to claim. The will of the creek seemed

against us, though. Several hours later, we'd only brought about ten salmon in from the point and another ten from the crevasse below the lower falls. Pinks abounded, but overall we caught far fewer fish than we were accustomed to. Skiff was the only one having much luck. He took over a bear fishing nook next to the upper falls where he scooped up sockeyes as they ran the waterfall. He came in with nearly 30 by late afternoon.

**Brownie:** We had better luck with bear viewing. A sleek, dark, medium sized brownie showed herself on and off all day, finally appearing for everyone on a rocky outcropping directly across the creek from the point. This bear made repeated appearances where Skiff was fishing the falls until he and Mindy were suitably spooked and left the area. Later, as I hauled gear back to the boat, I found the bear fishing on the other side of the creek near the mouth. She stood in the water facing the current with her head underneath, emerging every few seconds to breathe or bring a salmon carcass to shore. Very cool.



Fishing bear

On the way back to camp, Travis, Glenn and Rob pulled shrimp pots and the rest of us got settled in and ready for dinner. The new woodstove was cranked up and soon surrounded by an army of dripping clothes and gear. Skiff boiled hotdogs for dinner and Rob started a bonfire outside where we gathered as the light faded. With ten people at camp, all the cabins were occupied and three people slept in the lodge.



A motley Team (less Debbie and Dick) around the campfire

**Day 2:** At 6:30 the next morning, the late risers were roused and met down at the lodge for breakfast and coffee. By 8:30 we were on our way to pick pots and meet up at Sweetheart Creek. Finding the north side of the creek empty, we quickly laid claim to the best fishing spots and got busy. Rob and I headed to the upper falls to imitate Skiff while the rest worked around the point. As others offered advice to us

from downriver, Rob and I shrugged helplessly because there were simply no fish running the falls that morning. I gave up and tried a few casts with Glenn into the eddy

below Rob. The first cast brought in two beautiful big sockeyes, but then nothing. After a failed attempt to tag team with the folks on the point (alternately casting), Amy and I headed to the crevasse downriver. One sockeye came in right away, but then only pinks. Meanwhile, the folks on the point were slaying them and most of the group was busy cleaning. Just before we packed it in for the day, I slid into the queue and managed to pull in about a dozen sockeyes in 15 casts from the point, adding to about 50 others caught that morning.

**Blondie:** This time we had a different bear making the rounds, a small blond brownie that put us on edge with his curiosity and fearlessness. We kept a careful eye on him as he wandered the forest around us, arriving at the upper falls where we'd tried dipnetting earlier, then wading over to our peninsula. When he poked his head over the rise and down at us on the point about 20 feet away and didn't flinch when we yelled and hollered, we decided it was time to head home.



**Back Home:** The ten of us scurried about gathering gear, loading fish into dry bags, and hauling everything to the boat. Early afternoon we headed out to Stephen's Passage, anxious to see what the weather had in store. The last forecast we'd heard called for five foot seas, but we found flat calm water and speeded home. (The storm kicked in the next day while Glenn and I slogged through the Douglas Island Half Marathon.) We met in the afternoon briefly at Glenn's house to prep some salmon for smoking the next day.



Some of the catch ready for smoking

Thoroughly ready for a festive time (post Sweetheart Creek and post 13.1 mile run in the wind and rain), the processing party the next day (not surprisingly) turned out to be more of a frustrating messy marathon in itself. We filled Glenn's kitchen with fish, fish scraps and fish slime, six to ten of us bumping into each other while we negotiated the catch. I spent most of the time rinsing and cutting fillets while others

filleted, vacuum packed or smoked. Some six hours later the work was done and the fish counted. 111 in total, 11 fish apiece. An adequate catch, but less than hoped for. In the end I think the extra water in the creek inhibited the fishing, both by making our movements more difficult and by impeding the use of the cast nets in the swift current. Nevertheless, we made up for in adventure what we lacked in fish, and 11 sockeyes will take me a long way towards Sweetheart Creek 2007.