



Taku Adventures 2006: Moraines and Nagoonberries

As most of you know, I grew up at the Taku Lodge (about 25 miles from Juneau) and spent my summers there until my folks sold it in 1992. My family wanted to maintain a place in the Taku valley so they purchased a 160 acre homestead at Bullard's Landing (downriver from the lodge) and built a log cabin there complete with a full propane kitchen, bedrooms, fireplace and living room. After it was built I recreated in part my attic bedroom from the lodge in the back room upstairs. Unlike the old growth forest surrounding the lodge, the vegetation around the cabin is young and consists of a narrow stretch of first growth spruce forest along the river interspersed with fields of strawberries. Beyond this strip, marshy meadows stretch back to the mountains, dotted with birch trees, cottonwoods and brush. The cabin sits on a little hill and looks across the river at the Taku Glacier. Snettisham is slowly getting under my skin, but the Taku pulls at me tenaciously. Unfortunately, I've spent little time there in the last few years, something I remedied to some degree this summer.



Bullard's Landing cabin

August 11-13

Travis and I headed up the river for a relaxing weekend in early August, a trip that was timed to coincide with the high tides necessary for running the river as well as ripe berries and blooming fireweed. I got instruction from my parents on the locations of dangerous sandbars, how to run the propane system, etc. at the cabin, and headed out Friday afternoon. First we stopped by Dorothy Creek in Taku Inlet (a scenic creek cutting down a steep gorge) and the Scar (a huge slab of vertical rock inhabited by nesting gulls and marmots) and then headed on up into the river. With an 18+ foot tide there were no sandbars visible, but we swung wide around Hut Point and hugged the shore from there to avoid submerged obstacles. At the cabin we anchored the boat just offshore in the channel, opened up the cabin, lit a fire, and settled in.

After a series of more adventurous adventures earlier in the summer, being able to relax in a posh cabin all evening was a treat. Travis made a fantastic shrimp atheni dish for

dinner with Snettisham shrimp harvested during the Sweetheart Creek adventure. The most trying experience was trying to avoid the piles of martin poop in front of the wood pile. Once during the weekend a martin growled at me most ominously from among the wood, but we never saw him.

Next day we slept in. While Travis made potatoes and onions for breakfast I picked three cups of blueberries from behind the cabin in about half an hour. The blueberry bushes were thick with berries, bordering the fields of wild strawberries. Evidently the late spring and cold rainy summer postponed the strawberry season which is normally ending by that time. Surprising, the typically late bearing nagoonberries were beginning to ripen as well and I picked three cups over the weekend. Piles of bear dung were everywhere, though we never saw a bear.

In the afternoon we snooped around the tool shed until we found my mother's little outboard motor that mounts on the back of a canoe. Then we took off downriver for a quarter of a mile until we found the canoes stashed beneath a stand of spruces where they'd spent the winter. We drug one canoe to the beach, mounted the engine, and took off. Heading north, we followed the beach upriver for a mile before turning and crossing to the mud flats and moraines in front of the glacier. Hole-in-the-Wall is an arm of the Taku Glacier, the only advancing glacier in the area (and one of the few advancing glaciers world wide). Though it was melting under summer temperatures, the nearby moraines and pools of meltwater were evidence of the Hole-in-the-Wall's forward movement. (For the glacially uninitiated, moraines are mounds of mud and rubble

moved along by glacier ice; in this case the moraines in question were "push moraines" being shoved forward by the toe of the glacier as it advanced). Most of the mounds were 10-20 feet tall and spread in an arc before the glacier. We wandered around the ice and mud holes for some time before heading back home. On the flats between the glacier and river we found the tracks of Canada geese, a mother bear and cub, a wolf, and a moose.



Hole-in-the-Wall Glacier (from the top of a moraine)

After lunch and warming up in the late afternoon (proximity to the glacier enhanced the chilliness of the drizzly weather) I headed into the strawberry fields for half an hour, returning with several cups of sweet ripe strawberries for shortcake. The berries were so



Crevasse



Future glacial erratic lodged in the ice

thick I could hardly force myself to stop picking. Meanwhile, Travis' tapioca pudding was cooling in the fridge and we feasted on dessert and wine for dinner.

After listening to the rain on the metal roof all night, I rose Sunday morning to head upriver and pick nagoonberries, browsing

through the meadows looking for ripe individuals beneath the baby spruce trees. Nagoonberries grow as a low groundcover, each plant about six inches high with maple shaped leaves and bearing a single berry shaped like an inverted raspberry. With a luscious, tart flavor somewhere between boysenberries and raspberries, nagoonberries are sacred in my world, not only because they are achingly delicious but because they are rare (in any quantity) and are inextricably tied with the Taku in my mind.



Nagoonberries



Strawberries, blueberries, and nagoonberries

In the afternoon Travis and I boarded the canoe again and puttered downriver to the mouth of the big slough. This slough originates behind Taku Lodge in a series of beaver ponds and channels where I used to canoe there when I was growing up at the lodge. The big slough drains the beaver ponds and winds its way through the meadows before emptying into the river a quarter mile below the cabin. We followed the slough for a few miles, passing beaver slides and small tributaries until it narrowed,

quicken, and began to be cut by beaver dams. We turned and drifted/paddled most of the way back to the river. The amber water bordered by drooping green grasses and the sheer blue mountains of the valley behind (not to mention the massive glacier in the distance) were stunning.

In the late afternoon we packed up and headed out for an uneventful ride home, sorry to leave the Taku behind.



Canoeing in the slough



Wet Nigel in the boat

August 26-28

Intending to return to the Taku two weeks later, a small craft advisory and six foot seas kept me home Friday night. By Saturday the wind was dying and I headed out in the afternoon, leaving the harbor at 2:30 to catch the tide in a solid Juneau downpour. My companion on this trip was Nigel, my dog of nine years. Though unequivocally alpha dog among his peers, Nigel is rather sensitive when it comes to loud noises and vibrations

and is consequently left behind on most boat adventures. I'd taken him along on a harbor cruise a few weeks before where he proved to be comfortable on flat calm water and terrified of the slightest bump. Nevertheless, I decided to take him along in the hope that days of romping through the wilderness and chasing mice would offset the terror of the ride. He seemed eager enough to board the boat and by the time bumps became an issue (just outside the harbor) I was wearing my full body insulated survival suit so Nigel's anxious clawing at my leg didn't trouble me.



Nigel hunting rodents in the bog

The trip up was uneventful. More nagoonberries were ripe this time and I picked three cups before supper and settling in for the evening. The rain had ceased as soon as I left downtown Juneau, but picked up again as I climbed into bed in my Mexican double hammock upstairs. Nestled in my feather bed, I swung in the hammock, reading to the amber light of a kerosene lamp as I drifted off to sleep under the sound of rain pounding on the metal roof, thinking that there were definitely worse things in life.

Next morning Nigel and I took off for a tramp through the meadows. Our side of the river is made up of a flat piece of land about four miles long and perhaps one mile wide at its widest point. The river forms one edge of the border from the Taku Lodge in the very northern corner to about a mile below our cabin. Shaped like a half-oval, the rest of the land is bordered by sheer rock walls rising several thousand feet out of the meadows; these cliffs meet the rivers' edge at the north and south corners of the land, cutting it off from land access. In a region of fjords and rainforests, flat land and meadows are great novelties in Southeast Alaska. Only the section closest to the river and behind the lodge is wooded; the rest of the property is soggy meadow interspersed with drier patches of berries and wildflowers, birches, cottonwoods and clumps of willows and alders.

As I broke out of the young stand of trees around the cabin, Nigel and I came across a small hill about 10 feet high, five feet wide and 20 feet long. Wandering over the top of it through late blooming goldenrod, monkshood, and yarrow, we descended the hill only to climb up onto another. For a quarter mile we



The slough and meadow from the Big Bend

followed a line of similar hills in the otherwise flat meadow, the old terminal moraine from the joint Taku/Hole-in-the-Wall Glacier when it last stopped advancing a few hundred years ago. The whole meadow is dotted with these hills, now havens for wildflowers above the otherwise soggy ground. Glacial erratics (random rocks carried by the ice and left behind by the melting glacier) also dot the landscape, showing up in odd locations here and there and forming refuges for currents, lichens, and feeding platforms for raptors.



Glacial erratic with currents

Soon we showed up at the “Big Bend” in the slough where it curves from the middle of the meadow back toward the mountain. In the distance I could see fields of cotton grass in bloom and was compelled to continue my trek in their direction. I descended the last in a series of moraines and was laboriously slogging through the sage-like brush and fireweed when I heard a scream and looked up to see a red-tailed hawk cruising about 20 feet over my head. She was so close I could see her beak opening as she

called (see the photo above the title). Flying toward the river, she alighted in the top of a solitary spruce and I stopped my trek in order to pursue, snapping photos in the hopes of an eventual identification (I determined the species from these later). As I approached, she swooped down again and called while flying to another nearby spruce. This time I had to crash through a thick copse of willows and alders as I followed her, breaking out into an unknown sphagnum bog with its own fields of cotton grass. The hawk screamed again, flew back to the first spruce, then soared away toward the river to land in a stand of cottonwoods right next to an eagle nest. I left the pursuit in favor of exploring the meadow on my way to the nest. Nigel hunted rodents in small clumps of grass and I examined the glacial erratics and tried to determine what animal had left the trails tromped down through the moss. Surprisingly, fruiting nagoonberries lived among the clumps of sphagnum.

I eventually made my way to the eagle nest and made a half-hearted attempt to climb it. From about ten feet beneath the nest I could see there was no way to climb inside from below, so I aborted the attempt in order to appease my rather frantic dog (xtratuffs aren't really tree climbing shoes anyway). Judging from the feathers on the ground around the nest, I suspect it was active this year or at least used as a perching tree.

From there I began picking nagoonberries in earnest and caught up with the jeep track that connects our property with the lodge. Unfortunately, most of the berries on this part

of the river were already overripe, but I managed to pick about six cups of ripe ones by the time I made my way back to the cabin for lunch.

I'd hiked all morning under a gray but rainless sky; after lunch, however, the rain started in earnest, pouring down hard and relentless, obscuring the glacier from view and hammering on the roof upstairs. It seemed unstoppable, but that was just as well. I lit a fire and sat down on the couch with a cup of hot chocolate (spiked with a shot of my father's Chivas Regal scotch) and a mystery novel. It wasn't just any mystery novel, though! Called *Murder on the Alaska Ferry* this book is part travel log and includes a naturalist named Debbie Maas... No, no, I didn't write it! Last year a passenger from one of the last Tracy Arm trips I narrated when I worked for Auk Nu Tours contacted me out of the blue to ask if she could include me as a character in her book and if I might be her expert reader on Southeast Alaska. Of course I was thrilled. The book is now being offered to publishers so if you see *Murder on the Alaska Ferry* by Therese Mageau in the bookstores, be sure to pick it up!



View from the eagle tree

Late in the afternoon I decided to take the canoe for a quick spin, heading just upriver to a grassy marsh protected from the main river current by a point jutting out. One large slough wove its way deep inside the marsh, joined by several small tributaries. I came across several families of teal (I think), who glided away from me making perfect,

picturesque little wakes on the glassy water. Several times pink salmon broke the surface with knarled jaws and dorsal humps, bodies mottled with decay. I wondered if there was acceptable spawning habitat in the slough or whether these salmon had been caught in a deadend detour, stuck until it was too late to go and join the spawn. There seemed a certain resignation in their languid movements, but maybe I was just projected the feeling of fall closing in all around me.



Canoeing with ducks



Eaglets



Parent eagle

That evening I picked more berries around the cabin while Nigel explored and chased off a bear (I assume it was a bear—Nigel got a better look/smell than I did, but his hackles were up and he charged into the bushes).

After another sound night of sleep in the hammock, Nigel and I took a second trek through the meadows. As I broke out of the trees around the cabin I heard a strange whining clucking sound and looked up to spot the new eagle nest occupied by an adult eagle with some food and two fledglings. The father eagle gave me a serious look from the nest, then let out a warning call to his mate sitting in a perching tree upriver. Very good to see the locals raising two eaglets to fledge!

As I entered the meadow I decided to take a route away from the moraines; crashing



Wooden rose

through the brush near a stream I stopped to take a picture of a “wooden rose” (a rose shaped growth on a willow shrub) and noticed one of the Forest Service land boundary markers nearly lost in the vegetation. Nigel and I explored a bit more, finding some lovely hideaways in the meadow, and did some serious berry picking on the way back. After lunch and another cup of hot chocolate I reluctantly packed up, closed the shutters on the cabin, and took off for Juneau, leaving the Taku behind until next summer.



Looking up toward a Meadow moraine



Eagle, moraine, and Hole-in-the-Wall Glacier