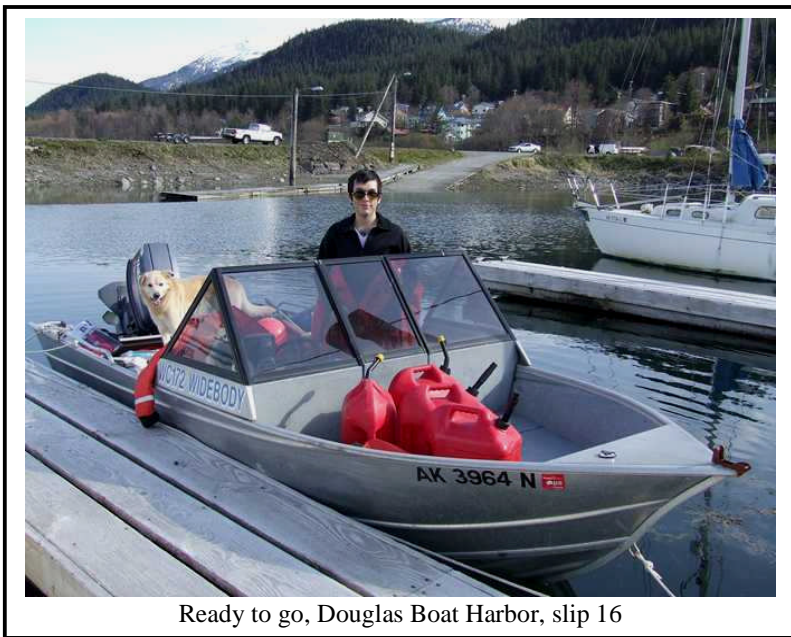




Snettisham 2008 – 2: Grumpy Bear May 9-10

It was Friday and sunny, but the weather didn't sound very promising—solid four footers from the north, followed by a front from the south bringing three to four footers the next day. I'd launched the boat during my lunch hour (after returning from the welding shop) in the hopes of heading down to the homestead with Rory before he left town, but I



Ready to go, Douglas Boat Harbor, slip 16

wasn't hopeful. We gathered our gear hastily, loaded the boat, and headed out at five o'clock, me in anticipation of turning around at Taku Inlet, Rory ready for foul weather and fully expecting to make it all the way. The water was tolerable in the channel and we sped away in the sunshine with our traditional drinks in hand. We didn't make it much past Sandy Beach, though, before the Coast Guard pulled us over for a safety inspection. It was so nice without the breeze that Rory and I were too warm sitting around in our mustang suit and float coat. The Coast Guard folks were pleasant and

petted Nigel while I unloaded my emergency kit to show them all my safety equipment (carefully gathered). I even surprised myself at my ability to pull both my fuel tanks out of their cavity in the stern to get around the fire extinguisher requirement (if you can throw your tanks overboard you don't need a fire extinguisher). I'm not sure I'd really want to handle fuel tanks if there happened to be a fire onboard, but I didn't question it. The inspection went off without a hitch—I lacked only my boat registration, as apparently I'd carefully ziplocked my car registration and put it in the emergency kit instead. Before we left I asked the officers how the weather looked and began to get hopeful—one footers around Arden, they said, otherwise calm.

So off we went, flying well into Taku Inlet before we had to slow down a bit to ride the one to two foot swells on our stern. It was infinitely better than the previous year's ride when Rory and I battled three footers from the south all the way down. And the weather was really beautiful, Devil's Paw in prominent view over the Juneau Ice Field. In front of Limestone Inlet Rory saw a whale breach and we stopped for a few minutes, watching it travel south close to shore. A few more whales came up outside Snettisham, but we moved on, passing the sea lion haul-out at a distance, now with only 50-100 animals on the rocks.

It was high tide when we got to the homestead, but we needed to leave at low tide the next day so I had to anchor in deep water. We unloaded our gear, locked Nigel inside the lodge, tied the double kayak to the boat, and puttered away. The mount for the fathometer is broken, so Rory held it in the water over the stern while I read the depth from the steering console in the front and drove the boat. I've memorized the combination of cliffs and logs on the beach where the sandbars end, but it drops off quickly enough that some precision is helpful. The first attempt put us in water that was too deep and the anchor wouldn't catch. On the second try she held firm and we left in the kayak to paddle back to shore.



Rory crossing Taku Inlet



Stephen's Passage

By the time we got settled and lit a fire it was eight, so we went about drinking wine and getting dinner ready. Rory brought homemade pesto for the ravioli and concocted a delicious French vinaigrette sauce for the fresh green beans out of various overwintered condiments I had on hand. We listened to reggae on the crank radio (we only get two stations) while eating in front of the picture window. For dessert we spontaneously decided to make a peach cobbler from a box mix that I'd bought at

least four years ago. It consisted of a can of peach filling and a bag of powdered topping. While it baked we played Scattergories and finished the wine.



Boat at anchor as seen from the lodge porch

After eating way too much ancient peach cobbler I finally retired to my cabin (Cabin 4, a.k.a Hermit Thrush), made the bed up, and cozied in for the night. Nigel crashed on his new fluffy bed and I think I barely moved until dawn.

The next morning I made some feeble and mostly futile attempts to do chores with Rory's help. First I grabbed the broom and swept off the decks, stairs, and boardwalk, noticing that my one-gallon gas jug (where I keep mixed gas for the chain saw) was out of place on the front deck (I

was pretty sure I'd put it away under the porch). On closer inspection I found four distinct punctures in it and all the gas drained away. Nearby one of the foam seats for the kayak had a corner chewed off. Rory had heard a commotion not long after I'd gone to bed the night before—a naughty bear had come in the night and made trouble!

After breakfast Rory and I grabbed the chainsaw and attempted to resupply my dwindling firewood. There was still a stack of whole branches that we'd gathered last spring from the great fallen tree, covered with a tarp all winter and dry. Unfortunately, the chainsaw blade had gone terribly dull and we only cut three pieces before giving up. We probably would have soon run out of gas anyway. So we moved on to other tasks, first taking the tarp off the outhouse and then putting the water filters back together behind the lodge at the end of my fresh water drinking system. Unfortunately, we met our next obstacle, and found the valve there frozen in the open position; nothing we could do would make it budge.



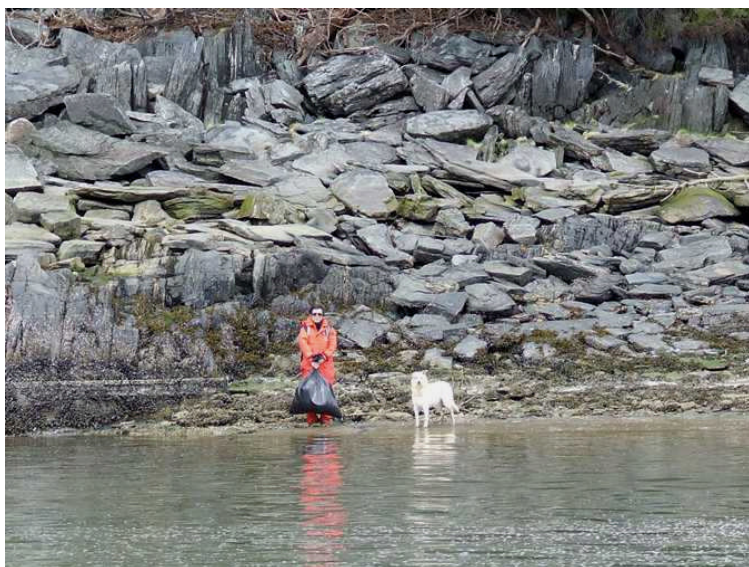
Bear toys

It didn't get much better. We trekked up the hill to put the olive barrel in the water, intact and exactly where I'd left it on the side of the creek. I cleaned the screens off the front of it and we rolled it into position in its little depression, setting rocks around it to hold it in place. In anticipation of water gushing through the filters back at the lodge, we eagerly headed down the mountain, only to find the system entirely dry. I headed back up, this time following the hose (which takes a more direct but less pleasant route up the mountain through the devil's club); it appeared to be unharmed, yet no water flowed through the system. The valve at the top was open, the outlet hose in the olive barrel was well below the creek's water level, but it didn't appear that any water was even entering the hose. I messed around with it for a while, then closed the valve and headed back down. It was evident that a small trickle had made it through the system, but not much. I suppose there's an air lock in it or something, but I'm baffled.



Olive barrel in the creek collecting water

By that time I was frustrated and it was time to go. We cleaned up the lodge, put newspapers back over the windows to discourage birds from hitting them, and I took off to gather the boat. It was very low tide and I had to drag the kayak some distance over the mud before I could float. Along the way I found a dead eulachon (I think) on the beach and as I paddled I saw quite a few more floating dead in the water. This is the only time of year that the water at the mouth of the river is clear so it was exciting to see the dead eulachon and (live) fry in the shallows. Unfortunately, Nigel followed me out, crying and whining when I got in the kayak. I'd hoped that having Rory on the beach and the short distance between the end of the sandbars and the boat would help his anxiety, but he was in a panic, even swimming a short distance after me when



Rory and Nigel waiting on the beach

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he ran out of beach. Eventually he turned and went back to Rory, who'd hiked down the beach to meet me in deep water. I pulled anchor and on my way to shore saw a whole school of eulachon pass by the boat. Very exciting! Eulachon are a type of very oily smelt that come into river systems in the spring to spawn. They're a significant high calorie food source for marine critters just coming out of winter's scarcity. They're also a highly valued Native food as well as one of the main trade goods that the local Tlingit traded with Natives from the interior. The Whiting River was one of the river corridors that Tlingit traders used to access their neighbors across the coastal mountains.



After Rory got on board I drug the kayak far up the rocky beach, turned it upside down and tied it to a tree before carrying Nigel to the boat. The water was flat calm and we sped away as a mist descended over the mountains. Stephen's Passage was almost glassy calm and very peaceful. We stopped for whales near the Seal Rocks, but they disappeared. The whole was smelled wonderful. Even with stops for whales and photography we made it home in about an hour and a half.



Seal Rocks, looking north up Stephen's Passage from the entrance to Port Snettisham