

Dru kavaking in from his boat at the homestead

Snettisham 2008 – 7: Mouse Mayhem July 23-27



My gear at the bottom of the ramp

I'd been determined to spend another full week at Snettisham in June, but a number of work and personal circumstances swayed me otherwise. Instead I vowed to take a few long weekends later in the summer and my first opportunity came in late July. After spending a weekend up the Taku I went back to work for two days, then headed down to Snettisham Wednesday morning. Already feeling bad about not having gone down the night before (but that was a bit much) I was antsy to get going in the morning. I finished packing and left the house a little after eight and stopped at A&P (the grocery store) for fresh bread and ice (I had a five day trip ahead). After grabbing the bread I quickly discovered a complete lack of ice in the freezer so I went to customer service where I was assured that there was ice in the back. The attendant called someone on the intercom and rang me up for three bags of ice--for \$7.50! That's expensive ice! I waited around for some time while the attendant continued to call someone named Brendan while assuring me that

the ice would be brought right to the counter. Eventually a cart showed up over at the freezers loaded up with bags of ice. Brendan (or so I assumed) came over with two bags; I took them and mentioned politely that I just needed one more. He went back to the cart and began to load the freezer, quite effectively ignoring me. I finally went over there, grabbed the ice, and crabbily departed.

The bags of ice were *tiny*, especially for the exorbitant price I paid for them, and clearly not enough (I was taking an extra cooler in the hopes of coming back with fish). On a whim I decided to stop in the neighboring liquor store, though I knew they wouldn't open for half an hour. I found the door open and a familiar face behind the counter, so I stuck my head in, apologized for the early hour, and asked if I could get some ice. He nodded, ushered me in, and asked what I needed. "Just three bags of ice" I said and approached the counter; he replied, "Just take it!" So not only were these bags much bigger, they were free! Of course, I've dropped more than a bit of money at Kenny's this summer.

So I shoved the ice into the coolers and booked it to the harbor. It was low tide and the ramp was steep so I was forced to carry most of my gear and gas down by hand, including two crab pots. By the time I'd schlepped my way to the boat it was 9:30 and I was suitably cranky. A beer might have helped the mood, but I wasn't feeling very festive and broke my "leaving the harbor beer" tradition. The seas on the way down weren't terrible, but they were uncomfortable and coming from the south. I was grumpy all the way across Taku Inlet but by the time I hit Taku Harbor my mind was so far away I got into a numb groove and started to relax. The tide was still low when I got to the homestead at 11:30, so I came up on the mud a few hundred yards from the lodge, dug in the anchor, and grabbed my backpack and satellite phone. For once it wasn't necessary to haul all my gear over the flats at low tide; I could wait a few hours till high tide.

I was intent on getting the lodge floor painted, and that endeavor absorbed most of the first day. The first thing I did was clear out the front third or so of the lodge (I was shooting for half the floor, but I could only move the couch so close to the stove and the rest of the lodge was jam packed with other furniture and tools). I still had a few stacks of siding on the floor in the front so I slid them over the back of the couch and leaned them on the other side. It was crazily crowded back there. I swept the front several times, then filled the large cracks between the plywood with paintable caulk. After that I lightly mopped to get some of the grime off, using a kitchen mop from home and a paint tray. I didn't want to get the floor too wet, as I wanted to paint that night. I kept the wood stove cranked up to dry it out.



The back wall ready for siding

While I waited for the floor to dry I sorted through the lumber behind the couch. All the pieces for the back wall had to be on the short side (no more than 97") so I leaned each piece against the wall to see if it would fit beneath the joist (this was quicker than measuring). About 15 were short enough, or a quarter of the wall. The rest of the lumber I carried out the back door, leaving out enough pieces to finish the wall and putting the rest on the porch with the balance of the siding for the ceiling. Sometime in the afternoon I put up visqueen as a vapor barrier along the back wall as far as the propane light above the stove. I also kayaked down to the boat, brought her to shore to unload my supplies, then anchored her out again.

On and off all afternoon I returned to the front half of the cabin to check on the status of the drying floor. The wood stove was stuck behind the couch so it wasn't heating up well up front and I was disappointed with the progress. I tried tricks like putting hot rocks from the stovetop and the tea kettle on the damper patches to hurry them along, and I even stood on some patches for a while, but it wasn't very effective. Eventually I brought down my Mr. Buddy portable propane heater from my cabin and ran that for some time, leaving the tank on the porch and running the hose through the door. Nigel was forced to stay outside as I couldn't let him on the front floor and there was literally no room for him to lay down in the back. I poured a can of blackberries in a small pot late in the afternoon and topped it with bisquick to make blackberry dumplings. I didn't want to start the pilots on the oven until I was finished moving it around for siding and painting, so I put the pot on the wood stove in the hopes that it was hot enough to cook it.

By this time it was getting on into the afternoon and I needed to start painting. I scraped up the excess caulk, swept carefully again, and decided the floor was sufficiently dry. I realized that some of the patches I'd thought were wet were just stains on the plywood. I mixed up the two parts of the floor paint and let it sit for half an hour before starting to cut in around the wall. It was a fairly simple process and looked wonderful when I was done. I got paint all over my feet when I went back to touch up a few places, but it looked really good afterwards.

At that point I was pretty worn out and it was getting late for working. I left the dumplings on the stove (not quite done) and headed to bed around 9:00. I read for some time and played a little solitaire. I'd like to say I slept well, but I woke up in the middle of the night with a terrible coughing fit (a paroxysm, if you will). I'd managed to contract whooping cough a few weeks before and was in the middle of the worst of it (I'm 90% sure it was whooping cough, anyway, but I was never diagnosed). This particular fit left me breathless and gasping, wheezing and vomiting for about half an hour, and I continued to cough for another half an hour before things settled down a bit. In general, though, I was feeling better and had coughed relatively little since leaving Juneau.

So I slept in a bit the next morning, not getting to work until around 9:00. I was disappointed to find the floor still tacky and too wet to support anything substantial. Fueled with wonderful blackberry dumplings for breakfast I cranked up the wood stove



Winter wren

again and got to work finishing the siding on the back wall. The first fifteen boards I'd set aside went up fairly easily. When I ran out I started up the generator on the front porch (very crowded now with gas tanks from inside, the Mr. Buddy heater and all the lumber) and trimmed as many pieces down on the lower decks as I needed and also cut the shorter lengths to go around the window. I hauled these inside and kept working, returning to the generator to cut a hole in the side of a board for the propane lines coming from outside. I

initially panicked as I thought I'd have to cut a hole in the middle of the board to line up with the hole through the plywood siding (this was easy in itself, but how was I going to thread the lines through the hole without unhooking them from the tanks or the appliances? Neither was an easy task!). I contemplated this for a while until I realized that the propane lines actually lined up quite well with the edge of the board (not the center) and I could stick them through before I installed it. I did wind up having to re-bend the copper propane tube, which I very nearly kinked badly. Every step I made as I worked in the back of the lodge had to be carefully calculated so I didn't knock something down. It drove me crazy. Again, Nigel spent the day outside as the paint was too wet in front and there was literally no room for him in the back.

By that time I was approaching the sink and had run out of vapor barriered wall. I grabbed the crow bar and started prying off the sink structure which was nailed directly to the studs. It had gone up hastily and it and it took a little while to figure out how I'd built it and why it seemed so strangely constructed. In any event, I dismantled it as carefully as possible and set it aside, quickly putting up the vapor barrier and cutting out the window. At that point I



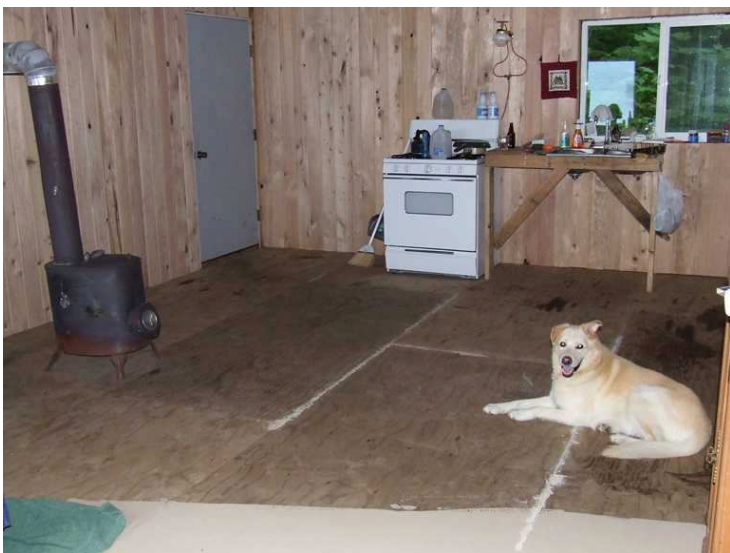
Rufus hummingbird

broke for lunch. There was no room inside, so I opened a can of beans, scrunched a bunch of crackers inside and headed out to the lower decks. The afternoon was cloudy and mild and I watched a little winter wren bop around the lower deck while the hummingbirds continuously visited the feeder and perched on branches nearby.

Back inside the rest of the siding when up fairly quickly. I had one hang up on the far side of the window when the first full length board left a gap between the tongue of the previous board on the bottom and its groove. I had to go back and pry half a dozen of the previous boards a little to the right until the gap closed. Amazingly, the last board fit perfectly in the corner. I screwed the propane light back into the wall and carefully nailed the sink system in.

The paint on the front half still wasn't completely dry, but I was dead set on painting the rest of the floor that night. I had guests arriving on Saturday and the floor clearly needed more than 24 hours to dry for heavy traffic. I'd originally intended to put everything from the back half of the lodge onto the painted floor, but it was obvious that it wouldn't tolerate that much wear yet. Instead I very carefully moved a few pieces of furniture onto it, each one on top of a towel or rags to protect the paint. I put the couch in the corner, and slowly carried over the cabinet, desk and metal mouse proof tin. Everything else was going to have to go outside.

I couldn't believe how much stuff I had down there! Most of it's leftover from construction...rolls of felt, boxes of screws and nails, plumbing supplies, a bucket of tools, a tub of miscellaneous items, a toilet seat, a dozen digging tools, a box of gloves, shrub clippers, levels, a dozen cans of paint, two drills, visqueen, stacks of scrap cedar...! I made a big stack outside the back door about 15'X20' and covered it with a tarp. The only things left were the stove and the sink system. I went through the same process as the day before, sweeping, mopping (more carefully this time), caulking, and so on. The stove did a better job of drying the floor this time. While waiting, I grabbed my tool belt, loaded up with 16d nails and headed to the first cabin. When I built the porches last summer I'd apparently only tacked them in, so I went back and finished nailing the first porch down and most of the second. Hammering like that is pretty exhausting! By 7:00 the floor was sufficiently dry and I set about painting. It was a bit more complicated this time with the wood stove and the oven, but the effect was fantastic. I headed to bed early again and listened to the torrential downpour on the metal roof in the middle of the night.



The back of the lodge before...



...and after!

Next day I slept in again and was delighted to find the front of the lodge floor completely dry and the back dry around the wood stove. I got the stove cranking again and removed the cloths from beneath the furniture and rotated the couch back its position opposite the picture window. After breakfast I locked Nigel inside (barricading him from the back of the lodge) and took the skiff out to set Dru's crab pots and put down my personal use halibut line. I dropped the pots just past the dropoff--one with salmon guts, the other with a carcass Dru gave me--and dropped my halibut line in deeper water baited with pink salmon. The weather had really closed in and it continued to pour torrentially; I was a little worried for all my goods sitting outside under the tarp, but there wasn't much I could do. I did retrieve the buckets for under the sink in the morning so I could use the sinks (the buckets catch the water since I have no functional gray water drain or treatment system). I was startled to find three mice in the red bucket—one lively, one very weak, and one dead. When I tried to dump them out the healthy one scrambled away, but the weak one couldn't even make it to the edge of the bucket. Lacking any other dry recovery place (other than inside the lodge) I put him in the outhouse and propped open the door. The back of the dead mouse's neck had been eaten away and his back bone exposed. When I threw away the weak mouse's corpse later that day (he'd died in the outhouse) I found blood stains on his chest. It was all a little macabre.

After working hard for a couple of days, I was more than happy to sit on the couch in my cozy lodge, listen to the rain, and read for a while while the paint dried. I'd finally lit the pilots on the propane range so when I developed a hankering for Russian tea I went in search of my stash. When I finally found it I discovered only a chewed up bag and little crystals of sugar clustered around mouse dirt. Argh. As an alternative to Russian tea I made myself a hot toddy and curled up with my book. I kept smelling something foul as I drank but could never place it.

When I felt antsy again I went through and organized the sundries cabinet, into which I've been jamming various things for years. By the early afternoon the floor was dry enough to start packing things in again so I got to work. It was a long process, but I took a lot of care in arranging things to leave the most open space as possible. Although nearly as much came in as I'd taken out, it was utterly transformed and I had ample space in front of the



The well-organized lodge

wood stove even for a large area rug. The tan floor against the hemlock siding? Gorgeous! I was very pleased.

In the process of moving things in and out, though, I discovered just how thoroughly the mice had inundated the place. Everything was covered in mouse dirt and stank, especially the area around and inside the oven. No cabinet was safe, no dish was clean--they'd been everywhere. So I washed about half the dishes that night and thoroughly cleaned all the shelves and countertops and oven, disinfecting everything with bleach. It felt pretty satisfying. I also found one last little mouse-sized gap in the hole for the propane lines under the copper tubing, so I did some creative cutting and stapling to cover it. That night I slept in the lodge to see if I could learn anything about the mouse situation, but discovered little except where the foul smell was coming from. A mouse had gotten trapped in the bottom of the garbage can and had lain there decomposing for some time.

Next morning I continued to wash and disinfect dishes (and the garbage can) and finished stapling hardware cloth around the gaps on either side of the roof beam. As I was scrubbing I heard a boat and looked out to see a zodiac approaching with three orange clad people in it. I waved them in and walked down to the beach to meet them. I recognized the leader as Blake, the lead biologist at the Fish & Game marbled murrelet research camp at the entrance to Snettisham. Three years before I'd given him a ride down to camp in my skiff at the same time that our shared landing craft had delivered my couch and other furniture. The biologists were on their way a little farther upriver to hike into a murrelet nest but first I gave Blake a tour around the compound. He invited me along and if I hadn't been expecting guests I would have jumped at the opportunity.



The cozy living room (front) of the lodge

Instead I headed back inside, finished cleaning, baked an apple crisp, and relaxed again. The smell of cooking mouse pee from the hot oven was atrocious. In the early afternoon Dru, his brother Nick, and their friend Carl showed up. We hung around the lodge for a bit, then headed out onto the water. Carl went for a kayak and the rest of us took the boats out. I left Dru and Nick fishing in the inlet and buzzed around the corner from Sentinel Point to do some exploring. My dad had pointed out a pile of large white boulders on

the beach and said that there had been a big structure in the woods nearby, probably associated with a mine tunnel (the origin of the quartz boulders on the beach). I tied the Ronquil to an overhanging alder (it was a rising tide) and wandered around the woods for about 20 minutes but never found anything interesting. Beautiful forest, though. I headed back and found Dru and Nick fishing halibut off River Point in Gilbert Bay. Dru gave me his line and we drifted around fishing for an hour or so; we had a few serious nibbles, but didn't catch anything. The current was strong and drug us down the slope



Slogging through the wet forest at Sweetheart Creek

pretty quick—it was too deep to want to anchor. On the way back I pulled in my halibut line and found nothing but sand fleas, so I dropped it again.

That night the boys made chicken cordon bleu in the stinky oven and I finished some soup I'd made for lunch. We played a hilarious game of Scattergories (I think the highlight was Nick's convincing delivery of "tropical milk") and headed to bed.

The next morning I was quite pleased to find no mouse dirt at

all in the lodge! The weather had been decent the day before while we were fishing (we even saw the sun for about five seconds), but the steady rain came back in the morning. We debated what to do and finally settled on stopping by Sweetheart Creek on the way home. After breakfast we more or less packed up and headed over there. I dropped everyone off, anchored up (it took a while to get the anchor to catch) and kayaked in. Everything was wet and I hadn't been able to find my rain pants before we left so a few feet inside the brush I was thoroughly soaked between my rain coat and my xtratufs. We tromped over the spit and up the creek and through the muck to a little crevasse we'd fished in before. We made a few casts into the bottom pool, but had no luck so we trudged on to the best fishing point upriver.



The boys at Sweetheart Creek waiting for the boat in the rain



Debbie, Nigel, and the dungie

We found it occupied, but tried a few casts in the pool just above. Dru was the only legal fisherman (you have to be an Alaska resident) with hip waders, so he did most of the casting. He caught one beautiful sockeye in the cast net, then the fish disappeared altogether. The folks on the point who'd been slaying them pretty regularly stopped catching anything too, so we decided to head out.

It was a wet and bleak day out there and I have to admit that I was rather proud of the pluckiness of the boys (especially those from out of town) and their fortitude to continue

adventuring in really miserable circumstances. I took everyone back to the homestead, dropped Dru off on his boat, and then left Carl in charge of my skiff while I changed clothes and packed up (it was a falling tide so Carl held my boat off the beach to prevent it from going aground). It took a little while, but eventually everyone had packed up, eaten some lunch (except for me), and I was able to sweep and close up the lodge. It felt wonderful to put on dry pants and I snuggled into my mustang suit before trooping down to the waterfront. Carl joined me on the *Ronquill* (Dru only has one extra seat) and we headed out under a fierce rain. It was so dense in Snettisham that I couldn't see clearly through the windshield, but the rain pelting against my face made it too painful to stand up. On the way we stopped to pick up the crab pots and Carl and I found one enormous male dungie. It stopped raining so vehemently in Stephen's Passage and the seas were on the stern, so the ride back was pretty tolerable; I ate lunch. The gillnetters were assembling and we wove around several nets. When we reached Marmion Island and the entrance to Gastineau Channel Carl climbed back aboard Dru's boat and they all went around the back side of Douglas to fish. I headed straight home and took two long baths and drank wine.



Carl, Nick and Dru