



View from the front yard (Taku Glacier)

Taku 2008 – 1: Analog 80s Games and a Big Weasel June 7-9

Two hours before high tide, Chris and I took off from Douglas Harbor with the dog and the groceries, bound for the Taku cabin. When we left Gastineau Channel we hung a left around Pt. Salisbury instead of beelining it for Pt. Arden and Snettisham. We passed Pt. Bishop, slowing down a little for the southerly swells, then crossed to the east side of the

inlet to check out the mouth of Dorothy Creek and the construction site for Juneau's next hydroelectric facility. Then we cruised on up to the Scar, a huge slab of cliff with all kinds of nooks and grassy ledges. Gulls circled in droves against the blue sky high near the cliff while others sat on their precarious nests; no guillemots were around down low.

Once we turned and headed straight upriver, the remnants of the southerly swells came from behind and we picked up speed. By the time the Taku Glacier came into view the familiar sweet scent of the Taku valley wafted down and I grinned foolishly with pleasure (maybe I was a salmon in a past life). We swung wide around Hut Point and past the glacier and made our way without incident to the cabin. We were the first to arrive this year, and thankfully all was in order. The strawberries were blooming at the edge of the river and lupines and chocolate lilies bloomed in the meadows. We unloaded the boat and anchored it out in the channel with a line



Gulls around the Scar

from the stern to shore, then hauled our gear to the cabin. Chris unshuttered the windows while I opened up and turned on the propane tank. The range and refrigerator fired up without a hitch and we soon had everything stowed away. We cooked dinner and broke out Chris's Connect 4 game, at which I proved rather unskilled (I'm certain I hadn't played since I was about 8). At some point I went in search of the "Simon Says" game and found a treasure trove of games from my childhood in a desk upstairs. Among them was Pac Man the board game, a dreadful version of the video game to which Chris took an instant liking. I also found another precious gem from my youth—an Air France deck of playing cards, no doubt offered to my brother or I by a tourist at the lodge. I have many fond memories of playing made-up elaborate card games with my brother during the winter at the lodge (I think "Prince in the Castle" was the best). In this deck, aces are ones, jacks are "V"s, queens are "D"s, Kings are "R"s and all of the face cards have names. It was a joy just to hold those cards again, and we broke up the other games that evening with gin.

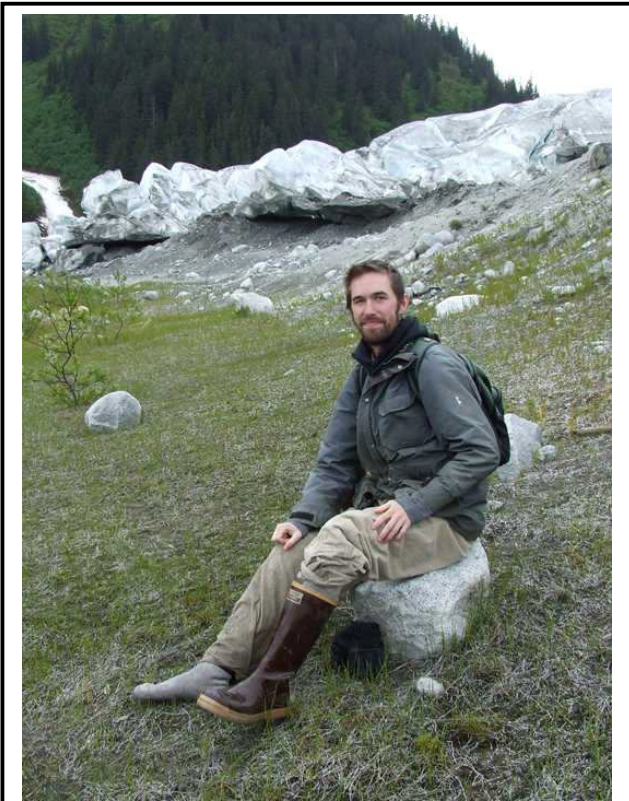
The next morning we prepared for our first adventure. I found my mother's tiny little outboard motor in the workshop and carried it down to the water while Nigel hackled up and chased the scent of what I assume was a bear. We found the canoe stashed under the alders and hauled that down as well, slightly dented from the snowfall. I hooked up the

outboard and gave it a pull while Chris hung onto the front—it started right up on the first pull! We climbed aboard, grabbed the small fuel jug from the boat and some gloves, then headed downriver to join the main channel where it crosses the river. My skills at reading the river have improved vastly over the last few years, but I admit (somewhat to my shame) that I made use of the buoys put in place for the Tulsequah Mine barges. The river channel was surprisingly wide and the sandbars few despite the fact that it was low tide (the river was high). We touched bottom once briefly as we crossed a sandbar, but otherwise the water was amply deep. Half way across the river we were making good time when the engine unexpectedly stopped. Suddenly we discovered how wickedly fast the current ran as we were swept backwards and over to the edge of a sandbar. I got the motor started again, but it quickly died. Though the engine's little tank still had some fuel in it, I filled it up and this immediately solved the problem.



Crossing the river to the Hole-in-the-Wall Glacier

Seals watched us from the river and as we reached the opposite shore below the Brassiere Hills and we saw some breach dramatically in an eddy as we passed. From there we



Wringing out socks on a push moraine

turned north again until we pulled alongside the mud flats in front of Hole-in-the-Wall Glacier. We drug the canoe up onto the beach and tied it to a willow tree before exploring. The mud flats were grown up with scrub willow about three feet high and covered with Canada goose prints. Unfortunately, as we approached the moraine in front of the glacier we were forced to cross a rushing little stream. It was too opaque with silt to determine depth visually so we tentatively stepped in and were pleased to find it only a few inches deep and quite solid. Until, of course, we reached the middle of the creek and with some momentum stepped into deeper water and soft sand. We both scrambled for shore and got water over our xtratuffs.

An offshoot of the Taku Glacier, the Hole-in-the-Wall is still advancing across the mud flats toward the river and is rimmed in front by a push moraine about 15 feet tall. The melting glacier has retreated somewhat from its

maximum winter reach and only a few tendrils of muddy ice reached the inside edge of the moraine. We picked a likely spot and began roaming up into the glacier, peering into crevasses and scrabbling up the ice. The ice was rotten and melting, and chunks the size of golf balls were constantly tumbling off all around (and on top) of us. We explored for a while and climbed as high as we were comfortable before heading back down and having a beer and lunch on an old powdery moraine on the mud flats. With the chill wind, the glacier, and the stark vegetation I felt like I was back in the ice age. We could just make out the Taku Lodge upriver and several lodge planes made passes over us. On our way



In the middle of the glacier

back to the canoe we crossed moose and bear tracks. The wind kicked up as we headed out and it began to sprinkle a little, chilling us as we pattered back to the cabin.

We lit a fire to warm up and played more games while the weather cleared up into a glorious afternoon. I finally suggested we go for a walk so we trekked out in the sunshine along the river bank upriver. Getting to the big strawberry field was simple, but the trail from there had long since grown over with alders and spruces. We turned inland and made our way through meadows of thick scrub brush, ferns, and fireweed, around sloughs and over old moraines until we broke out into the clearings close to the river and from there onto the road to the lodge. I was pleased to see that the track did not appear well used yet this year and the meadow on our property was growing back nicely. Clumps of lupine and chocolate lilies bloomed everywhere along with patches of sweet scented nagoonberries, but most of the rest of the flowers had yet to mature and we even found a few patches of snow where the drifts were deep last winter. Sweltering in the sun and swatting away droves of mosquitoes we followed the path through the meadow until it started to head into the forest behind the lodge and we turned around. I saw a hawk briefly, but not long enough to identify it.

Back at the cabin we grilled on the stone BBQ outside and watched the Tulsequah barge pass by with two escort boats. While Chris was in charge a bear evidently came around, but Nigel chased it off and we never saw him. After dinner we played more games and as my skills at Connect 4 improved slightly I realized I was becoming a Connect 4 addict.



Taku River and Taku Glacier from the meadow

After a hasty breakfast the next day we set out for our final adventure—the lake hike. The stretch of flat land that harbors both the lodge and our cabin is encircled on three sides by sheer purple mountains that rise straight up out of the soggy meadows. Somewhat downriver from the cabin the vertical face of the mountain is broken by a small cirque, now a lake indented in the mountains. I'd been there once 13 years ago and others of my family have ventured up a few



Hiking up the dry creek bed

times, but it is rarely visited and completely wild. We packed some beers and snacks and headed out in the canoe with Nigel (who was so eager to come he jumped in with no hesitation). We turned downriver and made good time with the current. Although it was low tide, I read the river to mean that there was a strong current running directly across the mouth of the big slough and we crossed that way without touching bottom (normally I'd swing wide around the mouth of the slough to avoid a sandbar and that's evidently how the barges do it based on the buoys). We did hit bottom once in a bizarre riffle right at the edge of the bank farther downriver and again on the way back up.

Below the main slough the vegetation takes on a fairly homogeneous grassy character interspersed in a few places with clumps of willow. Small sloughs wind through the grass connecting the waterfalls along the mountain with the river. We entered the southernmost slough, the water perfectly transparent. When we reached the base of the great waterfall we headed down a side slough and tied the canoe to a willow before walking back toward the waterfall and heading straight up the mountain.

It was a wonderful hike! I immediately noticed an exciting anomaly—the forest was mostly composed of cedar trees. Few were more than six inches in diameter, but they were the dominant vegetation for several hundred feet up the mountain. Cedars are amazing trees and not common in northern Southeast Alaska and I had no idea there were any up the Taku at all, let alone a whole mountainside forest.

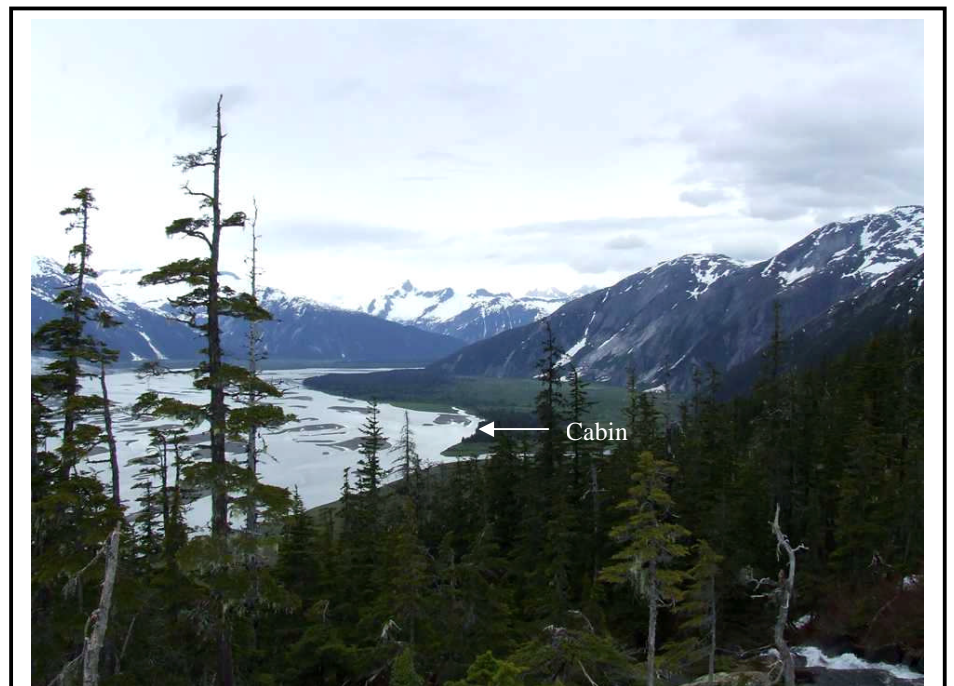
We started out the hike following a dry waterfall/creek alongside the main waterfall, which made easy and pleasant hiking. Soon the creek bed diminished and we took off



The lake

through the mossy forest, not yet overgrown and easy enough to pass through, if steep enough to require hauling ourselves up by tree branches and roots. About half way to the lake we veered over to the waterfall and rested on a huge rock at the edge, looking out over the valley and watching the mosquitoes struggling to attack us as they were swept away by the breeze and mist from the waterfall.

When we continued on Chris and I took different paths and at some point I lost track of him. When I reached the point where I thought our paths would converge he was no where in sight and I began to worry. Thinking that he'd most likely wait for me if he wound up in the lead and with a clear view in both directions, I started to have visions of him slipping on a rock (it happens to the best of us) and hitting his head, lying unconscious somewhere below me. I scoured the nearby snowbanks (there were quite a few at this elevation) looking for tracks and found none. So I doubled back, yelling fruitlessly against the roar of the waterfall. Eventually, after climbing up and down the area a few times, Nigel disappeared and I started back up the mountain, following his tracks until they met up with Chris's. I found them both at the top, slightly cranky for my anxiety. But, the lake was gorgeous, still mostly frozen, and after a



View upriver

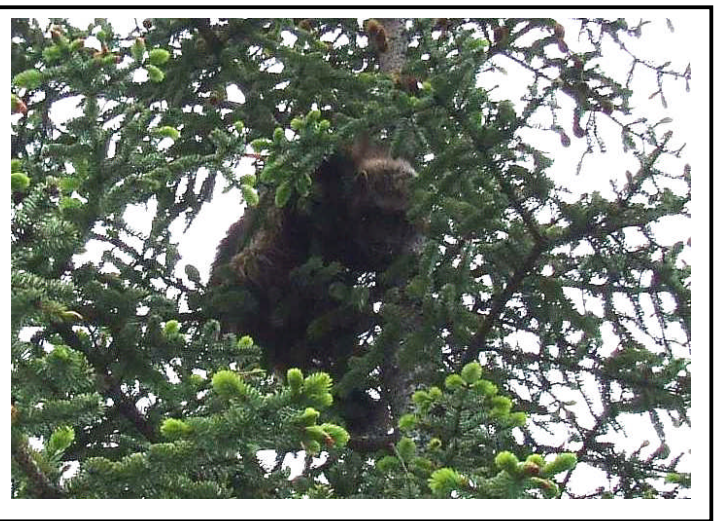
quick look we sat on the snow overlooking the valley and had a celebratory beer. The mosquitoes buzzed around us in dizzying numbers, landing in droves on Chris's sweatshirt and hood. In an experiment I brushed my hand over his shoulders and killed about ten without really even trying. By the time we finished our beers and decided to head back down, the snow around us looked like a mosquito massacre, absolute carnage.



Mosquito carnage

After a last few shots of the view we headed down the mountain fast, skiing and sliding on the snow banks and swinging on alders until we reached the bottom. As we broke out of the cedars and reached the canoe, Nigel suddenly hackled up and raced down the bank, leaping and chasing something on the other side. I assumed it was a bear or moose and saw a flash of brown as it ran through the grass.

Suddenly it leaped through a clearing in the grass and I had a clear view of its low brown body and the tan stripe running down its side—wolverine!!!! I stuttered to Chris that Nigel was chasing a wolverine, certain that it would disappear before we had a chance to see it again. Instead it veered back to the slough and went right up a young spruce tree! Nigel treed a wolverine!



Wolverine

So in case this doesn't impress you much, wolverines are extremely rare to see (not to mention very very cool creatures) and may well be one of the most unusual and interesting wildlife encounters I ever have. Plenty of seasoned Alaskan outdoorsmen have never seen one of these guys or count themselves lucky for a single encounter. This beautiful critter was about 20 feet up a tree and watching Nigel intensely. We got in the canoe and crossed the slough to stand under him for a bit. He watched all of us, a little saliva dripping from his mouth here and there. I had a clear look at his wide badger-like face, small ears, and impressive claws gripping the branch. Wolverines are the largest land member of the weasel family and have a reputation for ferociousness and persistence. I've heard stories of these guys jumping onto the backs of moose to attack from trees! He could easily have torn Nigel to shreds if given a chance. The photos are so poor because his background was the solid white of the sky.

On a high from the wolverine encounter and the hike we clambered back into the canoe and headed to the cabin. Then followed the least pleasant part of the weekend—cleanup. I washed the dishes while Chris cleaned the rest of the place; we shut everything down and hauled our gear down to the boat at about 5:15 only to find its stern sitting squarely on the muddy bank, and not going anywhere. The tide would rise for another two hours and there was nothing to do but wait. We grabbed a couple of beers, some bread, cheese, chips, and the Connect 4 game and headed back to the cabin. We opened one shutter for light and got to work on some serious checker dropping competition. I had intended to get us back to town a little earlier, but...I have to admit I wasn't heart broken about it. It just doesn't get much better than post-hike beer, Connect 4, and good company in the middle of the wilderness. An hour later I checked the boat again, still well grounded, and grabbed our last two beers. At 7:05 we went to check and found the boat just at the edge of the bank and I managed to push it off into deep water. It was exactly high tide. Apparently the boat had drifted in on the morning tide and managed to get caught at the peak as it dropped. Next time I'll put out a second anchor out to keep the stern in deep water.

Relieved, we loaded up the boat, closed up the cabin again, and headed south, taking sips of scotch for the traditional leaving-the-harbor drink since we'd run out of beer. At one point somewhat downriver I turned around to check on the back of the boat and make sure that coolant was running through the engine and was quite startled to see water pouring into the boat! It took my brain about half a second to recognize what was going on. The hose that dumps my bilge water overboard from the new bilge pump system is zip-tied to a fender on the starboard side of the boat. While in port the fender is on the outside of the boat to cushion it from the dock and the hose dumps into the water. But while underway, the fender is on the inside of the boat, and so is the hose! It had rained just a little while we were there and apparently the water in the very bottom of the boat had pooled up toward the stern (where the bilge pump is) when we got up on step (the bow of the boat is higher than the stern). So the bilge pump was working but the water was apparently going right back into the boat and cycling through! I stopped and held the hose overboard until the water was gone and we got underway again. We stopped again

a little later to watch two adult eagles fighting with an immature eagle, clasp talons and spiraling toward the water.

We ran into a southerly chop as soon as we passed Taku Glacier and it built up as we passed Jaw Pt. and approached Cooper. We made slow time and except for one short stretch when we were running in the trough we were more or less heading straight into the swells the whole time. I was looking forward to turning into Gastineau Channel and putting the swells on the stern for a while, but by some bizarre twist they remained in front all the way up the channel. Completely weary, we pulled into the dock at 9:30 and hastily tied up. I dropped Chris off and headed home, with just enough energy to drop the food tote in the garage and pull the perishables out. When I opened it up I discovered about three inches of bilge water inside! I rescued what I could and fell into bed.



Evening over the Taku River and Taku Glacier