



Mergansers in the river

Taku 2008 – 2: Aquatic Adventures July 18-20

It was a stormy Friday, flags whipping from the south, trees crashing, rain driving. The forecast called for seas to five feet. My expectations of making it upriver went from low to dismal as Chris and I drove over to Douglas Harbor and watched the chop run up the channel. I pulled in across from the ramp and Chris went to grab a harbor cart while I started unloading. Down at the boat I organized our gear and started the engine while Chris returned the cart to the ramp. He climbed into the mustang suit and I put a life jacket under my rain coat over my waterproof tin pants. I had every expectation of turning around at the end of the channel but we both figured a beer and a short boat ride

was better than the alternative. We departed at 1:15 to catch the rising tide; I poured more of my beer out than usual as an offering to the sea and the weather gods.

Heading down the channel was slow going fighting the southerly swell, but fairly tolerable. Chris was wearing a jagermeister hat he'd one at trivia night, which (classically) flew off as he stood up near Sheep Creek. We turned around to pick it up and managed to drive over it a few times, me struggling to control the boat in the breeze until I finally got upwind of it and

drifted in so Chris could pick it up in the net. He slapped it back on his head (hardly more wet than before) and we continued to make our way slowly but acceptably along. Once we passed Dupont, the swells started to build and we began to ride over three foot



Misty arrival on the river

seas and more. The driving rain made visibility tricky, but I plugged on in the faint hope of holing up in a cozy cabin for the weekend. When we started to take on a tiny bit of green water over the bow between the larger swells my doubts grew, the ominous Taku Inlet looming before us. We passed an open boat heading toward town with at least four people in it, three of them bundled up in orange survival suits. They all waved enthusiastically, I can only guess in the solidarity of foul weather.

I told Chris there would be three bad sections—Gastineau Channel (at that point nearly over), Pt. Salisbury to Pt. Bishop, and Pt. Bishop to Cooper Pt. After that I thought the swells would die down and be on our stern. I was nervous about it, but we crashed and slid and pounded our way to Salisbury (I can think of few other boating companions who would have tolerated this) when, quite unexpectedly, we found the seas suddenly more tolerable. Pairs of three footers may still have found their way to us, but we were riding along quite comfortably in the trough most of the time and rarely felt compelled to turn and face the incoming seas. Once we rounded Bishop the swells were on the stern and we picked up speed. Once around Cooper, it was practically calm, and we entered the misty river. The Taku Glacier was obscured by the low mist and rain, but we could both smell the Taku valley.

Beyond Flat Point all was calm. We passed Hut Pt. and followed the base of the mountain to start of the meadows south of the cabin. Cruising along the grassy bank we were greeted by the most delightfully acrobatic swallows. They plunged and soared and twisted in mid-air, hovering one moment and diving down to nab insects off the river surface the next. Most were barn swallows, but I saw what may have been a bank swallow among them. About half way to the slough we slowed down to avoid a mother merganser and her eight adorable fuzzy colorful babies paddling along close to the grass. Back at the cabin we came ashore, unloaded, and anchored the boat in the channel, tying a line to it first so I could pull it back in. The river bank at the cabin is about seven feet above the water and a sheer wall of sand and silt drops to a little shelf at the bottom. We schlepped everything up the bank and to the cabin and I turned on the propane and unlocked while Chris opened the shutters. He quickly built a fire and we started to warm up and relax from the stressful boat ride. It was calm relative to Juneau but the rain



Storm on the Taku (Brassier Hills in the background)



A bright moment during the storm (looking upriver to Sockeye Falls)

poured mercilessly. Knowing that there was heavy weather between us and town made the cabin particularly cozy.

That evening we ate pasta and zucchini and shared a bottle of wine before doing something I'd never done before up the Taku. We watched a movie. I'm a little embarrassed about this (as it is the wilderness after all), but the cabin has a generator in the workshop that, in part, powers a TV and VCR. We made our way down to the shop in the dark, unlocked it, and started the generator without a hitch. Back upstairs in the cabin we put in Star Wars: A New Hope and watched about 40 minutes before we started drifting off to sleep and I had to make my way back to the workshop to turn the generator off. That night the rain pounded torrentially on the metal roof above our heads and it was crazy cozy.

I had a few interesting adventures in mind for the weekend but I admit that the weather was a bit of a hindrance. Directly across from the cabin are the Brassiere Hills, two low rounded mountains that split the Hole-in-the-Wall Glacier from its parent the Taku. I always thought it would be a phenomenal hike to stand on the mountaintop between those two glaciers, and it isn't very high. However, it rained intensely on and off and most of the time the top of the mountain was obscured in clouds. The wind had made its way up the Taku and the trees were now thrashing about. When I checked the boat I found white caps on the river. Although there were moments of bright light here and there, it didn't seem like a wise idea to hike a cloudy mountain. We lit a fire and spend a good part of the afternoon playing gin and Connect 4.

But eventually we roused ourselves and decided to explore the big slough. We stopped by the work shop to pick up the little canoe motor and hauled it down to the water. Then we drug the canoe to the river bank and dropped it down onto the sand. We quickly

installed the engine and took off downriver with the dog in a light rain.



Entering the slough

The big slough we wanted to explore originates at the base of the mountain behind the Taku Lodge and winds its way down through the meadows until it reaches the river about a quarter mile below the cabin. It's about 75 feet across at the mouth, but quickly narrows, bordered by grassy banks and willow clumps. The amber

water reflects the high blue mountains all around and the green grass floating at the edge...it's really quite tranquil and beautiful. We pattered our way up the slough and turned with it at the big 90 degree bend until we were right at the base of the mountains.

There an avalanche had left several large boulders in the water and one was occupied by several baby barn swallows being fed by their acrobatic parents. This area was thick with swallows and their crazy displays of aerial prowess.

By this time the rain had stopped and blue sky broke out above us. We headed on and the slough began to narrow and quicken, passing old beaver dams and lodges. The first several beaver dams we were able to pass around easily enough, but we eventually came to a

more functional dam that raised the water level about a foot. We got out at the edge of the bank and pulled the canoe over before puttering on. It became increasingly difficult to steer appropriately as the channel narrowed to only a few feet across and often twisted.



Baby swallows

The next dam we came across was washed out on one side in a sharp bend. I got out and began pulling the bow line while Chris held us off the bank with a paddle (it's tricky turning sharp corners with a long rigid canoe). At one point I gave it a good yank, the rope came loose from the canoe, and I made a dramatic sprawl onto the mud. Chris assures me it was very graceful.

When I was a kid growing up at the lodge I used to canoe in the ponds which feed the slough. There was a series of



Approaching a beaver dam



Nigel in the cotton grass

stagnant sloughs and big ponds that were fun to explore and I was hoping to come across them at the end of the slough. I got my start bird watching there, discovering red-winged blackbirds (which weren't even supposed to be in Alaska according to my antiquated bird book) and yellowlegs. We kept puttering along between

high grassy banks, thinking we were almost there, until we finally decided to get out and take a look around. We found ourselves in a grassy, damp meadow with scattered stands of young dead trees and fields of Alaska cotton grass. We romped around for a bit with the dog before heading back for the cabin. I'm pretty sure we were very near where I used to canoe, but I never saw a pond.

Shortly after we headed back Chris took over running the motor and I had the delight of sitting in the front and being chauffeured around, passing down the narrow channel between the grassy banks. We made good time, going with the current and the falling tide. It had clouded back up and by the time we hit the big bend again it began to sprinkle. We watched a beaver swim across the slough, disappear, and come up again behind us, heading upstream. Back at the cabin I added a second anchor to the boat off the stern to prevent it from going aground again at high tide. We got a fire going, warmed up, and had macaroni and cheese and wine for dinner, supplemented later by quesadillas. Chris talked me



Playing Pac Man

into playing another game of Pac Man the board game at which I was (again) crushed despite my very real attempt at victory. We finished Star Wars that night and started Time Bandits before exhaustion forced us to sleep.

It was still pretty misty the next day but the wind had died down. We breakfasted on quesadillas, cleaned the cabin and packed up for our next aquatic adventure. I pulled the skiff in and we quickly loaded the boat before I untied the line and stepped away to toss it safely into the bushes. In that short time, the skiff managed to drift back out into the river, just out of reach. It was still anchored up, but now we had no easy way to reach it! Feeling very foolish and a little grumpy at myself I clambered up the bank and retrieved the canoe, lowering it down to Chris at the river. It felt very silly to paddle the 15 feet to the boat. While I was out there I refueled her, then pulled anchor and brought her back to shore. After securing it safely on the mud we manhandled the canoe back up the seven foot bank and stashed it under the alders. By then it was early afternoon and we took off upriver.

“Running the river” is a scary endeavor. I made my way to the cabin by myself for the first time three years ago and I’ve never been upriver of the cabin in my skiff. The river is laced with sandbars and shallow areas and the water is entirely opaque from the silt. This summer I finally felt like I’d garnered enough experience and confidence to try heading upriver....plus....much as the Tulsequah mine barges alarm me, it doesn’t hurt that their buoys help highlight the channel.

We followed the same path we’d taken by canoe to the glacier on our previous trip, watching a couple of river rats (inhabiting fast boats) coming downriver and solidifying our choice of route. We touched bottom once briefly in the middle of the river on the way across. When we reached the glacier we followed the buoys back to the center of the river, then returned to the west bank. It was slow going but I was having a blast, pleased

even with the cool weather. Just south of the lodge we lost track of the buoys, so I decided to head straight across through a wide opening in the sandbars.

Although I’d originally intended to make it all the way to Johnson Creek about a mile above the lodge (where I’d fished for trout as a kid) we’d run out of time and only had a half hour until high tide. As an alternative, we decided to visit the Taku Lodge. I approached the dock, pulled up on the inside of the float, and tied up.

I was terrified.

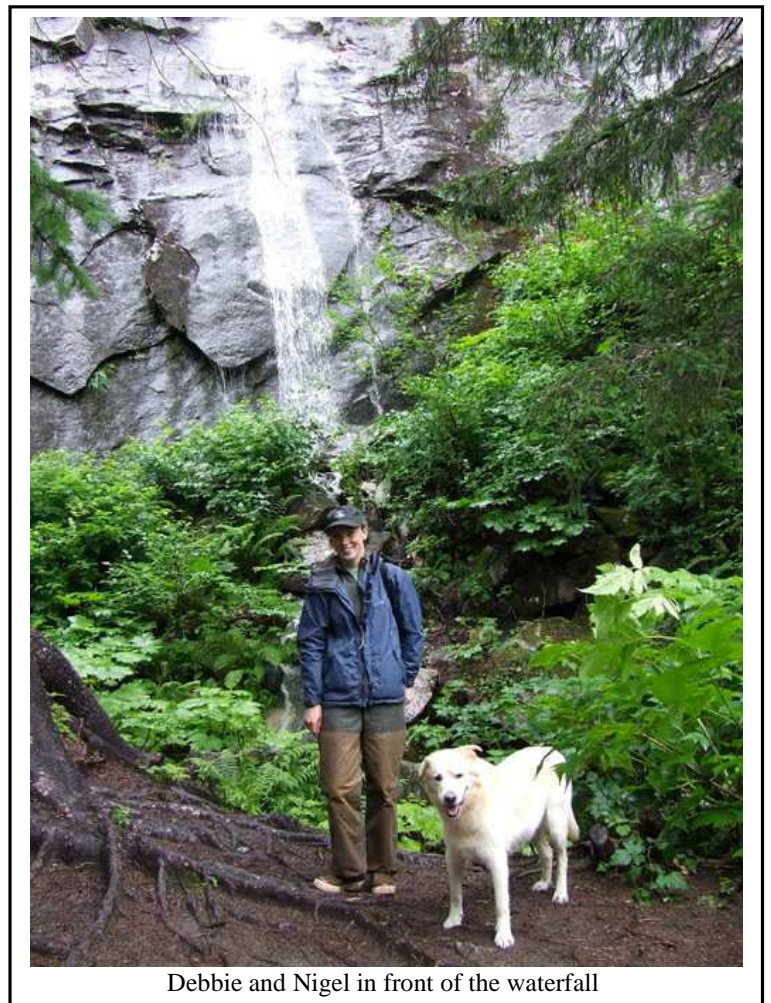


Heading upriver, Hole-in-the-Wall Glacier to the left

...because I grew up at the Taku Lodge, spending nearly half of every year there until I was a sophomore in high school. The lodge is my home, the place I love more than any other, and know better than any other. I regret losing it more than anything else; fearing only heartbreak, I hadn't been there in fifteen years. So as we walked up the ramp and onto the waterfront, I was shocked to find that everything seemed exactly the same! And I was so delighted to be there! I remembered everything so clearly, and it was just like I remembered! I may as well have been there yesterday.

So I took Chris on a whirlwind tour of the lodge. Sure, there were a few new buildings here and there and some of the forest had been cleared at the entrance to the (formerly know as) Eagle Nest Trail. But it was all so much the same! We entered the lodge building and made sure we were welcome to walk around—everyone was very pleasant and inviting. The moose and the stone fireplace, the dogsleds on the ceiling beams, and even the collection of bear skulls my dad left behind were familiar. I peered into the kitchen, but only had a brief glimpse. The little breakfast nook where I spent many summer days watching the crew working in the kitchen and playing solitaire was converted into something else, but the rest looked similar.

Outside someone was grilling salmon on the same stone barbeque my parents built and the whole area smelled of the familiar Taku basting sauce and salmon. From there we went to the cottonwood tree in the middle of the back yard (a tree I'd climbed often as a kid), pleased to find it in good health, if apparently topped. It did appear quite a bit smaller than I remembered, as did the whole compound! We poked our noses in the barn, which smelled the same as it used to, and discovered that the pool hall had been torn down and another enormous building was under construction. I told Chris about the evenings my parents and my brother and I spent in the pool hall playing pool on a beautiful old table with a fire in the barrel stove and Herb Alpert playing on the record player. We then walked around Killisnoo, the cabin I grew up in, and I pointed out the window that I used to sneak out of on early summer mornings.



Debbie and Nigel in front of the waterfall

From there we went back to the start of the Waterfall Trail in the far corner of the property and walked it—again, it seemed so much shorter than it used to! The trail was very familiar, just slightly more trodden than I remembered and with an extra little path that takes you closer to the mountainside. We walked past the enormous spruce trees that I remembered and I pointed out the extremely overgrown path that I had used on the way to the canoeing ponds and the slough. At the other end of the Waterfall Trail we met up with the jeep trail where we found a sign pointing left and reading “Three Mile Road to Nowhere.” Three miles down that road is our cabin! The sign suited me just fine. We went neither left nor right on the jeep trail, instead cutting straight through the woods (where I used to explore all the time as a kid) and meeting up with the old Eagle Nest Trail. We went down a little branch trail I used to use to a mossy spot in the woods I loved as a kid, then took the trail back to the riverbank and the lodge. I was amazed by how well I still knew the forest, just like I’d never been away! I was giddy with pleasure, and Chris was kind enough to let me ramble on. Back at the compound we walked along the river bank until I found an old log against the bank that I used to sit on for hours, reading or just sitting by the river. I couldn’t believe it was still there, only slightly more worn than before and not even overgrown. It was getting on, but I drug Chris through a

wildflower patch to one more memory, an old granite boulder covered with lichen and moss that I loved as a kid. After a few contented minutes sitting on the rock we headed back to the dock, poked our heads in the old hanger building, and returned to the boat.

From there we made our way back across the river, this time sticking to the riverbank in front of Hole-in-the-Wall Glacier instead of taking the more

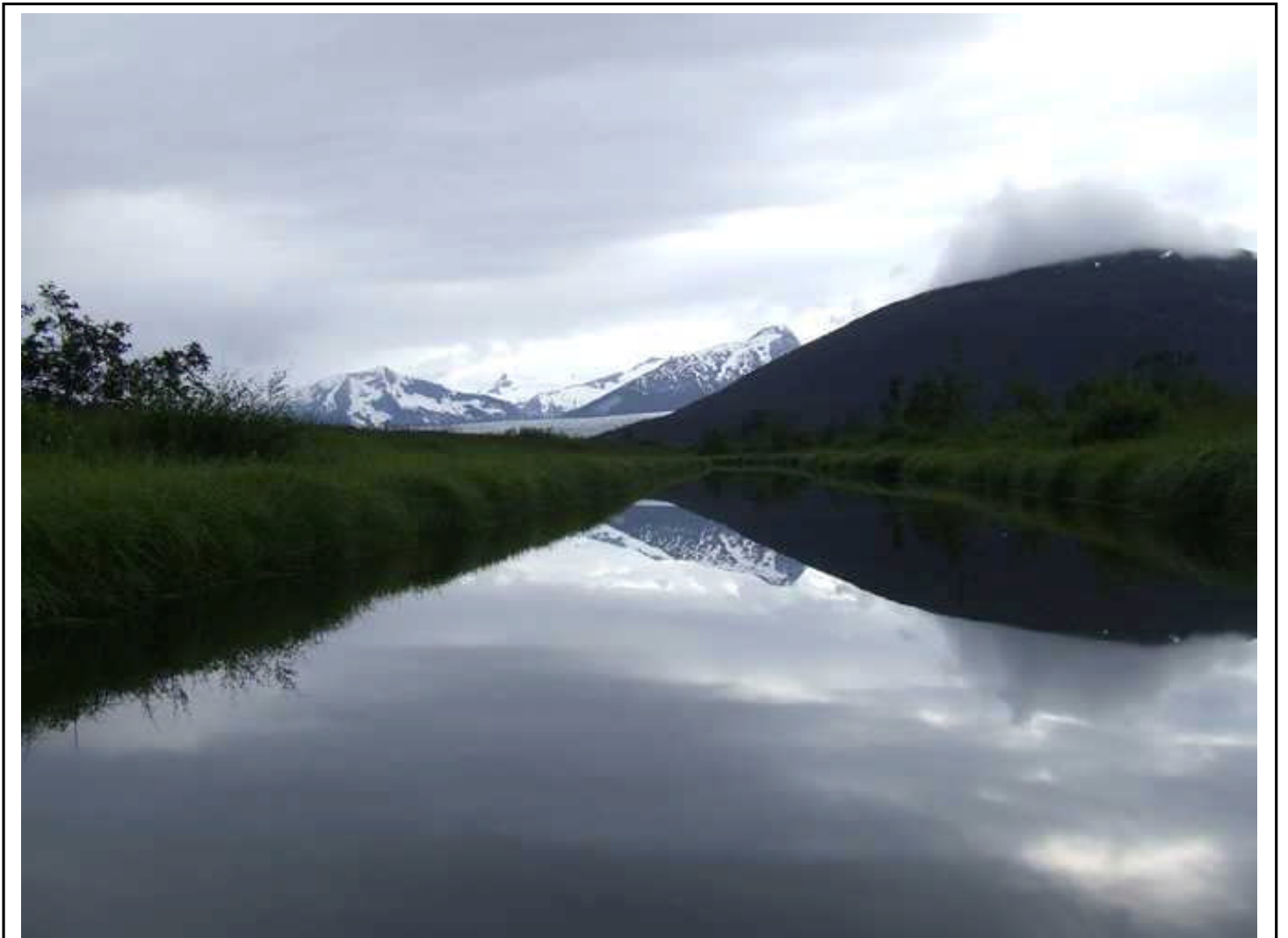


Part of the old mossy forest

circuitous route through the middle. It seemed deep enough and we saw other boats taking that route. We touched bottom in the same spot as we crossed back over, but otherwise made it out unhindered, passing the cabin again just past high tide. Beyond Taku Glacier we came upon a line of small icebergs in the water and Chris netted one as we approached. The water was calm and we stood up most of the way back. Nigel threw up, I’m not sure why. Gillnetters slowed us down a bit as we wove our way through the nets. I’d never seen so many out at once! There must have been 50 boats just between

Bishop and Salisbury. There was no way through but to take one buoy at a time, approaching them slowly until we could see which way to go to avoid the nets. In one spot there was a whole row of buoys in a line and when we tried to go around one we were shouted off by the owner, though I couldn't see a cork line or anything to snare us in the water. We wound up going far to the left and around the last buoy in the line.

We made it back to the harbor around 6:30, loaded our gear up the ramp, and drove off. I dropped Chris off and headed back home to chuck the ice in the freezer, put the perishables away, and take a very welcome bath.



Taku Glacier and Brassiere Hills reflected in the slough