

Dark winter days were brightened by the presence of at least three porch porcupines; the large, dark individual we continued to call Oscar (though we had no great evidence that it was the original Oscar), Squeak (who was most certainly the engaging, tolerant porcupine who first made an appearance in the fall of 2010), and a new porcupine with a fascinating scooped face named Gus (who, after being confirmed a female by a porcupine biologist, became known as Gussie or sometimes “Scoopy” for her unique snout).

I did make a few improvements to the house over the winter, finally replacing my downstairs carpet with a soft gray plush, which lightened the room considerably and greatly improved the smell. We reorganized the living room, creating a “nook” where the table used to be and transforming the room into a place I want to be all the time. When everything was settled again, I bought myself and the fish a present, adding a 40 gallon breeder tank to the living room for the three goldfish. With such a large tank, we bought nine zebra danios and two swordtails to join them. The small tank was converted to a betta tank, having grown soft on bettas after purchasing one for my nephew the year before. I purchased a heater and soon welcomed bright blue Maes to his new home along with six golden white clouds. When Maes died after two weeks, I replaced him with scarlet-blue Masetto. In the fall, Masetto died and the small tank became a frog and minnow tank inhabited by six white clouds, four pencilfish, and three dwarf frogs.

As spring approached, I formulated a plan for the summer that I hoped would improve my lifestyle. I’d take a week a month off rather than trying to handle the summer with frenetic weekends and a Monday or a Friday off here or there. That would allow me more leisurely weekends the rest of the time to plan boat camping, whale watching, hiking, or just hanging about town. I hoped that would lead to more meaningful time at Snettisham and a more enjoyable, relaxed summer all around. For the first time in a few years, I had no summer plans outside of Juneau.

Naturally it didn’t work out that way, mostly because the Ronquil sprung some leaks in June that put it out of commission for the central six weeks of summer (including two of my weeks off). But in the end I have no complaints. I made it to the homestead eleven times and up the Taku an unprecedented five times. Two trips involved family, as both my aunt from Flagstaff and my cousins with their 12 week old baby visited (becoming Snettisham’s first baby, at least in my time). Chris and I also made our annual pilgrimage to Pavlof Harbor in July, encountering the most dismal fishing we’ve had there yet (I caught two coho and was the only one to do so), but we had a good time camping there with our friend Dru nonetheless. We also camped around the back side of Douglas in May with Katie and Rob.

At the homestead, my main accomplishment was completing the bridge over the freshet gully. This venture took several trips and a lot of lumber and labor, as it including not just treads but a full rail system. The previous fall, a group of guys had leveled the two logs that span the gully (as well as they could) and spaced them an even three feet apart supported by stone footings. It was hard and enjoyable work from there, and immensely satisfying. I think the bridge transforms the property both aesthetically and functionally. With the new bridge in place, I also made a new trail on either side of it, in the process cleaning up a lot of the fallen limbs from the great fallen tree that had long littered the forest floor. Chris and I spent quite some time just cleaning up the area under the bridge itself, creating a truly impressive stack of branches.

I also installed a sliding door on the shed, painted the shed, finished the interior trim, and did a handful of other projects around the homestead as well as continuing to enjoy myself. I was also quite productive up the Taku, digging a new outhouse hole and moving the outhouse over it with the help of my mother, cleaning up a lot of the debris from the woods around the cabin, cutting trees to create paths for the 4-wheeler, digging the drainage ditch for the gray water system my parents installed, and clearing a trail between Debbie's meadow and the meadows upriver. The spruces continue to creep in and fill up the meadows (along with the alders) and I have plans to cut trees at the northern edge of the property to maintain what little meadow is left there next summer.

Time up the Taku meant that I was able to pick from the bumper crop of berries the summer produced. This was one of the best summers in anyone's memory, week after week of gorgeous sunny skies all summer long. It went on and on and we loved every bit of it. Consequently, the July blueberries sagged on their branches begging to be picked, and my parents and I wound up at the cabin at just the right time. The nagoonberries ripened early and I was able to pick quite a few early ripeners in August and late ripeners in September. Newly engaged in wild edibles, I expanded my normal picking repertoire by harvesting crowberries and sweet gale leaves in the late summer and highbush cranberries when we closed the cabin in November. In the fall I filled jars with Permafrost (Alaska's potato vodka) and added crowberries, sweet gale, nagoonberries, and highbush cranberries, the latter two of which I turned into liqueur several months later; the others remained schnapps (I'd stumbled upon a Danish website with sweet gale and crowberry schnapps recipes). Having such an abundance of berries, I also made jam for the first time, canning an outstanding nagoonberry jam and a passable blueberry jam as well as some rather tart cranberry jelly and cranberry/rhubarb jam.

I engaged in wild edibles in other ways as well, inspired in part by a class I took in the spring as part of the (regrettably named) "Becoming an Outdoorswoman" weekend camp at Echo Ranch in May. A wonderful lady from Gustavus took us around the edge of Berner's Bay and introduced us to many wild edibles, laying a good foundation for future foraging. At Snettisham I picked and ate hemlock parsley and devil's club buds, and shmushed yarrow leaves on cuts to stop them bleeding. I also harvested bundles of nettles, some of which I cooked, vacuum sealed, and froze for future use, and some of which I dried for tea. I also harvested bull kelp in the spring at Grave Point and ribbon kelp in the fall from Snettisham, which I cut and dried on my clothes drying rack in the garage (but have yet to actually use).

In fact, I harvested so much more from the natural world this summer that I formulated dreams for a dinner party I'd host featuring the bounty of Southeast Alaska. I'd have nettle soup, some kind of or'duvre with the kelp, coho and sockeye salmon, and jams, liqueurs, and rhubarb for dessert, all rounded out by venison stew with the carrots and potatoes from my garden. That's right, venison. I finally pursued my desire to hunt deer by preparing myself in the winter/spring so I'd be ready when the fall season came. In fact, the motivation for attending the aforementioned camp was its deer field dressing and deer hunting skills classes. I also took Fish and Game's Hunters Education course and shot my rifle all summer at Snettisham until I was comfortable with it and had it sighted in. I met two does on my first hunt, spending about 45 minutes within 50 feet of them or so (it was a bucks-only area, so they had nothing to fear from

me). I also called in a doe on Douglas, but did not have a clear shot. In the end, I did not wind up with a deer in my freezer, but I'd like to call it a successful shake-down season. I learned a lot on every hunt and walked through some amazing country and saw wildlife (mostly porcupines and birds) I would not have seen otherwise.

In the spring I also began to focus more on the wilderness again, having been introduced to the idea of bird language and a way to be a naturalist I'd never really considered. After reading and listening to Jon Young's work, I chose a place in the woods at the edge of the avalanche chute near my house and went there nearly every day I was in town to watch and listen to birds and other wildlife, and to generally learn about and be in nature. It was a transforming experience, and introduced me to a new way of birdwatching. I didn't just see birds and watch them for a few seconds or at most a few minutes: I saw birds every day and watched them engage in activities regularly that I'd rarely seen before. Perhaps the overall highlight was Tucker's and his family—Swainson's thrushes whose territory I'd clearly plopped myself into. I heard them every day for most of the summer and, though I rarely saw the adults (only seeing Tucker himself sing once or twice), I saw the fledglings every day for some time once they left the nest. Other regulars were Wilson's warblers, orange-crowned warblers, ruby-crowned kinglets (I even found their nest, though they seemed to abandon it soon after), and many others. Once a black bear came upon me, stepping just a foot beyond my toes before realizing I was there. Bird watching was revolutionized beyond my sit spot, too. I made a concerted effort toward differentiating warbler songs (making some progress there) and took the time to seek out new songs, leading to new species I wouldn't have seen otherwise including a warbling vireo, chipping sparrow, and two McGillivray's warblers.

I also went barefoot for most of the summer. Practicing on the trail near my house every morning with Cailey (which involves some awful gravel) I was rewarded with a whole summer of sensuous walking. I made vast improvements toward desensitizing my feet, such that most walking in the wilderness was a joy and, in the end, only gravel was really painful. Snettisham was wonderful, the Taku was wonderful, and I walked Cailey every lunch barefoot whether on the flume, Sandy Beach, or elsewhere. I remained primarily barefoot outside until late September when the cold and damp finally moved me back to shoes and, eventually, to socks when the temperature dropped below freezing. I hope the transition to bare feet next summer is shorter, and I look forward to walking barefoot again come spring.

In September, Chris and I gratuitously returned to Washington to attend the Puyallup Fair for a second time. If anything, it was more fun this year, enjoyed with a couple of Chris's friends. I felt bolder and more comfortable on the rides, though found myself genuinely terrified once or twice. A "luminaria" exhibit was attached to the fair, so we wandered through a magical land of salmon, whales, and jellyfish; an enchanted apple orchard inhabited by a wolf; a cluster of giant totem poles; and a magical Chinese pond complete with a bridge, water lilies, dragonflies, and lanterns. The evening ended with a fireworks display enjoyed while being flung and twisted and spun and dropped on the terrifying ride "Jumping."

In November, we made another pilgrimage south, this time to the most phenomenal comedy festival imaginable (seriously). Tenacious D spent years putting together the event, which showcased practically every musical comedy act around. I spent seven hours on the Santa

Monica Pier with a great big silly grin on my face. Among the many acts, we saw Eric Idle, a couple of our friends from Children's Hospital, Garfunkle and Oats, Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, Bob Odenkirk and David Cross with the Mr. Show Experience, and Fred Armisen (as a British punk rocker). When Jack Black introduced Eric Idle, Billy Idol showed up, the first of several surprise guests (Conan O'Brien was another). Chris and I came specifically to see The Mighty Boosh, though, and spent two and a half hours standing in the tent where they performed in order to be close to the stage. In the end we were about 30 feet from Noel Fielding and Julian Barratt, two of the most brilliant comedians in the world, playing the parts of Vince Noir and Howard Moon from their beloved Mighty Boosh world. I can't describe what a thrill that was! This was on the heels of an earlier giddy event, when I spotted Julian Barratt on the other side of a glass wall from the hotel lobby I was walking through. I was a mere 20 feet away from him as he held court over several people, looking completely suave and at ease; Chris was good enough to take a quick photo with the two of us in frame. I'm a little ashamed at what a thrill it was to see these guys in person, probably two of the half dozen celebrities I'd ever care to meet! The festival ended with a set by Tenacious D on the main stage that including a surprise visit by The Lonely Island, which may have had me hopping around with delight.

Cailey was again a wonderful adventure dog during the summer, but proved to be a challenge as the adventures waned in the fall. A new dog door is helping some issues, but a shock collar and constant vigilance is necessary to keep her from disappearing on our walks as she pursues interesting smells. Her nose has led to some discoveries I'm grateful for, however, One day she took off up an avalanche slide above Basin Road and I followed the ravens to find her gnashing on a young mountain goat, whose skull I collected. On December 9, she led me to the carcass of a porcupine in the neighborhood who sadly turned out to be our friend Oscar. As we mourned him, a new porcupine arrived out of the blue the very next day, a yellow individual similar in size to Squeak who we named Roubles. Squeak showed up unprecedentedly early on August 8 this fall and has visited regularly ever since (Oscar showed up a few weeks later), but Gussie did not return. Rounding out the porcupines is a tiny, fuzzy newcomer (possibly young-of-the-year) we've name Lucy.