



Mouse release

### **Snettisham 2007 – 10: Unusual Encounters August 17-19**

After installing a propane stove in the lodge, it quickly became clear that with one more project my civilizing efforts at the homestead would be complete (at least for this season). I needed a sink, and with that a gray water treatment system. So after a family trip and the Sweetheart Creek adventure I decided to get back to work. The week prior to departure I went around town visiting plumbing stores and Home Depot procuring all the pieces I needed to construct the system. Travis and I left work a little early on Friday and departed Douglas Harbor with Nigel before 2:00 pm.

Travis drove on the way down, offering me the very unusual experience of riding shotgun in my own boat over a long distance. It was actually pretty enjoyable, especially since the seas were light, if against us. Several whales blew in the middle of Stephen's Passage not far north of Snettisham, a good sign that the fall group-up may be beginning on schedule this year. We arrived at the homestead in an hour and a half at high tide.

After lighting a fire and relaxing for a bit, Travis wanted to try halibut fishing, so we left Nigel inside, retrieved the boat from at anchor, and took off for the edge of the sandbars. Unfortunately, a wicked current made bottom fishing tricky, so after some time Travis pulled up his halibut pole and I dropped my salmon pole. After about ten minutes of drifting, we both heard a whale blow in Gilbert Bay and began scanning for the mist, finding nothing. The exhale was much shorter than I would expect from a humpback, but followed by a clear inhale. The whale was breathing twice before sounding, but we never found the blow. I began to wonder what this whale was...if too small for a humpback, then perhaps a toothed whale? The blow was too long for a porpoise, and I would have thought too long for an orca too, plus there was clearly only one individual doing the breathing. I was puzzled. We gazed around the inlet as we heard the whale come closer until finally Travis saw it come up off the point toward Sweetheart Creek. I saw a glimpse of a fin, then watched it come up for a full breath. No blow, a long smooth back low in the water, a small, tightly curved dorsal fin. It was a profile I'd seen before, but never here--a minke whale had entered the inlet!!!! How cool is that!?

Well, most of you probably don't know how cool that is. Southeast Alaska's "Inside Passage" is home to abundant humpback whales, but they're the only whales that like the

sort of shallow, sheltered waters we offer. Most whales prefer the open ocean. Minkes will come in off the outer coast into adjacent areas like Icy Strait, but rarely any farther. Though whale watchers on the East Coast have some luck watching minkes, the ones around here are very skittish and difficult to approach. Dwarfed by humpbacks, minkes are only around 30 feet when full grown and don't give away their presence with prominent blows. Had we not been out there drifting, there's no way we'd know the minke was there. Although we never saw the whale again (it took to breathing only once per breathing cycle) we heard it move into the river inlet along the shore, then pass in front of the sandbars and move back out into the bay along the opposite shore—a typical feeding pattern for the humpbacks that frequent the inlet earlier in the summer.

That made the trip for me. We went back and relaxed the rest of the evening while I schemed about how to put together a sink. Before bed we greased down two five gallon buckets with pam and dropped tidbits of peanut butter and chocolate in the hopes of capturing mice.

Next morning we slept in, ate sourdough pineapple pancakes for breakfast, and I began clearing gear away from the wall and measuring for my sink. We found three mice in one of the buckets and let them dry out a little (their fur was a little greasy from the pam) before we released them that afternoon. I also organized some of the scrap wood outside, moving all the plywood from against the back of the lodge and the last of the lumber from inside. Late in the morning we decided to venture out in search of the Crystal Mine. Along the south side of the entrance to Snettisham are the remains of two gold rush era mines—the Crystal and the Friday mines. My parents had found the road to the mines many years ago and I had found it marked on an old USGS map too. All summer I'd wanted to go exploring and had scoped out the most likely spots for starting out. Not far from Sentinel Point and the entrance to Gilbert Bay are several old pilings on the beach. We pulled up there on a rising tide and Travis anchored us to a piling. We stepped into the woods, littered with rusting artifacts from the mine—I know there was a five stamp mill somewhere



The *Ronquil* at the mining site

in the area, and it could have been here. In any event, we found pipes, carts, bolts and other remains as well as an artificial rock wall in the middle of a small creek. The creek itself was strewn with pyrite laden rocks and pyrite dust (or is it gold?) lined the bottom.



Creek at the mine ruins

We soon found the beginning of the road as it rose from the shore and into the woods. A few hundred feet on, however, it lost most of its integrity and we decided to follow some trees with survey tape up the mountain in the hopes that someone else had already marked the trail. Farther up we came across a narrower, but still clearly man-made path and followed this along the mountainside.

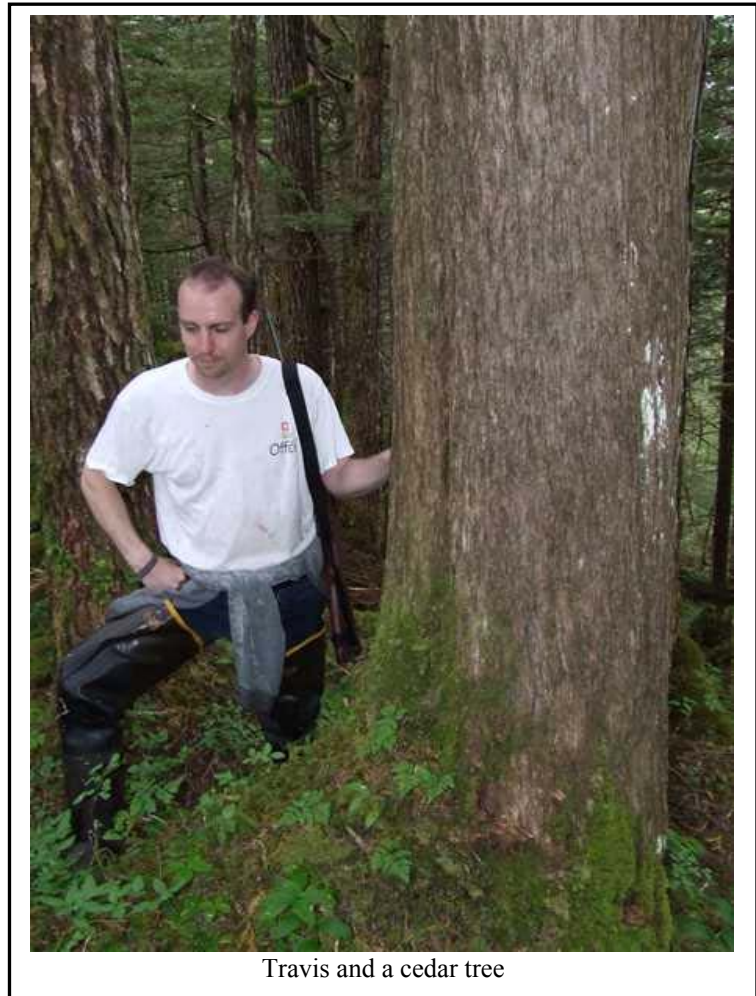
In places there were patches of “corduroy road” where people had laid logs side by side perpendicular to the path to make a (somewhat bumpy) road or walkway over a trench. It was unclear whether we were on the real road to the mine or a path meant to manage the water sources for the operations at sea level—or something else. Regardless, it was fun to explore,



Pyrite in the creek

though our route was in some places quite steep, overgrown, and littered with deadfall. Breaking out into a little meadow, we found a pile of rusting 50 gallon drums.

Shortly afterwards, the trail diminished and we decided to turn around, first scrambling up a near vertical slope to see what might be on top of the ridge. It turned out to be only a protrusion between two gullies, but what I found up there was worth the climb. As I started to wander around, a tree with shaggy, vertical strips of grayish bark caught my eye—a cedar tree! Cedars are common in much of Southeast Alaska, especially in the southern half, but quite rare in the Juneau area. There is something a little mystical about cedars, imparted by their scarcity (in my area), their amazing smell, and their anti-decomposition properties. Cedars can stand a hundred years dead before they start to rot and can live to be 1000 years old, though they rarely exceed a few feet in diameter. Looking closer, we discovered that we were standing in a grove of mixed cedar, hidden on the knoll.



Travis and a cedar tree

But soon enough we were making our way back down the mountainside. I had quickly soaked my pants crashing through the wet undergrowth and looked forward to the fire back home. We looked around a little more at the beach, then headed in.

That afternoon before dinner, I cut 2x4s for a sink stand and assembled it next to the stove, including room for a small countertop. Two hummingbirds had discovered my feeder outside (filled two weeks before, but apparently untouched during most of that time) and quarreled with each other over rights to it. Other than that it was pretty quiet. After supper I put together the sink drain with some help from Travis and assembled all the pieces for the gray water system. The treatment system is really quite simple. Basically, the water flows through a pipe (I actually bought some of that evil ABS pipe for this) from the sink into the top of an olive barrel. Attached to the end of the pipe is an 800 micron filter bag. Inside the barrel is a two foot piece of vertical pipe with holes drilled in it and also covered with a filter and attached to an outlet near the bottom. The

water has to flow through both bags to make it back out, at which point it flows into a buried drain pipe wrapped in felt. That evening I drilled the holes in the lodge wall and in the olive barrel (after a time-consuming search for hole saws and their parts) and cut the lengths of pipe to fit before calling it a night.

The next morning I wanted to relax, but first worked on assembling the parts inside the olive barrel and sealing the sink with plumber's putty. The olive barrel outlet is kind of a hack job, but I think it will work. The plans for the system are a DEC pre-approved design for small, remote operations but it leaves much of the detail to the owner. The rest of the morning I made a rare indulgence and read a book on the couch, enjoying the quiet and the murmur of the fire. Then in the early afternoon Travis and I walked down to the edge of the beach where we shot his grandfather's M1 carbine rifle as well as my own. I did poorly with my .444 but a little better with the M1. Before we left for town, we poured water down my sink and onto the ground outside—and it didn't leak at all!



The new range and sink/stand