



**Snettisham 2007 – 2, 3 & 4:
May 25-28, May 30-31, & June 9-10**

Memorial Day Weekend

Nigel and I headed down to Snettisham on Friday of Memorial Day weekend. The water was calm, the ceiling a low misty overcast, surprisingly dark after days of summer sunshine. I left Douglas Harbor following a week of late nights and manic errands, and had the uncanny feeling that I was sneaking off to another world. For the first time all week I was totally content. Nigel withstood the ride respectfully, spending most of it with his head in my lap or sniffing the air from the top of the food tote in the back.

I had hoped to begin installation of my fresh water system that weekend, but other more mundane tasks loomed. On Saturday the first priority was sleeping in, which was gratefully accomplished. When I finally braved the world and opened the cabin door, Nigel immediately hackled up and went bellowing around the corner, suggesting that a bear must have passed by in the night. He showed up a few minutes later with slimy bear scat down his neck, so my next task was a quick dog scrub at the edge of the river. Once that was finished I turned my cleaning efforts to Cottonwood Cabin. (The first three

cabins to go up were all stained in 2004 and now have a healthy growth of mildew, so I was compelled to bleach them in preparation for the next coat of stain.) Without running water, washing the cabins involves filling buckets with river water and schlepping them back to the site, soaking the walls with bleach solution and then splashing them with clean



New boardwalk over the muck

water. Each cabin takes about five buckets of water to clean. While I was busy washing, Nigel showed up with fresh scat down his neck, so he was bathed again when the cabin was done.

After the scrubbing round, I continued cleaning efforts around the lodge, bundling up all the metal straps left over from the cabin kits and bagging all the empty beer bottles to take back to town (I now have a “pack your own beer bottle out” policy). Then I turned my efforts to leveling the two makeshift decks we put on the mucky ground in front of the lodge porch last summer (leftover pallets from the cabin kits). They’ve been crooked all this time and I hated the white trash look of it. I also built a boardwalk from the edge of one of the decks across the muck and onto dry ground in the direction of the other cabins and extended the existing boardwalk in the opposite direction. This enabled me to finally discard the crappy plywood and pallets that inhabited the black mud for makeshift walking surfaces. The place looks less and less redneck all the time.

In the afternoon I began to clear a trail from the back of the lodge toward the creek for water system access. When I lost certainty as to the best route to take I quit and went to work on the outhouse, replacing the broken piece of roofing and cleaning out the cobwebs. Finally, I laboriously hauled a 50 gallon olive barrel up the mountainside to the creek a few hundred yards away where I wanted to start the water system. I lit a fire in the lodge, but was too disinterested to keep it going and too exhausted to do anything else. I went to bed early.

Next morning I went straight to work on the water system, first hauling five ten foot lengths of ABS pipe to the creek. Several years ago I’d hauled down 280 feet of black poly (plastic) flexible pipe for the water system but this spring I determined that I needed at least a few hundred feet more to complete the system. No



Olive barrel collecting water

one in town had any poly pipe in stock, so I settled on 250 feet of black ABS (non-flexible) pipe in ten foot lengths from Don Able and bought a bunch of couplings at

various angles to connect them. I also bought a through-hull fitting for the bottom of the olive barrel (the outlet hole) sized to match the ABS pipe as well as a ball valve to control the water flow.

The creek in question rushes down the mountainside and over a series of waterfalls, so I first spent almost an hour throwing rocks into strategic places in the creek in an attempt to divert enough of the flow to work. This had a surprisingly good effect, but once the water calmed, I realized that the spot I had in mind had a tangle of fallen trees/rocks below that made it dangerous and difficult for a pipe to pass under. I turned my efforts to a wide falls just up the creek, but there was too much water flow and the pools were too shallow to be useful. Finally I explored down the creek and came upon a low falls with a pool at the bottom. The barrel fit perfectly in the hollow and I began attaching pipes. First I attached a straight piece, then one at a 45 degree angle to reach the shore.

As soon as I hit the bank I found myself smack in the middle of the densest patch of devil's club around which colonizes the gully (the source of the freshet) through which I wanted to run the pipe. I came away with dozens of devil's club bites on my thighs, knees, and hands that lasted weeks. When I ran out of pipe, I trekked down repeatedly to haul more up, slowly wearing down the trail. Fifty feet from the creek, the water pressure was impressive and it became more and more difficult to add pipe so I decided to add the valve. When I did, the coupling immediately above burst open, and the same happened when I moved it farther up (nothing was glued together yet). Eventually I put the valve in at the second joint at the edge of the creek and it worked beautifully. I built a large pile of rocks underneath to support it, then set about reconstructing the broken segments below and adding the rest of the pipe. I ran out of couplings as the pipe went through a cool tunnel where the freshet gully runs under a tree root arch. Having nothing appropriate to connect the ABS pipe to the poly pipe, I left the project for the time being.

Pleased with the progress, I broke for a snack, then scrubbed Mink Cabin and cut a path through the vegetation from that cabin to the beach. After lunch and a



The start of the pipe through the devil's club thicket

cigar on the front porch in the company of flocks of Wilson's warblers, I lit a fire in the afternoon and stayed inside, cleaning and organizing the lodge. I found the crank radio that a friend gave me for my birthday last winter and wound it up, delighted to discover that I get two FM stations. I listened to *Kiss Me Kate* and bad pop music all afternoon, winding the radio every fifteen

minutes or so to charge it. Later I took a walk back to the water system and cut a path through the devil's club. (I probably should have done that to begin with, but the pipe's path seemed too organic to plan.) Finally, I hauled some more firewood inside from under the front porch, cleaned my rifle and went to bed.



Wilson's warbler



Nigel enduring

Next morning I did a few odds and ends and then decided to take off early, tired and anxious to have a few hours to catch up at home before getting back to work on Tuesday. Nigel couldn't resist a last roll in fresh bear poop, so he got another bath before we loaded up the empty beer bottles and garbage and took off for town.

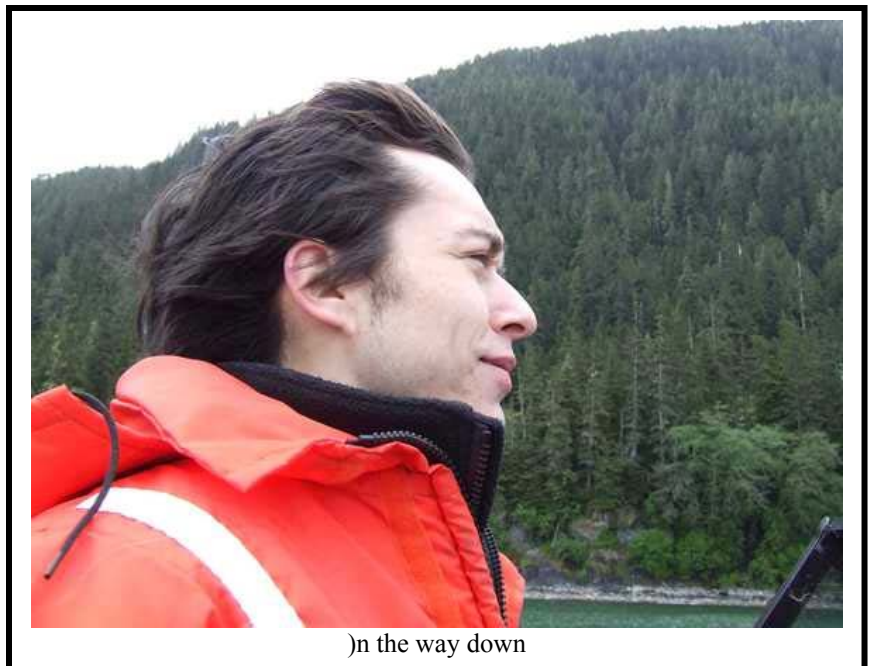


Snettisham whales

May 30-31

Two days later, Rory and I headed back down for a quick overnight trip. We left Douglas (my boat now has a slip there for the summer so I don't have to trailer it) around noon, a little wary of the brisk chop in the channel. When we hit Taku Inlet the seas built up and we picked our way across, sliding over the swells and seeking out the lee of Grand Island for a break before crossing the roughest part of the inlet. It calmed a little, but we bucked three foot seas all the way into Snettisham—the whole ride took three hours. Whales on and off all the way down and inside, but the water was too rough to visit them.

Rory and I spent the evening drinking wine, playing scrabble, chatting and eating jiffy pop popcorn cooked over the wood stove. Rory saw a bear on the beach from the front porch and there was sign of them all around. The next morning we started up the chain saw and took turns cutting some of the branches my mother and I had stacked up over Mother's Day weekend so I'd have a bigger supply when I came back alone (I try to resist chain saw action when I'm solo). Then we headed upriver in the kayaks. The water was high and the river flat calm and the seals pursued us relentlessly. One small seal kept watching us intently, sneaking a little closer to the kayaks every time before ducking underwater. He disappeared once and came up only 15 feet away, obviously searching for us but facing the opposite direction. He



)n the way down

finally swiveled his head around and dove with a panicked splash when he saw how close he was.

Watched by seals all the way, Rory and I paddled up the homestead side of the river along the smooth rocks and overhanging alders, farther than I'd ever been before. If we'd had more time, we could easily have gone far enough to hit the grassy beaches and sloughs past Ox Point.

After lunch we packed up and headed back to town on a more or less calm ocean, stopping to watch a pair of whales feeding at the sea lion haulout. We even caught the mist of a blow. About 100 or more lions were still there, cavorting in and out of the water.



Rory kayaking



Curious seal



Lunge feeder in Snettisham (that's the front of the whale's head sticking up)

June 8-10

The next weekend I stayed home, then headed back out June 8th. I'd intended to go straight south for the weekend, but Rob had a birthday party campout on Portland Island that I couldn't resist so I figured I'd stop there for the night, even though it added about 30 miles to the trip. Since I had to head north, I decided to "run the bar" instead of going around the back side of Douglas. Douglas Island is separated from the mainland by the Gastineau Channel--south of the bridge (where the harbor is) the water is deep and used by cruise ships, barges, and so on. A few miles north of the bridge the "channel" becomes a wide area of wetlands, almost dry enough to walk across at low tide and sometimes referred to as the "bar." On a high tide boats can cross and there are channel markers along the way.



View of Lemon Creek area from the channel

I'd never taken this route and it sounded like an adventure, not to mention a gas saving measure. On a rising 14.5' tide, I figured I had it made. I left work a little early that day to finish preparations for the trip. Loaded down with a bunch of lumber for the cabin porches and 300 feet of poly pipe (more on that later), Nigel and I took off from the harbor at 5:00 pm under a warm and sunny sky. We sped north and began winding our way through the channel

markers beyond the salmon hatchery. The deep channel was indiscernible under the rising water, and following the channel markers was the most exciting navigation I'd undertaken since winding my way through the channels of Lake Huron two years ago. When I reached the dump area, however, the channel markers were rather widely spaced and I slowed down and soon went aground briefly. Pushing off the bar, I repositioned and, with the motor partially tilted up, managed to make it to deeper water. From there the channel really narrowed to about fifty feet across, bordered by beautiful meadows of green grass.

It was nice that the sun was shining and the scenery pleasant, because I spent most of the next hour aground or drifting in water too shallow to lower the motor. It was completely new territory for me and rather unnerving as I really didn't know where I was or, more precisely, how far I still had to go before hitting deep water again. There was clearly a channel that snaked its way through the sandbars, but the water was opaque with silt and the breeze disturbed the surface beyond my ability to read for clues of depth. It was fascinating to watch the tide come in and cover the sand, but brutally slow, and I feared more than once that the tide would come and go and leave me stranded there. Eventually, I pulled out a book and read a few pages while the tide rose, and soon was able to lower the motor and move out into deep water. What a relief it was to finally see the north Douglas boat ramp and the promise of no more groundings! Two hours after our departure (and an hour before high tide), Nigel and I beat our way across two foot swells to Portland Island to join the festivities.

After a rather limited night of sleep, we rose early and took off at 7:45 am to head south. The north wind worried me, but at least we had it at our stern all the way down the back side of Douglas. The 2-3' swells were the largest Nigel had experienced. Because of the lumber stacked down the center of the boat he couldn't reach me so stayed in the back on his blanket, panting and trembling whenever the swells got



The Ronquil loaded down (can you find Nigel?)

bad. We came across a single lunge feeding humpback in the middle of Stephen's Passage off Point Hilda and spent some time watching it feed in a tide rip until I took pity on Nigel and left. We passed another whale before reaching the end of Douglas.

With a brisk north wind, I was worried about crossing Taku Inlet with Nigel and was afraid we'd have to call the trip and head back up Gastineau Channel instead. I figured we'd give it a shot—and give Nigel the chance to prove himself capable of handling rougher weather, and therefore, capable of coming with me more often. He'd been pestering me to come all week while I packed and ran errands, so I figured this was the test.

Surprisingly, most of the inlet was decent. The worst part came out of the Taku when we passed between Grand Island and Grave Point, but beyond that the swells slowly diminished until we could run at speed again. Nigel visibly relaxed and occasionally stuck his nose over the side of the boat to smell the air. I, too, relaxed, back in familiar territory. The breezy trip down the back side of Douglas had unnerved me, probably due to lack of sleep, wind, anxiousness to get to Snettisham, and the strange turbidity of the water. South of Grand Island the water was a reassuring green and the sun dried the salt spray on Nigel's back.

Cruising into Gilbert Bay nearly three hours after leaving Portland Island, I was greeted with a whale blow in the river inlet. I took it as a good sign. We approached on a falling tide and I let the boat go aground where we landed. Nigel peed in the grass and immediately rolled in bear poop. The day was perfect, hot and sunny and calm (where we were anyway) and I was instantly glad we'd come.

I hauled my gear up to the lodge and then started unloading lumber and humping it up the beach, through the sloopy marsh and into the woods to lay it alongside Cottonwood Cabin. I'm always amazed at how much hauling a single person can do. My shoulder was already sore and chafed from hauling the same lumber down the ramp at the harbor two days before, so I stuck a few rags under my shirt for padding. By the time I was through I'd gotten pretty good at finding that sweet spot where the lumber is perfectly balanced on the upper back and seems almost weightless. Meanwhile, Nigel had found more poop to roll in.

I'd wanted to tackle the water system over the weekend, but the sunny skies moved me otherwise. One of the great burdens weighing on me this summer was getting all the cabins and lodge stained. The wet weather last year prevented any significant staining and it was definitely overdue. So, I took advantage of the sun and broke open the cabin stain. It was such a perfect work day I couldn't get over it—hot in the sunshine, cool in the sun-dappled shade of the forest, mellow summer bird songs all around. I stained Hermit Thrush cabin first—the one I'd cleaned last fall when I fell off the ladder and broke a window. Nigel was learning the homestead routine and I found him napping in the sunshine on the lodge deck while I was on the opposite end of the property in the woods.

I rolled and brushed for a couple of hours until the cabin was ready, then took a break for a topless lunch in the sunshine (one of the advantages to traveling alone) before a 45 minute blissful nap. Forcing myself up at four, I stained three sides of Mink Cabin and the back wall of Cottonwood Cabin and washed Nigel in the river before breaking again

for a light dinner. High clouds came in and a stiff wind picked up, so I stained only one more wall before collapsing into bed.

During the night it rained and I figured my staining for the weekend was done. Sunday dawned clear again, though, if a little breezy, and I forced myself to finish staining Mink and Cottonwood Cabins, dreadfully weary of the task. Thankfully, in a way, the last cabin was not yet clean, nor was the lodge, so staining them was not an option. I did wash the front wall of the lodge in case it dried enough to stain in the afternoon, but it didn't. Although I didn't want to touch another brush, I managed to muster enough will to stain the cedar on the lodge porch, to relieve my paranoia about it going gray.



Mink Cabin post-staining

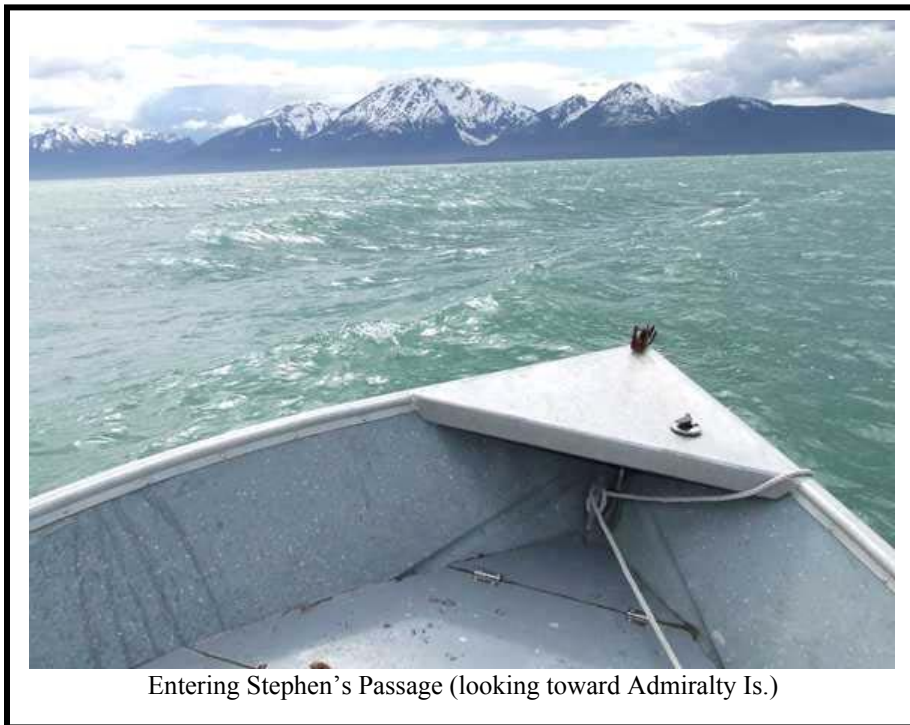
Early in the morning I'd hiked up the trail to the water system and dismantled the ABS pipe I'd placed two weeks before, hauling it down to the water for a return trip to Juneau. Have I ever mentioned that all of this construction business is new to me? Well, here's what happened. I'd gone out to a plumbing store earlier in the week to pick up an adapter to connect the ABS pipe to the poly

pipe I already had down there. After assembling the components, the helpful employee asked what project I was working on. I gave a vague answer about a water system. "A drainage system?" he asked. "No," I said, "a drinking water system," mildly irritated at his questions. "You can't run drinking water through ABS pipe," he replies. "Really?" I said. "It's full of carcinogens," not suitable for drinking water. I stared at him, suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that all the trouble I had gone through to carry the stupid pipe down there, get all the right sized parts, and put it in place was completely for naught. I was stunned, angry, and suddenly very very tired. My helper left me alone for a minute to collect my thoughts while he went to check if they had any more poly pipe. They did--three 100 foot rolls of 1.25"—just what I needed. But I was about to buy a bunch of lumber for the porches and couldn't part with any more money. I returned all the useless parts I'd just purchased, sifted through stacks of pressure treated lumber at Valley Lumber in the pissing rain, and went back to work.

That night one of my roommates paid rent, so I went back the next day with a friend's truck and bought the pipe. Of course, the pipe was too wide and inflexible to actually fit in the back of the truck, so my dad was kind enough to pick it up for me later. That night I loaded lumber and pipe onto the Ronquil in the sopping rain. Hopefully Don Able will take the ABS pipe back; if not, Cameron's Plumbing promised to take it off my hands.

So that was why I had to take the pipe back. Worn out from lack of sleep, staining, and long hours on the water, I started to load up after noon for the trip home, anticipating bucking a north wind all the way and already apologizing to Nigel. The tide was falling, but the boat was still 20-50 feet from shore (depending on wind direction) and floating, so I kayaked out, leisurely filled the gas tanks and prepped the boat. Things started looking bad, though, when I lowered the engine and the back of the boat started to rise up—I was only in 16" of water! I quickly brought aboard the anchor and poled my way to shore until I went aground, still 20 feet from dry land. The beach only slopes down for a certain distance before the river bottom becomes flat and a falling tide is devastating. I

had to act fast.



Entering Stephen's Passage (looking toward Admiralty Is.)

Leaving the boat barely aground, I rushed to the beach, dropped off the kayak and grabbed my gear, throwing it haphazardly in the back, then called Nigel out into the water where I picked him up and threw him on board. The boat was badly aground so I laboriously pushed from various angles until I found the deeper channel where the

stream runs out. All the ABS pipe lay on the beach, low in the intertidal zone, so there was no way I could leave it. With all the energy I had, I ran through the water, loaded up as much pipe as I possibly could, and crashed my way back to the boat. It took three trips to get it all on board, the boat always on the sand. When the last pipe was loaded I could barely move the boat, but managed to get it pointed out into the river. By this time I was soaked up to my thighs, my Xtratuffs full of water. I pushed for 25 feet before the boat floated, and another 25 before I could lower the motor and sneak away. Puttering down the inlet, I rearranged all the cargo just before we ran into two foot seas in Gilbert Bay.

That wasn't a good sign. Gilbert Bay is usually pretty calm unless there's an unpleasant wind blowing from the south. We beat our way over to the sea lion haul-out where about six individuals remained, all of whom jumped into the water on our approach. I was too close to the rocks, seeking shelter in the lee of Mist Island. Bucking the swells, the going was tediously slow and the seas built to three feet by the time we hit Stephen's Passage, but I did pass several whales lunge feeding. The good news was that once we started heading north, the seas were behind us, although the going was slow and uncomfortable sliding and crashing around on the swells. I tried to slide into the wake of a few boats to cut down on the crashing with mixed success. At 4:00 pm, a very grateful Nigel and I tied up at Douglas Harbor and took our wet and weary bodies home. Still soaked from the falling tide ordeal, I quickly jumped in the shower to warm up. The pipe is still on board the boat.



Looking back toward down Stephen's Passage from Taku Inlet (Grand Island is on the right, mainland on the left)