



Seals resting on a sandbar

Snettisham 2007 – 5: The Week June 17-24

A full week in Snettisham! A long-time goal, I finally managed to plan a seven day trip over the third week in June, excited about days of unhindered work and guiltless opportunities to play.

The story really begins the week before my departure with a great deal of anxiety on account of the weather forecast (not to mention the stress of preparing for the trip, loading the boat, etc.). Monday started the week with a long-term forecast of winds at 20 knots and seas four feet. Real four foot seas are navigable in my skiff but somewhat scary and very uncomfortable, especially with another batch of lumber on board and my dog. As the weekend neared the forecast saw no improvements and I started to really fume inside, infuriated that my week could be stymied by the weather, especially in June! I couldn't take the following week off (being the last in the fiscal year) and then we were into July already.



Anchoring on the sandbars downriver (note lodge in the distance)

The First Sunday

So on Saturday I made all my preparations and determined to try it the next morning—after all, I could always turn around. As I've said before, you really never know what's out there until you're in it. I left at about 9:30 am under an overcast sky and cruised down Gastineau Channel on a light chop, pleased at least that the wind was still behind me. Entering Taku Inlet I rode over some widely spaced swells coming down Stephen's Passage, heartened by the light color of the water beyond. By the

time I reached Pt. Arden the seas were flat calm and I sped my way to the homestead, making it in an hour and a half. A good start! What a relief! All that agonizing over the weather for nothing. One whale greeted me in Snettisham.

Arriving at a very low tide (-3.8) I had to leave the boat anchored to a sandbar a hundred yards downriver of the property (see photo above) so initially I only hauled my clothes in a dry bag on my back and the food tote to the lodge. It was enough! After an early lunch I put my new intertubed wheel on the wheelbarrow and hauled the rest of the tree branch rounds from the fallen tree behind the first cabins to the lodge along with the stored dry goods from Mink Cabin.

With more staining in mind for the week, I then set to work scrubbing Murrelet Cabin, (the one on the point) which is the most exposed and had the worst mildew damage. While I was dousing it in bleach solution I felt a pain on my lower arm and lifted my rubber glove to expose a strange sore the size of a quarter that was raw and swollen and rather unpleasant looking. I figured I must have chafed it somehow and irritated it with the bleach but couldn't imagine when; thankfully I was nearly done and didn't worry about it.

About an hour before high tide (3:00 pm) I kayaked out to get the boat, putting poor Nigel was in a frenzy on the beach as I drew ever further away--he was very close to swimming after me. When I returned to shore he did happy jack-rabbit runs in the grass. I staged the lumber from the boat over some logs on the beach, re-anchored the boat in deeper water, then moved the lumber up to the stack I'd started next to Cottonwood Cabin. Finally, I spent some time reorganizing the lodge kitchen area and putting away all the dry goods. As mice continued to be a presence, I added a metal mouse proof box from one of the other cabins for anything rodents might find tasty. I made pasta for dinner and fell asleep sitting on the couch at 5:00 pm with half a cup of wine in my hand (I spilled it when I woke). I guess I was tired. But, it was too early for bed so I rallied, brought in some wood, stacked the rest under the porch and cleared some trails before calling it a day.

Monday

All the stress of the previous week and the endless work and preparations must have taken a toll because I slept obscene hours the first few days (almost twelve hours Sunday night, ten the next). Monday morning I set to work reconstructing the water system, first hiking to the creek and struggling to unscrew the adapter for the ABS pipe that was still attached to the olive barrel and replacing it with attachments to the flexible poly pipe. I dug out rocks from the hollow where the water barrel sits in the creek as deep as I could without going over the top of my boots, nestled the barrel in, and built a sturdy dam of rocks below and to the side of it to prevent it from moving in high water. I attached a 20 foot length of pipe to the through-hull fitting in the bottom of the barrel and let it temporarily drain back into the creek while I worked on the rest of the system (see photo below). This first involved getting the hose on site; hauling the heavy coils up through the damp forest was not fun and I thought more than once that I must be doing penance for some terrible deed.



Olive barrel and the first short length of pipe emptying into the creek



Potable water!

By far the biggest trick in laying the hose was uncoiling it; each length came in five foot diameter coils and the hose was reluctant to straighten out. I didn't want to hook the hose up to the barrel/water while I was laying it out, but this meant that I didn't have any resistance against which to uncoil it. I learned to use the natural curve of the pipe to tightly wrap it around a fallen tree, then pull it downhill (though the devil's club), flipping the coil around and around in an attempt to straighten it, then tucking the other end around another tree in the hopes that it wouldn't spring back. It did many times. Some hours and three heavy coils of hose later I was nearing the lodge, having taken a much more direct path than I'd used with the ABS pipe. In all it took about 350 feet to make it to the lodge, but I left the last length long as I wasn't yet sure what I would do with it.

Then began the more fun task of attaching the lengths of hose to one another. The couplings are simple plastic pieces that fit inside both ends of the hose secured with hose clamps. My father had recommended that I soak the end of the hose in hot water prior to inserting the coupling to make it easier and ensure that the hose clamp seats well; I'd already tried this

trick down at the lodge where I'd attached a coupling to one end of each length of pipe before hauling it up and it worked flawlessly. This time I boiled water in a kettle, grabbed it, a metal cup, a screwdriver and some hose clamps, and headed uphill to the first joint. Although forcing the stiff pipe into the cup of hot water was a little tricky, it worked amazingly well and I soon had all the pieces joined and the valve attached at the very bottom. I opened the valve, boiled more water, then trekked all the way to the top of the water system to attach the first short piece of hose to the start of the long run. This was the trickiest part, as the 20 foot length of hose had water running through it and didn't want to cooperate. I soaked the other end in hot water and joined them as quickly as I could. The icy water running through the coupling quickly cooled the hose and I

struggled to get it fully over the coupling. But it worked, and I hurried back downhill to find water shooting out of the valve at significant pressure (see photo above); my friend and his GPS later determined that the vertical height of the system was 100 feet. The system worked beautifully, and even the twisted hose calmed and settled with water coursing through it. I closed the valve and attached the filters to treat the water--one ten micron and two one microns in a line, sufficient to filter out the native giardia and cryptosporidium. I had a water system—potable water on my front porch at pressure. Pretty cool.

That was three o'clock. After a well-deserved break I began work on some rock foundations for the porch of Mink Cabin, the second cabin. I buried one large flat rock for one side, but the other post needed to be right in a crook between two large tree roots at the edge of a spruce, so this one took some creative rock piling techniques to prepare a stable foundation. While I was messing with it I heard Nigel's excited bear bark and ran back to the lodge in time to see a brown bear slowly romping from the edge of the water into the forest over the grassy beach. I waited around for a few minutes, then went back to work, but was quickly called back by more barking. A lovely young brown bear had emerged from the forest and was standing on a log observing her surroundings. I snapped a quick picture, then put Nigel in the lodge. The brown bear, christened Cindy, proceeded to take a nap on a log before grazing on grass. I sat on the porch drinking red wine and taking pictures while I watched her



Cindy napping



Cindy the cow

at the edge of the beach, listening to the ripping sounds as she tore up mouthful after mouthful of grass. She was far enough away that I didn't trouble her, but she looked in my direction every minute or so. It was one of those ideal moments when the whole crazy project down there made sense.

After dinner I cleaned up my chain saw, put the blade back on, and cleaned my rifle before heading to bed.



Porch 1



Porch 2



Porch 3

Tuesday

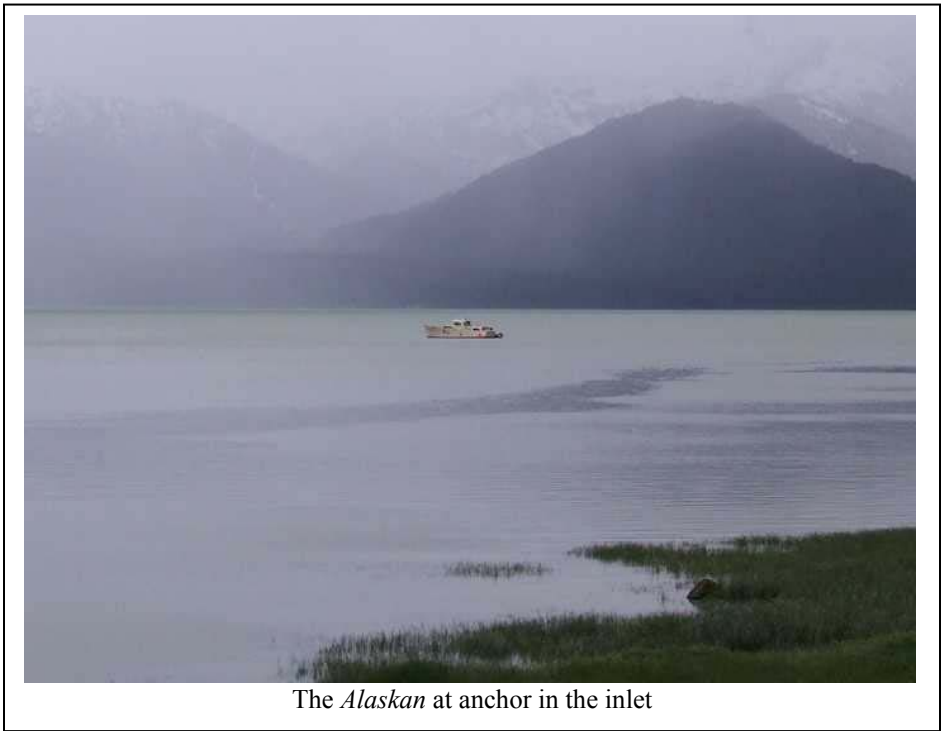
Next day the weather was pleasant and I was compelled to take advantage of it by staining Murrelet Cabin and then the front wall of the lodge. Not breaking until two in the afternoon I took an extra half an hour after lunch to just to sit in the sunshine. Then I returned to Mink Cabin with a few 2X4s, a level, and my tool belt and set to work building a deck. It was pretty fun, actually. The weather was pleasant and I was free to take my time planning and trouble shooting along the way. Three mosquito coils burned around me, making the mosquitoes tolerable and filling the air with pleasant smoke.

Unlike staining or other more mundane tasks, building a porch (for me) is a very engaging, intellectual task—all those calculations needed to determine how to construct it, how long the posts should be, how wide to make the deck, making sure everything is level, figuring out how to measure and nail in hangers by myself, etc. Very enjoyable and, in the end, very satisfying. Three and a half hours after I started I had a decent porch, 12" shy of the whole length so I could add a step up later.

I was beginning to wear out by this time, but had one more task ahead of me for the night. The weather was still nice and with that was the compulsion to stain the rest of the lodge, already a year and a half up with no protection. I'd gratuitously taken the afternoon to build the deck, but forced myself to clean the lodge walls that evening in preparation for staining, starting at 7:30. Nigel was wiser than me and called it a night at 8:00, uncharacteristically asking to be let inside while I worked.

The good news was that I had a ready supply of water at the lodge and didn't have to haul it from the river. I donned my kitchen gloves, put a gallon of water in a small bucket, splashed in some bleach in, and set to work wetting the walls with a rag, later returning to rinse them off with buckets of water. Not the greatest system, but sufficient. Soon that strange sore on my arm began to hurt badly again and half way through it became excruciating and I worried about making it worse. I was desperate to finish cleaning however, and was getting more and more irritated by the whole project, so I wouldn't stop. I paused long enough to put a bandage and duct tape over the sore and duct tape around bottom of the glove in the hopes of keeping the bleach solution out. It didn't work very well and the pain grew worse. At 9:00 pm I was finally finished, rinsed my arms off well, and quit for the day. At least I was somewhat distracted by the two whales feeding just off the sandbars all evening.

All night long my arm hurt and I slept poorly, feeling badly that I'd so bothered my little wound. When I woke up, I found that my modest sore had become a gruesome chemical burn down the whole inside of my right forearm leaving only a narrow, healthy strip of skin where the duct tape had kept me dry. It was ugly and painful--I'll save you the picture! For the next few nights the arm kept me from sleeping well or being as productive in work. Apparently bleach doesn't rinse off very well, so although I had doused it in ample fresh water the bleach went about dissolving my skin as I slept. It took two weeks for all the scabs to come off and I suspect the scars will last some time.



The *Alaskan* at anchor in the inlet

Wednesday

By this time I was pretty worn out and gave in to easier jobs around the property, cleaning and straightening all the cabins and moving items between them to more appropriate homes. I also set up a piece of plywood over two sawhorses outside the lodge for a cooking/cleaning station and stained the rough cut cedar 1x6s that I'll use to wrap around the posts supporting the lodge porch so it matches the rest of the porch. The weather was great but the lodge walls were still too damp to stain.

At one in the afternoon the *Alaskan* steamed into view. A 55' steel boat originally built by my dad in 1969, my parents have been renovating the *Alaskan* for a year and took it down to see me on its first long trip. I watched from the porch while they anchored and was happy to discover that, in addition to the lumber and water barrels on board, they also had a passenger; Travis had arrived, and with him a respite from work and solitude. That afternoon I gave my parents a tour of the property and had dinner with them on the *Alaskan*. After dinner we loaded up the *Kathy M* (my parents' 22' Hewescraft) with all the goods and delivered them to the beach. Travis and I lit a fire—my first since the second night--and made s'mores.



Yellow-billed loon

Thursday

The next morning the *Alaskan* pulled anchor for town and Travis and I went whale watching. There were at least three whales feeding between Gilbert Bay and the Speel Arm and we spent most of our time with a small whale feeding along the shore. We were lucky to have a close pass and took some photos of the whale fluking with scenic mountains behind (see photo). We also saw a rare, solitary yellow-billed loon (see photo). Before heading back for lunch we cruised up the Speel Arm to take in the scenery.



Travis photographing a whale



Chocolate lilies and irises

After a lunch of jiffy pop, Travis and I headed back out to the boat for a trip upriver at high tide, this time leaving Nigel behind. I followed the deep channel as well as I could remember it from observations at low tide and looked for indications of deeper water, but it was a fairly slow process and we hit shallows more than once. Above Ox point (on our side of the river) is a deep concave bend bordered by a grassy meadow. We passed this area, noticing the brown bear prints on the sand at the edge, and crossed to Whiting Point on the other side where the current ripped around the rocks. We swung well clear and continued on a short ways before running out of comfortably deep water, sunshine, and patience. It was the farthest I'd gone upriver, and it certainly looked promising, but we'll need a jet boat to go much farther.

On the way back we beached the boat

at the grassy land at the deep bend above Ox Point and stepped onto a truly stunning meadow of grasses, wild flowers, wild celery, and other plants. Irises, paintbrush, and chocolate lilies were among the flowers blooming in the grasses. Bear trails were everywhere and we quickly checked out the fresh prints on the sand before heading home for dinner.



Bear tracks



Shooting upriver



Glenn, Allison, Hope and Steven working on the outhouse hole

Friday

The next day I cleared an area on the hillside behind the lodge for an outhouse hole before breakfast. Later, Travis and I walked upriver on the sandbars and shot my rifle and Travis's pistol and shotgun. Carp, Stacey and Glenn arrived in the early afternoon with the kids in tow so we picked up work again. The lodge porch is about five feet off the ground and all this time we've been accessing it with a steep ladder; Carp's job was to build a stairwell for me with the lumber that my parents brought on the *Alaskan*. He got started

that afternoon while Travis, Glenn and I stained most of the rest of the cabin, leaving half of two walls to finish cutting in another time. Then Glenn got started digging an outhouse hole behind the lodge while Travis helped Carp. In the evening, the boys left to pull shrimp pots and returned an hour later with several dozen huge spot prawns (see photo) which they cleaned before starting a bonfire for the evening.

Saturday

Saturday was a mixture of play and work. The kids were wonderful helping me continue the outhouse hole in the morning, with Hope cutting roots and Allison and Steven digging/pulling out rocks. Glenn and Travis finished the hole later, working like fiends—it was quite impressive. Stacey kayaked a little with the kids in the afternoon, then she and I and Travis went out and played and photographed the seals for a while. It



Glenn and the kids around the fire



Snettisham spot prawns



Travis and Carp making devil's club canes



Carp finishing the stairs

was high tide and the seals were everywhere, dozens of them peering at us from all directions, the braver ones coming within 15 feet of our boats. Glenn went for a solo kayak when we returned.

That evening Carp finished the stairs while I cut a clearing in front of Cottonwood Cabin so it has a view of the river (see photo below). We feasted on a shrimp pasta dish that Travis put together as well as salad and hamburgers provided by Stacey. Dessert was Travis's blackberry dumplings around the campfire with ice cream Stacey made with the kids.

Sunday

Sunday I packed and cleaned and relaxed a little while the boys harvested devil's club stalks and peeled them, fashioning quite lovely canes and walking sticks. Apparently devil's club dries into a very hard, durable wood. As the tide was falling and the day getting on, Travis and I decided to leave the families behind to finish up on their own. Unfortunately, the tide was just at that point where the boats go aground a few dozen feet from shore and transporting gear is a hassle. We ferried Stacey to the Carpenters' boat but our anchor was in such shallow water that on the way back we went aground and I had to walk a fair distance toward shore to pick it up and carry it back to the boat. By then we were grounded again so I turned the boat out and pushed till we floated. We drifted around the inlet, fueled up, and headed home on calm seas. I saw some splashing against the Admiralty shore near Grand Island and pursued it, but never saw the porpoise or any other critter that might have been responsible. I had absolutely no desire to return to Juneau and could easily have lived the rest of the summer at the homestead!



View from Cottonwood Cabin



Seal (photo by Travis Morrison)