



Looking toward Stephen's Passage and Admiralty Island from Snettisham

### **Snettisham 2007 – 6: Charismatic Megafauna July 3-8**

Like I said at the end of the last trip report, I was reluctant to return to Juneau after a full week at the homestead. Once I'd recovered a bit from exhaustion and had a few days of flush toilets, cars, and my office job, I was more than anxious to return. By the time I'd spend the whole next weekend in town (my second all summer) I was desperate to get back. I also began to worry that my annual leave reserve was low, so I thought I'd use a Wednesday holiday (Independence Day) to maximize my leave--plus I have to get my dog out of town for the midnight fireworks on the 3<sup>rd</sup> anyway (for both our sanities). So it was that I came to work my tail off Monday and Tuesday (the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of July) in the hopes of sneaking away the rest of the week. In one day I managed to file two emergency regulations packets, launch three grant programs, and send out notices and newspaper ads for all five. I spent most of Tuesday on edge, and by the time it was done I was so worn out and stressed that I could barely force myself to pack up and go.

But go I did, leaving the harbor at 7:30 pm for a misty ride south. Pulling into the river inlet at 9:30 pm I was surprised to find a small boat with a serious radar on top hanging out just off the sandbars on my side of the river. Ready for a confrontation, or something, I pulled up alongside the boat and discovered that it was my friend Matt Kirchoff who heads the marbled murrelet study camped at the entrance to Snettisham. He was planning to anchor there for the night to catch the dawn flight of the murrelets to their nests upriver. Marbled murrelets are very unusual seabirds, preferring to nest on the branches of mossy trees (in old growth forests) rather than on sea cliffs like most of their relatives. They fly back and forth to their nests every day, some traveling as far as 50 miles inland. Extremely elusive, only a handful of nests have ever been found. Of the several dozen individuals the Snettisham researchers tagged with radio transmitters this year they've found about five nests up the Whiting River, one 30 miles away in Canada! Snettisham is home to the densest population of marbled murrelets we know about.

After a quick chat I headed in, forced again to beach the boat well south of the cabin due to the low tide. I carried Nigel to shore, then laboriously carted my goods up to the lodge over several trips across the mud. Then to bed. The next morning Matt kayaked to shore and I showed him around the place. He said that hundreds of murrelets has flown upriver at dawn (around 3:00-4:00 am) which he could see on his finely tuned radar. Once Matt left I fixed the temporary bottom step of the lodge stairs (you'll be proud, Carp), then buckled down and went to work on the porch of Murrelet Cabin (the one on the point). This was a similar job to the previous porch, though I had more trouble with the

foundations. Low to the ground, I didn't even wind up using vertical posts. This took up most of the day and when I finished I washed the lodge windows and quit.

That night I decided to see the murrelet migration for myself. I slept on the couch in the lodge and got up when it was light at 3:30 am. Throwing on some raingear and grabbing a folding chair, I headed down to the water's edge and waited. All was quiet, except for the swarm of noseems that quickly found me. I went back for some bug

repellent, then walked to the rocky point and sat there for about 20 minutes, listening and watching intently for the hundreds of murrelets Matt had described. They didn't really show up the way I'd hoped! I did hear murrelets calling a few times, but none passed on my side of the river. Nigel pestered me until I finally gave up and went back to the couch. At least I made the effort!



Next day I figured I'd had enough porch experience to work on the really tricky one—Cottonwood Cabin, which requires about four steps up. The first task was to remove the existing steps that were attached with hangers; it took about an hour, a bunch of tools, and some swearing to get the hangers out of the rim joist on the front of the cabin and then the treads off the stringers. I planned to use the existing pre-cut stringers for the new stairs if I could. I think I really understand the value of a cat's paw now.

Once the porch building started I had fun—this porch was full of challenges. I had to decide on a design, since much of the normal length of the porch would be taken up by stairs. Plus I had a hodge podge of lumber I'd gathered for all the porches that I needed to sift through, some left over from a batch I'd brought down years ago, others brought down this year. I had a combination of 2x6s and 2x8s of varying lengths for the decking, so I had to figure out which porches got which sizes and then, or course, cut them to size. I used the cabin end of the long boardwalk for cutting lumber, as that was as far as my extension cords would bring electricity (the generator is too heavy to move comfortably by myself). Thankfully, this is pretty close to Cottonwood Cabin, which required the most complex and numerous cuts. By the end of the day I had the platform up, offering a rather nice view of the river where I'd cleared branches during the previous trip. I didn't fully nail in the treads until I was more confident that I'd met code.



Constructing Cottonwood Cabin's porch



The finished porch

That day I also finished washing the cabin windows and cut plywood to place over the sides of the outhouse hole where it was wider than the outhouse itself (Glenn, Travis and I had carted the outhouse frame on site during the last trip). I covered the boards with a pile of rocks, leveled the outhouse and cleaned up around it. While I worked I could hear a whale blowing in the inlet. This whale had been tantalizing me all day, and when he showed up just at the edge of the sandbars on a glassy calm river I couldn't resist any longer. Calling it a day at 4:00 pm I drug the kayak out and took off, only to see him disappear around the point as I took the first few strokes. But I went out anyway, and followed the shoreline south and around the corner, noticing a large flock of gulls feeding some distance from shore and guessing that the whale might be headed in that direction. As I drifted, I watched the whale turn from its easterly route and make a big arc until he was headed right for the birds (then a quarter mile away). Soon he lunged right in the middle of them; I put on speed and charged in that direction, but apparently one lunge was enough, for the whale headed away again; I turned around,

having journeyed rather farther than expected.

A little disappointed by my progress over two whole days of work, I set about making stairs for all the porches the next day. Surprisingly, the stairs to Cottonwood proved the easiest, though the treads required several revisions. Creating a single step for the other two porches proved more difficult and frustrating, requiring many more cuts than was strictly necessary. In the end, I left the step to Murrelet Cabin incomplete and have yet to devise a way to make it work. It would be impossible to explain the problem; suffice to say it was very frustrating. It took nearly as long to build those silly steps as it took to

build a whole deck. I also hiked up to the creek, pulled the olive barrel out of the creek, cut the hose at the shore, and installed a valve.

Another whale (or the same one) teased me all day until I quit again at about 4:00 pm and took off onto the calm inlet by kayak. As I reached the edge of the sandbars this whale headed out for Gilbert Bay (giving me one pass at about 50 yards) and joined up briefly with a second whale that was heading in. They hung around the point toward Sweetheart Creek for a while and I kayaked all the way around the corner, just to say I'd done it. When I turned around a brisk wind was blowing in, slowing my progress and annoying me. It's amazing how irritating a 6" chop can be when you're in a little kayak!

Stopping at my boat on the way back I checked the motor and discovered that the mechanism to tilt the engine up and out of the water was broken. Reluctant to allow the boat to go dry at low tide with the engine down I tied on the kayak and took the boat downriver to deeper water. Finding the right place to anchor was a little tricky, as my fathometer sensor bracket is broken and I have to dash to the back of the boat and hold it in the water every time I want a reading. The screen, of course, is in the front of the boat, which makes reading it awkward. Plus, the anchor was reluctant to catch so it took several attempts before I was satisfied.

By that time, Friday night, I was wearing out. I called Juneau on the satellite phone and found out that no one was joining me for the weekend and contemplated heading back home, but decided that was silly since it would have cut short my long weekend and negated all my hard work at work. As I sat around the lodge that night recording the day's events in my journal I suddenly couldn't remember whether I'd turned the fathometer off or not. I don't use it often, so I've gotten out of the habit of checking it before I leave the boat. It could easily drain the battery before the next time I used the engine. So I left Nigel inside and kayaked downriver to the boat (some distance now that the boat was in deeper water); indeed, the fathometer was on, and I was very grateful I'd remembered.

Then I returned to shore, contemplating making a nuisance of myself to the tourists who had invaded my river. Earlier in the evening I'd looked up when I heard boat engine noise and discovered the *Mist Cove* (a 157' small, high end cruise ship) entering the inlet at speed. It anchored in the middle of the inlet just downriver from the lodge and I was resentful at the unwelcome company and the bright lights. I figured I should buzz them and demand a tour or something. But I left them alone, returned to shore and let Nigel out. Hearing whale blows again I casually glanced up saw one, then two whales surface just off the stern of the *Mist Cove*. I shrugged and was happy for the tourists (they'll probably be my clients some day). But something didn't seem quite right. *Hmmm...I thought...those whales aren't grouped like humpbacks...and gosh, they sure are breathing a lot...and not spending very much time at the surface...and my, what big black dorsal fins they have! Holy s#&#! Those are orcas!!*

So five minutes after I hit land, I put Nigel back in the lodge, grabbed my binoculars and camera, and took off for my boat, bringing the anchor on board before the orcas surfaced



Orca in the inlet

again on the other side of the inlet. Most of you know what an orca fanatic I am; if not, let's just say that orcas make life worth living when nothing else does. To have orcas in my inlet, visible from the lodge, is all the better. So I headed out to take a look around. At least ten, maybe twelve or more individuals were cavorting here and there within a roughly quarter mile radius between the river inlet and Gilbert Bay. They were alone or in small groups engaging in seemingly social activity such as tail slapping, breaching, and

rolling around on the surface, staying in the same area for more than an hour. I shut down and drifted, rewarded with a few passes, but mostly watching them with binoculars. When they left Gilbert Bay and started heading toward the Speel Arm I trailed them for a time as the light faded (it was about 9:30 pm by this time). Based on their physical features and pod size, I'm sure they were transient killer whales (mammal hunters), but their curiosity and boisterousness resembled residents. They continued cavorting as they traveled. Two calves were particularly energetic, performing dolphin style breaches together and frequently breaking away from the group to buzz close by the boat and spy hop to bring their eyes above water and look at me. Unfortunately, my camera does not focus well in low light so the photos leave something to be desired. After scouring the transient ID book back home I failed to come up with any definite positive matches, but just to hang out with them—in Snettisham no less—was spectacular. All by myself on the water pattering alongside curious, playful orcas--there might not be anything better.



One of the playful "twins" checking me out



Another orca look

Anchoring so late was a little tricky and I was grateful that I'd been careful to memorize the beach so I could recognize the right series of logs in the dark. It was too dark to read the fathometer screen from the stern of the boat where I was dangling the sensor in the water, which added to the challenge. Plus I just could not get the anchor to catch. Finally, exhausted, we were anchored and I prepared to climb into the kayak for the ride to shore. That was when I discovered that I'd failed to tie the kayak to the skiff when I started anchoring and found it floating 100 yards downriver (I'd brought it aboard while orca watching, then dropped it in the water to anchor). I had to pull anchor, retrieve the kayak, and start over again. Once ashore I fell into bed exhausted and happy.

Saturday dawned sunny with a brisk breeze so I was compelled again to paint. I used up every roller I had, all but one brush, and wound up using garbage bags to line my paint trays. All day the porches in front of the lodge were covered with some combination of outhouse pieces drying in the sun. First I found the pre-cut plywood siding for the outhouse behind the lodge and carried it up front, applying a bright coat of beige paint to the inside. Then I washed the outhouse frame itself in the woods before painting the rafters, seat, and seat braces out front in the sunshine. When the frame was dry, I scraped the chipped areas, sanded some spots, and painted it beige, later returning to paint the floor. By this time the day was heating up and I was grateful for the breeze to cool things down and keep the bugs off. As I continued to paint in front of the lodge, it got so hot I couldn't stand it anymore, so I stripped off first my shirt and then my pants, and wound up painting for several hours in my underwear, socks and shoes. Amazingly, I didn't even need insect repellent most of the time. It was absolutely glorious weather! I cranked up the radio and was immediately rewarded with "American Pie"; strangely, this was another one of those perfect moments in the whole bizarre construction process—painting half nude in the sunshine to my crank radio.

The moment passed. By the end of the day I was truly weary of painting. I had managed to put two coats of paint on the inside of the plywood siding and primer on the outside.

At about 7:30 pm I decided it was dry enough to apply the final outside coat, but the previously opened can used for the first outhouse (in 2004) was hopelessly rusted shut. I sought out a fresh can, but this had overwintered several times and was separated beyond my willingness and ability to stir—latex doesn't freeze well. So I took it as a sign and quit for the day. This was a wise move, as it began to rain early in the night; thankfully, all was dry save for the outhouse floor. The next morning I stowed all the painted



Painting outhouse pieces in front of the lodge

pieces away, packed up early and headed back to town, mentally and physically exhausted.

That's actually not the whole story of the weekend (after all, what's with the dramatic title?). As agonizing a decision as this is, I've decided to cease writing anything about bear encounters anywhere in Snettisham (with the exception of Sweetheart Creek). Exploring the greater Snettisham area by boat and kayak and being in the area as much as I have this year has for the first time resulted in multiple bear encounters. I wrote about meeting a young female bear in the last report, but that is as far as I'll go. I fear that descriptions of the encounters, their locations, and the habits of the bears I see could potentially lead in some way to the early demise of these individuals that I begin to consider friends. It would do them great disservice. So, significant portions of the weekend (and some of the most exciting and wonderful parts) are left untold, though I will include a few photos. I'm probably being too paranoid, as Snettisham is already heavily utilized by bear hunters from Juneau, but I couldn't bear to find a carcass lying on the beach somewhere and worry that I may have contributed.

