



Nigel reluctantly waiting to get in the boat, Snettisham Homestead

Snettisham 2008 – 1: Sea Lion Madness May 4-5

May struck, the boat was ready, and I could no longer resist my desire to escape town (and find out whether my lodge was still standing). Saturday morning Chris, Nigel and I launched the boat and headed out of Douglas Harbor in a light mist, giddy at the anticipation of reaching the homestead (well, I was giddy, anyway). Our first excitement came as we entered Taku Inlet while watching for a whale to come back up. Some unrelated splashing nearby caught my eye and we spotted a covey of gulls diving and circling--a sea lion was thrashing around on the surface, breaking his dinner into bite sized pieces. (Without paws or claws, sea lions are forced to bite off pieces of prey by clutching it in their teeth and whacking it dramatically against the water.) The fish he'd caught was enormous! At least a good sized king salmon or possibly a flatfish—I didn't get a good enough look to determine species, but it was sizable. I'd never seen a sea lion with a fish so big!

So then we had to cross Taku Inlet, bucking a two foot southerly swell. Nigel quickly became distraught but we plowed on, my patience not yet worn out so early in the season. By the time we hit Grand Island occasional three footers joined the fray and the crossing to Taku Harbor was unpleasant. We stopped briefly in calm water at the entrance and watched another whale come up before continuing on. After getting kicked forever on the seas south of Taku Harbor we approached the entrance to Snettisham where another whale or two appeared. We hurried inside followed by the incessant seas, finally on our stern. As soon as we turned the corner the water became dangerously littered with woody debris—big logs and trees interspersed with countless smaller flotsam. We moved a bit more cautiously here, and slowly came up on the winter sea lion haulout on the west shore. I'd guess 400-500 animals of all sizes lined the rocks. One year-old pup (surprisingly small) was nursing in prominent view. The din was terrific.



Chris and Nigel on the *Ronquil*, Douglas Harbor Ramp



Sea lion suckling

From there we made the final pass to the Whiting River and my homestead, pleased to see that the lodge at least was still standing. It was high tide and we pulled up onto the beach, hauling our gear to the lodge and grabbing the double kayak *Keet* from storage underneath. We had intended to return to Juneau that afternoon and the tide was meant to drop to -1.1' so I'd thought to anchor a few hundred yards downriver where the water deepens. (The water in front of the homestead is really the end of the river and at low tide it's all

dry sandbars.) We kicked off the beach, leaving a very insecure Nigel behind. As we puttered downriver Nigel was beside himself crying and carrying on and running down the beach after us. With the high tide he quickly ran out of beach against a cliff and, fearing that he'd swim (and also being quite weary and ready to relax) I decided to anchor a little closer in. So we set anchor off the homestead beach and kayaked to shore, dragging the *Keet* up into the grass and flipping it over.

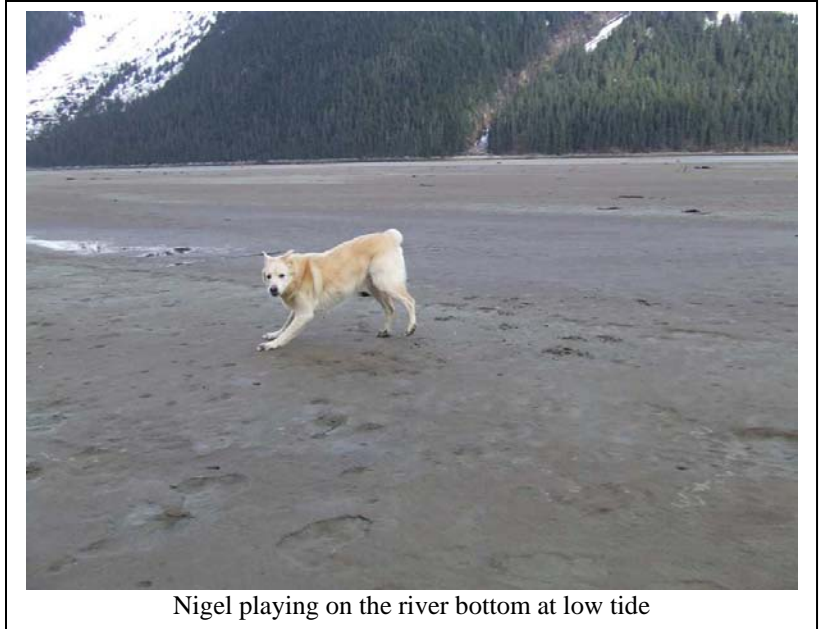
Chris and I celebrated our three hour boat ordeal with a beer and a tour around the property—entirely intact and none the worse for wear. The lodge had a tolerable amount of mouse droppings inside and chewed paper towel rolls, but was otherwise unchanged. We unboarded the picture window and had some lunch before haphazardly putting the stove pipe back together and lighting a fire. It was early May and still very chilly, the beach grass not yet sprouting. Winter debris covered everything. Although I'd imagined sitting on the porch enjoying the view, we were grateful for the heat and stayed inside playing gin. I lit the propane lights and range to make sure they still worked and as the tide dropped we contemplated whether to move the boat to deeper water or stay the night. I admit that I had no desire to return to Stephen's Passage and fight my way through the swells again and Chris was amenable to staying, so we let the boat go dry as the tide dropped. I'd also noticed an unusual amount of water accumulating in the skiff on our



Playing gin

way down (more than the rain would account for) and wanted to let her drain out anyway.

At low tide we walked down to the boat to pull the plug and take a walk on the sandbars, by then almost entirely covering the inlet. On the way back we cut over to the edge of the rocky beach and both quickly spotted something unusual on the rocks. A sea lion! A dead sea lion, to be exact, perfectly intact as far as we could tell. It was smallish and looked to be perhaps two or three years old. Very exciting stuff! And, yes, I reported it to NMFS. By then it was getting on in the evening so we retired to the lodge for the night. After dark a bat buzzed back and forth in front of the porch.



Nigel playing on the river bottom at low tide

Next morning we drained the night's rain out of the boat and walked back to where we'd found the sea lion, no longer there. Flocks of golden-crowned and white-crowned sparrows hopped around the beaches and vied with the ruby-crowned kinglets for most boisterous singing. When the tide came in I kayaked out to the boat, picked up Chris, Nigel and our gear at the beach, and we headed out to Gilbert Bay. The inlet was alive with murrelets and a few other alcids and loons. Mallards and other ducks bobbed

around the beach near the homestead and we saw an eagle sitting in a brand new nest just downriver.



Stranded Steller sea lion

The water in Port Snettisham was flat calm so we decided to take a detour to see the great avalanche that took out seven towers between the Snettisham hydroelectric facility and Juneau. Around the corner in Speel Arm we found the devastation—carnage in a wide swath down the mountainside. No snow left by then, just dirt, bare rock, and massive trees

ripped and shredded to pieces. Very impressive. We lingered for a bit, then turned and headed back for Stephen's Passage. By the time we hit the entrance, I glanced behind me



Snettisham avalanche

and discovered an alarming amount of water in the boat—what would normally take several days of heavy rain, but the boat had drained out that morning. Something was evidently wrong. I stopped and pumped with a hand pump until the water retreated from the main deck, then we headed out into the swells. They were milder than the day before and on our stern, so the trip back was a bit more comfortable.

Unfortunately, the water kept rising in the boat and we had to stop again in the lee of Grand Island to pump it out. I'd rented a slip in Douglas Harbor for three months and intended to leave the boat in the water, but we were forced to haul it again, as it surely would have sunk in the harbor.

Exhausted and chilled, I dropped Chris off and parked the boat, ready for a shower and a nap. At least the homestead was still in good shape! On Tuesday I came back to the boat, scrubbed it, put the plug in, and flooded it to find the leak. I found a seven inch crack in the hull about three quarters of the way back. Mystery solved! The next day I hauled it out to a welding shop on my lunch break, left it for a couple of days, and launched it on my lunch break on Friday! Apparently there was more than one weak spot in the hull, but it's been watertight since.



Snettisham avalanche