



Soffit screens!

## *Tracks*

**Snettisham 2007-1: May 12-14**

**Taku 2007-1: May 18-19**

### **Snettisham**

April passed by with weekend after weekend of commitments in town while the snow finally melted all around Juneau. I and my friends finished repairs to my boat, me ever anxious to head south. Finally, on May 12<sup>th</sup> I was able to escape the city and flee to the homestead, holding my breath the whole way in fear of fallen trees and crumpled buildings or, at the very least, a legion of mice holding sway over the lodge and occupying my couch. My mother was good enough to come along and let me spend Mother's Day weekend exploiting her for labor and excuses to have fun.

After launching the skiff at Douglas Harbor, we bumped our way south, choosing to moderate our speed in favor of comfort and lack of structural stress to the boat, loaded down with random kitchenware donated by my parents, 200 feet of black pipe for the water system, a mouse trap, food, beer and wine. The trip down was uneventful. There were seven whales or more spread out in the middle of Stephen's Passage between Grand

Island and Snettisham, but none inside. At River Point (turning into the river from Gilbert Bay) a dozen eagles and scores of gulls and scoters worked a bait ball near the shore. From there we were relieved to see that the lodge was still standing, though the smoke stack, not surprisingly, was upside down.

Hitting the beach at low tide we were forced to haul our gear a few hundred yards across the muck before we hit solid



Mom cutting soffit screen

ground. After playing out some line and scrunching the anchor in the mud, I grabbed the last of the gear and met my mother at the lodge for the grand opening. I was pleased and surprised to find it smelling wonderful, with little evidence of vermin. The afternoon was getting on, but before we settled in my mother and I temporarily fixed the smoke stack and took a tour of the rest of the property, all intact expect for a crack in the outhouse roof. Then we shared a bottle of wine with alfredo ravioli and veggies cooked over the camp stove, enjoying the warmth put out by the little wood stove inside.

In the morning on Mother's Day we ate breakfast and got to work on the soffit screens. There's about an inch and a half gap between the plywood under the roof and the top of the blocking (walls) which made perfect infiltration points for rodents in an otherwise fairly tight building. It would be fruitless to remove the resident mice without first covering the soffits. They're also good spots for insects to come in, so I bought two kinds of hardware cloth—sturdy quarter inch screen to keep the rodents out and fine mesh to keep the insects out. My mother and I measured a soffit area and set about cutting pieces to fit. Once we had stacks of screen, she bent the pieces into shape and I climbed a ladder and laboriously stapled them in place with her super trigger-style staple gun. It was awkward uncomfortable work and I was grateful when we finished the first side of the lodge and took a break for a kayak on the slack tide.

My mother in Tsaa (the red kayak), and I in Cheech (the blue kayak), we crossed the inlet and turned upriver on the opposite shore, cruising past waterfalls, rocky beaches and



Mom kayaking

mossy cliffs wet with snow melt and overhung with budding alders and looming spruces. The water was high and glassy calm under a lightly overcast sky. Everywhere along the shoreline American pipits plundered the rocks and mud for insects, wagging their little tails as they hopped along the rocks. A red-necked grebe (rare here) dove in the river among the harbor seals.

We soon came to the big avalanche chute that we see across from the lodge. The high



Avalanche

tide was melting the vertical face of the snow (twenty feet high) and chunks of ice were floating downriver. It was evident that this winter's avalanche was somewhat more dramatic than most, as the slide had razed an extra 30 feet of forest at the edge of the chute. The timber at the bottom would have kept me in firewood for years.

A little farther on we came to one end of a long stretch of sandy beach that grows up with rich green grass later in the summer (a good spot to look for brown bears). As this time of year, the grass was just beginning to show itself so the walking was easy. We left the kayaks at the end of a little slough and trekked upriver at the edge of the water, surprised at how wide the beach was (100 feet or more). We soon came across tracks in the wet sand, washed by a previous tide and difficult to read. They seemed too small for a bear but too big for much else. As we followed them upriver, the tracks shifted to the edge of the grass and became clear enough to recognize distinctly canine prints—wolf. Soon another set of prints appeared running more or less parallel to the wolf tracks, but rather larger and with much bigger claws—bear. As we continued onto dry sand, the unadulterated tracks revealed that there were actually two wolves traveling together, the tracks side by side. Another set of parallel tracks soon appeared right next to the wolf tracks—river otter. As we reached the end of the sand bar, the narrow stretch of sand ten feet wide harbored bear, wolf, and otter tracks in a parallel line. Pretty cool. We clambered on some rocks to continue farther upriver and saw that in just another 100 yards we could walk far upriver on the sandbars. Our stomachs urged us home, however, and we trekked back to our kayaks, crossing the river among curious and distracting harbor seals. I saw an Arctic

tern head  
upriver with a  
fish in its mouth  
and watched to  
see if I could  
discern a  
nesting area, but  
I lost it in the  
distance when a  
harbor seal  
emerged from  
the water and  
demanded my  
attention about  
20 feet away.

After lunch, my  
mother and I  
grabbed my  
chain saw and  
set to work  
clearing  
branches and  
cutting



Drippy shoreline

firewood. Two winters ago, the enormous tree in the center of the property (directly behind two of my cabins) fell down, making a tangled mess of the forest floor and the path to the other cabins. It was very satisfying to cut these branches into stove sized pieces one at a time and slowly clear the devastated ground. I typically tire easily working a chainsaw, but on this occasion I felt unstoppable and fiendishly cut until I ran out of gas. Then we hiked back to the boat where it was aground in the river mud at low tide and carried a jerry jug of gas and the black pipe up to the lodge before going back at the branches. The last few were dug into the ground under tension and the blade kept getting the caught in the wood as the branches settled. It was very frustrating and took a great deal of effort to cut through the last two. We left them on the ground for the next trip and dug out the wheel barrel, my mother stacking firewood under the front porch while I brought her logs one load at a time. The small rounds (four to six inches in diameter) look attractive stacked up next to the kayaks.

Exhausted and hungry, we roasted hot dogs in the wood stove and drank beer. Then I attacked the soffits on the other side of the building which proved to be even more awkward than the first. Half way through, my arms were visibly trembling with the effort of balancing myself between the rafters (squishing my head against the ceiling while I hung on) and squeezing the increasingly stiff staple gun to secure all sides of the metal screen. It was hot up high and sweating from head to toe with the effort; thankfully my mother seemed to forgive me for the groans, cuss words, and demands for more staples that escaped me. I was reaching the end of my rope and physical ability to

continue by the time I was through, blistered and aching. S'mores awaited me for a

reward, then bed, though I was too amped up to sleep right away.

I got up early the next morning and cleaned up around some of the cabins, folding winter tarps and stowing random pieces of plywood left over from construction. I was disappointed to discover that the homemade mouse trap yielded no mice after all that work on the soffits. After a breakfast of refried beans,



Lumberjack Debbie

cheese and avocado on tortillas cooked on top of the wood stove, my mother and I got to work cleaning around the lodge. First we inventoried and restacked the lumber, then cleaned up the trash heap that I'd started between some trees where I'd shoved all the foam and plastic packing material that came with the cabin kits and kayaks. We drug all this out and my mother made a nice tidy bundle to take back to town.

Our last task was to scope out the creek for logical sites to start the water system. One of the primary goals this summer is to install both a safe drinking water system and a gray water disposal system. The fresh water will come from the fast running creek that runs down a gorge on the upriver end of the homestead; I have most of the barrels, pipe, and filters that I'll need, but first I need to find a viable site to collect water. We found a likely spot up the mountainside where a natural waterfall could make a decent collection basin and added some rocks around the edge to see how well it would dam. In a few minutes we added eighteen inches of depth to the pool, so we thought the spot was promising. I plan to put an olive barrel in the creek with a pipe running out the bottom and down to the lodge through a set of filters to eliminate the native giardia and cryptosporidium. But that will have to wait until the next trip.

Both of us were tired, so we had lunch and spent the rest of the time packing up and attempting to use the satellite phone, which proved to be rather finicky. We left around 1:30 and stopped at the sea lion haul-out in the entrance to Snettisham. Hundreds of lions

still cavorted and growled on the rocks, though few of the huge males were present. A gang of youngsters dove into the water as we drifted past and made a scene, leaping and splashing around the boat before they got bored. At least half a dozen individuals sported prominent brands on their sides so researchers could identify them. Stephen's Passage was nearly calm, and whales blew all the way north.



Snettisham lions

### **Taku**

My family set aside the following weekend as a work/learning party up the Taku. The cabin there is maintained by my parents, but used by my brother and I, so this was intended to teach us the ropes so we could start pulling our share of the work. We were to learn about the generator, water pump, docks, river boat, and other systems as well as split some firewood for the dwindling stock on the porch. We took off at 2:45 on Friday afternoon to catch the high tide, my brother driving the boat for the first time on the way up. My dog Nigel, normally terrified of the slightest bump, appeared grateful to be along and limited himself to crawling onto the bench and putting his head in my lap, forgoing the more typical frantic clawing. The day was clear and stunning, and Taku Glacier (still partially covered in snow) cut a stunning image in front of 8,500 foot Devil's Paw in the ice field above. The river was high, so we had little trouble accessing the property. However, scrambling up the riverbank when we arrived brought quite a shock—three to five feet of dense snow everywhere. It was May 18. We were stunned, but made the best



Taku Glacier from the cabin

of it, shoving our drinks in the snow bank outside the front door to cool. All the tools and equipment we had intended to use were hopelessly buried.

We spent the evening reconnoitering around the cabin and enjoying the fresh king salmon my mother cooked for dinner. The next morning I took off upriver on snowshoes to

explore the meadow, marveling at the depth of snow everywhere. It was deep even between the spruce trees around the cabin and as I broke out into the strawberry fields beyond there were drifts that reached ten feet. We broke the snowfall record in Juneau last winter (over 100 inches), and about 18 feet fell at the Taku Lodge just upriver from the cabin.

My first interesting discovery was a bear pile on the snow, and then a series of moose tracks, some of which appeared quite fresh. Lacking any other goal, I decided to follow the tracks back toward the mountains and away from the river. Based on their definition (they didn't appear to have melted or frozen) I guessed/hoped that they were fairly recent; on the way, another pair of moose tracks joined up and I found several piles of droppings. I prodded the droppings, but couldn't tell whether they were warmish because they were fresh or because they



Happy Nigel

were decomposing in the sunshine. It must have been close to 60 degrees and I soon found myself in my t-shirt and sweating in the sunshine. The views around were spectacular.



Moose

them should turn up and decide to chase me—perhaps I'd have time to escape if the snow caused the moose to flounder. For myself, my mother's snowshoes made easy walking (and possibly running) everywhere.

After about twenty minutes, I broke out of the last clump of trees and into the meadow and figured I should take a moment to glass the area in the unlikely event that anything showed up. As I perused the slough a few hundred yards away I was shocked and delighted when two moose showed up on the far bank! I took a quick photo and began stalking them in earnest, moving slowly across the snow in an indirect direction that would take me toward clusters of willows for cover. Of course, my stealthfulness was pointless, as my snowshoes were hopelessly loud and Nigel didn't share my discretion. The two moose were well aware of our presence, and began to meander downriver on the bank of the slough. I tramped after them, sneaking closer when I could move from one clump of trees to the next while out of sight. I halved the distance between us before I broke cover and clumped in their direction, taking photos as I went. At last Nigel could stand it no longer and took off after them like an over-excited wolf puppy,

The moose I was tracking continued to head toward the slough and the mountains, meandering between and through stands of spruces. Most of the time they stayed on top of the crust but in softer places they post-holed down as much as three feet; I found this comforting in the event that one of



Bear tracks



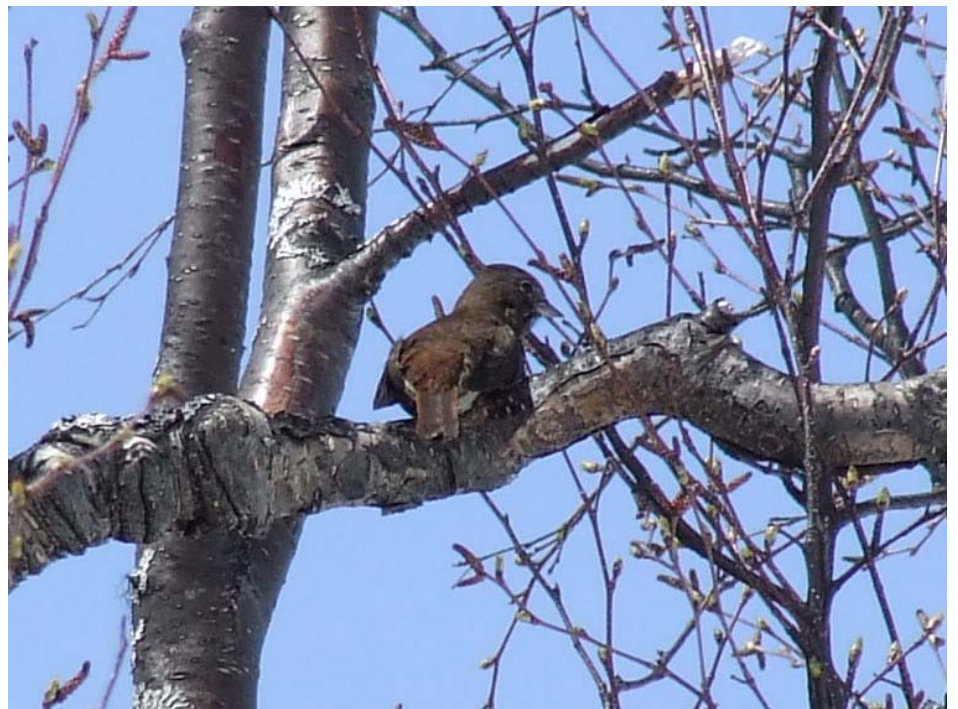
Resident eagles

prompting the moose to trot downriver. I snapped a few more photos before they left the slough bank and disappeared into the scrub.

On the way back I encountered more bear tracks. The snow was less deep in the broader meadow and there was bare earth at the bottom of the clumps of willows. Each clump seemed to have its resident Lincoln's or fox sparrow, singing in spring for all they were worth. When I made my way back to the cabin, two female hummingbirds were vying for the feeder and we wondered what they could possibly be eating the rest of the time.

Shortly thereafter my mother joined me for a second snowshoe upriver, this time making our way farther north onto some of the moraines. The resident eagles were back, perched in their lookout tree and watching us as we labored past. The woods were full of warblers and thrushes and we noticed the poor spruce trees brutalized by the winter snows. Some trees had five feet of barren trunk, their branches clustered around the snow at the base, pulled off by the weight of the snow as it fell.

My mom and I continued to birdwatch in the meadows, stalking sparrows amid



Fox sparrow in a birch tree

the willow clumps. We found strange mounds of muddy structures on the grass in clear areas like flattened termite hills and couldn't come up with an explanation. Moose tracks were everywhere and we found some clumps of willows with branches nipped and whole trunks stripped bare by their browsing. Scaups and mergansers in the slough, Canada geese calling in the distance. We stopped for a few minutes on top of a dry hill at the edge of the slough to soak in the sunshine.

We were hungry and tired by the time we got back to the cabin, as were the dogs. Since we couldn't do any work, we ate lunch, packed up, and headed back to town on the rising tide. I spent a few minutes by the river reading before we took off. This time the seas were an uncomfortable three feet in Taku Inlet, and yet Nigel remained calm the whole time and pestered no one. What a good dog! We'll have to return sometime for a work trip, but I'm grateful for the bizarre sunny snowshoe in the middle of May.



Evening on the river