



Sweetheart Creek 2007 August 9-10

Teamo Supremo reunited this year with its 2005 members—Glenn, Dru, Melissa and myself. Once relegated to bear watching duties as a non-resident, Melissa was excited to take part in the slaying adventure with the rest of us this year. Unfortunately, she missed an evening flight from Anchorage and had to fly down on the day we were to start fishing. Dru generously offered to stay behind and bring her in his boat, so only Glenn and I took off for Sweetheart as intended at 8:00 am from Douglas Harbor Thursday morning.

The ride down was smooth and rainless and we arrived at my place about 9:30 to pick up tin snips, line, duct tape, bear mace, bug repellent, and a kayak. We'd chosen a Thursday in the hopes of avoiding weekend crowds and the gillnet opening. As it turned out, we found ourselves weaving our way through gillnets in the Port and the beach near Sweetheart was already plugged with eight or so boats. Wondering where we'd find a place to fish, Glenn and I unloaded, anchored the boat, and began the hike to the creek. Before entering the woods I shed my xtratufs (rubber boots) and donned a borrowed pair of waders for the day. I left the boots next to the "bears are present" sign at the start of the trail so I'd be sure to see them on the way out.



Glenn getting ready to cast into the middle pool, burlap bags in foreground

We first made our way to the favored fishing spot, the point of land that sticks into the tumult just below the upper falls. A troupe of people were already occupying it, leisurely casting into the pools. We went around them to the upper falls and tried a few casts there, to no avail. We finally went farther downriver and wound up dropping our stuff on a flat rock next to the lower falls and casting into the creek in the middle pool. Fortunately, the water

was considerably lower than last year and walking around the edge of the creek in thigh deep water offered little risk of taking a swim. However, the lower waters also meant that less of the water was turbid enough to offer hiding spots for the skittish sockeye. Though Glenn was able to effectively cast into the boiling, opaque section of water closer to the other side (see photo above), I did not have the strength.

The next few hours were pleasant enough fishing, though we had mediocre luck with the catch. The fellow right across the creek from us was slaying fish at nearly every cast, being closer to the rushing water and patiently waiting for us to cast first again and again, apparently using us to scare the fish in his direction. To further our frustration, the family on the point above us were taking their sweet time collecting fish, standing around and chatting for long periods without fishing at all. With at least five members set to catch their limit that day, they were looking to harvest 125 fish or more, offering little chance for others to share the best spot.



A sockeye in the dip net

Glenn's first successful cast caught two jacks (precocious, trout-sized males); though Glenn had no interest in them, I took one thinking it would be bad luck to throw back the first catch of the day. My job was to pull in the net after Glenn cast it, then grab the dip net if there were fish, help transfer the fish from the cast net to the dip net, then take the fish to shore for stunning and bleeding. We set up a couple of burlap bags in the water to store the fish in the creek. For more details on the fishing strategy and Sweetheart Creek in general, see previous trip reports posted on my web site within the Snettisham Construction 2006 reports (www.takudebbie.com/homesteadhome.html). The most exciting cast brought in four sockeyes, though we had to spend considerable time untangling them from the net.

I have some mixed feelings about engaging in a harvest of doomed hatchery fish—a harvest that is put in place artificially in part so that local Juneauites (who live in a “nonsubsistence area”) can catch sockeyes (which are tricky to catch on a hook and line). The sockeyes shouldn't be there and what we don't harvest will die without spawning. We more or less know that the fish are going to be there and from a distance it all appears

easy and not as sporting as pursuing them in the ocean. However, a few moments on the creek and it's suddenly clear again that there's nothing easy about it; the trails are primitive, overgrown, steep and mucky, you have to keep a constant watch for bears, the bugs are notoriously bad, and at times like this time you really have to hunt for fish.

This latter issue was largely because we lacked a good fishing spot and had to increase our repertoire for harvesting. We began to better discern the locations of the fish in the creek, their reactions to others' harvesting efforts, people in the creek, etc. After Dru and Melissa arrived around 1:00 pm we quickly moved downriver into the pool just below the lower falls. While Melissa and I cleaned the 15 fish we'd caught up above, Dru and Glenn began slaying them standing in the middle of the creek. By the time we joined up, however, the fishing had slowed down, apparently because another bunch of fishermen on the other side of the creek had departed and the fish were no longer forced into our range to escape their nets. Melissa and I stood on a little protrusion of rock at the edge of the deep pool and cast with a second net, to little avail. Once again I found myself without sufficient strength to throw the net those extra few feet into turbid water. I caught one large sockeye, plus a bunch of little guys including jacks, dolly vardens, and what I think was a rainbow trout. By this time we'd run out of room in the burlap sacks and had



Melissa with the string of fish

begun stringing fish on a line tied to an overhanging tree. Melissa and I provided shore support with the bonking, bleeding and stringing. After I gave up my fruitless casting I gutted fish while waiting for the boys to make a catch.

By mid-afternoon we were wearing down. Glenn was still our primary caster, though Dru caught a few as well. Glenn had blown out an ankle dragging the kayak from the beach around the point and into the creek and worn out from casting all day. The rest of us had fared a little better, but were also pretty tired and the noseums were beginning to harass us, plus the fact that we hadn't eaten in some time was beginning to show. We were starting to wrap things up and consolidate our gear when a sow and three cubs showed up across the creek. They wandered downriver while we tied two dry bags full of fish to the kayak along with the string of fish. We'd decided to use

the kayak rather than hump the fish through the woods and back to the boat. This seemed like a good idea in general and fairly straight forward, though I'm not sure anyone had really fleshed out the plan. I know I hadn't.

But, it suddenly became moot and we never had a chance to talk about it. Mama bear crossed the creek a hundred yards downriver and started heading in our direction. Any brown bear coming toward us would be cause for alarm, but a mother bear is a whole different story. There were several other people nearby so we didn't think she'd bring her cubs very close, but she kept right on coming up the bank so Dru and I each grabbed one end of the kayak and began working our way through the fast moving water toward the opposite



Glenn and Dru fishing in the lower pool

side. The creek is about knee high there and rushes over large cobble stones on which I struggled to maintain my balance, leaning back against the pull of the kayak. The bears kept coming, so Glenn and Melissa were compelled to join us on the other side; Melissa didn't have hip waders on, so Glenn piggy-backed her across. I looked up in time to see Glenn go down about five feet from shore. So, despite our efforts, all four of us wound up wet for one reason or another (my waders leaked a little).



Mama and cubs on the far side of the creek

So there we were on the wrong side of the creek with a kayak full of fish and a strong current. Heading back over wasn't a viable option with the bears, and soon staying put didn't seem like a very good option either as another adult bear showed up just upriver from us. It was clearly their turn to take over fishing. We began laboriously walking the kayak down the shore toward Gilbert Bay. A few hundred yards downstream the channel split in two, the distant one hugging the shore of the spit that separated our boat from Sweetheart Creek

and the one we were in slowly curving away into the tidal flats. We kept looking for places to cross, but couldn't convince ourselves to brave the current and the deep pockets of water that always loomed; thus we found ourselves in the tidal flats heading away from where we wanted to go and I, for one, was very cranky. It was just past low tide.

Glenn suggested that we go back upstream and try to find a better crossing. Now that we were in the bay, we had passed all opportunity to cross the creeks in shallow water. Neither Dru nor I relished the idea of dragging the heavy kayak against the current and then crossing the creek, so I came up with another plan. We'd drag the kayak out to the edge of the flats, leave the fish on shore with Glenn, Dru and Melissa which would allow me to hastily kayak back to the boat and pick them all up in the bay, ending the need to haul our fish on our backs or on the kayak and cutting short this most unwelcome adventure. There was ample water to make it back to that point and the tide was rising. Without the fish, I could make good time paddling around the point and to the boat in the kayak.

Alas, my plan was not accepted. Unwilling to wait in the estuary, Glenn and the others walked back upriver and over the point toward the boat while I labored to kayak back with 175 pounds or so of fish on board. It was incredibly slow going, surprisingly so.

Every stroke was an effort and the boat barely inched forward. I was grateful for any shortcuts I could take over shallows so I could get out and walk, though pulling the kayak was also hard work. Since the tide was rising, I took a risk and cut between a high gravel bar and the spit and made straight for the boat, though it was



Mama bear and cubs

uncertain whether there would be enough water to float the kayak in the middle. Thankfully there was, but the tidal current was swift through this narrow passage and the sand was soft, so tugging on the heavy kayak against the current was brutal. Ahead of me I could see the others waiting on the shore battling the insects. Finally reaching the

end of the dune I boarded the kayak again and made my way slowly toward them, landing about 20 feet away from where I was headed due to the pull of the current I'd been fighting. There we finally untied the fish from the kayak and I fairly flew out to the boat, moving at least 5 times as fast with a fraction of the effort.

I hastily tied the kayak to the boat and pulled anchor. Returning to shore I could see the swarms of noseems that hovered around the faces of the others. As I stood on the bow of the boat cruising in they literally hit me in the face, a cloud so thick I could feel them all over my skin. They crawled or flew into my eyes, half blinding me and causing me to squint and tear up. Once I looked down at the back of my hand and counted 12 dead noseems within a half inch radius, stuck to my skin. I hastily applied a little deet, then set about emptying bags of ice into Glenn's cooler and packing in the fish that Melissa extirpated from the line. Everybody was suffering from the bugs--it was unbelievable. In the meantime, Dru retrieved his boat and arrived just as we had plugged the cooler on my boat. We finished loading gear, then Melissa and I gratefully took off for the homestead, leaving Glenn and Dru to load the rest of the fish in the other cooler.

I didn't feel human again until I had washed my face and hands and flushed the bugs out of my eyes. A dry pair of pants and socks didn't hurt either, nor did the donut holes that Melissa brought along. I lit a fire and baked cookies from dough I'd made the night before while Glenn and Melissa worked on a campfire outside and Dru made dinner. We ate venison, yakisoba noodles, and stir fried vegetables inside the lodge before sitting around the campfire and smoking a well-deserved stogie. Melissa had promised banana boats for dessert (after an anomalously failed attempt two years before) but we were all too full and tired by then to make the effort. Maybe next year!

In the morning I somehow managed to be first up, despite my weariness. None of us were moving very fast. We had some breakfast, made some coffee, and relaxed a little while we decided what to do. With 32 fish split three ways (Melissa works in Denali and doesn't have a place to store her catch), the others had as much as they wanted. I wanted 20 fish, but really didn't feel like returning to Sweetheart by that time, already exhausted and with an evening of processing fish ahead of me. I figured I'd make up for lack of sockeyes with



Dru cooking supper over my new propane range

coho salmon this fall. We decided instead to stop by South Island on the way home and do a little trolling and/or halibut fishing.

First, though, I had to retrieve my xtratufs. Yep, we'd failed to come back along the trail through the woods so my fool-proof trick to remember them fell through. Melissa and I swung over to Sweetheart while the boys headed over to South Island. I raced up to the "bears are present" sign and found my boots, not carefully folded over like I'd left them, but scattered nearby. One had a large tear in the side of it and two punctures and there were baby bear tracks nearby. Talk about adding insult to injury—or was it the other way around?

Anyway, I returned to the boat good naturedly grumpy (xtratufs are imperative with my lifestyle, and not cheap), and we headed home. It was a gorgeous blue sky day, but a little choppy on the water and we weathered two to three foot seas crossing Stephen's Passage. We stopped about 10 times along the way when the gas hose popped out of its socket on the gas tank. By the time we got to South Island it was almost noon and I'd had enough. Melissa graciously agreed to come home with me; we stopped at Dru's boat to pick up a few beers and Melissa's cell phone so the guys could call us when they got home and then took off. Thankfully, the seas calmed so we returned in only a light chop. Melissa drove the boat like a pro from Pt. Arden all the way into the harbor.

After unloading our gear into my garage, I gratefully took a shower, then talked Melissa into heading back to the boat to haul the cooler up the ramp. The huge white cooler was packed with fish and ice and weighed a ton, but I didn't want to make the guys haul it up for us. I was feeling guilty that my gender had largely prevented me from pulling my share of the fishing—I have what you might consider well-developed arm muscles for a girl, and yet still I could not cast the net far enough to be effective. Plus, the tide was dropping so the longer we let it go the steeper the ramp would be and the harder it would be to move. Melissa and I got a cart and manhandled the cooler inside (with the help of a generous boat neighbor) then pushed it down the dock toward the ramp. Though it was farther away, we chose the second ramp because it's longer and therefore less steep (one end is fixed on shore and the other rises and falls with the dock and the tide). Much to my surprise, we managed to push it up easily enough, then left it at the top for the boys to take (we didn't have a vehicle large enough to transport it).

Our work done for the moment, Melissa and I headed home and had lunch outside in the glorious sunshine. An hour or so later the boys called from my boat, wondering where the cooler was. We met up with them at Glenn's house some time later to process. This turned out to be a much easier task than in years past, as I was the only one who vacuum packed the catch. Dru and Glenn wanted to smoke all their fish right away so didn't bother to pack it. I filleted a couple of fish, then went inside with a borrowed vacuum packer and worked with Melissa for a while vacuum packing. In two hours we were done, all my fish in neat fillets or portion-sized bags. I was grateful it was over, and am delighted at all the beautiful red sockeyes in my freezer.