

KETCHIKAN TO JUNEAU

AUGUST, 2020

By Dave Hustvedt

While reading *Paddling* magazine I found an intriguing quotation:
"There is value in doing things that the mind cautions against."

So I began to plan a long kayak trip in the Alaskan Inside Passage. The Pacific Northwest was familiar; I'd been on extended paddles in the area five times. My wife Lou Ann and I first kayaked in the east arm of Glacier Bay in 2011. Later my paddling in the area included the Beardslee Islands in the lower Glacier Bay, a circumnavigation of Annette Island (south of Ketchikan), a trip through the islands north of Tofino (on the west side of Vancouver Island in Canada), and a return trip to the upper east arm of Glacier Bay. [You can read about these in 19-2b, 20-2b, 24-2b, 26-2b, and 27-1b.]

It seemed like a 300 mile journey from Ketchikan north to Juneau would be the thing to do. The general outline of the trip was:

- Drive to Bellingham, Washington
- Ride the ferry to Ketchikan
- Paddle north to Wrangell, then to Petersburg to pick up food for the second half of the trip
- Paddle on to Juneau and ride the ferry back to Bellingham

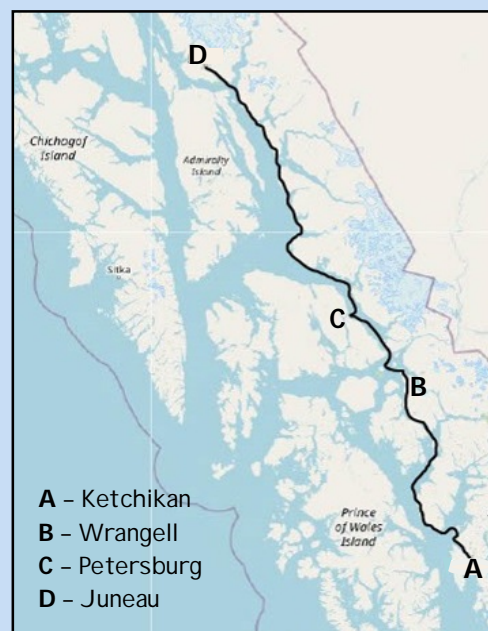
I bought detailed nautical maps and plotted a route for 20-mile days for a journey of roughly two weeks. Leaving from Bellingham in August of 2019. Unfortunately, the ferry crews went on strike and shut down the ferry system for most of that summer.

Undeterred, I rescheduled the trip for June of 2020 to take advantage of the longest daylight. I reconsidered the daily mileage, 20-mile days seemed aggressive, and planned a new itinerary of 10-mile days with stops again in Wrangell and Petersburg. The great virus pandemic forced the ferry system to shut down until August.

THE PADDLING PLAN, seven pages which included the following sections:

- Itinerary
- Lodging Information in Wrangell, Petersburg, and Juneau
- Ferry Reservations
- Estimated latitude and longitude of campsites
- Tide Schedules for Wrangell, Petersburg and Juneau, which I picked up at the Ketchikan Harbor Master's office
- Food List, for each day
- Equipment List and Location (PFD, day bag, hatches)
- Misc. Travel Notes

As it turned out the list of campsite locations was of limited value once I was on the route since the daily mileage was almost always more than ten miles; it averaged 17.





Loading on the seaplane dock at Wrangell

The trip took 18 days and 318 miles on the water, with overnight stops in Wrangell and Petersburg. It was rainy and cool almost every day. I paddled with someone recommended by Joy Farquhar, who was from the Seattle area and experienced in long trips. With the exception of Day 17, the trip was a panic-free succession of day paddles that went according to expectations.

MAPS: I assembled a set of nautical maps along the planned route. I cut up and laminated the maps showing important sections of the route; the most useful was a larger scale map that showed the entire route and was something I kept on my deck throughout the trip.

FOOD AND WATER: Mountain House dinners and breakfasts typically come packaged as 2-3 servings per package. To minimize trash and make the food more compact I repackaged them in single meal vacuum-packed packages. Lunches were planned to be tuna packages and tortillas. Thirty-two meal packages were prepared based on the trip plan. Fifteen of the breakfast and dinner packages were carried from Bellingham to Petersburg. The second set of 17 packages was mailed to Petersburg for General Delivery pickup.

Snacks for use while paddling were Welch's fruit chews, Clif Bars, and vacuum-packed peanuts. These were also divided into pre-Petersburg and post-Petersburg packages, which were mailed to General Delivery there.

My stove was a very efficient Jetboil Zip. I carried three 8-ounce butane canisters. However, even using the stove for breakfast, dinner, and coffee I only used 155 grams of the 230 grams of fuel in one container.

I carried a Katadyn water filter and a Steripen, as a backup, for water purification. Fresh water streams were common along the route. Strangely, the water even after filtration was a dark red color, probably leached from trees. The red color was evidently harmless since I drank it for almost three weeks without a problem.

SHELTER: My tent was a two-person self-supporting tent from Hilleberg (the Niak model.) The important features I have found for the Alaska environment are: waterproof, no mesh except at the entry, and a large vestibule for storing things you want dry, but not necessary inside the tent.

A Nemo inflatable sleeping pad was quite comfortable and compact. A good sleeping pad is so essential that I brought a second, smaller, backup pad. I also opted to bring a warmer sleeping bag than the temperatures might have suggested. The extra comfort at night is well worth the extra volume required to stow the bag in the boat.

Waterproof tarps are a necessity in Alaska. I carried an 8' by 8' tarp from Hyperlite made of a composite waterproof fabric and weighing 0.5 pounds. This came in handy for cooking and eating during the frequent rain. I used the matching ground cloth for the tarp to cover gear and protect it from the rain in camp. The additional and perhaps primary use for the tarp was to provide an alternative in case I had to camp someplace without enough room to set up the tent.

COMMUNICATION EQUIPMENT: Communication equipment was of two types: radios and satellite communicators. The radios were standard marine handheld units. They were used primarily for contacting the harbor masters when paddling into one of the three towns on the route. They also came in handy for contacting my paddling partner when we were separated a couple of times.

COMMUNICATION GEAR, CONTINUED:

I actually carried three different types of satellite communicators. The SPOT device was used to send daily position reports to a preset list of ten people who were interested in following my progress. It can also send an SOS that will activate a rescue to the GPS position sent by the SOS.

The second device was a ResQLink by Cobham ACR. I wore this device on my PFD in case I needed rescue on my kayak or in the water. The ResQLink sends out my GPS location and flashes a light when activated. The device has to be registered with NOAA every five years and periodically be tested and have its batteries replaced by Cobham.



Crossing the Stikine Outlet near Wrangell

The third device was a Garmin inReach Explorer, also carried with me in my PFD. The beauty of this device is that it can communicate in real time via email through a satellite. It also has a tracking and mapping capability and could be used to navigate. It also downloads local weather forecasts that I found to be relatively accurate. Finally, it has an SOS feature like the SPOT, but with the email feature it can allow real-time communication with rescuers. The only downside of the inReach is that its internal batteries have to be recharged from a USB connection. I carried rechargeable USB compatible batteries for this purpose.

Finally, I used a Garmin eTrex 20x handheld GPS for real time navigation. It was loaded with the nautical charts to give detailed information. I mainly used it to track mileage, speed, and to record the daily campsites. It is powered by a couple of AA batteries which lasted 3-4 days if I set the screen on-time to 30 seconds or so. I only needed to actually look at the map screen occasionally. I also carried an identical back-up unit in case something bad happened to the first unit. (It didn't, but you never know.)

BEARS: I like bears, but at a safe distance and definitely not in my tent. Anti-bear preparation included a bear spray canister clipped to my PFD, a stainless steel .357 Magnum revolver in one of my PFD pockets, and a 10mm semi-automatic pistol with bear load ammunition that I kept in my tent on shore. As it turned out I never saw a bear (unlike Glacier Bay where bears are common). A local guide in Juneau told me that residents of the inside passage have convinced the bears that the shoreline is not safe for bears. The first couple of days I hung my food from a tree. After it became evident that bear activity was minimal, I put all the food and cooking equipment in a duffel bag tied to the base of a tree away from the tents. I dropped a handful of mothballs into the bag and my kayak since I had read that this deters bears.

KAYAK EQUIPMENT: The boat for this trip was a new Delta 17. It is a bit faster than my older Delta 15.5GT but has the same internal volume. However, the 17 is too narrow for more than one of the black plastic bear-proof food containers; I elected to not take any bear-proof containers and use different anti-bear strategies: hanging or mothballs. I took the usual kayaking equipment: two sets of paddles, paddle float, pump, and sponge. A set of small wheels for towing the kayak onto the ferry and around town was essential but awkward to pack. I added small diameter lines on either side of the cockpit. These were fairly slack to permit grabbing them easily to assist in re-entering the kayak if it capsized.

I wore a dry suit every day with polyester long underwear inside. It was a comfortable combination that did not overheat but kept me warm on the water.

KAYAK EQUIPMENT, CONTINUED: Good gloves are essential to protect the hands from extended exposure to seawater. Unfortunately, none of the regular kayaking gloves really worked. The waterproof foam-insulated gloves wore out and leaked after a couple of days.

In Wrangell I found cotton-lined rubber fishing gloves that did not wear out, were very flexible and provided a good grip on the paddle. I bought five more pairs in Petersburg.

An NRS deck bag in front of the cockpit kept snacks, batteries, a first aid kit, and other things handy. A few other items such as the wheels and tarps and wet gear that did not fit in the kayak were carried in a duffel strapped to the back deck of the kayak: clumsy looking, but effective.



Debra Jo and Dave, in his new dry suit

ALMOST TO JUNEAU...

The weather for Day 17 was forecast to be rainy with 25 knot winds with waves to four feet. The previous paddling days had generally been rainy but relatively calm with waves less than two feet. The weather in the morning was actually calm with heavy fog. We navigated a six-mile crossing of the Snettisham opening by GPS with periods of essentially zero visibility. A pod of killer whales was hunting nearby. Shortly before reaching the end of the crossing the black and white tail of a diving whale broke the surface and disappeared two or three feet in front of my kayak. But the fun was just beginning.

As we reached the end of the crossing the fog began to clear and we headed out into the open water of Stephens Passage. It was then that the forecast wind came up from behind us driving four- or five-foot following waves.



Dave's new red kayak parked on the rocks at the bailout on Day 17

Turning around was not an option. The shore was nothing but big rocks with no beach. My paddling partner and I became separated. I had to brace a couple of times to keep from capsizing. At that point I headed to shore and managed to get my boat safely wedged on some rocks. Fortunately, the tide was going out so the kayak was not going to be carried away.

Wearing my dry suit, I was warm and comfortable even after a dunking as I got out of my kayak. My paddling partner was in a much worse condition. She had capsized, re-entered and made it to shore.

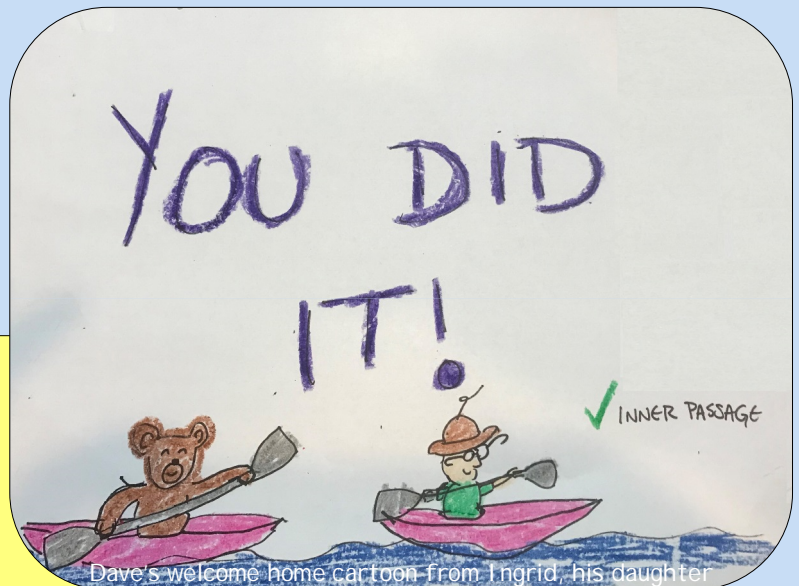
Unknown to me she had stopped wearing her wetsuit a few days into the trip. After some confused radio conversation with her, it was apparent that she was probably hypothermic. I hiked back the 300 yards to her and got her into a sheltered spot above tide line and helped her into dry clothes. After that I had to empty both kayaks and pull them up the rocks to tie them off above high tide.

I spent a fairly comfortable night in a rocky alcove instead of a tent. The next morning, Day 18, was calm with bright sun and no rain. I paddled back to my paddling partner's camp and found her on the shore loading her boat. Other than a damaged skeg and some minor dings her boat was seaworthy. We paddled 30 miles into Juneau harbor that day as if nothing had happened.

In retrospect we should have heeded the forecast of wind and waves and stayed in camp. However, weeks of benign weather and an urge to finish the trip led us to start out in what seemed to be just another foggy, rainy day. Rocky dangerous shores led to our continuing on in rapidly developing adverse conditions.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This was not an RMSKC trip; RMSKC believes that paddling with at least three when at sea is a prudent practice.

But we also recognize the truth in our former instructor, BCU 4-star Brian Curtiss's words, "The way to develop as a paddler is to try things you haven't done yet."



Dave's welcome home cartoon from Ingrid, his daughter

FOR YOUR ENTERTAINMENT



We recently took a poll:
99% of people were annoyed
when their tent fell down

FOR YOUR INFORMATION



This trailer is available for rent
to members. Contact Clark for particulars.