

MISCELLANEOUS TIDBITS

FROM

GLACIER BAY

By Sue Hughes

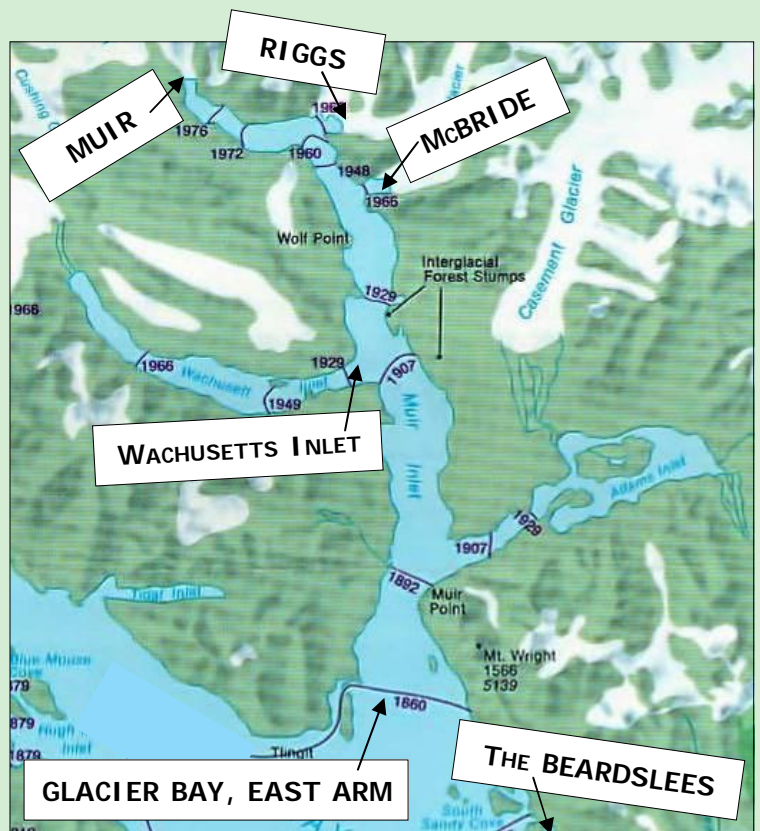
Paddling in Alaska had never been in my plans, but when an opportunity came up this August I remembered the expeditions RMSKC members had written about and off I went with a good friend and my daughter.

Our eight-day commercial trip was supposed to have delivered us by tour boat to the point where the East Arm [labeled "Muir Inlet" on this map] and the West Arm spit from the lower part of Glacier Bay. It was unclear why, but it turned out that we paddled all the way north through the Beardslee Islands and then spent just a couple of days by the glaciers in the upper reaches of the East Arm.

That was the first of the trip's many issues, but the bottom line was I had a good time and learned lots and lots about myself and about paddling in this part of the 49th state.

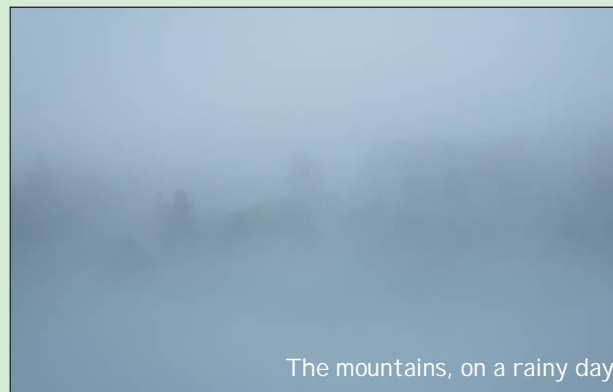
My first major realization was about the boats that guide companies use: I'd always said that I would not take a commercial trip because I didn't want to motor around in a tandem. It turns out that is not the only problem. I still don't like doubles, but it's almost impossible to keep up with them if you're in a single, and if it's a wide, rocker-less heavy single it's not enough fun to bother. There are places where going with a commercial operation might be preferable to fielding your own expedition, but I will think hard about the kayaks a business provides before I paddle with another tour.

I also learned something about my own paddling style. I've done miles and miles a day on Lake Powell and I'm a pretty strong paddler, but what I like best is poking around. I've laughed that there's not much difference between one red side canyon at Lake Powell and the next, but I still want to see them all. That's what I assumed we'd do in Glacier Bay: have enough time to stop and check each cove and stream that we came across. Because so many miles were added before we even got to the East Arm, most days were spent paddling from Point A directly to Point B. For me that's even less fun than steaming around in a double.

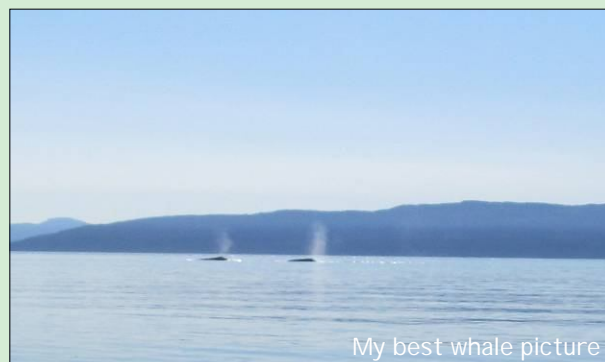


Here are some other, more general, things I learned about kayaking and camping in southeast Alaska. Some of them may be of use to you if you are thinking of going:

- It might **RAIN**. Truly, it might rain really, really hard, so hard you can't see the mountains or the wildlife at all. It might rain that hard for days and days. Actually it could easily rain every single day of your trip. It didn't happen to us, but the possibility would definitely make me think twice before I went again.



- The **PHOTOS** you have seen won't be what you will be able to take or even what you will see. It took me some expectation-adjusting to realize that "You will see whales" meant that you'll see whale spouts and maybe a back or, if you're lucky, flukes coming up and going down. Silly me, it hadn't occurred to me that the images I was expecting were captured on a rare sunny day, by a photographer with a fabulous camera and an expensive long-distance lens, who'd been out looking for weeks and weeks...and then just got lucky. You probably won't get a glimpse of a mother otter hugging her baby on her stomach, either.



- Poor John Muir, I don't know how he did it. Thankfully, there is a lot of **CLOTHING** available today that can make your trip much more comfortable. This is one of many sites for help comparing waterproof fabrics: http://www.shopdenali.com/gg_wbbrands2.aspx. Here are some specifics:
 - **HATS:** A goretex wide-brimmed hat makes it easier to see and hear than a hood. Kristy and Rich Webbers have nice ones they got from REI. I loved the fleece skull cap I wore under my hat when it was cold.
 - **GLOVES:** In my opinion, the jury is still out on pogies vs. gloves. Dave Hustvedt swears by his NRS titanium gloves but they're expensive and hard to get on when your hands are wet, and they don't last long. Neoprene gloves mean your hands are prunes after a couple hours of paddling. Pogies are cumbersome and not as warm as I was led to believe.
 - **BOOTS:** High-top boots are the only way to go. I thought my Chota mukluks had much better arch support and treads than the Xtra Tufs that everyone in Alaska favors.

- Specifics about **CLOTHING**, continued:
 - **UPPER BODY:** I put on my light-weight synthetic down sweater (nano-puff) the minute I stopped paddling. A fleece vest is a god-send, as are fleece quarter-zip shirts.
 - **LOWER BODY:** Fleece pants and then heavy-duty goretex rain pants with a gusset in the crotch so they move easily in all directions were perfect.

Here's a list of **PERSONAL ITEMS**, some a little quirky, that made me happy:

- I took my own **PADDLE** and my own **PFD** because it was worth the extra baggage charges to have a light-weight paddle and a pfd that fit.
- I prepared deck-sized, laminated **CHARTS** of the area we were paddling in, even though we were on a guided trip; I also took my deck compass. For me, being able to look at the chart and know where we were going and the names of the places we were paddling past was the best part of the trip; I am so glad I took them.
- I made **LABELS** for every dry bag. With a lousy short-term memory but a burning desire to have all my things easy to locate, I need labels. I used pieces of the white tyvek-like book mailers from Amazon.com and an indelible marker. What a life-saver they were. Mine were pretty specific and I got teased, but I relied on them all the time.
- **BANDANAS**...because Kleenex do not work in the rain.
- **EYESHADES**...because it's hard to go to sleep when it's still sunny at 10:00.
- A **THERMOS** to carry hot tea...because the ocean is 40° and cold water to drink isn't the answer.
- A few **PRUNES** in the morning and an **I BUPROFEN PM** at night cured almost everything.
- My blue plastic **IKEA SHOPPING BAG** was an ideal gear carrier; when I put it down stuff didn't get full of pebbles.
- Expensive brand name **ZIP-LOCK BAGGIES**, the kind with hard plastic sliders, were a great purchase. They shut easily and reliably, even when my hands were cold or wet.
- Black **GARBAGE BAGS** meant I could get my wet gear, and all of it was wet, home without soaking everything else in my duffle.



For you desert paddlers, some bits about **CAMPING IN REAL RAIN** in the Land of the Midnight Sun:

- Keep a pair of dry socks in your sleeping bag and never take them out.
- Actually, keep a whole set of clothes that is used only in the tent so you'll always have something dry to sleep in, even if it means putting on wet gear in the morning.
- Sadly, goretex is only good up to a point. A rubber rain jacket is the only thing that will totally keep you dry if it's pouring day after day but, of course, you'll drown in your perspiration.
- Put a tarp up over your tent spot before you set up the tent—everything will stay much drier. Then you'll need another tarp for cooking under, won't you?
- Get out your flashlight before you go to bed, even if it's going to be light for hours; it won't be easy to find later in the dark when you really need it.

Enough about the minutia, what about the trip itself? Although the paddling days were too long, the Beardslees, in the southern part of Glacier Bay, were an interesting maze and there was lots of wildlife. I do wish we had been able to take more time to work on navigating among all the islands; I was never sure where on the chart we were which was frustrating.

When it was clear, the peaks of the Fairweather Range to the west of the lower bay were stunning. It wasn't windy and the water was sheltered so we only had significant seas for a couple of hours on two different days. The weather was mostly sunny, and warm enough to want shorts during a few of the lunch breaks.



High tide on the shores of the lagoon in front of McBride Glacier, which is marked with an arrow.

The very best part of the trip was camping two nights on the shores of the lagoon in front of McBride Glacier and then paddling there among the icebergs with seals and flocks of screaming black-footed kittiwakes on the cliffs.

The upper East Arm has less vegetation because it has only been out from under glacier ice for about a hundred years, but the tundra-like landscape was lovely, too. The variety of rocks made me wish I'd studied more geology.



Low tide on McBride Lagoon



Riggs Glacier, farther up the East Arm from McBride Glacier

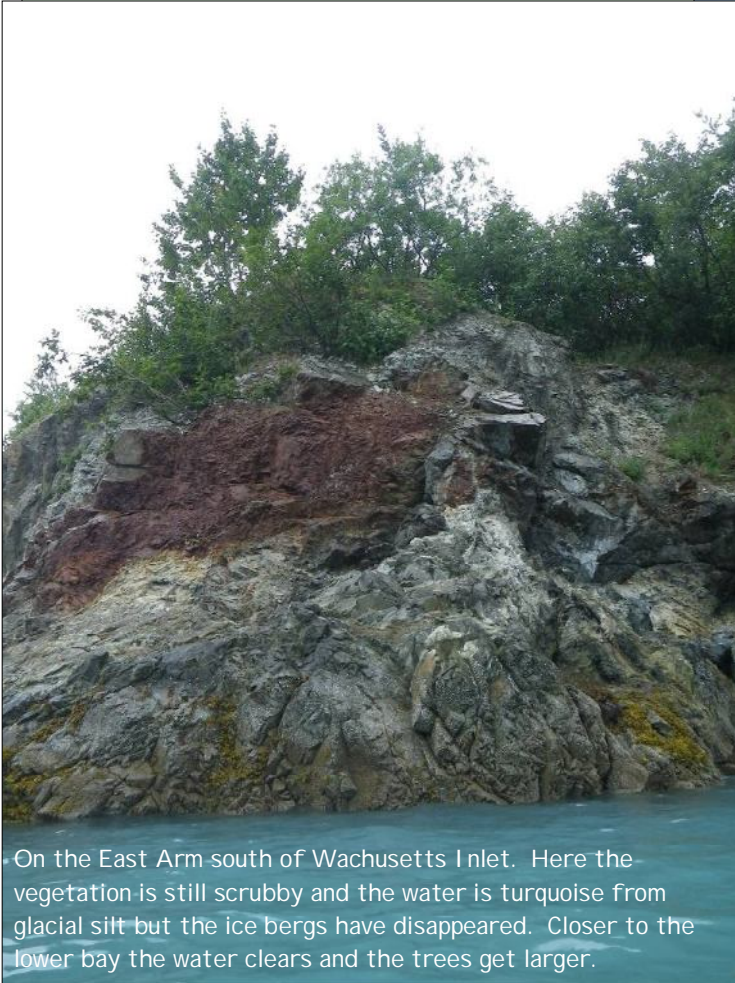
Later that day several of us went farther up Muir Inlet to check out Riggs Glacier. It has receded so much in the last few years that it is no longer a tidewater glacier.

I wish we'd had time to go all the way to up the far arm to Muir Glacier, but the next morning we needed to head back down the west side of the East Arm to catch the boat which would tour us around the West Arm and then drop us at our lodge in Bartlett Cove.

Most of the last two days back to the pick-up point were rainy and bleak, with the only mosquitoes of the trip and a night of a drenching downpour. Thank goodness everything got soaked the last days of the trip instead of the first!



Crossing the mouth of Wachussetts Inlet



On the East Arm south of Wachussetts Inlet. Here the vegetation is still scrubby and the water is turquoise from glacial silt but the ice bergs have disappeared. Closer to the lower bay the water clears and the trees get larger.



The author in McBride Lagoon

Thank goodness, also, for the Rocky Mountain Sea Kayak Club. I would not have gone on this tour if I hadn't read the accounts of the self-supported trips to Glacier Bay that Dave and Lou Ann Hustvedt made, with Jud Hurd and Al Lovas the second year. [Check issues 19-2b and 20-2b of *The Mountain Paddler* on the RMSKC website.]

And I would have been miserable without all the help friends and RMSKC members gave me before I left: I learned about tyvek labels from Brian Curtiss and taking a thermos to fill the night before from Jay Gingrich. Countless others discussed cold weather and rainy weather gear with me and many sent me off with their charts, gloves, pogies, hats, mosquito nets, paddle pants, and even a storm cag. Thank you, everyone.



Darling Daughter rocking her plastic sprayskirt while the weather was still warm