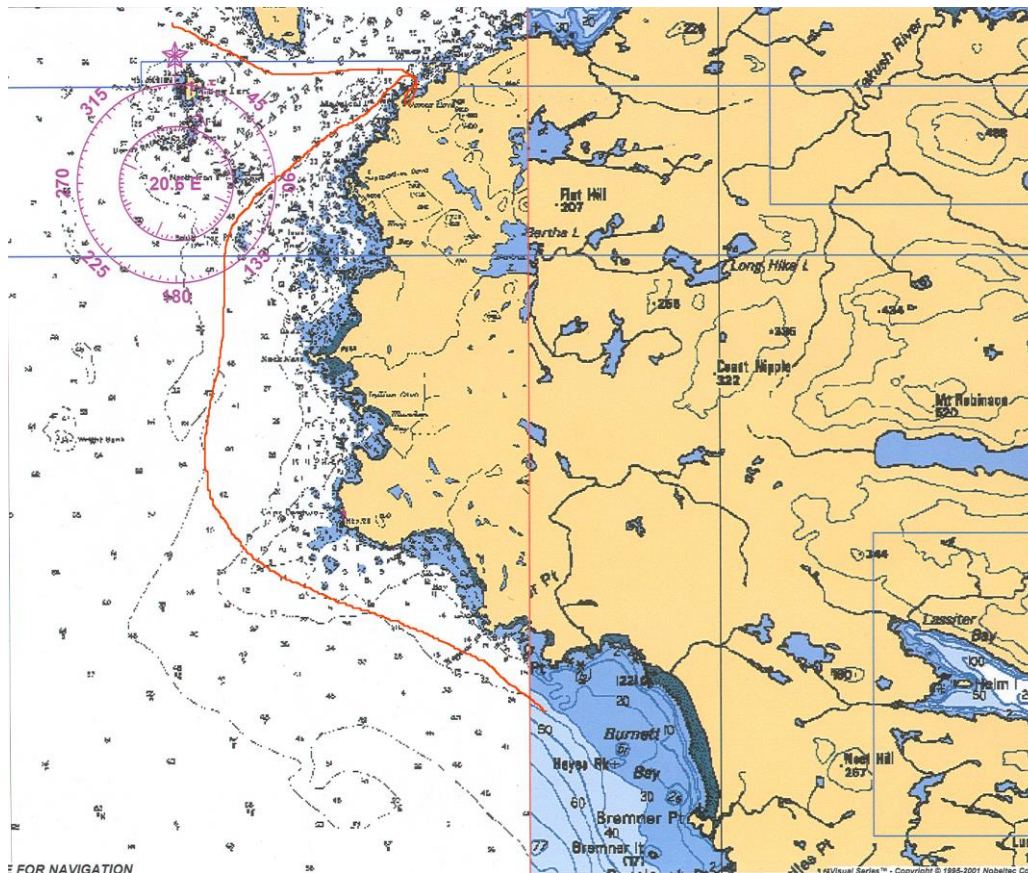


# Cape Caution

## IV CAPE CAUTION.



In getting under way, we departed Oak Harbor, Washington,



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early in May of 1980, planning to visit friends residing on a Canadian Island in the Straits of Georgia, and other friends residing on the mainland further north, proceeding into Desolation Sound, then through a succession of channels; Homfray, Pryce and Calm Channels, through Gillard Pass and Dent Rapids into Cordero, Chancellor and Wellbore Channels. This passage making, beginning with Homfray Channel, represented new territory to us. We followed this course in order to remain in protected waters as much as possible, while availing ourselves of the scenic wonders to be found in the fjord-like channels.

During the whole forthcoming Alaska journey, it was expected we would be exposed to the ocean, roughly estimating, for the period of one day's cruising, at two different locales, at Cape Caution, and at Dixon Entrance.

One might observe 'caution' wherever he ventures, whether looking **both** ways before crossing the street, by dead-bolting his body and material wealth, by not ingesting packaged and processed foods; or in taking note of nature's disposition before venturing out into the world.

As mariner, one might also construe the labelling of an extension of land that juts into the sea, as 'CAPE', sufficient cause to wonder at its particular hazard. To the readers of sea-stories, the 'big three' appear as beacons within these narratives; Cape of Good Hope, Cape Leeuwin, and the o'erfabled Cape Horn, each harboring its own special significance; all are attached to continental shores, needing to be cleared if one is to continue onward in his passagemaking.

In the olden times Cape Horn stood storied as an awesome place for sailing vessels, and stands today as symbol of the ultimate encounter between man-ship and sea. Never predictable, and when engulfed in storm, the Horn is considered amongst the most formidable of nautical foes.

Symbol; all manner of men have assaulted 'her' for all manner of reasons; the survivors, some humbled and content in their accomplishment, wondering still more upon themselves and 'life' itself; others, strutting about, publicizing themselves as conquerors of the mighty, no matter how shabby their performance. And some who dream, drawing inferences from these others, assessing the significance of the place, of the symbol, and of the men; Yes!, all manner of men. And perhaps the most famous of the single-handers, Joshua Slocum, chose

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Magellan over the Horn (no less of a challenge, it should be mentioned; and perhaps far more to write about).

There are many Capes of course, not one of which we had ever encountered. That our first, of all the ominous sounding names of continental encroachments upon the sea should be named 'Cape Caution', appeared perhaps as admonition, as trial, possessing for us, its own symbolic significance. Doubtlessly, one might embellish the literal significance of CAUTION to arouse fears not commensurate with the realities. We, of unbridled imaginations, are quite easily able to astound ourselves with the rustlings of a mouse.

Most likely, when the storm rages, Cape Caution, like any other Cape, looms as dire peril to the mariner who would unwisely wear passage under 'canvas'. For should one fail to beat past her rock-studded shoals to the North, they would endure a frothing lee shore sufficient to summon any ship to its doom.

If we were to attain to Alaska in Atavist, Cape Caution must pass astern of us. We would ask you to suppress your natural propensity towards mirthfulness, and your general derisiveness, and perhaps your embarrassment as well, at our expense, as this brief tale is unveiled.

We had departed Forward Harbor on a dismally gray, cold morning, our nominal destination twenty-odd miles distant, somewhere within the environs of Havannah Channel. We cruised pleasantly along in Sunderland Channel, with a southeast breeze on our stern, with rain-bows off our starboard bow. As we entered Johnstone Straits, sighting a 'school' of killer whales to port, the wind began to fade into a seeming calm as we passed through smoothing waters. But very soon thereafter, approximately seven or so nautical miles from the entrance to Havannah Channel, a wind arose abruptly from the northwest, blowing down Johnstone, directly upon our 'nose' quickly attaining a steady twenty-five knots. The water began to assume its usual conformation under such persuasion, creating a short steep chop through which Atavist and crew were obliged to pound and hobby horse; Alas!, our first bittersweet kiss from Johnstone nearly caused us to gag; the situation developed into one of those where one elects to 'slug it out' for another hour or longer or turn tail to the nearest shelter. These conditions held, without mitigating; or without worsening beyond something we felt we could not endure. At times, it seemed a moment by moment decision, yet each moment persuaded the next. As we pounded into this bucking spray-ridden contest, our mettle wavered, but persevered, thereby gaining for us our objective for the day. It has

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been conjectured, 'forewarned, forearmed'. We had tasted a piece of the action wondering what lay in store for us. And little did we suspect or expect the blast we received the next day as we turned westward in Tribune Channel as Atavist was pummeled on the nose with an excess of thirty knot winds, forcing her helmsman to turn tail, seeking shelter.

Four days later, we departed Tracey Harbor traversing Wells Passage, this time into Queen Charlotte Straits. As we progressed up these Straits, hoping to reach Skull Cove, some thirty-five nautical miles distant, a wind from the northwest greeted us once again, slowly increasing in velocity. While the day eventually became clear and sunny, the winded air blowing across these cold waters produced an uncomfortable chattering chill at the helm. (I was one who did not wish to 'fart around' with a dodger, preferring unobstructed vision and complete freedom of movement). We were now beginning to feel the ocean swell, in addition to the choppy waters.

As we entered Richardson Channel, the water seemed to become more massive and confused, most likely influenced by a narrowing flow in the current. The northwest wind, from dead ahead, had also increased in velocity exceeding twenty knots, construing the combined conditions of wind, swell, chop and current, plus the chilled atmosphere, as more than challenge to our mettle; it was a long way to Skull Cove in very unfamiliar waters. Thus we yielded somewhere between Jeanette Islands and Ghost Island (spooky place no?, Ghost Island and Skull Cove), to seek shelter in Marsh Bay which lay some two to three miles astern. After lunching there, again we attempted to confront the wind and water, finding conditions mostly unchanged, without and within, yielding more readily this second time, to await a more favorable hour.

On the following, another foggy, overcast day, we entered Richardson Channel, heading, once again, for Skull Cove. The wind had abated. We were therefore spared choppy waters; however, we were greeted with the ocean swells, which were spaced far enough apart to not cause anything more exciting than a mild roller coaster ride, discounting, of course, the occasional frightening wave of a larger magnitude. These wave conditions prevailed with only a slight increase in size as we approached the Southgate Group, where the sea was breaking on all the jutting rocks in the area. However, we soon cleared seaward of Tinson Islands, navigating the landward side of the Southgates and, sequentially, all the other islands and rocks in



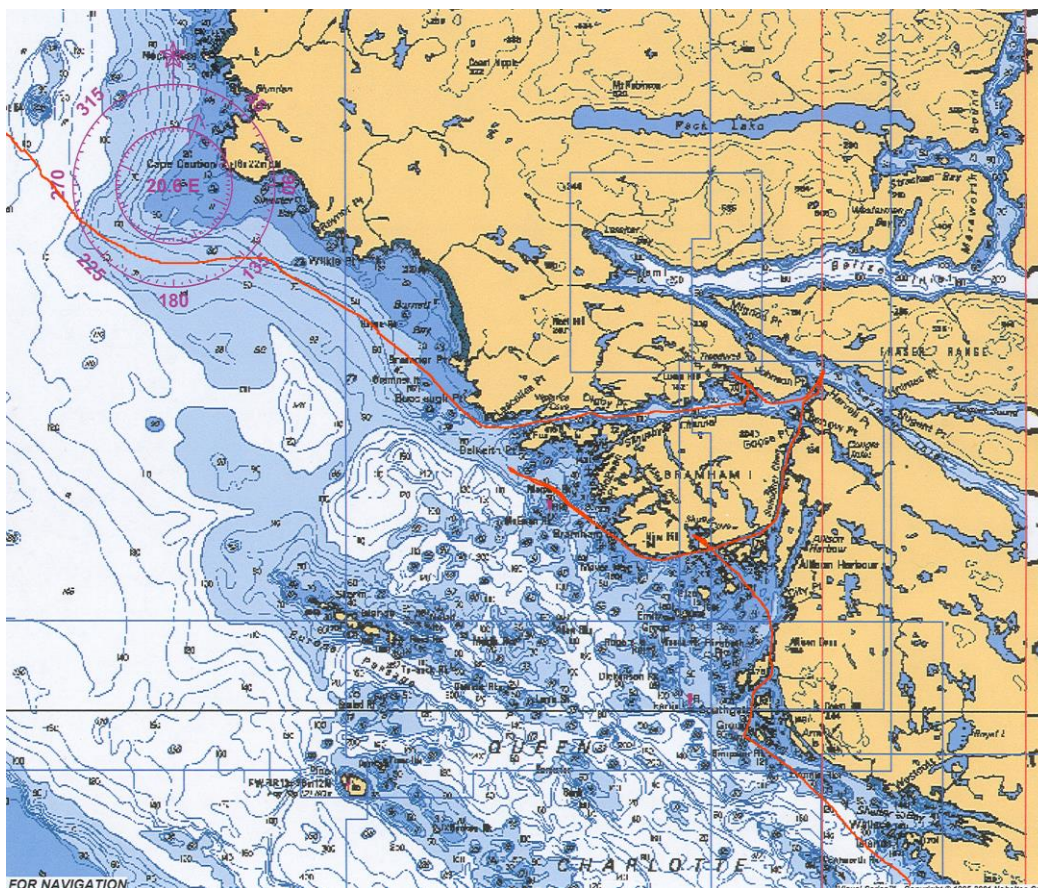
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the vicinity of Allison Harbor, to proceed rather comfortably into Skull Cove.

The next day proposed to contain our assault upon Cape Caution. We had tasted some nasty chop, some moderate swells; we had both yielded and persevered, our mettle, appearing to be a sometime thing. Still, in all, we had advanced beyond the wiles of a millpond; we had acquired, without accounting it in some measure of ergs, watts, roentgens, knots, Beauforts or dollars, some fiber to our nerves, possibly a vital requirement in undertaking the passage of a Cape or any endeavor that would find one thrown about in a sustained continuum wearing away at one's stamina, one's resolves, one's reserves and one's erstwhile fiber.

Surely, on a calm day, and such days do exist, one might find the sea a millpond. But who could wait?

With the barometer rising, we departed Skull Cove, this next day, once again overcast, yet without wind. Soon we began to feel the swell, and when clear of the lee of Mayor Island, the swell mounted, the mild roller-coaster ride of the previous day becoming a more sensational rising and falling, as shoalings more directly exposed to these ocean swells created steeper waves, which we had





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estimated at eight feet, this height determined by what we could not see while in the troughs. Uncomfortably, and in doubt, we pressed on, passing McEwan rock. In approaching Bremner Islet, the swells suddenly grew closer together, seemingly steeper and taller, with curling crests, throwing Atavist violently about - "Holy Shit!!, Lemme Outta Here!!". Scared-you-know-whatless, we turned tail...er...I turned tail, tucking it between my legs - only to ride those swooshing surfy, lumpy miles, returning to Skull Cove, our mettle...er...my mettle lying about in a shambles. Actually the first mate was nearly 'out of it' in the throes of incipient *mal de mer*, not having taken a Bonine soon enough. This was the utter low point in our whole sojourn, we thus believing Alaska was taking on the appearance of a fairy tale, a fantasy-ridden joke Fate had perpetrated on us. Hah, but then, what did we know of Fate?

Yet, in hindsight, what we had endured, we had, in fact, endured; there was no fantasy in that; there was no mistaking its reality. Aside from riding 'bronco' we were really no worse for



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the wear; even our underwear maintained its pristine condition.

We then explored the channels thereabouts, even passing through Nakwakto Rapids returning therethrough to anchor in Treadwell Bay, planning, in our next 'assault' upon the Cape, to go by way of Slingsby Channel. We needed to transit Slingsby at, or near, 'slack water' to avoid the breaking water as the tide ebbed, and to avoid travelling against a flooding current.

We rose early on the following morning to be prepared for the slack before flood. Again it appeared foggy and overcast, again without wind, and the barometer still rising. As we were leaving Treadwell, we encountered a Canadian Fisheries boat waiting to pass through Nakwakto Rapids, as the ebb eased. We spoke this



vessel, Ursa Major, her Captain reassuring us that ours was a good sea boat. Even though the swells were moderate, he assured us there was no danger, informing us the fishing fleet was leaving Port Hardy that very morning, heading North. The weather forecast had predicted Northwest winds for the following day. By all the signs, it did, indeed, seem this very day would be our best opportunity to proceed. Fortified by this genial soul, thus assured,

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we parted company of Ursa Major to head out Slingsby Channel, expecting to arrive near 'slack water'. When we reached the Outer Narrows, we realized it was not slack, for we had begun to accelerate towards the sea. Oddly enough, the sea was considerably flattened at this place into a low 'roily-boily' whirlpooly swell. I decreased the throttle to idle, sufficient to maintain steerage; still we galloped with the ebbing current, as a mere chip of bark, rushing rapidly over hill and dale towards the sea. If ever we needed to turn back, no possibility existed, so fast did we rise and fall over the suppressed swells, until near Lascelles Point, where they became more peaked, similar to those we had experienced the day before. However, we traveled so rapidly past this point we did not have any time to contemplate any options, whereupon, we were able, suddenly, to observe the state of the water to our starboard. To starboard, beyond the effect of this current, the sea appeared less steep; in fact, it seemed reasonably navigable. Indeed, as soon as we gained the starboard course, the ride became more comfortable and almost regular. Now all seemed possible. In hindsight, we reasoned that, if we had just persisted a while longer on the previous day, we would have passed through, what we had assumed, was the effect of an ebbing Slingsby Channel, which we had deduced as the cause of the steeper curling sea we had encountered in approaching Bremner Islet.

On this second assault, we passed on the land side of the Islet, enjoying a very brief respite from the, now, less than troublesome swells. As time passed, the day brightened, the swells remaining quite regular until we passed over the shoaling extension of Cape Caution, approximately a mile and a half from its shore. The swells did not increase, but became very confused, tossing Atavist about considerably, but as we made passage, we soon began taking the swells more on the beam, which created a more regular, yet most uncomfortable ride. We oft intoned to ourselves "Its not dangerous". The first mate had taken the Bonine in ample time to glide through the whole gambol in a somewhat elevated mood, dispensing sundry confidence-building comments.

We headed towards Egg Island, giving Iron Rocks a wide berth to their seaward side. It was a thrilling sight, observing from the seaward side, the long sloping mounds as they rose to form waves that would break upon these hardy rocks. Yes!, our very first experience of its kind, translucent blue-green waves turning into white froth and foam as they rose, cascaded and collapsed upon these rocks, the inevitable shore that would finally impede their flow through time and space.



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Yes!, we had passed Cape Caution in a springtime mood, under the influence of northwesterlies, yet our passage might have been considered opportune, or well-timed, despite all our anxieties. For days, on either side of this windless passage (there's that question about sails again), the Cape and its environs had been under the influence of these northwesterlies, creating a moderate swell of a considerably greater magnitude.

A few days later, we experienced a taste of these northwesterlies as we made way from the north coast of Calvert Island through Hakai Pass in twenty-five knot winds, a most exhilarating ride as the waves rose sharply, composed of a chop atop a swell. With the jib alone we heeled some twenty-five to thirty degrees presenting our beam to these buggers which lifted us abruptly, falling out from under us abruptly. One might conjecture we had acquired some sea nerve rather quickly. It was indeed a stimulating ride under sail for some three or four miles until we gained the lee of some islands which considerably reduced the effect of the sea. Perhaps this short junket had contained far more danger than anything we had encountered until then. But, be advised, we were anything but nonchalant during this short passage; there was no turning back; we could have proceeded down-wind, perhaps taking the water over our transom; it became a matter of hanging-on until we gained the lee of the islands.

How our attitude had changed. Perhaps we had grown carelessly overconfident with a Cape behind us - only Perhaps!