

## Robson Bight, 1998



The inland waters at the north end of Vancouver Island are famous for their resident Orca pods. For everyone who's starting out kayaking in the northwest US (and western Canada), this is the Disney World of Kayaking. Getting away from towns and houses is just a few paddle strokes and the waters are dappled with hundreds of islands small and large. Here are many places relatively protected from wind and wave.

At a place called Robson Bight, just below the “J” in Johnstone on the map above, the Orca are given their own space. Where the water flows from northern mountains the clean rounded stones deposited under the waters of the bight

are a favorite place for Orca to rub and clean themselves on the bottom.

Even Kayakers are not allowed into the whale's space at Robson Bight. The space is restricted a half-mile out from the shoreline to ALL boat traffic. Officers of the Canadian Fisheries department patrol that space zealously.

But a square mile of space on Johnstone Strait is surrounded by hundreds of square miles of not-so-restricted space. Whale watcher tours venture down the strait from Port McNeil and Port Hardy, first nation fishing vessels work the waters nearby for salmon, competing with whales and sport fishermen. Small water taxis zip hither and yon to support logging camps far up the long fjords; barges towed by tugs haul needed materials to communities not served by roads, and giant cruise ships bully their way through day and night heading up or down the inland passage to Alaska.

Our nearly disastrous maiden paddle in Desolation Sound the previous year tempered our enthusiasm with a bit of caution. All winter we gathered information, acquiring the excellent "Kayak Routes of the Pacific Northwest", by Peter McGee, and reading any article that mentioned the area in kayaking magazines.

We bought Canadian Hydrographic Services (CHS) charts of the area as well as area tide guides. We went out on a local lake and practiced rescues. I took an advanced paddling course and kayak repair course from Lee Moyer when his Pacific Water Sports shop was open near Sea-tac airport.

As our vacation approached, I wrote off to the First nations Mamalelaqala Band in Campbell river for permissions to visit

Village Island and camp on Compton Island, prime spots near Robson Bight.

We lived in Olympia, Washington and preferred to ferry to Vancouver, BC through Port Angeles and Victoria. We drove up early, spent the night and easily caught the morning's Red Ball Ferry to Victoria in the morning.

The Red Ball ferry is enclosed, rather than having the car decks open. At Port Angeles you drive on (and off) through doors at the end of the boat. In Victoria you enter and exit through doors on the side of the boat. The doors are closed during transit, but everyone goes up to passenger seating and decktop views during the trip.

Lucky enough to have loaded early, I sat in the car, kayaks jutting out overhead and watched Victoria Harbor slide past through a narrow vertical slit between the doors. A car slid past, then a house, a boat, some pilings, more cars, more boats, more pilings, sections of a building. The boat slowed as it approached landing, then stopped and the huge doors rolled back disclosing the usual ferry view... a parking lot full of vehicles waiting to go the other way.

We were through customs with a few quick questions and on our way. (Idyllic times, before 9-11-2001.) Near the ferry the streets are pedestrian friendly and you need to be careful not to run over a horse or bicycle-drawn carriage or any of the thousand tourists thronging the waterfront on gorgeous sunny days.

I love Victoria. I would choose to live there before any other city I know. Luckily I don't have to live in a city, I get to drive through them. We turned left from the Terminal and after

a few short, slow blocks around the Empress Hotel and the Royal Museum, then left at the light onto Douglas street and you're on the Island Highway. Just watch the signs so you don't veer off toward Sydney and you're on your way north.

The Island Highway is multi-lane and high speed from Victoria to Campbell River. It's new so there isn't much around it. If you've time, drop in on any of the communities along the coast, they're each treasures to enjoy, as are any of the residents we've ever met.

Beyond Campbell River the highway narrows to a single lane each way but traffic thins to almost nothing and travel is swift. With leisurely lunch and rest stops en-route, Telegraph cove, near Port McNeil is only a few hours away.

Telegraph Cove is a resort. The cove is small and crowded with docks and boats. A guide briefed a kayak tour group for launch as we watched. We spoke with a strong looking 70 year old couple with lots of paddling experience. They met a group of friends at Kaicache Creek for 15 years. After they left we set about our own launch.

I paid for long-term parking and boat launching at the general store next to the ramp, we parked up in the lot and put our boats onto our new boat-carts then loaded our gear into the boats. The carts were easy to trundle down to the launch ramp, then Connie floated around with the kayaks while I took the carts back to the car.

When we turned southeast leaving Telegraph Cove a stiff 25 knot wind hit us and began to stir up a lot of wave action. We landed on an exposed rock to check the water ahead and decided to hole up on a nearby beach for awhile. A double

kayak was already on the small pebble beach and with the water on the rise, the beach was shrinking.



*Connie leaving telegraph cove*

The other folks on the beach were on a first-time kayak ride in a rental from a different nearby resort. After an hour on the beach they decided to head back.

A double kayak disappeared through the slot in our little refuge spot and after a few moments it slipped back in to take refuge in the wind shadow of the small island across the from us, just sitting in their boat. Some single kayaks did the same thing a bit later. Our beach grew smaller and smaller as the leeward respites in our area filled up.



*Waiting out the wind*

The wind eventually diminished enough that two the kayakers going through the slot didn't come back, so we re-launched our trek. The surface wasn't calm, but wasn't difficult paddling. There were lots of kayakers out. Several singles came by and angled into the wind shadow of the Blinkhorn peninsula, which juts into Johnstone strait near Telegraph Cove. A gorgeous green double kayak soared by at high speed, both paddlers working in synchrony made their big boat almost fly. They disappeared along the shoreline on the northern side of the peninsula while we followed another couple toward the outside. We had to round it to get to Kaikache Creek our intended campsite.

We were too close to the peninsula. The waves recoiling off the land made a messy piece of water. I was more confident after my recent class and Connie handled the mess with aplomb. She said she was encouraged by my calm and ability to stay close. The waves rocked and slapped at us for a few

moments then we were past and into clearer water. We continued to follow the couple ahead of us until they pulled up on a small beach.

We stopped to ask if they knew anything more about Kaicache Creek and while we talked a flotilla of kayakers came past.

“Just follow them.” Our momentary acquaintance said.

We pulled into the traffic just as the same older couple we had talked to earlier came paddling by. They spent a moment telling us how the wind had pushed them back onto the leeward shore of the Blinkhorn Peninsula. Then we watched as they paddled away from us. Connie expressed disappointment that she wasn't able to go as fast and I marked it as something we'd have to investigate further.

Kaicache Creek is a large camping area. With all the kayaks that had come past us we feared all the sites would be gone, but when we arrived there seemed to be fewer people camping than we'd seen.

The beach was solely rounded rocks, probably similar to Robson Bight. Smoke from a couple of fires drifted upward but there seemed to be room for more. The rocky beach required some care, but we found a site quickly near another camp that had a fire going. After unloading and setting up the tent we brought the boats up off the beach and introduced ourselves to the couple next door.



*Kaichache landing*

They were the ones who flew past us in their big green double earlier. They were teachers from the Vancouver area, Don and Shelley, and were paddling a Current Designs Libra XT.

Their fire was to dry their clothing and gear. When they landed they were looking the wrong way when a huge cruise ship wake hit them, minutes after the ship had passed.

They struggled to keep the kayak onshore when water partially filled their hatches, then a second large wave had totally swamped their boat. Onlookers rushed from other camps to help, but it took six people to bring the boat up far enough to dump some water from its hatches and hold it ashore while the wake set passed. A heck of a way to begin their vacation but they were laughing about it by this time and drying out as best they could.

Around nine o'clock the next morning whale watching boats gathered offshore and a number of kayakers launched

into the foggy overcast too. Connie and I launched a little after the others and drifted just outside the kelp beds, about fifty feet off shore.

Explosive blows of breath built in volume from down the strait and we saw some spouts farther out as the pod of orcas moved through toward the northwest.

Our heads snapped around as we heard a blow close to the south. A group of three whales trailed the pod closer to the shoreline. They came at us directly then dove just before they hit us.

“Damn that’s big!”, I remember thinking, and ...” ...no KNOWN incidents of Orcas attacking kayaks... ...no KNOWN incidents...” nervously recycling through my head.



*Orca approaching*

The pod continued northwest trailed by kayakers and whale watching boats at a respectful distance. A half mile northwest one orca breached, launching itself high into the air and falling back with a mighty splash.

The sun emerged later in the afternoon, drying us all a bit. Connie was out fishing from her kayak when whales came past again and a few passed fairly close to her as I watched from the shore.

The rest of the day was sunny, but forecasts for 20-30 knot winds kept us on the beach. We stayed at Kaicache another night deciding to try for a camp nearer Village Island the next day.

The next morning was foggy early. After two to three other groups had launched we decided to cross to the Hansen Island side of Blackney passage. We donned our newly acquired dry suits just in case. I had worn mine through the series of classes with PWS in spring and early summer and felt confident that if we got dunked they would give us more time to execute our practiced recoveries.

I first approached tide planning in Johnstone Strait the same way I did it in South Puget Sound. In a few words: that doesn't work. Instead of hitting Blackney passage at slack tide, we hit it at maximum flood.

Puget Sound is rather like a big bag that water flows into and out of through its single opening. Current inside the sound is relatively predictably related to the height of the tide coming in or going out.

Johnstone Strait is a long salami shaped bag with a small

openings at each end. Water enters and exits each end through restricted openings and kind of sloshes about in the middle. Tide height and tide current are separated by the complicated flows and backups of water at the restricted intake and outflow points. That's why you get huge tidal rapids of 12-16 knots at the Southern end and up to 6 knots through the gaps at the northern ends. Ultimately its very complicated and you should ask the locals.

A little two foot mixed chop in mid-channel was easily handled. We kept to the northern side of Blackney passage because it kept us away from the main traffic flow of large vessels following the shipping route north and south through the passage. A small unnamed islet at the southeast end of Hanson Island provides a protected waterway leading past the fastest part. A dozen kayakers sat lunching on a sheltered beach there as we passed. At the end of the waterway we heard water running like a faucet on full, similar to our experience with the barge in Desolation Sound, but couldn't locate the source of the noise. Tucking in close to Hanson Island we pushed our way over thick kelp beds and soon made out a four inch overfall. Water rushing into Johnstone strait came so fast that it couldn't fill the backeddy from the little island that blocked its rush so it pushed past the standing water, running off the higher water like an overpowered faucet.

The rushing sound faded as we worked out of the kelp beds. A house with big decks loomed on our left. Several young folk hung out on the decks taking advantage of the once again emerged sun. Later we learned that this is the ORCA Lab, a noted whale research facility run by Dr. Paul Spong. ( <http://orcalab.org/> )

A mile into Blackfish Sound we decided to cross to

Compton Island. We waited on a large ship to pass before heading out and made the crossing briskly. Like I said before, it's a shipping channel, don't dawdle.

The crossing was easy and we slipped in past Compton and Berry islands gliding smoothly on the swirling eddies of the incoming tide. We had permission to camp on Compton, but decided the day was young enough to look for something closer to Village Island, which we wanted to visit.

A fish farm that seemed to spread across the entire channel came by, its bright orange markers easily visible. We spooked a family of Otters up the bank after sliding quietly around the corner of another little islet. They turned at the top of their mudslide to watch us go by.

A small islet next to Ralph Island had been mentioned favorably in one of our books and true to reports it showed ahead of us. We nosed up close to a low grassy saddle just above the waters edge. It rose to a high, well treed island (Ralph) on our left and brushy rocks on the other. We dismounted and decided to drop our tent less than a dozen feet from our landing.

The soft grass we landed at was seagrass, sometimes awash, but a few feet higher on the rise a soft grassy spot offered itself. As we set up our tent another couple pulled up in single kayaks.

“Darn, we were here earlier but decided to look for a better site.”

“There’s room for another tent here”, I said, pointing out a lumpier spot nearby.

“Nah”, the woman said, “I think we’ll camp around the corner on the rocks...”.



*Ralph island camp. Looking toward New Vancouver*

Half an hour after they left the woman paddled back, towing the other kayak. She explained that there wasn't room for their boats on their campsite, so they'd just unloaded and would leave the boats here overnight. We invited them back for coffee later, as we had the luxury of an established fire circle on a large flat rock, with sitting logs placed by some prior camper. She flung a “perhaps” over her shoulder and scrambled off up the trail and over the rocks to their camp.

They came over later in the evening and we swapped stories until the sun was an hour below the horizon. As they turned on their lights to find their way back the spot of one fixed on a deer eating some salty delicacy at the waterline a few yards away. It was either very hungry or very used to humans. Later that night we woke to its grass-chomping sounds next to our

tent.

I was up early the next morning and as I waited for my coffee water to boil watched a pair of mink scampering along the rocks. In furtive spurts they maneuvered on around the next point following whatever errand drove them.

The morning tide was low. A reef rose around the muddy low-tide lagoon we'd paddled over to get here. The neighboring couple carried their boats over the rocks to launch near their site. Ten A.M found us sitting in our kayaks on the muddy lagoon bottom waiting for the tide to lift us. Water began to flow in through lowest gap in the reef wall then others and quickly spread across the flat muddy lagoon. It only took about 10 minutes for our bows to lift and soon we would push off and make our way out through the widening gap in the reef.

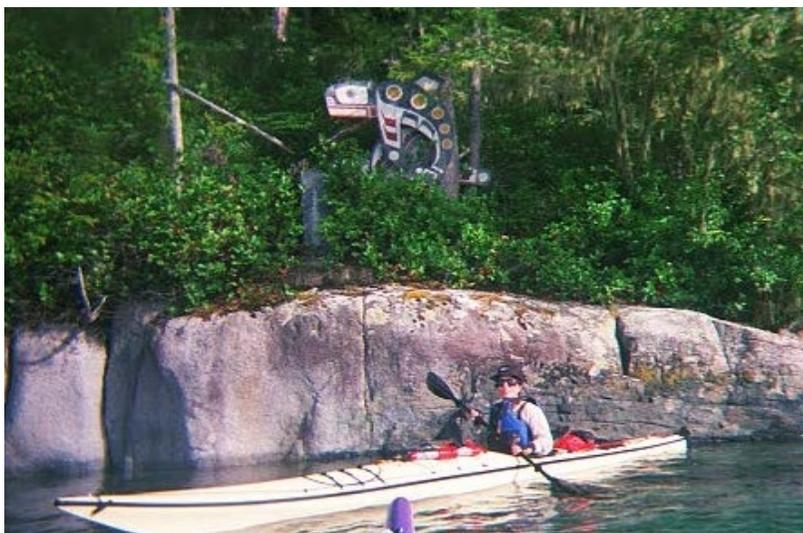
Village island was only a quarter mile across the water so this part of the trip was short. We landed on a beach full of other kayaks that waited at the base of stairs that led up about fifteen feet to the abandoned village of Mamalilakula.

Atop the steep embankment was an assortment of neat wood framed houses that looked about 1900s style. A native guide hosted a tour of the village and had a group of about eight people which Connie paid to join. I chose to sit with the boats. They were fully laden and we hadn't brought them far enough up the beach to avoid the rising tide for long.

Mamalilakula was the site of the last potlatch. A northwest native custom where an influential person invited other influential people to party for awhile and gave away all his wealth to the attendees. This gained a large amount of prestige

for the donor. Of course this obligated the attendees to reciprocate so you had a lot of the same stuff passing around a regular group on a regular basis. For some reason the Canadian government found this subversive in the 1950s and banned the practice. In 1954 the chief at Mamalilakula gave his potlatch in disregard of this stupid law and the Mounties arrested everyone. That put paid to the village and it was abandoned. Everyone who stayed moved to New Vancouver, not far away, but this site is an eroding museum piece now. It is always a recommended visit but come with a bit of cash to pay the guides fee.

We lunched on the shore there, then paddled north across Knight Inlet and Spring Passage to the shore of Gilford Island. At Health Bay we got some good pictures of an Orca totem placed there by the local villagers. We were bound for Echo Bay, but here's where my inexperience in trip planning came home to roost...



*Orca symbol near Health Bay IR*

We didn't actually *plan* to go to Echo Bay. We chose it as a trip point because it was recommended for camping and had a water source. In preparing my charts for this trip I had marked the navigation chart with camp sites including a spot up in the corner of the chart on Gilford Island that I had *assumed* to be Echo bay based on a roughly sketched map in a booklet. Cheap SOB that I am, I did NOT purchase the chart ABOVE or WEST of the one I had which showed Robson Bight. When we arrived however, that spot was quite vacant. Nothing but low trees lined the waters edge in a narrow bay.

A cabin with a boat moored to it floated at the back of the little bay. The owner was friendly and offered directions that made it seem close, less than 3 miles. We'd been on the water for six hours and didn't look forward to any longer paddles. He looked for a map but couldn't find one.

“..just go over to Kramer passage and go straight up. Where it begins to widen out, aim about 10 degrees left and you'll be right there...” ...can't miss it. Lots of boats at moorage, etc.”

“...can't miss it...” He obviously didn't know how capable I was...

The miles began to wear on Connie. I waited for her more than usual. While the core of her stroke was good, keeping up was becoming harder for her. I traded paddles with her to test if that made any difference. Instantly she was able to keep pace with me.

When we bought our carbon fiber paddles I bought a 7” wide blade and she got a 5” wide blade. We were told the smaller blade on her paddle would be easier to pull through the water. It didn't occur to me that her stroke wouldn't move as much

water as mine. Our boats weren't that different in displacement. But her boat wouldn't be pushed as much as mine as long as we used our different sized paddle blades. On technicalities that advice wasn't wrong, but it was the wrong information for us. She had to take a lot more strokes to move her boat than I did.

We paddled across Kramer passage to seek a back-eddy against the outgoing tide. It wasn't a strong ebb, but any resistance was unwelcome. A bay on Baker Island offered just what I was looking for and we paddled on as the late afternoon light began its long northern fade. It was near 9:00 P.M. when we reached the narrowest point in the passage. There was a structure on our right and further ahead what looked like many houses, just to the left of the centerline of the passage. Deepening shadows made recognition difficult and we were half way across the then unidentified body of water before we could see that the "houses" were just big rocks on a shoreline. We were off our charts and on our own.

The sun was below the horizon and a breeze built a six inch chop on the water. We decided to push for the nearest land, what appeared to be an island to the west. Half an hour later we arrived at our target, a light colored cliff face that had been easier to steer by in the lowering light. Working along the shoreline we found a smaller islet that had a marginal landing spot .

Landing carefully among large rocks on a sloping shore we found a tent spot that looked like it was mostly out of the water, but beached logs and thick brush prevented us moving higher. We unloaded gear and snapped on our rainfly just as the last of the light fled. We were forced to finish cooking our meal in darkness. During the northwest summer that's late.

The water didn't try to share our space that night. We spent eight solid hours on the water and probably wouldn't have noticed until we awoke damp in the morning. But isolated as we were, I felt kinship with ancient paddlers. No people noises, no boats, no house lights or campfires on any visible shoreline. We were separated from the modern world like people who had first plied these waters thousands of years ago. We were lost. It had a great calming effect on me.

I also felt foolish as hell for not bringing the right chart(s).

Fog smothered us in the morning. We could barely make out the shoreline of the larger island 50 yards away. Our fresh water supply was nearly gone, less than a quart left in the bag after breakfast and filling our deck-top bottles. We decided to do a brief shoreline search for water, then go back the way we'd come. Easing our boats over the rocks we launched into the fog shrouded waters around 9:00 A.M.

The fog thinned a little as we crept back past our target cliff of the prior night and around the corner. We had to cross over a channel to get back around the corner we turned late last night, but fog hid that shore. Once we heard a power boat but couldn't see them. After a mile the fog lifted and we could see the opposite shore. We crossed to what looked like a small bay.

We landed on a muddy beach where dozens of tiny geysers spouted from the sand. Clams! It was an interesting stop but there was no fresh water so we worked our way back along the shoreline towards yesterday's last good reference point, where we'd exited Kramer passage. We approached a sport fishing boat for directions but it pulled out and went elsewhere before we got close.

It was around 11:00 A.M. The fog had completely lifted by now, and we could see where we were going. We could see the “houses” we had paddled towards yesterday, visibly rocks now on a distant shoreline.

Rounding the corner back into Kramer passage we rafted up for a water break, looking at the house we saw the day before on the other shore. We hadn't found water and thought the occupant might be able to help us.

The crossing was maybe two miles wide. As we drew closer we saw that the “house” was planted on a large square shaped block. Canadian and American flags flew and we could make out more structures beyond it. The suspicion grew that we were looking at Echo Bay and by the time we were within reading distance its identity was confirmed by a sign on the general store. The visible structure we had taken for a house in yesterdays evening light and passed by was the store at Echo Bay.

Sometimes I feel like my brain has a huge hole in it. In a blinding flash of LATE sight (like insight, but too late), it dawned on me that had we simply stayed on the shoreline of Gilford Island, we'd have been there yesterday.

A low dock at the end of the moorage let us get out. We tied the boats, aware that we were just a little less nattily dressed than the boating crowd lounging for the most part on their yachts here.

The general store had everything so we bought it all. Well, it seemed that way. Then we went outside and sunned ourselves on the big block, a remnant of Seattle's first I-90 floating bridge. (A remnant of the part that remained afloat

after the rest sank.)

We might be able to paddle back to Telegraph Cove in the two days remaining on our vacation, but inclement weather could trap us out somewhere. It gave us an excuse to call a water taxi using the store's VHF radio. They offered us a half price rate if we could wait two nights until they brought some some scheduled clients from Port McNeil to Echo Bay. We agreed, then paddled over to the Marine Park to set a camp.



*Lawn ornament at Echo Bay Marine Park*

The Marine Park at Echo Bay has a large grassy area with cracking cement paths outlining a WWII military housing area. A pipe runs up the hill at the back and supplies freshwater to a tap at the top of the meadow near the outhouse. A disintegrating single government pier serves the community as an entry point to the marine park proper and a local schoolhouse up the path from the park.

A creek or inlet runs out the back of Echo Bay past the

rotting hulk of a small powerboat left high on the south shore. On the north the shoreline of the marine park is a steep beach and overhung bluff.

Opposite the moorage and general store is a small community of floating dwellings tucked under a vertical wall of stone. Each area: resort, village and park is separated by water. Small boats regularly cross from moorage to Bakery to park and back. A private house on the ridge at the back of the inlet has livestock, deer and a mule grazing.

Nothing I've ever experienced compares to mule song right next to your tent in the middle of the night! ...brought me bolt upright in my sack! Luckily this braying happened only twice. After that I didn't worry about wild predators sneaking up on me.



*Govt pier at Echo Bay MP*

We had sunshine, clouds, rain and fog in our two days at

Echo Bay. Nothing unpleasant just typically northwest weather. Enough bad weather that I didn't feel like a wuss for calling a water-taxi and enough good weather to enjoy laying about drying things off.

The water taxi pulled in on time the final morning. He offloaded passengers at one of the on-water chalets while we toted our many bags down to the government pier. We'd floated our empty boats over the day before and pulled them up on the dock in preparation to exit. When the taxi pulled in, the boats mounted easily on an overhead rack and we were off in less than 20 minutes.

Telegraph Cove was crowded. The taxi operator helped us dump our boats and gear on the small finger pier next to the boat ramp then left. As it began to rain we decided to portage our gear to the lawn above the dock, then carry the boats up the walkway. As we worked back and forth from the dock to the lawn we both noticed a tall teen eyeing our gear but we didn't discuss him until after we discovered one of our new zero degree sleeping bags in it's waterproof stuff sack was missing. We were in a hurry to get the boats up and it took both of us to carry them up the winding narrow ramp. It was a great disappointment to end a lovely trip on that note, and the only "learning experience" that was distasteful.