

KBWC Blog

Gone Kayaking

By Jessica Shepherd
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Landfall ~ Photo by Jessica Shepherd

The torrent of political news has depleted us, from the deconstruction of democracy to an expanding war in the Middle East. So, given the promise of a warm weekend, Hal and I pack for a kayak trip on Kachemak Bay.

Setting out from Kilcher Beach, we carry boats to the water's edge and load them with food and camping gear, then wait for the rising tide to lift us free. Striking east, we will spend the first night at Fay Kilcher's off-grid cabin, where Eastland Creek enters the Bay.

We enjoy a light tailwind as we paddle along the towering sandstone bluffs that define the north shore. 800-foot cliffs are scored by numerous landslides that strip away tenacious alders that otherwise green their flanks. Above them, a lone immature bald eagle chitters and rides the updraft. The sound of a slim waterfall near the summit reaches us as we breathe in a perfume of briny ocean and spruce sap. Around us, plump black and white Pigeon Guillemots bob in small groups. And we laugh in surprise when finger-length salmon smolt popcorn around us. Sense of space and time expand, a benefit of getting somewhere under one's own power.

The wind grows stronger as we progress. Despite the tailwind, waves roll in at an angle, so the direction of least resistance draws us subtly away from shore. Paddling in the trough between waves, then using the next surge to drop us into the trough closer to shore, we angle our way forward. This method is not without risks, and as the wind and waves pick up, we both struggle not to capsize. After a near miss, Hal calls for us to land, and we haul out to assess our situation only to find, to our relief, we have made it to our first destination.

We haul our gear up above high tide, then head up to a neighbor's off-grid cabin, find the key, and re-familiarize ourselves with the simple comfort of this little oasis. There's water on the stove for dishes and fresh sheets on the bed up in the loft. Behind the cabin, I find an Adirondack chair out of the wind and let the warm sun dry me out while Hal rakes grass cuttings from the tidy lawn. The wind carries the rumble of waves, the jangle of wooden chimes, and a melodious hermit thrush amid the cottonwoods and spruce.

Tomorrow, we are scheduled to paddle across to Chugachik Island, where, weather permitting, we'll meet up with dear friends Dave and Melisse for an overnight. They'll come by water taxi with their dog Georgina. But we won't attempt the crossing if these swells continue.

We haven't been on the water in two years due to busy schedules and surfy conditions. I find I've grown more cautious in that time, no longer willing to cross the Bay from the tip of the Homer Spit, where tricky cross-currents and boat traffic can be life-threatening. Still, I value the memories I have of those voyages, especially the approach to Gull Island, where the squall of bird sounds swells and recedes as one paddles past.

That night, we study the map and consult the tide book to plan our route and determine when to launch. The 17.8-foot morning tide will peak a little before 5:00 am, coinciding with sunrise, so the earlier we set out the better, before the day breeze kicks in. Now in our mid-sixties, we're starting to feel less certain of how hard we can push ourselves and more aware of the consequences if we falter.

The Bay is calm when we wake the next morning. At 7:20 am, we start hauling the boats and gear down to the water's edge only to find we've waited too long and have to navigate boot-sucking mud with each armload of gear. Finally, launching by about 8:15, we head for the far side of the Bay, about four nautical miles away.

A bit of a headwind from the northeast creates a swell. We're also paddling against an outgoing tide, which slows our progress. I watch landmarks on the left shore creep past. A deep V in the cliffs marks Falls Creek, followed by the alluvial outflow of Swift Creek. To the right, the green shape of Chugachik Island slowly materializes against the backdrop of equally green mountains.

We keep our noses pointed toward a tall white peak jutting up from behind the rest of the Kenai Mountains, likely Truuli Peak, the tallest in the range at 6,611 feet. The waters settle as we approach the leeward side of the Bay. For a few moments, we stop paddling to enjoy the undulating calm. Gulls, sea otters, and a solitary loon bob nearby.

Around my blue kayak, the water appears army green but grows dappled and silvery further away. Straight ahead, the low-slung sun casts a glittering fan of gold, and I pull my ballcap down to shade my eyes. Hal cautions me so I don't drift too far south and end up fighting the outgoing tide. Better to overshoot and let the tide carry us in.

Upon reaching the lull of the tiny cove where we'll make landfall, I stop and take in the familiar setting – grizzled red rocks, towering spruce, and a sandy beach, welcoming and unchanged. A loon yodels, announces our arrival.

We set up our tent on the wooden platform, saving the scenic upper campsite for our friends. Then, before they arrive, we set out to brush the quarter-mile trail to a pocket beach on the east side of the island. Stepping around two piles of bear scat, we cut back overgrown alders and devil's club and clear downed limbs from the path. Several years prior, we helped reopen this trail after years of neglect. That effort fostered a sense of familiarity, and we've returned nearly every summer to keep the trail open and visit this favorite place.

Once done, we stand on the far beach, overlooking the State-managed Fox River Critical Habitat Area. Better known as Fox River Flats, the land appears and submerges twice each day with the tides. Green seaweed gives the appearance of grassy meadows when the tide is out. The bluffs on the left and the rugged Kenai Range on the right converge in the distance. Kachemak Bay sits on the fault line where the vast Pacific Plate confronts the crumbling North American Plate.

Dave and Melisse arrive around 3:30, riding big swells, which make unloading the boat a little challenging. Once they set up camp on their perch, we all hike back to the far beach. Hal and I are privately pleased with ourselves for having smoothed the way before their arrival. Dave suffered a health crisis in February and is still regaining his mobility. This trip is his way of testing himself.

We share a dinner of Middle-Eastern fare, then sit around a smoky campfire on the beach. Melisse prompts Dave to tell a story, then jumps in with the parts he leaves out. We talk about places we've traveled, concerts we've been to, the dogs we've loved and lost. As we bask in the never-ending light of midsummer, the night air cools, and the waves hiss behind us. We reminisce about mutual friends, retelling old stories. Some are gone, some moved away, but all impart their spirit to this place.

We wake very early the next morning to a cacophony of eagles chittering, juncos ringing, sparrows warbling, and hermit thrush trilling – an orchestra tuning up for the day. The sky is overcast, the water is flat, and the tide is going out, all favorable for a return trip to Kilcher Beach. I have opted to stay another night and return by water taxi with Dave and Melisse, so I cook oatmeal with dried blueberries for Hal while he gathers his gear. A whisper of air suggests wind later in the day as he heads out, and I track the bright dot of his red dry suit and orange kayak until I can no longer see him.

Chugachik Island has no fresh water, and I'm down to a couple of inches in my water bottle. So, shortly after Hal slips away, I gather up a cook pot with a lid and a couple empty containers and paddle toward Bear Cove.

Bear Cove, as the name implies, is a sub bay on the south shore with a high number of bears, mainly black. Located near the head of Kachemak Bay, it is home to several summer cabins and perhaps a few hardy hermits who overwinter. At the head of Bear Cove, about two miles from where I launched, Charlie Creek flows briskly out of the surrounding mountains. Paddling in around ragged rocks and over algal green waters, I nose my way up the creek until the kayak bottoms out. Securing my craft, I hike around truck-sized boulders to a pool where I scoop up cold, clear water. Likely some of the purest on the planet.

I paddle back on calm waters, making good time. Clouds reflect from the surface, and I have the dizzy feeling of riding the sky. The round trip takes about two hours, and I make it back before Dave and Melisse get up, feeling pleased with myself as I boil the water for safe consumption.

The landscape is every shade of green with lacy ferns unfurling, impenetrable stands of broad-leaved devil's club, currant bushes vining over rocks and stumps, and a perfusion of elderberry and alder shrubs amid a backdrop of tall spruce and cottonwood. And always, the glug and swish of the ocean.

At breakfast, seated at the picnic table, Dave seems shaky and a little glum. He expresses frustration at how much harder everything is now. While he's regained considerable mobility, climbing up and down trails, maneuvering in and out of a tent, and sleeping on the ground prove challenging. I'm feeling stiff and sore myself, though it doesn't compare. But then Dave says, "I've discovered I have a fighting spirit. I didn't know that about myself." And with that, he sits up a little straighter and reaches for a boiled egg.

Later, we walk to the far beach and sit to enjoy the view as the sun burns away the morning's haze. Talk, as it will, turns to politics and religion. Melisse and I cringe at the concept of a God who micromanages and weights our every action. Dave considers himself a conscientious objector to the notion of a supreme being. For me, any interest in organized religion lost its appeal once I recognized how greatly women suffer under the guise of a patriarchal God.

Maybe what stirs the cosmos is some creative force, call it God or Gaia, that seeds the processes of evolution, complete with natural disasters and regeneration. But surely this essence or force doesn't meddle with our individual lives. And I'm not buying an almighty creator who would favor men over women, Whites over People of Color, and straight over gay or trans. I imagine a more hands-off, let evolution take its course sort of creator.

On our last day, I wake to a light drizzle. I pull on a raincoat and set out to paddle around the island. Rounding the first bend, I see a bald eagle sulking on a snag. Nearby, crows squabble over a small dead otter the eagle likely landed, then lost to this feathered mob. I paddle on through shallow waters that will recede to gravel during low tide and set my sights on the seal rookery. Several seals swim in the shallow water watching my approach without concern. On the rocky rookery itself, three seals are hauled out, looking for all the world like giant slugs. Among them, two sea otters sleep. I nose up to the nearest otter with quiet strokes. My scent is carried away on the wind, and I glide in close enough to hear him grunt and grumble like an old man, back feet in the air and front paws folded on his chest. Tingling with the pleasure of approaching unseen, I withdraw, leaving him none the wiser.

The cloud cover makes for flat seas, and that afternoon, we break camp. We skim back to the Homer Harbor on a water taxi, where Hal waits to welcome us home.

Back Door Wilderness

Recently my wife Jessica and I stepped away from the usual grind—politics, work, all of it—for a much-needed kayak camping trip around the east end of Kachemak Bay.

On a Friday, we drove the 2-mile steep road from our house down to Kilcher Beach, where we launched in the early afternoon. The wind was gusting steadily out of the southwest, and the two-foot swells kept us alert. Because of a deep low tide, we had to haul our gear-laden boats a hundred yards across the mud and wait until the incoming tide crept in far enough to float them.

Roughly an hour later, I was broadsided by a large swell and had to hard brace on my left side to keep from rolling, and then, half an hour later, the same thing happened to Jessica. After that, we decided to take a break and pulled up onto the beach to reevaluate our options due to the worsening wind and swells. After finding a spot further up the beach out of the wind, we considered whether we should turn back, wait it out, or attempt to hike up the beach to Eastland Creek Cabin, which we guessed could be anywhere from one to two miles up the beach and possibly not accessible due to the incoming tide.

After about 30 minutes, the wind started to ease, so I decided to shuttle the boats and gear further down the beach to a small point that offered a better view of the water beyond. At 3:30 p.m., I paddled one of the kayaks to that point and, to my surprise and relief, realized we'd landed right in front of the Cabin itself. I met Jessica partway back as she was hauling gear by hand, and gave her the good news. After spending the night at the Cabin and due to a rapidly receding tide, after another

muddy, hundred-yard trudge through shallow, boot-sucking water, we launched from the beach there around 8:00 a.m. the next morning.

The east end of Kachemak Bay is a vast wilderness that deliciously swallows one up after launching from the Beach just below our house. Traveling east after that point, one is accompanied only by eagles, loons, sea otters, and shorebirds with little to no human contact, let alone the small fishing boats that tend to hang out mostly around the Bear Cove area.

The [over 2 and half million acre Kachemak Bay Watershed, including the Kachemak Bay Fox River Critical Habitat Areas, the Kachemak Bay State Park and Wilderness Park and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge](#), protects fish habitat within the Watershed by creating contiguous "green" corridors along inter-jurisdictional anadromous streams. Particularly, with climate change beginning to take a toll on the Bay's ecosystem, these unique areas serve as a vital sanctuary or at least a place where climate-related impacts affecting fish and wildlife can be kept to a minimum.

The Kachemak Bay wilderness and the fish and wildlife habitats that depend on them, however, are under siege after [republican political leaders have introduced plans to privatize state and federal public lands](#). The most recent of these threats is contained in the text for a mega tax bill that is being rushed to President Donald Trump, who was the original sponsor. Among other disastrous provisions, the bill mandates an unprecedented sale of public lands to help pay for tax cuts for billionaires. Without public comment and starting within 30 days of the passage, [the Bill](#) mandates the sale of 2 million acres of federal land in 11 western states and Alaska, to the highest bidder over the next 5 years. In addition, [more than 250 million acres are eligible for sale](#), making it the largest single sale of national public lands in modern history and threatening sacred lands, water supplies, recreation areas, wildlife habitat, and much more all for the purpose of helping cut taxes for billionaires.

According to Drew McConville with the Center for American

Progress:

Notably, the House of Representatives rejected a public lands sell-off proposal in their version of this bill after it provoked strong and notable opposition from Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-MT) and other Republican officials. But bill text released by the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on June 11—as well as amended bill text first published by Politico's E&E Daily on June 17—contains sell-off language that's substantially more expansive.[1]

Back in the boats, with calm seas and minimal wind, by 10:00 a.m., we reached Chugachik Island, a small rocky haven, near the mouth of Bear Cove, that is home to sea otters, black bears, eagles, songbirds and cultural sites. Upon arrival set up our tent, and indulged in the traditional post-paddle nap while listening to the beginning of the Day Breeze swish through the lush vegetation, increasing surf and songbirds.

At 12:30 p.m., I restocked the guest register with additional pages, then we hiked the short trail to Seal Beach. But within 50 feet, we hit a major snag—several large spruce trees, likely brought down by the heavy December 2024 snowstorm, had collapsed across the trail. One especially big tree appeared to have pulled others down with it. Armed only with loppers and a handsaw, we couldn't

make much progress in clearing the mess but did manage to trim a few limbs and widen a detour path that prior hikers had started. We spent the rest of the afternoon clearing the worst of the trail's overgrowth, most notably the ever-encroaching Devil's Club and left the full cleanup to a future team with a weed whacker and at least one chainsaw.

On Sunday, June 15, to beat the Day Breeze and resulting swells, I hit the water at a quit and calm 6:10 a.m., returning across a glassy bay to the EC Cabin to resupply water and empty a few squirrel traps. By 7:45 a.m., I was headed back to Kilcher Beach.[2] Just before getting there, I noticed a handful of Loons who, undisturbed by my non-motorized presence, floated and called in their haunting melodies. I reached the Beach just after 9:00 a.m.—blessedly, at mid-tide, which meant a much gentler landing and less mud.

Help to preserve Alaska's unique back door wilderness like Kachemak Bay:

Call Lisa Murkowski - Anchorage (907) 271-3735/ Washington D.C (202)-224-6665.

Also Call Dan Sullivan: Washington Office: (202) 224-3004/Anchorage Office:

Phone: (907) 271-5915;

Tell them to Defend Public Lands in Alaska and oppose handouts to big corporations and provisions that harm our communities in the Budget Reconciliation Bill.

[1] Drew McConville, What To Know About the Senate's Public Lands Sell-Off, Among other damaging proposals, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act includes a controversial plan to sell off public lands to pay for billionaire tax breaks. Center for American Progress (June 18, 2025).

[2] Please ask permission to use the road down to the beach to access the Bay by contacting the Kilcher Homestead.

