South Baranof Glacier Study: Expedition Notes


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"Have you even looked out the window?" Ken Bellows was incredulous when I called him at 7 a.m. to see if our charter to Port Alexander was going to fly. The truth was, having staggered out of bed with rime-rimmed eyes, I hadn't. But when I did take a peek – whisps of fog clinging to the hemlock branches in our neighbor's yard – it was a familiar sight. And on most days, to my Southeast Alaskan eyes, it would also have been a beautiful sight. But on this particular morning we were trying to fly to Port Alexander to begin an expedition examining the status of Baranof Island's glaciers. "Beautiful" was not a word that came to mind.

Despite the inauspicious start, myself and Eli Bildner, a dear friend from college, managed to adventure our way from Port Alexander to Baranof Warm Springs and then back to Sitka. Along the way we traversed the entire eastern margin of the South Baranof Wilderness Area, surveyed a couple of glaciers, and were privy to all varieties of Southeast Alaskan beauty – even, surprisingly, the sort that requires application of sunscreen. It was an experience I will fondly remember.

After a weather-enforced 30-hour holding period in Sitka, the adventure started in earnest with a mid-day flight to Port Alexander. The pilot was Ken Bellows, whose cool, confident demeanor implies equal parts aeronautic competence and adventure. (For fun, he lands his float-equipped Cessna 185 on the icefield north of Baranof Lake.) At his able hands, the 40-minute flight was uneventful, unless you count the breaching whale off Necker Bay or emerging into a vast azure blue sky and sun – sun! – at Port Lucy and Chatham, escaping the clouds held at bay by Baranof Island's mountainous vertebrae.

The transition in Port Alexander was a quick one. Waiting at the dock were both our kayaks (transported down on the SPC tender, *Chief Kawina*, in exchange for two cases of Alaska Amber) and the water taxi that would take us 30 miles up the east coast of Baranof Island, Glen Smith's *Moontrapper*. We didn't even have an opportunity to set foot on land before zipping up Chatham on Glen's gillnetter-cum-charter boat.

Two hours later, Glen was throttling down the *Moontrapper* as we crossed the southern boundary of the South Baranof Wilderness Area and slipped into the fjord that had somehow been assigned the meager and entirely unbefitting toponym of Patterson "Bay." Titular objections aside, it's a remarkable spot. On one side, sheer cliffs roar out of the calm, protected waters. On the other, a series of semi-alpine lakes spill into the fjord, and above the lakes, glaciers.

Looking around our new, topographically turbulent settings, the scope of our

project began to sink in. I always enjoy penciling out routes on USGS quads at home, sipping a cup of tea, squinting knowingly at the contours. *Two hours to the top of that ridge? No problem.*

Confronting my ambitious graphite squiggles invariably leaves me cursing my tea-sipping doppelganger. Fortunately, with experience, this disconnect diminishes. But no matter how many years you've bushwhacked your way through the best the Tongass has to offer, it's a foible of ambition to which none of us are immune; contours will always have a way of looking a whole lot closer when tiptoeing around a cliff.

The following day certainly had us both tiptoeing around cliffs and cursing. I had picked out a ridge that ran between two of the semi-alpine lakes – Blanchard Lake and Finger Lake – and ultimately to a glacier. However, the brush, even by Baranof Island standards, was recalcitrant. The swarms of biting black flies homed in on exposed flesh the way teenage girls act around Justin Bieber. Eli sprained an ankle. A well placed stub of a hemlock branch scalpeled the skin off my middle fingertip. And sure enough, when consulting our topo at the base of one of the many small escarpments we encountered that day, the contours seemed to be hugging each other as though they had come down with a case of hypothermia.

We didn't make it to the glacier. Admittedly, we had far too late a start – 11 a.m. – to ever have a chance. The day's effort left us battered mentally and physically. But it also left us with an appreciation for South Baranof Island.

Patterson Bay and its rugged surroundings are not an area inclined to let humans pass. At long, long last, once we reached alpine and the top the ridge, a survey of the surrounding terrain revealed that, remarkably, we had chosen what was clearly the easiest route. For once my tea-sipping doppelganger would get a reprieve. Rather, that the easiest route was everything but easy offered a strange sense of satisfaction. As Eli says, "I am glad to be reminded that wilderness has no obligation to be a comfortable place."

But while being properly humbled is a healthy experience, we still needed to get to some glaciers. Which is exactly what we did.

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In the run up to the trip, I got in the habit of telling people that Eli and I would be off "glaciering." Mostly folks would nod and smile, wishing us luck. Apparently, "glaciering" needed no justification.

Not that I can blame them. Glaciers capture the imagination in a way few other creations of Mother Nature can match. Their profound power – often muted and understated but at times dangerous and explosive – gives me the goosebumps the same way the ocean does when I see a video of a sinking ship's bow slip under the surface leaving nary a trace of its former proud, sea-worthy self, spare perhaps a few bubbles escaping from the depths below. That oceans can make ships simply disappear as though

they never existed, or that glaciers can carve out vast valleys where they once were not, inspires a mix of fear and awe, and, ultimately, curiosity.

Naturally, I've always taken pride that Baranof Island – *my* Baranof Island – is far and away the most glaciated island in the Pacific Northwest, and perhaps within the next ten or twenty years, the only glaciated island in the Pacific Northwest. How fortunate that such grand forces of orographic sculpture inhabit my very own backyard! In my forlorn younger years, the glacial love affair was mostly carried out by oogling at satellite photos and fawning over topographic maps. As I grew older it has evolved into what I've come to regard as an avocational academic interest. And now it has evolved into glaciering – glacier research of sorts.

Baranof Island's glaciers, while enthralling to some, remain a mystery to all, at least scientifically speaking. No one has ever bothered to see what they're up to. Or more technically, says Bruce Molnia, co-author of the Alaska section of Satellite Image Atlas of the Glaciers of the World, the USGS's comprehensive catalog of every glacier in the world, "No information is available about the status of these glaciers…"

Our glaciering seeks to answer this question, at least in part. Eli and I, along with Chandler Kemp, a junior at Cornell who was born and raised in Haines, and Adam Andis, an SCS staffer, assembled contemporary terminus data for five different Baranof Island glaciers using GPSs. We're now in the process of comparing these data to the historical record – aerial photos dating as far back as 1926 and, from more recent years, remote sensing imagery. Have the glaciers advanced? Retreated? Why? We have preliminary answers to some of the questions – it appears as though the smaller hanging glaciers are remaining static while the larger valley glaciers have retreated alarming distances – but we're nowhere close to done.

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As one can deduce from these above paragraphs, our glaciering fortunes took a turn for the better later in the trip. After kayaking out of Patterson Bay and up the coast, we made camp at a picturesque rocky cove, and forayed up to a glacier near Mount Ada the next day. A combination of easier terrain, thorough reconnaissance (while in our kayaks in Chatham, we had a terrific view of our prospective route), a much earlier start time, and perhaps a bit more purpose in our step all ensured three solid hours of glacier time at the base of Mount Ada.

In spite of an ornery, persistent PDOP error message on our Trimble GPS – we had no idea what it meant, nor did the approximately three-pound user manual that we had lugged up to the glacier with us – we managed to record a partial perimeter of the terminus. Two days later, after kayaking farther up the coast, we had similar success in reaching and measuring a glacier in the Falls Lake watershed.

While both successes were welcome, our bodies and motivation paid a price. I had sprained an ankle and, in turn, Eli had sliced open his thumb. The bluebird skies that

had provided such buoyancy to our *espirit de corps* had given way to low overcast and intermittent drizzle. And worst of all, the hordes of biting black flies were only growing in strength.

Eli aptly related the flies to the Orcs in *The Lord of The Rings*. Prolific in number, supremely deficient in intelligence, the insects were so oblivious to impending doom in their quest for human skin that we would need not even muster inertia with our hands or fingers when snuffing out their entomological existence. Over the trip we probably killed thousands of the flies, a count that I'd like to think would merit an approving nod from Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, and the rest of the Fellowship.

But our sanity suffered. Eli, a vegetarian, lamented, "The flies are turning me into a spiteful, sadistic person, which I'm not." (The author took a more gleeful approach to his transformation into insect antagonist.) And further, while the black flies were a somewhat manageable threat, the occasional horse fly would join the onslaught. Just as Boromir was felled by Lurtz, a sort of super Orc, while repulsing waves of common Orc foot soldiers, occasionally a horse fly would manage to excavate a divot of flesh – often through long johns or other protective clothing – while Eli or I were distracted by extinguishing the legions of black flies that had already amassed on our hands or arms or face. We needed respite.

Kayaking offered as much. We paddled up the coast to our penultimate destination, Baranof Warm Springs and its cabins, boardwalk, waterfalls, bathhouses, and hot springs.

Fittingly, our trip concluded as it began: dictated by weather. To say that the low cloud ceiling left us trapped at Baranof for a couple of days seems oxymoronic – after all, how can one be "trapped" at Baranof? – but certainly we were looking forward to getting home. Our wish was granted two days later when a Harris Air floatplane snuck in to reprovision and ferry passengers to Baranof Wilderness Lodge. We paid seat fares for the deadhead trip back to Sitka.

Home always feels more homely when you're battered, bitten, and bruised. This we were. The South Baranof Wilderness had left its mark. Taken as a whole, wilderness is a powerful thing, not unlike oceans or glaciers. You can enter its boundaries, thrash around for all you're worth, and when you leave and head home again, much worse for wear, the wilderness resolutely remains, undisturbed.

In its most pure form, this sort of wilderness – the South Baranof Wilderness – is a rare and precious thing. Just as with glaciers, it has become a point of pride to have such spoils of wilderness in my very own backyard. I only hope such a magnificent opus of nature – its future uncertain just as, unfortunately, all of nature's oeuvre is to varying degrees uncertain in this age – will remain and persevere so that future generations can venture into its boundaries following their self-assured graphite squiggles and then head home battered, bitten, and bruised, leaving behind a land so wild that no one will ever know that anyone had been there.