Stump Cove, Glacier Bay

GLACIER BAY, 2019

FIVE TO GET READY, FOUR TO SHOW, THREE IN ALASKA, ONLY TWO ACTUALLY GO

By Marlene Pakish

All the planning in the world never prepares you for the truly unexpected.

There were five of us planning and preparing to go on this trip to Glacier Bay National Park, but only two got their paddles wet; there are three stories that I am leaving untold because those are not my stories to tell.[1]

This is my trip account of the amazing experience kayaking in Glacier Bay while paddling with Dave Hustvedt.

Our flight was from Denver to Seattle to Juneau to Gustavus, Alaska. Then a short taxi ride from the Gustavus airport to Bartlett Cove, where the Glacier Bay National Park Service office is located. We arrived on Saturday evening and secured camping sites in the free campground in Bartlett Cove.

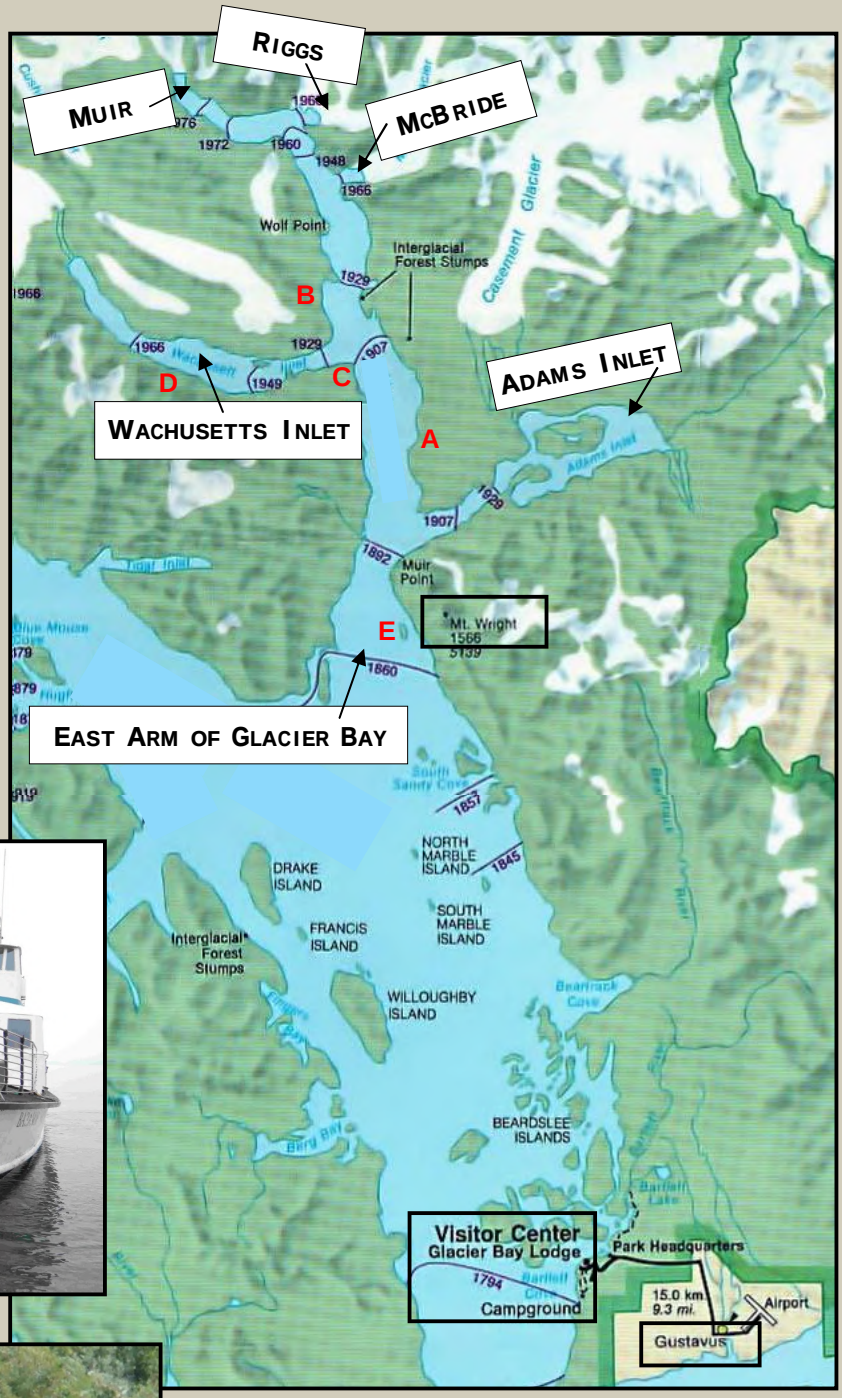
Sunday was an hour of orientation with the park service, packing our food in the bear canisters (three canisters each), and then getting our kayaks and gear to the tour boat launch area for departure on Monday morning.

[1] Find those details on page 27.

MONDAY, 8 JULY 2019: Our kayaks and gear were loaded on the tour boat and we left at 7:30AM for our drop-off point west of Mt. Wright, about two hours from Bartlett Cove.

After getting off the boat, we packed our kayaks and headed up the East Arm of Glacier Bay. Our goal was to paddle just past Adams Inlet and find a camping area with no bear activity.

As we were paddling, we saw mountain goats, otters, seals, eagles, and a grizzly (brown) bear on shore. Supposedly the East Arm of Glacier Bay has less bear activity than the West Arm...hmmm, we'll see. We paddled nine miles and found a camping spot [A on the map] on the other side of Adams Inlet.



Leaving the tour boat below Mt. Wright

Goats near Mt. Wright

Passing Adams Inlet

TUESDAY, 9 JULY 2019: In case you are wondering, yes there were bugs! Not only mosquitoes but little black gnats that look like pepper flakes in your food. Bug netting is essential, especially over the head, but one must remember it's there when you have a fork full of food heading toward your mouth.

We left this camp a little after 8:00AM and headed farther up the East Arm. The weather was perfect: this morning it was 53° with 85% humidity but no rain. We paddled 7.5 miles and found a great camping spot in Stump Cove [B on the map]. We were staying two nights at this camp so that we could day paddle up to Riggs and Muir glaciers.

SIDENOTE: The rangers at Bartlett Cove and Kara, from Glacier Bay Sea Kayak rentals, advised against going into McBride Inlet.

It's a tricky inlet with strong currents, bergy bits (floating ice chunks broken off from the glacier), and shallow areas; before we arrived in Gustavus, there had been a couple of rescues there that were pretty serious. So we didn't chance it. And, yes, there were a lot of bergy bits at its mouth when we went by.

Riggs Glacier

WEDNESDAY, 10 JULY 2019: Today we paddled up to Riggs Glacier and poked our nose into the mouth of Muir Inlet. Roundtrip it was a 14.5 mile paddle. There was a lot of smoke from the fires burning in Fairbanks and Canada. We had talked about finding a camping area near Riggs Glacier, which is pretty loud because it is melting and sounds like Niagara Falls, for the next night but the smoke was too strong to camp up there. Besides the smoke, the weather had been perfect, the water smooth (sans the current) and no afternoon storms.

Glacier Bay truly is an amazing place; the one thing I wish I could have brought back are the sounds. The different bird songs, the sound of porpoises swimming behind us, the otters feasting on mussels, the sound of a mother grizzly yelling at one of her cubs…. Oh, wait a minute, I just got ahead of myself.

THURSDAY, 11 JULY 2019: It was a short paddle today (silent happy face)—four miles to our next campsite [C on the map] just past Wachusett Inlet, not quite to Hunter Cove. We pulled into what we thought might be a good place to camp but it had a bear sleeping area, so we left that beach and paddled farther past it.

ANOTHER SIDENOTE: When we stopped to set up camp, we always looked for bear scat and sleeping areas, which look like grass that is packed down. They could be mistaken for a previous camping spot although you don't want to chance that.

Wachusett Inlet

Dave and I were sitting between the high tide line and the kelp/mussel/water area since it was low tide. I have no idea what time it was, probably late afternoon, and I heard a new noise I had not heard before.

I looked down the beach to my right and about half a mile away was a grizzly bear walking near the water line looking for food. I told Dave that there was a bear coming and he looked and said, "Yes, and she has three cubs with her." What!

The noise I had heard was the mama bear yelling at one of her cubs (I named him "Johnny") who was not keeping up with her!

Campsite with Mama Bear and her triplets

We quickly moved our bear canisters away from the tents, moved our other stuff behind our tents (table, chairs, books), and then I asked, "What do we do, do we go into our tents?"

At this point in the story you need to know Dave did not bring his gun with him on this trip, and both of us forgot to purchase bear spray at the store. Since we could not fly with bear spray (not even in a checked bag), the thought had been to get some from the shed where people leave items that they can't take back home, but unfortunately there wasn't any left behind, and neither of us thought to ask in the gift shop at the Lodge. If we had, we would have had bear spray with us.

So there we were, a mama bear and her three cubs slowly heading our way. Dave said we needed to get in the woods behind our tents, mainly to be closer to the Sitka spruce trees in case we had climb one, and then he handed me one of his trekking poles as a weapon…just in case.

He said we were lucky that the wind was in our favor, that the mama bear was more interested in turning over rocks to find food, and that she was not acclimated to tents or people food smells. She hung out by the shore, for what seemed like forever, turning over rocks and yelling at Johnny. That's a sound I won't forget anytime soon. Neither one of us took a picture because we were both worried that the click of the camera might give our location away.

We stayed at this camp that night, but I didn't sleep well as I was worried that she would take another walk with her cubs or worse, a male grizzly had her scent and would be following her. Plus, every time I looked down the shoreline, the rocks looked like bears. Dave and I decided that our next campground would have rocks, beach, rocks—not a wide sloping continuous shore like this that was an "all-you-can-eat" buffet for the bears.

Dave in the clouds in Wachusett Inlet

FRIDAY, 12 JULY 2019: We were on the water by 7:00AM. We paddled up Wachusett Inlet about three miles; it was beautiful. Dave said that after paddling that one he has paddled all the inlets in the East Arm of Glacier Bay. (Dave had paddled here in 2011 with his wife, Lou Ann).

[Read about that trip in the *Mountain Paddler 19-2b*.]

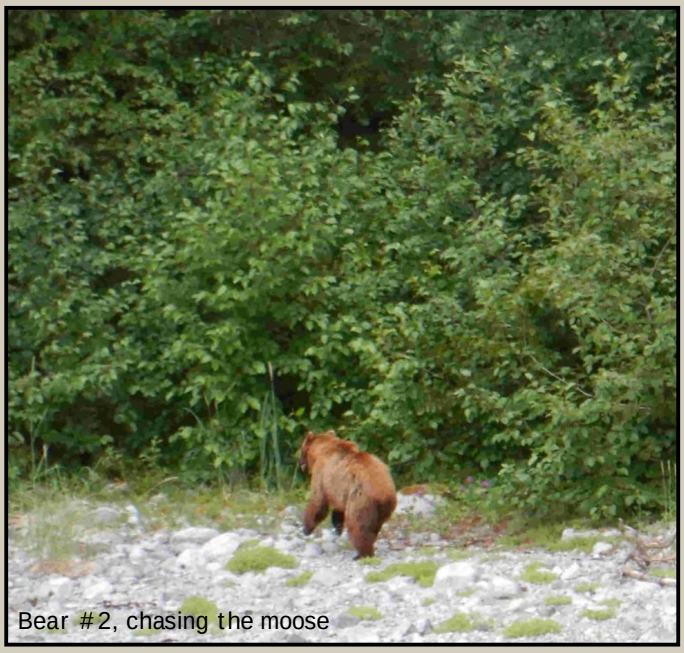
Camping spot with rocks that drop almost directly into the water; no smorgasbord beach for bears here!

We paddled a total of ten miles and found a gorgeous camping spot [D] with a rock, beach, rock area—exactly what we were looking for.

I really hadn't slept the night before, so ten miles felt like twenty. I was tired! I was glad the next day was a slack day: no breaking camp; no moving the boats; no paddling.

Looking across the East Arm to McBride Glacier

SATURDAY, 13 JULY 2019: Our tents were up on a little knoll so we could see McBride Glacier on one side and our little beach/cooking area on the other side. Such a beautiful place and once again, the weather was amazing with high humidity but no rain. I had morning coffee with time to reflect on what a beautiful place Alaska was. We had two days left out here and I was already thinking about meals at the Glacier Bay Lodge when we get back. Oh, and a shower and a real bed.



Bear #2, chasing the moose

We both had an early dinner and we were each in our tents reading at 5:00PM. In hindsight, I'm pretty sure we were lucky to have been finished early with dinner and washing our dishes because at 5:15 we heard limbs breaking close to our tents. I yelled to Dave wondering what that sound was, and he thought it was a bear coming through the woods.

Well, it actually was a moose running through our campsite, jumping over our kayaks and racing into the woods beyond that. Dave was already out of his tent because he said he didn't want to get trampled by whatever was coming through the woods.

As I was trying to get my shoes on, I thought to myself, "Why is that moose running?" And just as I was wondering about that, a grizzly bear came charging out of the woods running after it! What? Yup, we got a full Alaska experience seeing a moose being chased by a grizzly bear. It was amazing! There was a scratch on Dave's kayak from the moose scraping it as it leapt over it, but Kara, from the rental place, didn't charge him for it.

Wow, after that we were trying to decide, do we stay or do we go? We both said, "Let's go and catch the tour boat tomorrow, a day earlier than planned." We packed up camp, keeping a watchful eye out in case the moose/bear duo decided to circle back around. We were on the water by 7:00 PM and paddled the seven miles to the little island [E] across from the Mt. Wright pick-up.

A whale feeding

Setting up camp at 10:00 PM, and hearing whales feed and talk during the night—I had a hard time sleeping again. I was still ramped up about the moose/bear sighting, and then the whales had me concerned because they were in the channel that we had to cross the next morning.

SUNDAY, 14 JULY 2019: It was low tide in the morning and the whales were out in the bay more than in between the island and Mt. Wright—whew! It was a little less than a mile to cross and we made it in record time. We had a couple hours before the tour boat would be coming our way so we unpacked, cleaned our boats and hung out hoping the tour boat would remember to look our way. We had been told that if we decided to catch the boat before our scheduled day, to be at Mt. Wright and the captain would check the area before going up the West Arm of the tour.

West Arm scenery, from the tour boat

The tour boat picked us up at 9:30AM and we got to see the West Arm, which may be more amazing than the east side. A little different shoreline but also lots more boat traffic i.e., cruise ships, tour boats, fishing boats, kayaks.

We were back at Bartlett Cove at 3:30PM, returning the kayaks and bear canisters, and leaving food in the shed that I didn't eat for someone else to take. We had to grab a couple of campsites for the night since neither of our rooms would be available until the next night: one more night on the ground and then a bed.

MONDAY, 15 JULY 2019: After a nice dinner last night (real food), we had today to hang out and wait for our rooms to be ready. Reading in the lodge, doing a little gift shopping, and eating real food breakfast, lunch and dinner. And believe it or not, that evening it started to rain and it continued to rain through the night into the next day.

TUESDAY, 16 JULY 2019: We were heading home with a flight out of Gustavus at 6:00PM, arriving in Denver on Wednesday morning at 9:30AM. Food for thought, overnighting in the Seattle airport is more uncomfortable than sleeping on the ground without an air mattress, maybe.

What luck we had with the weather, with the mama bear and cubs and the moose/bear sightings because that's all they were, just sightings. Should we have had bear spray? Absolutely, but as Dave said, "Being smart to avoid bear encounters is still the best defense."

Marlene loading her gear onto the tour boat

Other things I learned on this trip: Do not bring mac and cheese, it cooks into a goopy paste; paddling against the currents in the East Arm isn't fun but doable; Dave is a great guy to paddle/camp with; there are a lot of bugs in Alaska; the bees eat small black gnats; and I want to be reincarnated as an sea otter.

Dave and Marlene, still worried about mosquitos?

[1] ALL THE PLANNING IN THE WORLD NEVER PREPARES YOU FOR THE TRULY UNEXPECTED

George had to drop out ten days before their departure because of a serious family medical situation. Thankfully things are now under control, and pretty much back to normal.

Marsha had a flukish twisted intestine two days before they were to leave, had a successful surgery but was then stuck in the hospital for a few days. She's already planning another Glacier Bay paddle for next summer.

Jud went to Alaska but didn't paddle. They had a full flight to Seattle so Alaska Airlines asked people to check their carry-on bags at the gate. Jud and Marlene did so. Marlene's bag made it to Gustavus but Jud's didn't. It didn't show up the next day either. They cobbled together some of the equipment that he was missing, but in the end that didn't really work out either. So, Jud used good judgement (Wayne would be proud of him) and chose to not go. He changed his ticket home for the next day. His bag finally showed up at home two days after he arrived. But all is not lost. So far Alaska Airlines has given him a $400 voucher on his next flight. He is going to call them and request a voucher for a flight to Gustavus so that he can go back in 2020. Here's hoping.

On a related topic, Dave's plans to kayak the Inside Passage were put on hold until 2020. The ferry system was on strike and that would have moved his time in Alaska to a period of less advantageous tides and shorter days.