

Rafting the Stikine River

Wildlife, lasting memories reward those who take the challenge

By JOEL CONNELLY

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WRANGELL, Alaska -- After venturing up the Stikine River in 1879, naturalist John Muir came back and wrote that it was "a Yosemite 100 miles long."

However, on the fourth and fifth days of our recent Stikine raft trip from Telegraph Creek down to Wrangell, the walls of the Coast Range were wrapped in clouds and our time was consumed by relentless, driving horizontal rain.

At 5 a.m. on the sixth day, I unzipped the tent flap: The storm had broken and would not soon be fixed. All around me rose the wonders of which Muir wrote 121 years ago, just after the Cassiar gold rush in British Columbia gave the river its first brief period of fame.

A half-moon loomed over glistening granite walls. Downstream, just above the border of British Columbia and Alaska, a 1,500-foot-high cascade burst out from a hidden lake in Hole in the Wall Mountain. The 10,023-foot summit of Kate's Needle drifted in and out of the mists, plastered with newly fallen snow.

Many years ago, in an essay on canoeing, Canada's future prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau described such moments: "You feel the beauty of animal pleasure when you draw a deep breath of rich morning air right through your body, which has been carried by the cold night, curled up like an unborn child."

We had quickly warmed to the Stikine, a swift, swirling and silty stream that is the biggest of the four great rivers that bore through the world's mightiest coastal mountains to empty into the waters of Southeast Alaska. The Stikine's name aptly means "Great River" in the language of the Tlingit Indians, who ventured down the river 1,000 years ago to settle at the coast.

We had flown to Telegraph Creek, a tiny historic British Columbia hamlet that got its name as part of a 19th-century scheme to build a telegraph link to Europe across northern Canada, Alaska and Siberia. It marked the

upstream terminus of navigation -- at 158 miles -- for steamships that plied the river until 1969.

The husband-and-wife team of John Verhey and Sylvia Ettefagh, operators of Alaska Vistas, started our trip with a quick drive into the Stikine Canyon, which begins upstream from Telegraph Creek.

At the junction of the Stikine and Tahltan rivers, members of the Tahltan Indian nation set nets for sockeye salmon. Sitting in cottonwoods, looking down on the river, were a half-dozen bald eagles and two golden eagles whose 7-foot wingspans we appreciated at their takeoff.

The 1,000-foot-deep Stikine Canyon was marked in the 1970s by British Columbia Hydro for construction of two high dams, a project that would have backed up a 50-mile-long reservoir. The Tahltans fought against it and won.

Lately, the Tahltans have helped draw up a provincial land-use plan for much of the 20,000-square-mile drainage of the Stikine. Most of the 400-mile-long river lies in British Columbia. The plan rules out logging downstream from Telegraph Creek, expands two big provincial parks, and requires that any mining and road building not conflict with salmon runs or the valley's healthy brown bear population.

We shoved out into the current, flowing at a brisk 5 miles per hour, at Telegraph Creek, making for a first night camp at Bob and Carol Nilsen's remote wilderness ranch. After dumping gear, my friend Rick McGuire hiked up to the timberline with the Nilsens' dog Preston.

On his way back down, McGuire stopped to watch a fox. Suddenly, Preston bolted out of the woods behind him, followed by a young grizzly bear. McGuire had no time to react. The bear came within 30 feet of him, screeched to a halt in a cloud of dust and grunted. It then bolted back up the trail.

"Why would a fox hang out with a grizzly bear?" McGuire asked.

"Haven't you read children's books?" asked Bob Johnson, a fellow traveler who works for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Yakutat.

According to Johnson, the grizzly acted according to form: The bears are wary of the one animal that challenges their position atop the food chain. If a human does not run, the beast will approach to within 30 feet, then turn tail.

The next day brought us more face-to-face encounters with wild river life . . . and death. A dead moose lay on a midstream sand bar, with a fiercely glaring golden eagle sitting atop it.

As we made camp, a friend of Verhey and Ettefagh named Pete Brendsten shouted: "There's a bear in the river!" A young black bear floated downstream, paddling furiously for the opposite shore. He made it into an eddy, climbed ashore, shook himself and disappeared.

Although most of our journey was in British Columbia, a raft trip down the Stikine is a very Alaska-like experience. It offers solitude, sudden jolts of the unexpected -- a moose and her calf swimming down a side channel -- glaciers descending into valleys they have carved, and rainy days that explain why ice fields stretch up the Coast Range past Juneau.

"Wouldn't be Alaska without this," Ettefagh joked as the high overcast lowered and it began to rain during our fourth day on the river.

The Stikine has few whitewater rapids. Still, swirling whirlpools dubbed "Stikine hippos" make it a major canoeing and kayaking challenge. Just below its confluence with the Scud River, the Stikine forms a series of standing waves near its east bank. A swirling "keeper eddy" flipped a German family's canoe during the week before our raft trip. They quit and flagged a passing jet boat to make the rest of the trip to Wrangell.

We were lucky if we saw a couple of jet boats and a kayaking party during a day on the river. Up north, the Tatshenshini-Elsek river system draws so many rafting parties that Glacier Bay National Park rangers weigh rafters' honey buckets at Dry Bay -- a bureaucrat's way of making sure that no waste has been left along the river.

Everybody seems to know everybody else on the Stikine. On our trip, people were adjusting to a painful loss. A Wrangell guide named Todd Harding had been scheduled to take our gear upriver by jet boat to Telegraph Creek. However, he died suddenly of a heart attack two days before the trip, while taking a group to the Anan Creek bear observatory.

"He was the foremost authority on navigating the river, and was everybody's backup: He helped put together everything from search-and-rescue to the Fourth of July fireworks," Verhey explained.

Brendsten, the RCMP constable in Telegraph Creek, had met us while making the long jet-boat trip back upstream after attending Harding's funeral in Wrangell. He was with the Nilsons. Harding's widow had insisted that Verhey and Ettefagh go ahead with our river trip.

Writing about wilderness canoeing back in the 1940s, Trudeau wrote: "It is a condition of such a trip that you entrust yourself, stripped of your worldly goods, to nature. Canoe and paddle, blanket and knife, salt pork and flour, fishing rod and rifle, that is about the extent of your wealth."

It seems a far cry from Ettefagh's paella dinners, our sleep pads that fold into chairs, or the satellite-linked phones and a global positioning system in case we needed assistance.

Still, as we struggled to make camp in the storm, I could feel a bit of what Canada's most literate politician meant. We struggled to erect a tarp in the wind, secured our tents, ran to get wood needed for a fire, and stripped out of soaking wet clothes. Starting with the palms of our hands and soles of our feet, the fire spread its warmth through our bodies.

All sorts of wonderful things happened on our sixth and last day, after the storm.

We pulled ashore and hiked a mile through rain forest to the iceberg-dotted lake at the terminus of Great Glacier, the largest ice sheet flanking the river.

Ettefagh told a Tlingit legend: The glacier apparently extended all the way across the Stikine when the Indians first traveled downstream. "They saw the river flowing beneath the ice," she said. "They first had braves go over the top of the glacier, and they reported water coming out the other end. They then sent first logs and then canoes full of elderly women, to see if the river was safe. It was."

Downstream, in a quiet side channel, moose and calf swam side by side. A few years ago, our hosts had witnessed an hourslong standoff in which a

mother moose successfully defended her newborn baby against a persistent and clever wolf.

We were picked up by jet boat to go the final few miles into Wrangell, but with a spectacular detour up Shakes Lake to the mouth of its namesake glacier. One of Southeast Alaska's most spectacular mountains, Castle Peak, loomed a vertical mile-and-a-half above us.

I came off the river with more than a few mosquito bites, clothes that still smelled of smoke, stiff joints and a bit of dried Stikine mud and sand in my pack.

But I was also refreshed and renewed, my mind freed from petty preoccupations, and my memories lasting. As the plane lifted out of Wrangell, I looked down as a plume of silt extended from the mouth of the Stikine into Sumner Strait. I will be coming back.

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