

## CHAPTER 1

# WHAT WILDERNESS GIVES

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**MY PADDLE IS USELESS.** The ice is so thick, the bergs as tightly packed as a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, that there's simply no water to slip my paddle into. So I push on ice, shove it so hard that if I were in water, I'd roll my kayak. But nothing happens except the ice pushing back, and bergs all around crunching and rumbling like a crowd of hecklers.

In every direction is ice, spreading across the fjord to steep rock faces and towering, snow-clad peaks. Two large bergs have me stuck. I can't turn, can't go forward, all I can do is go backwards through the sliver of a lead that brought me here. But I can see the shore where I believe there's still enough open water to carry us out of the fjord.

My kayaking partner, Carol, who has been following close behind me, now strikes out on another wedge of water, and together we slowly grind and shove and push our way. Around us on larger icebergs are the dark crescent shapes of harbor seals, all of them turned to look at us, no doubt wondering what these two thin blue boats are doing in their icy world.

At first imperceptibly and then more gradually, the floe becomes thinner, and then, finally, we are out of it, into a sliver of blue water along the opposite shore. After all that ice, the water feels smooth as silk. We paddle fast, urged on by tide and wind, out of Nassau Fjord and into Icy Bay. We stop on a wide sand beach at Gaamaak Cove and sit, surrounded by beached icebergs, laughing with the relief of those who have overcome great obstacles. Prince William Sound has surprised me again.

This is day four of an early July ten-day trip to southwestern Prince William Sound. A water taxi carried us, our gear, and our boats to Ewan Bay. We planned to paddle to Chenega Bay on Evans Island to take the Alaska state ferry M/V *Tustumena* back to Whittier.

Yesterday afternoon, we paddled into Nassau Fjord and spent a lovely full-moon evening there, listening to the crack and thunder of the calving glacier, filtering water from a nearby stream, watching a black bear forage along another beach, and seeing the moon rise as the snowy peaks all around us turned pink with the setting sun.

We reveled in having all this to ourselves. Now we know why: the ice floe must have gathered behind us, so that no others—motorboats or kayaks—dared enter. No other boats visited Chenega Glacier that day; no other people were in sight.

Though I've kayaked in Prince William Sound for over 20 years, I've never been caught in an ice floe like that before. So I didn't know just how dire was our situation. As long as we stayed in our kayaks, we were likely fine, though I didn't know how long we'd be caught in that ice floe. Several tides back and forth, pushing the ice even tighter together, could have kept us there a long time. Or worse, the ice could have shoved at us to a point of capsizing. Hundreds of large ships throughout history have been crushed and sunk by sea ice. We were surrounded by bergs the size of houses, and there were times when bergs began to lift my boat and I felt my balance slipping. Once in the water, what would we have done? Climbed out on an iceberg, laid there like a seal with no blubber, hoped for rescue?

But the danger is now mere conjecture. We pull our lunch out of a dry bag and sit in sunlight, beached icebergs towering around us.

"That's the crunchiest kayaking I've ever done!" says Carol, and all I can do is laugh.

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Prince William Sound is a place of extremes and convergences—of weather, geography, wildlife, and experiences. One of the most active seismic regions in the world, it anchors the eastern edge of the Ring of Fire; it's the northernmost reach for the temperate rain forest; it's rest stop and destination for tens of thousands of migrating birds and marine mammals. Arctic terns fly in from South America; humpbacks swim from Baja California and Hawai'i. It's a biological and geographic center for the Pacific, where temperate and subarctic environmental conditions overlap.

Like the center of a wheel, the Sound is the apex of Alaska's Pacific shores that curve from Southeast Alaska to the Aleutian Islands. A 3,500-mile-long undulation of capes and fjords and islands and islets and sea stacks, Prince William Sound is encircled by three mountain ranges draped in ice fields from which more than 150 glaciers pour, dozens of them tidewater. It is an expansive, meandering maze.

I like that. I like reading the map of the Sound and tracing the fingers of water yet to explore, the beaches and ridges yet to walk, the headlands and islands yet to stand upon.

My first summer in Alaska, I sold tickets on the train that ran between Portage, on the road system, and Whittier, on the shores of Prince William Sound. This was

before the road, built in 2000, connected Whittier to Anchorage; the train was the only way to get there.

Selling tickets on that train, I met the great cross section of those who visit and those who live in Alaska: Anchorage residents with coolers and dogs heading out on their pleasure boats; college students with backpacks ready for a summer's adventure; neatly dressed tourists just embarked from their cruise ships; fishermen just back from an opener smelling of fish guts.

Once I met a man who had fished the waters of the Sound for 23 years. Tall and lean, with a long black beard and a black cap, he'd told me story after story in a deep Russian accent about his adventures in the Sound.

"I could spend many lifetimes exploring Prince William Sound," he had said, "and still not see it all."

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Now I've spent time out here for 25 years, kayaking, hiking, riding on ferries and sailboats, fishing boats and pleasure boats. I've camped on beaches and stayed in Forest Service cabins; I've come out so early that one spring we had to dig snow off the beach to create a campsite, and so late in the fall that winter storms stranded us.

On this trip with Carol, I am once more amazed at how this place continues to surprise me, at how much of it I've yet to experience. I'm also flooded, at every corner, with memories of all the other times I've had out here.

Emerging from the tunnel between Bear Valley and Whittier, I remembered once more my first view of Prince William Sound. Growing up in the Appalachian Mountains and spending time on North Carolina's Outer Banks, I'd always wished to live where mountains and the sea came together. When I saw Prince William Sound, with its ice-clad mountains dropping sharply into the crystalline blue sea, I knew I'd found it.

Boarding the water taxi at the harbor, I recalled that first summer when I'd come upon two kayakers sitting at the dock, wet sleeping bags, tent, raingear, clothes, and maps spread around them to dry in the first sunshine in 12 days. When I asked them where they'd paddled, they picked up a soggy topographic map and showed me their route. They'd spent two weeks of rainy weather paddling the entire western side, from Chenega Bay to Whittier, at least 75 miles around islands, across straits, past glaciers, and through passages. I was astonished that such an adventure was even possible and yearned to do it myself. They gave me their wet maps to keep, to harbor my own dreams for such a trip.

After being dropped off on a small beach in Ewan Bay, Carol and I paddled to a stream to collect water. I'd hiked up this stream before, with my two-year-old son,

and we'd bathed him in a still-water pond, while at the far end a common loon had let loose its sonorous cry. We passed another small knoll, where once I'd climbed through a series of meadows, following a slick track made from one muskeg pond to another, and there at the ridgeline saw three river otters playing in a larger pond, tossing a pink salmon from adult to pup. At another stream, I recalled staying at the Culross Passage cabin in midsummer, standing on the porch as a half dozen black bears swiped salmon from the stream just yards away.

And there are memories, too, of the biggest agent of change in Prince William Sound's recent history: the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. The year of the spill, I'd volunteered at a camp on Perry Island, my eyes burning and head aching from oil on the beach. I'd walked to an eagle's nest with a researcher, where he'd found oil on the egg, brought back on the legs of the parents. I'd observed a fishing boat hauling oiled kelp into its hold while a sea otter floated nearby. Walking a beach in West Twin Bay two years after the spill, I'd found tar balls bigger than my fist. Visiting Sleepy Bay Beach eight years after the spill, I'd watched technicians and residents of Chenega Bay try yet another method to wrest oil from the rocky substrate.

Memories of that time, and the damage it still wreaks, weave tightly into my experiences of Prince William Sound. Even more so this trip: I'm kayaking in the Sound while in the Gulf of Mexico, oil continues to gush from BP's deep water well. The BP spill has been like a 21-year-long echo for those of us who experienced firsthand the oil spill in Prince William Sound. It sits heavy on my heart, a weight I carry this entire trip.

Yet this weight is somehow balanced by all the joyful memories, and more so by how this place can't help but draw me in to the present moment. That's the lesson of the ice floe: be here, now, in this moment, in this place. Prince William Sound never ceases to amaze me. It is still, as naturalist John Burroughs wrote in 1899, an enchanted circle.

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After navigating the ice floe, Carol and I cross Icy Bay to camp at a favorite beach, one with a small cave where I've sat out many a rainy day. As if on cue, the next morning we awaken to rain pattering on our tents. It's not a driving rain, and we certainly could paddle in it, but decide to make use of the cave and hunker down for a day of reading, sleeping, eating, and walking the beach.

Prince William Sound is a stunning place, but it's not an easy place. To be here is to expect rain and wind; to expect to need warm layers and hats and gloves and raingear; to have a marine radio and extra food for being stranded by weather; to be uncomfortable. To be here is to live water.

Water shapes Prince William Sound; water sustains it, creates and contains it. Glaciers pouring to sea, pushing rock before them and carving U-shaped valleys from solid rock; streams rocketing down from the mountains to the sea, carving and carrying silt; rains stippling rock and nurturing a dense rain forest growing on the thinnest of soils, all weathering and shaping the Sound. Water links land and sea, where Sitka black-tailed deer, brown and black bears, and river otters come to the shore to feed, and seabirds come to the land to nest. And water is how people get here, how they navigate this place. There are no roads and very few trails; it's by boat that people enjoy what water has created.

Water, the weather it creates and remoteness it engenders, tempers visitation so those who do come can find the remove that wilderness alone provides. This is what draws people here, as much as the beauty of the place and diversity of wildlife: the solitude.

It has, in the past two decades, become more popular. The oil spill put this place before the world's eye, and the 2000 road between Portage and Whittier made it more accessible. A wholly solitary experience is increasingly rare.

Our second day out, after lunch and a walk down a long sand beach along Icy Bay, we rounded a headland and were astonished by a group of 14 kayakers. They were all from Israel, and this was their first time in kayaks, in Prince William Sound, and Alaska. The decks of their kayaks were loaded with gear, and they bumped into each other as they gathered around us to tell us all they'd seen: humpback whales, harbor seals, icebergs, salmon. While at first Carol and I had been irritated by their noisy presence marring our wilderness experience, we came to appreciate their wonder and amazement; it reminded us how it was for us the first time we'd set eyes on this place.

Still, though, the vastness of the Sound makes the experience of having a beach, or a cove, all to yourself, possible. So when, on our rainy day at Cave Camp, a small skiff carrying a man and a dog comes ashore, we're taken aback at having to share "our beach."

He strikes up a conversation and invites us back to his boat for dinner. Wet and cold and curious, we agree. He and his wife serve us a bowl of shrimp from the waters on which we float and tell us about their adventures in the Sound. A firefighter and a computer technician, they spend much of the summer months on this boat, exploring the Sound. They catch salmon and shrimp, walk beaches, and watch whales. Here in Knight Island Passage in summer, humpbacks abound, feeding on krill. He tells us of one humpback that, he says, must have been enamored of the sound of his engine. The whale circled the boat several times, spy-hopping so close they thought he'd land on the deck, and even rubbing against the sides of the boat, but so carefully there was no damage.

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After returning to our camp, Carol and I talk about why people come to Prince William Sound, what we all—the Israeli kayakers, the pleasure boat couple, and us—have in common. It’s the desire to be in a place where the human footprint is negligible, where wildlife abounds unfettered, where wilderness still reigns. No matter who we are back in our towns and cities, our jobs and careers, there’s a common denominator out here: the way being in wilderness makes us more fully human. It’s a paradox, that we must leave behind our daily lives in order to become more ourselves. This is what wilderness gives. And as the wilderness of Prince William Sound brings us home to ourselves, those of us who return again and again show a strong and enduring allegiance to it.

Over bites of shrimp, we’d told the couple that we’d seen a black bear along the shoreline on our way to camp. They’d told us how rare it is now to see a black bear, how sport hunting has increased exponentially. Hunters shoot bears from boats, though it’s illegal; enforcement in such a large and remote place is difficult. So this couple does what they can to keep hunters from such illegal activity.

Prince William Sound seems to elicit this kind of desire to protect the place by direct means. On our ferry ride back to Whittier from Chenega Bay, Carol and I speak with three other kayakers. They bring out their maps and show us their route, how they paddled the outer shores and hiked up beside icefields for views of calving glaciers. A retired glaciologist, he is all too aware of how climate change is affecting the glaciers, the waters, wildlife and forests of the Sound.

Later in the summer, I will spend a weekend on a volunteer beach cleanup with others who have been doing this beach cleanup work for decades. I’ve been on a few of them already—the first time, with my eight-year-old son, we found as much to keep as to throw away: a weathered paddle, a boat seat, buoys, and nets. These beach cleanups used to find mostly derelict fishing gear, but now, increasingly, the haul is overwhelmingly dominated by one object: the ever-pervasive plastic bottle. Walking beaches in rain, pulling trash from between driftwood, I’m reminded that, as much as people come to the Sound to recreate and experience an untrammelled natural place, they often come to defend it, to look for ways to give back to this wild place that has given so much to them.

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Carol and I spend our days paddling shorelines where salmon jump all around us, where sea lions patrol embayments, where jellyfish float languidly beneath our paddles. We’re enamored of the fecundity of this place; even as we’re aware of how it’s changed, we revel in what remains. We spend a night on a beach facing a group of islands called the Pleiades. The next morning, we both sit on the beach in morning

sunlight, with our notebooks and our coffee, writing. At a now-familiar sound, we look up. It's whale breath, and there, just yards from where we sit, surfaces yet another humpback whale.

On our eighth day, the winds change. Yesterday, we crossed Port Bainbridge in seas so calm they were glassy. But today, as we turn the corner from our campsite to paddle down the wide passage, we're hit with a wind that grows the farther down the passage we go. So we slip into a cove, paddling close to the rocky shoreline, and find a narrow slit between rock faces just wide enough for a kayak.

There we enter another world. It is quiet, calm. The waters are so still we can see as well into them as we can into the forest edging the shore. Gazing into the forest of bright green eelgrass and sea lettuce, my eye catches some glimmer of blue. At first I think it's a reflection of my blue kayak, but it moves, wriggles, flashes blue then yellow. It's a small swimming creature, about the size and shape of my pinky finger, snaking through the water. Its head is yellow, its body blue and green, and all of it iridescent.

I've never seen this animal before. I've never been to this quiet lagoon before. One could pass by this shore every day and never find this little lagoon. And that's how it is here in Prince William Sound. That's why I keep coming back.