

# Johnstone Strait

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Last month, Noel wrote about the trip we took to Nootka Sound with the folks from Comox Valley Kayaks. That trip whetted my appetite for more, and when CVK said they had a trip to Johnstone Strait to see the orcas, I had no choice but to say yes. What I didn't anticipate was that this trip was to be a complete contrast to Nootka Sound...

Thursday I drove up to Courtney, met up with the guides and another participant, and we carpooled north to the launch site. The weather was blustery as we headed up the island and the forecast wasn't promising, but we were optimistic the conditions would be OK. Our launch turned out to be a very nice campground recently built at the edge of a large logging camp on Naka Creek, just north (or is it west?) of the Eve River. Sometime after dark the rest of the group arrived, giving us a total of eleven people: 2 guides, 2 pseudo-guides, and 7 paying guests, four of whom had never paddled before.

The adventure began that night, as I was awakened by the sound of splashing and breathing on the shore. My mind immediately pictured a 15', blood-thirsty bear hungry for plump Americans to snack on. After a while, I realized the sound was dolphins or orcas splashing just offshore, but still my heart rate didn't come down for days.

Friday morning we woke to wind and rain, and the sight of large boats out on the strait taking water over their bows as they crashed through the waves. I had hoped this trip would be more exciting than Nootka, but this seemed rather extreme. Fortunately, Mike (the #1 guide) agreed and we decided to head down the coast (rather than across the strait) for a few kilometers to a nice beach. After packing the boats and giving basic instructions to the beginners, we pushed off with the wind to our backs.

Half an hour later, we were turned around and heading back to camp. Outside the small bay where we launched, the conditions were bad and getting worse. By the time we started back, I'd guess the winds were 10-15 knots, gusting higher, with 2-3 foot seas. We quickly broke into several groups based on paddling skill and strength, and, with the wind getting stronger, pointed our boats into the waves and paddled hard.

To make a long journey short, it took me about 1 1/2 hours to paddle back, with the winds getting up to 20-25 knots and the seas 3-4 feet. At first I was scared because I'd never been in conditions even remotely this bad, but after a while I realized I was hardly moving and anger replaced fear. I paddled smarter (rather than harder) and the ache in my arms began to subside and I started enjoying paddling up the face of a huge wave and then crashing down the back side and having my bow bury itself in the next wave. I stopped thinking about how slowly I was moving and taking each set of waves as they came, adjusting my strokes and cadence for the conditions. Anyway, I made it.

As several of us stood on shore and looked back over the water, we realized we could only see 8 of the 10 boats. Mike had turned back to check on everyone and we were relieved when he paddled up and told us that two people had landed where we turned around and were OK. It turned out one of the paddlers had recently dislocated his shoulder and couldn't take the strain, so he wisely told one of the guides and they headed for what passed for a beach. A couple of people drove up a logging road, clambered down to the beach, and found them inside a shelter making a fire. They assumed we wouldn't be able to get to them for a while, so they were preparing to spend the night. Instead, they climbed up to the truck and Mike and Toby paddled their boats back. By evening, we were all together again, sore and wet, and more than a little disappointed.

That night it rained hard and not only were our spirits dampened, but Jeff (he of the bad shoulder) woke up in a soaked sleeping bag. Huddled under the tarp that morning, just about everyone had thoughts of quitting and going somewhere dry and warm. Luckily, Mike wouldn't hear of such things and decided we should head somewhere more protected, like Rupert Inlet on the east side of Quatsino Sound. We packed our gear into the cars and headed north once again, with a stop in Port McNeil so people could run their sleeping bags and tent through a dryer. We arrived at a beautiful campground run by MacMillan-Bloedel, set up camp quickly and headed to Alice Lake for delightful (and calm) paddle around the lake. It couldn't have been any more different from the previous day's jaunt and was just the right antidote for our blues.

More rain that night, but the weather forecast for Sunday was much better and we decided to try Johnstone strait once more. We drove a short distance to a private campground/launch west of Telegraph Cove and stood on the shore looking at a blue sky filled with white, fluffy clouds reflected in the calm water. This was more like it!! As if to prove that things would be better, there was a bald eagle watching us launch and river otters were playing in the marina as we paddled out.

We paddled a couple of kilometers down the coast amid huge beds of bull kelp and over amazing clear (and COLD!) water. We reached a small bay near where we would camp for the night and for some reason we all stopped paddling for a while, just taking in the beauty surrounding us. Suddenly, someone yelled, "There's a dolphin!" We looked and, sure enough, there were some dolphins heading our way. In a few minutes, there were easily a hundred dolphins all around us, feeding, jumping out of the water, even swimming right under our boats. We stayed in that area for over an hour as they put on a show SeaWorld would be proud of - three or four dolphins jumping clear of the water together, or my favorite, seeing a salmon jump several feet above the water with a dolphin right behind it. As far as we could see in any direction there were dolphins feeding. Words (nor my feeble attempts at photography) can't describe what an incredible experience this was.

As we paddled to camp, we could see boats in the strait with dolphins riding their bow waves, and as we pulled into our campsite, the dolphins were still putting on their show. In fact, it continued that night and the next morning. (They were Pacific white sided dolphins, in case you were wondering.) That night we camped amid the driftwood on the beach and were treated to a great telling of Robert Service's "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" around the campfire. The next morning, after Mike's acupuncture treatment (one of the participants is a natureopathy student and just happened to bring his needles), we packed up for the last time and headed back. The plan was to cross the strait and wander amidst some islands, but halfway across Mike picked up on the radio that a superpod of orcas was headed our way. So we stayed where we were (in the middle of a large but weak tide rip) and waited.

Sure enough, the whale watching boats arrived first, followed by a couple of dozen orcas. The first to come near us was a bull, with a dorsal fin about 4 feet high! I never knew they were so big. After the dolphin show, anything might seem anti-climactic, but their size and the serene way they swam through the strait was incredible. They passed by us in less than 15 minutes, but we stayed put for some time talking about what we'd just experienced.

Eventually, we realized the tide rip signaled a change in the current, so we headed back against the current. Once I got to the shore, I used some of the information Lee Moyer talked about and tried to stay in the back eddies, letting the current work for me instead of against me. And it worked, except when it deposited me on some rocks. That's when I discovered just how cold the water was and decided I wasn't going for a swim. I'd guess the temp was in the low 40's. Anyway, we got back to our launch site, had a late lunch, and said our good-byes as everyone headed south to catch their respective ferries.

Where the trip to Nootka Sound was pleasant, this one was an unforgettable adventure. It had everything, from calm to danger, great joy to disappointment. I'm glad I went and can't wait to go back next year and spend more time exploring.