

# *Quicksilver* 2016

Alaska to California

Mike and Hilde Gill

## *Awarded the Cruising Club Bowl*

We rejoined *Quicksilver* in Kodiak in May with a rich prospect: we would spend the next few months exploring Alaska, including Prince William Sound and the Inside Passage, continue south through British Columbia, and aim to be in San Francisco by early October. Murphy though had been waiting in the wings all winter. Not only had it been quite exceptionally wet, even by Kodiak's standards, but the power had been switched off to the dehumidifier and heater for several months. We found a mouldy and damp boat, requiring three weeks of hard work especially by Hilde to



restore her to a liveable space, and by Mike to repair the systems attacked by the damp, mainly electrical. Hilde developed severe back pain, after three days culminating in a visit to the local hospital, to confirm a kidney stone as its source, somewhat interrupting progress. We finally got away at the

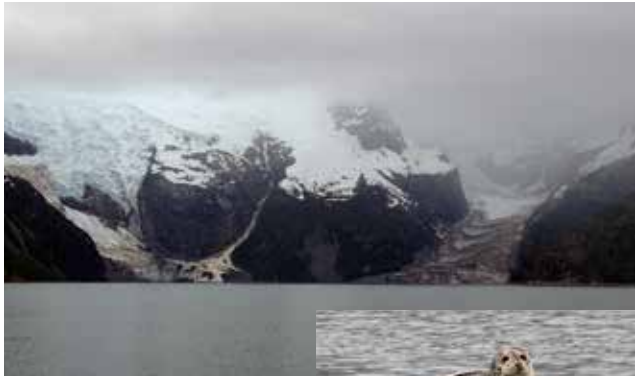


Qikutulig Bay, Kenai

beginning of June, having enjoyed a few days of welcome sun, and headed off in the direction of the Kenai Peninsula. We were quickly reminded of the adage that to cruise is to mend pumps in exotic places: the heads blocked, the macerator pump disintegrated, and as if

in sympathy, the grey tank pump played up badly. Then a stainless steel component of one of the main sheet blocks failed in a particularly bumpy stretch of the Chugach Passage south of Port Chatham, the autopilot and the echo sounder started to play up, the rain returned with a vengeance, and our rich prospect began to fade a little.

However, even in damp conditions, the Kenai Peninsula is a very attractive cruising ground; it has better winds than Prince William Sound, it is deserted, and full of bays, many well protected. There are fjords, one with a thousand foot cataract, others, such as Northwestern fjord, with huge calving glaciers and an abundance of wildlife.



Both the autopilot and the echosounder were repairable, the latter by opening it up and putting it in a bag of rice overnight. But as we approached Seward, a secure artificial harbour in beautiful mountainous surroundings, and a good place to refit, another pump failed, this time an expensive and complicated one, the fuel injection pump. Seward had an engineer,



Great and small in Northwestern Fjord

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and Anchorage the required expertise, but infuriatingly we had some of the best weather this year in Alaska while we waited for the repair to be finished. By the time we got to Prince William Sound, it had become cold and wet again, and on 18 June we sought shelter from a forecast gale in Humpback Bay. Protected by high mountains virtually



Nellie Juan Glacier



Harriman Glacier

invisible through the murk, we hardly felt a breath, but the rain was relentless for forty-eight hours.

The plan was to explore the Sound clockwise from west to east. It is about seventy-five miles wide, but has such an indented

coastline that the total length exceeds that of the states of Washington and Oregon combined. Our first attempt to get close to a glacier had to be

aborted; Icy Bay was living up to its name, bergy bits were dense, and visibility was dreadful. So we headed instead for Ewan Bay, where next day the sun obliged, mountains appeared, and we began to appreciate the



Mike at Windy Bay, next to Orca Bay, Prince William Sound

beauty of the Sound. We weaved our way, much of it under sail, through

the scores of bow-pickers, the favourite style of casting a gill net for salmon in the Sound, to a little nook close to Nellie Juan Glacier, and from which with a short, if sandfly-ridden, hike we could get a great view of the glacier.

Though under power, we had a magic trip through Culross Passage up to Barry Arm and Harriman fjord, where glaciers really do abound, and with care you can get very close. Some careful crossing of a terminal moraine into a peaceful lagoon saw us to our anchorage that night

in Serpentine Cove, which treated us to four glaciers within half a mile or so, with lovely waterfalls below them. An anchorage this isolated and beautiful but still quite close to 'civilisation' is very special. The town of Whittier is only 16 miles away as the crow flies. The weather held next day for us to get right up to Harriman Glacier.



Mirror Cove

It then all turned very damp. We found some enchanting land-locked spots on the north side of the Sound (Shoestring Cove, Cedar, Land-locked and St. Matthews Bays), but rarely had a view of the mountains

surrounding them. Motoring through cold mizzle to get from one to the other seemed increasingly unattractive. Hilde continued to struggle with mould which kept on reappearing, especially on food and clothes, and despite re-insulating lockers. Bears were hardly in evidence, and though

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we saw many whales, none obliged by breaching. By the time we got to Sheep Bay, and met up with some friends based in Cordova, the sun began to peep through, and we had some spectacular hiking from nearby Windy Bay.

We much enjoyed a few days in Cordova, a bustling fishing port,



surrounded by hillsides sporting large numbers of salmonberries. We left to cross the Gulf of Alaska on 3 July with the unusual promise of a spell of several days of fair weather. The Sound had lived up to its reputation: beautiful when you can see it, which may be infrequently, and most of the time very little wind, but wonderfully empty. We never shared an anchorage except by design.

In the event we had usable wind only for the first few hours across the



Gulf, and even then on the nose. Visibility remained poor throughout, so we never caught a glimpse of the spectacularly high mountains near Yakutat on the way. Just before our third dawn at sea we crept into Murphy's Cove, just north of Cross Sound, and spent the next few days exploring this lovely area. We especially enjoyed Hoonah, where we found some remarkable



Our garden

carving of a traditional clan house front, five huge and complex totem poles, and dance masks, all almost complete after five years of work. The house front was about to be shipped over to Bartlett Cove in nearby Glacier Bay for a spectacular three day potlach to consecrate the new clan house there for the Tlingit

tribes that had settled in the Sound after having been driven north by the Russians in the early 19th century. Two new large traditional cedar canoes were being finished off to join the older ones which were being

rowed vigorously up the harbour, practising for the long row up to Glacier Bay for the festival. The Tlingit were noble losers. Many of their totem poles sport on their summit the top-hatted figure of Alexander Baranof, the 'big chief' of Tsar Alexander's Russian-American Company, marking his victory over them. Occasionally someone would cheekily put the raven, totem of the Raven moiety, on top of the Baranof figure. Here and elsewhere, we met clan elders and carvers who threw light on the art of the native tribes, the Tlingit,



Bishops Bay Hot Springs

Tsimshian, Kwaan and Haida being the main coastal ones. It records the history of the tribe, the clan, the family and the individual artists, as well as their stories. These embody their mythology, cosmology, world view and moral imperatives in the form of sacred objects, more durable than oral transmission. The native tradition appears to be reviving and

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is increasingly playing out in contemporary youth culture camps and environmental protection and conservation.

Elfin Cove and Pelican are both enchanting boardwalk-based settlements, and the west coasts of Chichagof and Baranof Islands have plenty of remote but secure anchorages, as well as several hot springs. Mirror Cove

combined both, though its entrance requires a tight less-than-a-boat-length dog leg.

We became so used to our solitude that when two other boats joined us in Double Cove, we decided to explore nearby



Fury Cove

Ford Arm. The American charts had so far proved excellent, but at its head, we hit a rock. True it was marked P.A., but ‘approximate’ in this case meant inaccurate by nearly 200 yards in a channel barely more than twice that. Fortunately only the base of the keel was involved, though Hilde’s knee took a bad knock as she was thrown across the cockpit.

Sitka, a little further south, is well worth a visit, despite the effects of being on the cruise liner circuit. Its setting is splendid, its Russian history and architecture fascinating, and the collection of First Nation totem poles in the park on the edge of town and of artefacts in the Sheldon Jackson Museum impressive. Unfortunately it rained much of our time there, so we scarcely saw Mount Edgecumbe, described in the pilot as the prominent landmark for Sitka Sound. We were held up by fog and torrential rain in two spots further south on Baranof Island, but by 11 August it had cleared enough, we thought, to make a dash through Decision Pass to Port Protection at the north of Prince of Wales Island. We made it, but mostly in thick fog. Port Protection is a typical small Alaskan settlement, reachable only by float-plane or boat, much of it on boardwalks through the forest, leading to isolated wooden houses. Prince of Wales Island can get 250 inches of rain a year, so we should not have been surprised that our lives continued damp. Despite the scars of deforestation – logging was the economic mainstay - it is attractive, reminiscent of the Norwegian leads, with scores of islands and islets providing shelter its whole length.

The rain eased enough to allow us to see our way through El Capitan passage, and two days later by the time we got to Tlevak Narrows en route to Hydaburg, we actually enjoyed a little sun. The totem poles both there and in Klawock, further north, were remarkable.

We found Alaska expensive by US standards. 'Fresh' food from supermarkets had already travelled far, and had limited further life on board. A partial solution was to grow our own in a plastic bucket.

After weeks of motoring, we looked forward to a decent day's sail across Dixon Entrance to Prince Rupert, the Canadian port of entry. As we left Nichols Bay with a big tide and a decent breeze behind us, all seemed good, but the autohelm played up again, the fog soon rolled in, the wind died, and we had to motor for more than half the distance. Next day Mike spent hours on his back in the cockpit locker removing the autohelm power unit, only to discover, thankfully, that the problem was a loose grub screw.

We began to entertain the hope that if we got further south, and chose the inner route down the Inside Passage, the weather might improve. So after a visit to the excellent museum in Prince Rupert, we left on 21 August. We managed some sailing with the twins up along Grenville Channel, and by the time we got to Bishops Bay Hot Springs, it was getting positively hot. The baths were terrific. A whale lolled around in the Bay all night.

As we approached Cape Caution, one of the few exposed stretches of the Inside Passage, the weather deteriorated, and we waited in Fury Cove for a gale which never arrived. Once in the lee of Vancouver Island, we had to beat in rain and light airs to Port McNeil. The rapids and whirlpools around, and east of, Johnstone Strait, have quite a reputation, and we had contrived to be in the area at the top of springs. So we elected the gentler 'back' route via Green Point, Wellbore, Dent and Yaculta Rapids. We arrived at the last of these an hour before slack and shot through at fourteen knots.

We stopped in Teakerne Arm, where Vancouver spent two weeks in 1792. We were about to go ashore to swim in Cassell Lake when a large aerosol can containing expanding foam exploded in its locker in the heads. The heads, the galley, and both of us were liberally coated in the fast-setting muck, and despite labouring mightily to remove it, we are still scraping it off from the most unusual places.

Another rainy spell set in, and we had become fed up with feeling wet and cold. Beautiful as Desolation Sound must be in sun, Vancouver's comments came to mind: 'Our residence here was truly forlorn; an awful silence pervaded the gloomy forests'. So via Dodd Narrows and Conover Cove in the Wallace Islands, we made for Victoria. We knew it was in something of a rain shadow from the Olympus range of mountains the other side of Juan de Fuca Strait, and indeed the sun shone for our entire



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three day stay, grandly tied up in front of the Empress Hotel. We enjoyed Victoria, especially its restaurants, the Museum and a 'river cruise', courtesy of a friend of Mike's sister-in-law. After only three and a half weeks in Canada, we crossed over to Port Townsend in Washington, where the sun continued, the mountains looked gorgeous, and at last we could begin to restore the bright work down below. It is an attractive town, boasting many late nineteenth century buildings, housing interesting shops, including three bookshops for a population of 10,000, and has a relaxed feel to it.

Murphy made a brief reappearance, when just after pulling up the anchor to go to the fuel dock, we realised the engine had stopped, and would not restart. It turned out that the insulation of the wire to the fuel cut off solenoid had deteriorated, causing a short - boats!

We left on a big spring tide, but soon with little wind. Hilde was laid low with a virus, so we stopped overnight in Crescent Bay, half way along the Strait. On 18 September we got away early, reached Cape Flattery by lunchtime, found our way through the Hole in the Wall inside passage, and set off rather uncomfortably close-hauled on port tack, next stop San Francisco. It was a difficult first night at sea, with squalls and inconstant wind, but by early next morning we could at last lay our course. The wind slowly came more aft, and by the 20th we had the spinnaker up for the first time since the passage from Japan last year, but only for a few hours. The racking and seizing round the halyard cringle was clearly tired, and we were treated to the sight of the sail collapsing into the sea under the boat. We retrieved it, but it was obviously at the end of its long life.

The breeze became fitful for the next couple of days, requiring use of the engine, but by the 23rd it started to blow nicely. As we approached Point Reyes, a whale crash-dived, soaking Mike in the cockpit with his tail splash. It was blowing a full gale as we rounded the Point, and we were pleased to get past the spindrift and into Drakes Bay that evening, five and a half days out from Crescent Bay. Bald eagles had been largely replaced by pelicans. Drakes Bay is reminiscent of Studland Bay, but in one way is crucially different: we took three attempts to get the anchor to penetrate the kelp and set properly. The Bay is surrounded by cattle ranches, and when the wind died early next morning, flies invaded us on a grand scale. We were still swatting them furiously by the time we got to San Francisco Bay. Sailing under the Golden Gate for the first time is a memorable moment, and soon we were enjoying the friendliness of the Sausalito Yacht Club and the very welcome cossetting of a friend of Mike's sister. The views of San Francisco city and of Sausalito are spectacular, the sun seems to shine all the time, and morale is soaring. Our Alaskan and Canadian summer could have certainly been drier, but our Californian autumn has its own attractions.