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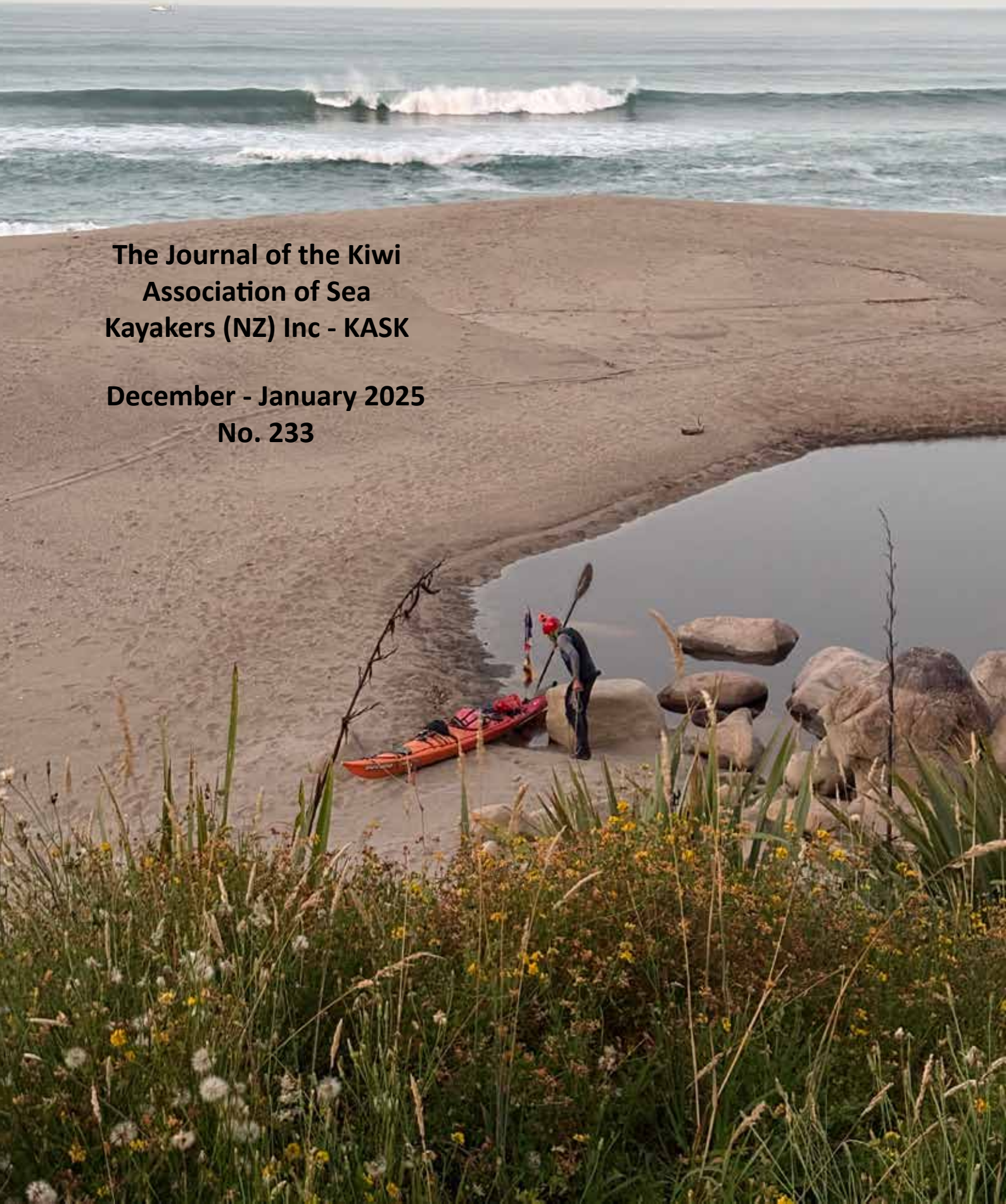
NEW ZEALAND SEA KAYAKER



The Journal of the Kiwi Association of Sea Kayakers (NZ) Inc - KASK

December - January 2025
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The third part of the three part series on the Alaskan book by Paul Caffyn in the next KASK magazine #234

Cover photo:
New Plymouth paddler Brent Sharp has resumed his South Island circumnavigation from Kohaikai Bluff (Karamea) on 20th January and has reached Paturau where he is now waiting for a calm sea before heading for Farewell Spit
By Paul Caffyn

Editing and Layout:
Jacquie James
Email: jacquie@kask.co.nz
Proofing: Peter Van Kuyk

President's Report
By Steve Cooper

The Christmas and New Year holidays are about done now, schools are back and the weather is settling more. So, now we can make up for lost paddling time, or, if you've been fortunate over the last few months, keep up the regular paddling!

What better way to kick the year off than a trip to Nelson and Kayak Fest in mid-February. As I sit here writing this, I'm making last minute preparations for the journey south, when you read this, it may well all be over! Hopefully the next issue will be bulging with reports and pictures from a great event and the follow up D'Urville Island and Abel Tasman weeks. (HINT, HINT, please send Jacquie a short. or long, item with your thoughts and/or a few pictures, the organisers deserve it never mind it being of interest to you and other readers.)

The KayakSafe workshops have been progressing well thanks in no small part to the sterling work of Dallas and Kelvin as well as the other volunteer presenters/assistants. We are starting to get more interest from other organisations and I see our safety workshops growing beyond the season of KayakSafe specific workshops, all good for kayaking in New Zealand.

In this issue you will see an article about solo paddling, and I think it's something we should think about carefully before embarking on multi day solo trips, they involve more than simply a number of day trips on consecutive days and are likely to take us into exciting new locations. That's great, so long as you truly are equipped with sufficient experience to deal with all the "excitement" such a trip can entail. It concerns me when people attend a kayaksafe workshop and say they learnt loads and they are planning to paddle solo down the coast of New Zealand (or similar), chances are they should have a bit more experience before such an undertaking and that suggestion is often not well received or understood.

If you're a member of KASK you will have received links to the material for the AGM that we will hold at Kayak Fest, even if you're not attending Kayak Fest I would encourage you to take a look through the material, which includes our updated draft constitution. Let us know your thoughts and submit items for us to consider for the future of KASK.

As always, keep getting out there enjoying the water -- Safe Paddling!

Submissions for magazine #234
25th March 2025

Doubtful Sound: 30 years apart

By Gerard Effeney

In mid-2024 I was sorting through some old boxes of trash and treasure that had long been neglected in the darkest corner of the garage. Hidden inside one was a photo album that featured one of my first New Zealand sea kayaking experiences; a five-day trip in Doubtful Sound in December 1994. The garage clean-up paused as I retired to the couch and reacquainted myself with Doubtful Sound through the photographs and hand-written notes. On the last page, my younger self had written a promise – to return again to this pristine place. It occurred to me that it would soon be exactly 30 years since I made that promise and, despite many visits to NZ over the intervening years, I had not yet returned to Doubtful Sound. A seed was planted and the focus of my upcoming trip to NZ in December 2024 was changed to include Doubtful Sound.

So, this is a story of two trips in Doubtful Sound, exactly 30 years apart.

1994

In the early 1990's I was a young, single, schoolteacher living in Brisbane. During these years of youthful freedom, I would spend as much time as I could in New Zealand, tramping, paddling and mountaineering. 1994 was no exception and in early December, I joined a five-day sea kayaking trip into Doubtful Sound with Fiordland Wilderness Experiences. The group had an international flavour being composed of a Frenchman, two Germans, as Aussie (me) and a local Kiwi guide (Bill Gibson).

Getting into Doubtful Sound was part of the adventure. The early morning staging point was the village of Manapouri where we loaded two double Sea Bears and a single Necky Narpa onto a speedboat and crossed Lake Manapouri to West Arm. The kayaks were then transferred to a trailer, and we loaded our gear into the back of an ancient station wagon for the trip over Wilmont Pass to Deep Cove. We all had our fingers crossed that the brakes on the old car would be up to the task as we descended from the mountain pass into the valley below on NZ's steepest road.





Once in Deep Cove, we prepared to get on the water under blue skies and calm conditions. Having fed the voracious sandflies, we paddled down the sound's main reach passing Elizabeth Island and stopping at a small beach near Olphert Cove for lunch. Our destination and campsite for the first night was a small, sheltered cove opposite the entrance to Crooked Arm. The steep nature of the terrain means that landing sites and places to camp are typically limited to areas where a creek or river joins the fiord. Our tents were pitched amongst moss and ferns, and we carried a huge mosquito net that, once suspended beneath a tree, became our communal cooking area and refuge from the ever-present sandflies.



An early start on day two saw us carrying on down Malaspina Reach with the sound becoming steadily wider with glimpses of the ocean in the distance. We turned into Pendulo Reach to transit one of the most exposed areas of the sound but as conditions were good, we stopped for lunch at a spot with panoramic views across to Secretary Island. From here we headed into Bradshaw Sound and on to our campsite near Macdonell Island, encountering seals and dolphins along the way. We spent two nights at this campsite as it was a good base to explore one of the most picturesque areas of the sound. The campsite featured abundant moss and tree ferns and I think I heard Kiwis during the night. We spent the next day in Gaer Arm and explored up the Camelot River for quite a distance. Dense forest and snow-capped peaks were visual highlights. The next day we set out to retrace our path back to Crooked Arm in cloudy but calm conditions. A highlight of the day was a pod of very friendly and inquisitive dolphins that swam around and under us multiple times. Weather conditions were very changeable and in the main reach we ran before squalls of rain before turning into the calmer waters of Crooked Arm. We chatted with the skipper of a cray fishing boat that was sheltering there and admired the numerous waterfalls plummeting from the sheer cliffs nearby. Blue skies and fresh snow on the peaks greeted us for our last day as we headed back to Deep Cove and then back out to Manapouri where we all went our separate ways. I headed to Wanaka to start a technical mountaineering course in Mount Aspiring National Park.





2024

Thirty years on, I am still living in Brisbane and still making regular trips to NZ. Having decided to revisit Doubtful Sound, and knowing I would be paddling solo, I started a fairly intense period of preparation including the creation of a detailed risk assessment and management document. I got some help to get my roll back up to speed and also expanded and refined my repertoire of self-rescue and other skills to cover a wide range of undesirable events or circumstances. I read all I could about the history and weather of the area, sourcing copies of out-of-print books to fill gaps. I became slightly obsessed with the weather forecasts and reports for the area and monitored the automated weather station near Secretary Island over a couple of months to become familiar with the weather patterns and how forecasts married with recorded conditions. What I was missing though was the local knowledge of how the winds interacted with the complex topography of the sound and to fill that gap, I sought help via the KASK Facebook site. Thanks to AJ for answering my questions. I poured over maps and Google Earth to identify all the places I could potentially land if the need arose. I also tested my cold-water paddling gear in the midst of an Australian heatwave. I was prepared as I could be.

Early December saw me flying from Brisbane to Queenstown with three large duffle bags containing a Feathercraft sea kayak, my paddling gear and camping equipment. Just over 24hrs after leaving home, my bags and I were back in Doubtful Sound's Deep Cove having crossed Lake Manapouri by ferry and then over Wilmont Pass by bus.

Deep Cove was just as I remembered it, but a lot had changed for me since my last visit: happily married for 25 years, two adult children and an increasing amount of grey hair just to name a few. I was also a much more experienced kayaker equipped with some high-tech gear that did not exist 30 years ago (e.g., my GoPro camera and Garmin InReach mini).

Deep Cove was to be my base for the next few days with paddling goals chosen to reflect the weather and available time. I was prepared to spend nights out in the sound if the weather was on my side. Paddling solo meant conversative decisions and initial hopes of going as far afield as Bradshaw and Gaer Arms were curtailed by the weather forecast and so an overnight visit to Crooked and Hall Arms became the goal, with a retreat to Deep Cove before the weather turned

nasty. I left a float plan describing who I was, where I planned to go and how to contact me at the office of the Deep Cove Hostel.

My first full day in Doubtful Sound dawned calm and relatively clear with a promising forecast of light winds and no rain. Having assembled and loaded my kayak, I set out from Deep Cove heading for Crooked Arm. I passed on the northern side of Elizabeth and Fergusson Islands and after a couple of short stops, crossed the main reach to its southern side near the base of Chamberlain Falls, all in easy conditions. The falls are fed from Lake Chamberlain, about 700m above, making it one of NZ's tallest waterfalls/ cascades. It was possible to paddle very close to the tall cliff-faces here.

A headwind and slight swell provided some variation to the paddling conditions as I continued on to the entrance of Crooked Arm. The twisted nature of Crooked Arm makes this an area of outstanding beauty with vertiginous peaks all around, often shrouded in tendrils of mist and cloud.

I explored the arm for some distance, filling my water bottles from a convenient waterfall and backtracked to the first large bay. A high tide allowed me to get in close to the shore, but I could not see any indications of where previous visitors might have come ashore or camped. Some scouting on foot was required and I fairly quickly located a level, but damp spot. I was not convinced that this was the best option, but it was good enough. I slung my fly with integrated mesh walls between two trees and pitched my tent underneath. This arrangement provided a double layer of protection from the resident sandflies. The only time I opened the door of my tent was to go to bed. The three sandflies that came in with me were quickly dispatched and I had a good night's sleep.

A chorus of birdsong accompanied the breaking dawn, and I took my time to pack up and get on the water in cool and misty conditions. The forecast was for increasing winds and heavy rain by late afternoon, so my plan was to head back towards Deep Cove visiting Hall Arm on the way. I stopped in the middle of Crooked Arm for a long time to enjoy the morning silence, surrounded by mirrored reflections of the mountains on the water. A magical experience.

By mid-afternoon I was exploring the delights of Hall Arm. I knew the weather was beginning to turn for the worse, but this was confirmed







by a call on VHF from the manager of the Deep Cove hostel who relayed the recently issued gale warning. Conditions in the main reach were beginning to deteriorate as I exited from Hall Arm. It was time to head for shelter and having made the short crossing to the lee of Rola Island, I admired the Rata trees in bloom and then ran with the wind the short distance into Deep Cove. A storm raged overnight with heavy rain, lightning and thunder that shook the building.

Morning brought classic Fiordland conditions with steady rain leading to the formation of countless waterfalls. Surprisingly, there was little wind and so I launched again from Deep Cove and spent a lovely morning in the rain exploring the waterfalls of the Deep Cove area out to Rola Island before the wind picked up and conditions deteriorated again. I retreated to Deep Cove and dismantled my kayak in readiness for the bus and ferry trip out the following morning. More heavy rain fell overnight accompanied by strong winds. On the morning bus ride over Wilmot Pass, the clouds parted to reveal fresh snow on the nearby peaks.

In contrast to my first visit to Doubtful Sound, I didn't see any seals or dolphins. This was probably due to not making it out into the more distant parts of the sound or perhaps I was in the right places, but at the wrong time of day. The amount of time spent in Doubtful on this visit was too short. This was a result of my travel dates being already locked in place when I switched my destination to Doubtful Sound.

Will there be a third visit? Absolutely, and I'm not waiting another 30 years! Next time will be for a minimum of 6-8 days, possibly later in summer. The use of Feathercraft folding kayaks reduces the logistical challenges of accessing Deep Cove. I simply purchased a return ticket to Deep Cove with RealNZ and paid extra for my additional bags as freight (the price was based on a uniquely New Zealand unit of measurement; the volumetric equivalent of a banana box…. I paid for 6). Deep Cove Hostel exceeded my expectations with excellent facilities in a great location.

As a foreigner, travelling solo with a kayak in a bag, I was conscious that to the average person I could easily be mistaken for an eccentric weirdo (best case) to someone who needs to be saved from themselves and not permitted to proceed (worst case). I was therefore fairly circumspect about my intentions when making my bookings with the mainstream travel providers. I did leave a float plan with detailed descriptions of my kayak and paddling gear, methods of communication and next of kin contacts with the hostel manager in Deep Cove. This level of planning was well received as it seems there is a fairly steady stream of ill-prepared adventurers who bite off more than they can chew resulting in local personnel and resources being drawn into search operations.

After my return to civilisation, I rendezvoused with my wife in Queenstown (she flew in with another Feathercraft and a pair of packrafts). We paddled the Rees River in our packrafts before making our way up to the Abel Tasman National Park via the West Coast. The contrast between sea kayaking in Abel Tasman and Doubtful Sound was significant. We hadn't visited Abel Tasman for quite a while, and we spent a couple of very enjoyable days exploring the interesting coastline with numerous seals, dolphins and occasional penguin. While the area was host to the greatest concentration of sea kayakers I have ever seen, we chose the less popular campsites away from the walking tracks and never felt crowded.

PS. Thanks to Chris Henshaw and Steve Cooper from KASK who helped get my NZ VHF callsign sorted out.

Solo Paddling - Experience: the safety net

By Stuart Trueman

Foreword By Steve Cooper

I have recently been informed by a few, relatively new, paddlers about their plans to undertake some relatively long solo trips and asked to offer my comments. The first alarm bell for me is that they were asking me! I've done a fair bit of paddling in general and consider myself to be a reasonably competent paddler. I often go out in my kayak on my own for the day, but generally in my local area to known locations. I am not, in my mind, a solo kayaker so I don't consider myself to be the right person to offer advice about others plans for solo trips. I thought I'd ask someone who is qualified to talk on the subject.

Stuart Trueman was the third person to circumnavigate Australia by sea kayak and he did this solo and un-supported and so clearly his views on solo kayaking, in the current times, with all the advantages that modern equipment provide are worth listening too. If anyone knows what it requires of a paddler to complete solo trips successfully then Stuart should be worth listening to: So I asked for his views, here they are:

Nobody has to justify why they paddle in a group; nobody who paddles solo asks other solo paddlers why. Depending on your mindset, Solo or Group trips will appeal.

Sea kayaking as part of a group has many advantages over solo kayaking; most importantly, it's social. You learn quicker; the safety net is increased; you will be inspired and motivated through others. Anxiety and doubt are absorbed by the group as you become part of a team.

Without a doubt, my most enjoyable trips have been group trips; however, complications multiply with every paddler added to a group, so some trips may have to be solo if they are to happen at all.

Solo kayaking is a freedom, giving a sense of achievement acknowledging that all aspects of the trip have been addressed by you. When paddling alone, I am more able to absorb the environment, focus on where I am and where I am going. I make all the decisions.

You are, however, alone in an environment where skills, experience and equipment are what's keeping you alive.

If you had decided on paragliding before sea kayaking, you wouldn't just read a book before jumping off a cliff; the dangers are obvious. Sea kayaking doesn't have such a dramatic and obvious risk; it can be subtle.

We can be enticed further out than we perhaps should as the weather or tides change, night draws on and we get tired.

After group trips, paddlers going solo find that all those helping hands to carry kayaks and kit have gone. The reassuring group meeting after the weather forecast, discussing the days plans are not happening.

When you are tired, hungry, nervous or in doubt, there is nobody else. It's less complicated, but without anyone to share the load everything is harder.

Experience allows both obvious and subtle skills to develop. These skills are the foundations of

what replaces the group. The obvious skills are: what conditions can I expect with this weather, how far, how fast will I be moving, etc..

Without this experience you are still learning what you and your kit are capable of; you are experimenting in a harsh environment.

More subtle are the lessons learnt from an awareness of change, sensing when things are going wrong. Without this awareness, by the time you realise that the days plans need to change, it could be too late.

It's not going to plan; it's the first time you have been in this situation, so your options to overcome it are theoretical, something you read about once. You don't know what you don't know.

A climber once advised, "Do the Big Stuff before you know too much."

An irresistible impatience to accelerate progress towards your goals may make going solo appealing and you could take on big solo trips before your experience has caught up with your ambition. A gradual approach helps keep experience in step with progress.

Start with social paddles. More paddlers mean more chances of the unexpected, but also much more combined experience to deal with it. We learn through our mistakes, which can be tough when you are on your own, so learn with others.

See what works for other paddlers and take on board what's useful for you. Push yourself on adventurous group trips and keep learning. Evolve your solo kayaking in areas you are familiar with and have paddled before.

Use the local marine rescue to log in and out. (Log a Trip Report with Coastguard in NZ speak).

Reflect after each trip: Did you get what you wanted from the day, or are you just grateful it's over? If objectives were achieved, nothing forgotten, broken, and nothing you couldn't handle, then step it up.

Tripping over time while rushing towards a deadline could be the difference between adventure and misadventure. Regardless of mindset, consider the balance of progress, experience and safety as you progress towards your goals.

Paul Caffyn Around Alaska - Part II

Bears & Diabolical Deltas!

False Pass to Nome

30 June - 10 August 1990



Stranded in darkness by a drying tide, I used the spare paddle to dig a moat and build a platform on which I could lay out the aluminium space blanket, inflatable mattress and sleeping bag. And then wait for the tide to come back in

Bering Sea - The Sea of Bears

I found the Bering Sea a total contrast to the heaving grey seas of the Gulf of Alaska. For the next few weeks, as I headed north-east along the top side of the Alaska Peninsula, the sea was often choppy but there was never a serious swell. I bumped into big mobs of both fishermen and brown bears during those weeks. Early to mid-July was prime time both for the Bristol Bay salmon fishery and big brown bears fishing the river mouths for salmon that had escaped fishermen's nets.

For five years, during the planning of the Alaska trip, I undertook a heap of research and corresponded with Alaskans to find the best way to protect myself from black and brown bears. In early August 1980, a black bear attacked, killed and ate a 27 year old solo Folboat paddler in the Glacier Bay area near Juneau. All that remained of the poor chap was, 'an intact skull, shoulder blade, long bones and 4-inch section of spinal cord.'

For dealing with bears, I learned there were two polarized schools of thought which I termed the 'Rambo offensive' and the 'common sense' approaches. The Rambo offensive school involved being equipped with a small arsenal, stopping short of heavy artillery. Heavy gauge rifles, pump action shotguns or powerful handguns were carried as bear protection. Kayak tour operators working out of Ketchikan and Juneau in S.E. Alaska carried pump action shotguns on every trip as the ultimate deterrent to black and brown bear attacks. However, I foresaw a few minor problems if I carried a heavy gauge weapon in the cockpit - firstly shaking fingers could discharge a weapon as I pulled it out, blasting a humongous hole in the hull, and secondly a poorly aimed wounding shot (shaking fingers again) would just really piss a bear right off. In my case, the overriding factor was the Caffyn minimalist weight factor - a weapon and projectiles were far too heavy to carry in the kayak.

The common sense school of thought involved applying many of principles that I'd used when camping in the saltwater crocodile country of tropical Australia. For bears it involved not camping either at the mouth of a salmon stream or alongside a bear trail, keeping food well away from the tent, and keeping well away from a sow and her cubs. My tongue in cheek game plan, for dealing with a charging brown bear,



My very first morning in the Bering Sea; a big brown bear wombling down the beach towards me.

was to turn around, drop my survival suit, bare my posterior and the charging grizzly would find the sight 'unbearable'. This plan changed dramatically when I first saw how fast the brown bears could gallop.

In 1989, I did in fact carry a can of a new product called *Counter Assault*. An aerosol spray, it contained capsicum, which affects the respiratory system, mucous membranes and eyes. Tests in a laboratory environment and a few outside tests on rogue dump bears were very effective. Prior to the 1990 trip, a chap approached me after a slide show in Bellingham and asked what I was taking to deal with bears. When I told him *Counter Assault*, he offered to lend me a can of *Cap Stun*, which was the military/police version with a higher concentration of capsicum. He only had one can left as the Bellingham police had used up all their stock to quell a riot at the local jail. I took up his offer with alacrity as I reckoned rioting prisoners were probably far more dangerous than brown bears.

Each night when I camped on a beach with heaps of bear sign, either tracks and/or scat (dung), I made sure the can of Cap Stun was beside me. I heard two stories about the misuse of Counter Assault. All the field workers employed by Exxon during the oil spill clean-up were issued with a can. One lass was playing with her can in a large Bell helicopter that was dropping her crew into a remote beach. She triggered a very short burst, which debilitated not only all the passengers but also the pilot and came ever so close to causing a fatal crash. The second story was about a chap who thought the spray was not to be used to spray at charging bears but as a deterrent when used like a personal underarm deodorant spray. A vivid imagination can picture his response.

During the 89 days of the 1990 trip, I saw a total of 40 brown bears, one black bear, and had two brown bears bump into my tent during the hours of darkness. Alaska is still considered the frontier state of the USA and as such it is still attracting what I call a 'red neck' element from the lower 48. A maximum bag limit of 2,000 brown bears was in operation in 1990, that is up to 2,000 could be killed by trophy head and skin hunters. Larger bears don't stand much of a chance with guides and red neck trophy hunters searching for them by float plane. Thus, most of the bears I saw only needed to smell the slightest whiff of my scent and they were off over dune ridges.

One morning in the Bering Sea, three big brown bears were slowly plodding along the beach, with a spacing of about 50 feet between them. An onshore breeze was blowing. When my scent wafted to the first bear, he immediately stood on his hind legs and scanned the upwind horizon until he spotted my paddling motion. He dropped to four legs and galloped out of sight over the dune ridge. The two bears following behind repeated his action and I wished I'd had a video camera to record their reaction. I'm sure I didn't smell too badly.

All the literature about camping in bear country describes climbing trees to escape from charging bears and hanging all food suspended in bags from a line between two trees. I'm positive the writers had never visited the Alaska Peninsula or the Bering Sea coast. For, as a Bristol Bay salmon fisherman told me,



The crew of a Bristol Bay salmon boat.



"Women are as scarce as trees up here". In this area, the topography consists of rolling tundra flats, with the nearest tree hundreds of miles away.

All I could do in the treeless tundra country was cook outside the tent and keep my food in the air-tight kayak compartments. Unfortunately, the night at Middle Bluff in Bristol Bay when a brown bear clawed its way into my tent, a near gale-force southerly wind was blowing. I'd backed the tent hard against the base of a big dune ridge. There was plenty of bear sign on the beach, huge plate-size paw tracks and scat or big piles of dung, so I built my usual Caffyn's patent pending 'bearicade' around the tent. This was whatever I could fabricate from driftwood, the kayak and paddle, so I would know if a bear was approaching too close to the tent. Unfortunately, because of the southerly wind, I had to move the MSR cooker and billy under the tent fly so they wouldn't be blown away, and lash the paddle to the kayak decklines.

Two hours after midnight, I was dead to the world, sound asleep with the alarm set for 3:00 am. With a horrendous sound of ripping tent fabric, I woke instantly. Realizing instantly it was a bloody great brown bear, I yelled, "Get out of it!" with just a tad of tremolo in my voice.

Quickly I groped around in the dark to find my glasses and the head torch. There was no need to unzip the tent door, since there was now a gaping hole through which I exited the tent. When I yelled out, the bear had fallen backwards over the kayak, then galloped over the dune ridge. It was only when shining the torch at the flapping streamers of nylon that I realized its



11 July, Middle Bluff in Bristol Bay. The damage to the tent from the early morning bear attack.

claws had missed my face by inches. The aluminium wind-shield of the MSR cooker had been flattened by the bear's paw.

Next morning I wasn't quite sure of what to do next. I didn't have enough duct tape to effect repairs. My needle and dental floss could keep some of the weather out but I still had over 1,000 miles to paddle to reach Nome. Caching the kayak in long grass, I set off with the rolled up tent under my arm to walk 15 miles back towards a fish camp in the hope of finding some duct tape or a sewing machine. I'd only covered 100 yards when a *Piper Cub* dropped out of the sky and landed on the beach beside me. The previous day I'd chatted to Brad Heile on a beach where he'd landed for a break from salmon spotting. After I explained my predicament with the shredded tent, Brad said, "Jump in, we'll have breakfast in town and see what we can do about the tent."

It was the start of a magic day. Brad worked on charter as a salmon spotter to a small fleet of drift net salmon boats. As we flew up Bristol Bay, we passed over a horde of small but fast fishing boats, all jockeying for position to set their nets. It looked like the start of the Whitbread yacht race in Auckland except that



Brad Heile with this ***Piper Cub*** salmon spotter

ramming and towing of other boat's nets were accepted practice.

A maximum of 1,500 vessels was allowed to work this lucrative fishery. Some 30 million fish returned to these waters to spawn each summer, and 50 to 60% of these were caught within a three to four day period. Average catch per boat was 100,000 pounds according to Brad, for an average initial cash return of $1.25 per pound. It is no wonder that permits went for a top price of $275,000. In a six week period, fishermen made enough money to live comfortably for the rest of the year.

Brad shouted me a yummy non-dehi breakfast at the Red Dog Inn in Naknek and we found both duct tape and a sewing machine at one of the large canneries. With the tent patched, we went salmon spotting for a few hours and then Brad flew inland to a huge lake where we watched salmon looking for sheltered sites to lay their eggs. Late evening, Brad dropped me back to Middle Bluff and I made sure a large bearicade was in place before I crashed for the night. A magic day.

Walrus

On 5 July, I had seen six brown bears during the morning and as I neared the vertical grey cliffs of Cape Seniavin, I was puzzled by a strange reddish band at the cliff base. Paddling closer, there appeared to be a cloud of steam hovering above this reddish band. Only when long white, curving tusks became visible did I realize I was looking at a very large mob of walrus. They were all clustered together, lying side by side, for warmth and company, all bull or male walrus with an immense body weight up to 1.5 tons. Their long ivory tusks, which can grow up to three feet long, and weigh up to 12 pounds apiece, were used for hauling out on ice, digging up the seabed for shellfish, fighting, keeping breathing holes in the ice open and for defence against polar bears, killer whales and man.



Cape Seniavin, 5 July. A summer haul out beach for male walrus. A magic encounter in the Bering Sea

Wary at first of how the walrus would react to the kayak, I drifted past with the wind, taking photographs. When I paddled close to the beach, the whole mob lumbered into the sea. I was surrounded by whiskery faces as they swam near the kayak.

Wounded walrus or cows protecting their young have been known to attack umiaks and kayaks. Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen in their frail kayaks were attacked several times by walrus in 1895 and 1896 as they paddled through the Arctic sea ice to Franz Joseph Land.

In former years, when walrus were hunted by the Inuit, nearly every part of the walrus was used. The skin was used for umiaks and floor coverings, the meat was eaten, blubber was burnt for heating, light and cooking, the intestines were used for parkas and window panes, and the tusks for hunting implements and carving. Sadly, today, the tourist dollar has changed the hunting of the walrus into taking only of the ivory tusks for carving. Heads were chain-sawed off while the rest of the body was left to float distended onto shore. In 1990, I was saddened by the sight of so many smelly, rotten headless carcasses washed up on the beaches.

The Diabolical Delta Country

With a relatively smooth 50-mile crossing of Bristol Bay astern, I thought I was home and hosed with no major drama before Nome. But my pre-trip research left me totally unprepared for the most diabolical of torments known to a sea kayaker, the vast sprawling mud flats of the Kuskokwim and Yukon deltas. I had expected tidal flats during the Alaskan trip but not extending up to 10 miles offshore.

I found the mental stress of dealing with shallow muddy water off the Yukon and Kuskokwim river deltas far worse than the violence of bumper/dumper surf landings in the Gulf of Alaska. My pet mild derogatory phrase coined to describe the problems I encountered was 'the diabolical deltas.'

One lady I met who had worked at a village school in the delta country sympathized with me over problems with drying mud flats, mosquitoes and the soggy, spongy tundra. She politely called this delta country the 'Armpit of Alaska.' I suggested that anatomically wise, it would be better termed the arsehole of Alaska. Embarrassed to relate how I'd spent two nights camped out on the mud flats when left stranded by an ebbing tide, I was relieved to hear her say, "Oh everyone round here has spent at least one night out on the mud flats."



30 July, Flat Island, Yukon River mouth. The Alstrom family at their summer fish camp.



24 July, Tununak; Paul with one of the few old traditional style Hooper Bay kayaks he saw in 1990

No wonder the fishermen I met off the delta front were always in a hurry. They always stopped to look at the long yellow kayak but I never had a chance to ask more than one question about what lay ahead before they would say, "I'm in a hurry to catch the tide." The fisherman all wore ski goggles to keep spray out of their eyes as they planed their aluminium skiffs over short dirty seas off the shallow delta front.

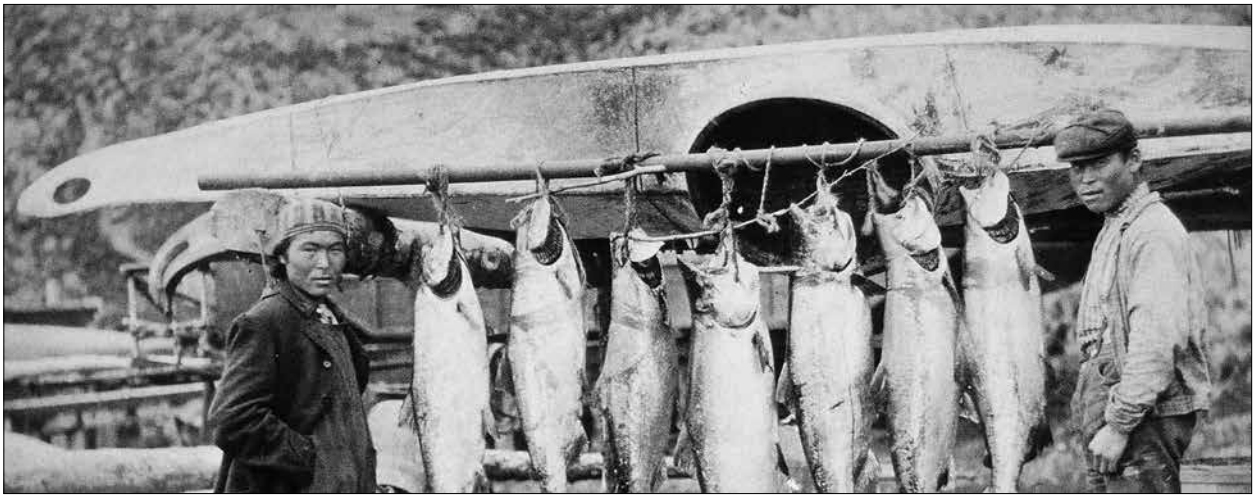
My main problem was a diurnal tidal cycle in the deltas, only one big flood tide and one ebb per 24-hour tidal cycle. The more common cycle worldwide is a semi diurnal cycle, with roughly two six-hour flood and two six-hour ebb cycles per 24-hour period. In Etolin Strait, my map showed tidal flats drying out 10 miles offshore. When I tried to sneak through Etolin Strait, with an overnight paddle on a big flood tide, the ebb tide sucked out at 2:45 am leaving me stranded high and dry on the mud flats.

Using the blade of my spare paddle, I scooped up a platform of damp sand some three inches high, spread out the aluminium space blanket, inflatable mattress and holofill sleeping bag. Propping the kayak on its side, I slept with my head in the cockpit, where my paddling clothes were stashed in case of a very quick inundation by the flood tide. Then I tried to catch a few hours sleep before the flood tide scampered back across the flats. In daylight next morning, I could see neither sea nor coast, I was so far offshore.

Needless to say, my relief at reaching the gravel beaches and rocky shores at Stebbins was immense. For many nights afterwards, even when camped on dry ground, I experienced nightmares of waking on mud flats with the sea inundating my tent and sleeping bag.

Old Skin Boats

Part of the reason why I chose to paddle around Alaska was that it was the first area I had visited where skin boats were utilized for centuries as the main method of transportation. Various types of sealskin-covered kayaks evolved according to the vagaries of local sea and weather conditions. I was keen to photograph any surviving skin boats and talk to the Inuit hunters about their traditional hunting and paddling techniques.



What the Hooper Bay skin kayaks were used for in the old days - salmon fishing. Big cockpits, a hole at the bow and a lifting lug at the stern to help carry the kayak



27 July: so good to see the enthusiasm of the Hooper Bay village kids to try out my kayak and paddle



A backyard meqiq or wash-house for the family since there was no running water in the village

In the light of my trip, I hoped to evolve ideas and theories as to why specific designs had developed in different areas.

I was disappointed to find that aluminium skiffs and powerful outboard motors have totally superseded the ancient skin boats of coastal Alaska. I did see three beautifully crafted wooden frames of the Bering Sea kayaks at the Yupik villages of Tununak and Hooper Bay but these relics of a past era were not being given the tender loving care and attention that they deserved. Covered for the last time with canvas, a more durable skin than seal-skin, the rotting cloth hung in tatters. It was obvious the boats had not been near saltwater for years.

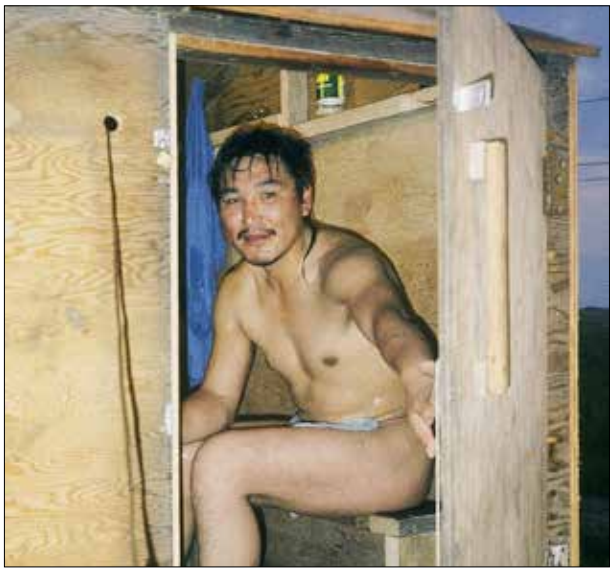
However, I was tickled by the response of the Yupiq kids to my kayak. When I surfed to shore at Hooper Bay, I was quickly surrounded by a mob of excited kids who helped carry the boat clear of the beach. Boys and girls alike all wanted to try out the cockpit and feel the weight of the paddle. I can only hope my trip stimulated a resurgence of interest in the old skin boats.

Steam Baths

I felt privileged at Hooper Bay to be invited by a Yupik family for a meqiq or steam bath. Since there was no running water in the smaller Eskimo villages, cleansing of the whole family was carried out in a steam bath. I was told that each village has an elder whose tolerance to heat was greater than anyone else. There was talk also of an invisible belt that is tightened as the temperature and humidity rise and how the elder, as he tipped another pitcher of water over the hot rocks, emitted a low throaty chuckle while lesser mortals hugged the floor where the steamy heat was not as bad.

Each house at Hooper Bay seemed to have its own meqiq out the back. They looked not much bigger than a kid's playhouse, with a small entrance door at one end and a chimney at the other end. The small door led into a tiny cubicle where I stripped off my clothes. Before entering the steam room, I was given a bowl of cold water and a tube of thin sticks wrapped in cloth. Instructed to soak the tube in the bowl of water and then breathe though it, I was starting to wonder what I had let myself in for. I was told it was to stop the hot air burning my throat and lungs. In the steam room, a 44-gallon drum with an outside fire box had a steel mesh on top which supported a layer of volcanic rocks.

The wooden walls and floor were scorching hot to my buttocks and back, but worse was to come when Frankie poured a can of water over the rocks. A wall of steaming heat hit me and I lasted only 90 seconds before exiting into the wee cubicle. The others followed me and after cooling off we made several more forays into the steaming heat. The men boasted of the marvellous medicinal and recuperative powers of steam baths. The benefits for me were twofold. I slept like a log for the rest of the night and all the mud



Frankie had a higher tolerance for the steamy heat in the backyard Hoooper Bay meqiq - then Paul!



Traditional Hooper Bay style kayaks alongside the US Revenue cutter *Bear* in 1919, off Nome and ready for trading

and silt that my body had absorbed in the Kuskokwim delta was cleared from my skin pores.

Last Days to Nome

Whether it was this relief or a marked improvement in the weather, I knocked back the last 180 miles from Unalakleet to Nome in only four days, averaging a creditable 45 miles per day. And the last day into Nome was a veritable hummer. The wind at last swung onto my stern quarter allowing me to indulge in some early morning surfing. As the sun rose, the wind eased and the day warmed up. I ended up stripped down to just capilene long johns, hat and polaroids. When the sea went off, I was able to take off the sprayskirt. I was jogging along, conditioning my brain that this was indeed the very last day of the 1990 trip and trying to prepare for the anticipated post-trip depression, when I passed an aluminium skiff grounded on a beach. An elderly Inupiaq couple from Nome had been out berry picking and we chatted about time and tide. The conversation went something like:

"Where did you come from?"

"I started this year at Juneau."

The chap shook his head slowly in disbelief.

"Where are you heading for?"

"I'm finishing this year's trip at Nome today."

"Well, where do you hope to get to?"

"Next year I want to follow the ice pack north to Barrow and then along to Inuvik in the Mackenzie delta."

There was a lengthy pause here as the chap began to comprehend the full length of the task I had set myself. He then looked me squarely in the eyes and said slowly, "Well, you better put some clothes on then." It really broke me up, and we laughed for ages.

At 8:00 pm that evening, 10 August 1990, I entered the turning basin at Nome and landed on a scrap of sandy beach, ending 89 days and 2,760 miles of paddling. No one was expecting me. I asked an elderly Inuit chap if he would take my photograph by the kayak. I didn't experience an overwhelming feeling of elation or relief. The weather was so good on that last day, I felt I didn't want to stop.

Summary for 1990 Trip

Distance Covered	:	2,756 miles Elfin Cove to Nome
Start to Finish time	:	89 days
Rest & Recuperation days	:	8
Weather-bound days	:	2
All up average	:	31 miles per day
Paddling day average	:	35 miles per day

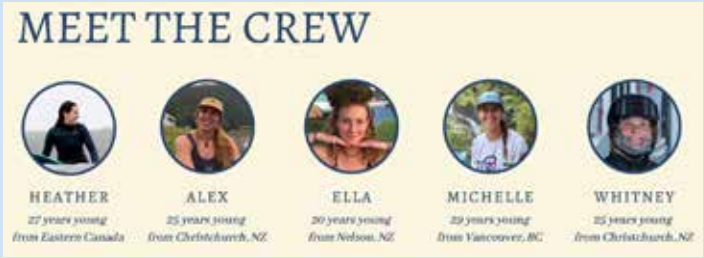


Paul after completing the 1990 paddle at Nome

The Passage Paddle

A Journey of 5 Gals Embarking on an Adventure of a Lifetime.
To Inspire & Empower!





In May 2025 a group of 5 epic wahine are embarking on an expedition of a lifetime. A voyage consisting of 1 coastline, 2 countries, a whole lot of kilometres to paddle, laughter to be had and tears to be shared. Where it all started was in Abel Tasman National Park, New Zealand. Over the past 2 years we all worked as sea kayak guides sharing a beautiful office, building friendships, sharing dreams & memories.
Our journey in the sea kayaking world has had a massive impact on all of us. The ability to connect to our land, explore, and reach some of the most rugged & remote places only accessible by kayak. Slowing down, being present moment to moment. Stripping back to simplicity and creating a space away from the sometimes chaotic world we live in. Building trust, courage & confidence within ourselves and others, allowing us to transfer this knowledge into our everyday lives. The community that is created around this activity is something special. There's not many people you can float crazy ideas to and have no questions asked apart from when and where.
This being said an idea was floated around about paddling the inside passage as a female crew. We all united with similar passions & values jumping at the opportunity to paddle together. Things quickly got underway and plans were being made.
This leads us to our project The Passage Paddle. To inspire, encourage and share the stoke of all things adventure. Especially for women looking to immerse themselves in the outdoor space. Also acknowledging and protecting the lands we pass through while sharing our efforts to have minimal impacts.
We will be leaving from Telegraph Cove on Vancouver Island, Canada in May 2025 and paddling north following the inside and middle passages until we reach Skagway, Alaska in September 2025. We will explore the intricate coastline and along the way hope to connect with various communities, sharing and collecting unique stories from the diverse voices of the coast and our journey along the way.
As five experienced outdoor guides, we hope to share the power of the energy and determination women can hold, and take on the challenges that this paddle will present.





Recent photos

By Oliver Winkler



A midweek evening paddle from Sumner to Godley Head with the Canterbury Sea Kayaking Network



Ian kicking off the annual Canterbury Sea Kayaking Networks' training weekend



Nick instructing a group on rock gardening between East Head and Pa Island



Paddling past a big sea stack at West Head



Paddling past East Head of Okains bay on an evening paddle of the Canterbury sea kayaking network's annual training weekend







Campfire on Fairy beach

Brent is Back - in the South Island

by Paul Caffyn
photos: Brent and Sharon Sharp

New Plymouth paddler, Brent Sharp, is back on the water this summer aiming to finish the West Coast stage of his South Island solo circumnavigation and possibly his South Island circuit.

Brent has a wealth of nautical experience, from skippering really big vessels around the world, tankers and cargo boats, having graduated from a Mate's certificate to a Skipper's certificate. But it was a sit-on-top fishing kayak that brought Brent much closer to sea level than the bridge of a big ship. He and an older friend often headed offshore fishing for tuna from New Plymouth on their sit-on-tops. However, after reading a copy of *The Dreamtime Voyage*, Brent admitted he was buggered! He bought a proper sea kayak and made a tentative start to a North Island circuit with a short paddle north from New Plymouth.

His red plastic kayak's name is *Secala*. Born in Motueka, Brent's family moved to Fiji when he was two years old. His kayak name is the Fijian name for the white collared kingfisher.

Brent's website is a delight to follow his paddling missions, with a corker mix of still photos, text descriptions and short video clips:
seacalakayakadventures.com

On 25 September 2020, Brent completed a solo circuit of the North Island. He had launched from New Plymouth (his home port) on 20 September 2017 but constrained by time off from work, he made the North Island circuit in a series of 20 stages, always in a clockwise direction and always starting each stage from where he last finished. A total of 2,860 kms in 78 paddling days with his wife Sharon as on-shore support.

On 7 February 2021, Brent kicked off a South Island circuit from Monkey Island, at the eastern end of Te Waewae Bay, heading westwards for Puysegur Point then up the unrelenting Fiordland coast. He arrived in Milford Sound on 12 March. Wild weather and big seas had lived up to their well-deserved reputation with Brent holed up on shore for 18 days, only able to paddle safely on 12 days.

On 17 February 2024, Brent resumed his South Island mission from Milford, heading north to Jackson Bay and then northwards up the West Coast.

By 1 March, Brent had landed at Hokitika however a huge low in the south Tasman Sea developed a huge 5 – 6 metre swell along the West Coast. It gave Brent a well-deserved break from paddling.

After Brent successfully crossed the Grey River bar on 7 March, we had a great catch up over a beer or two and I had the opportunity to inspect his paddling safety kit. On this PFD, he had a *Garmin InReach* tracker, a PLB and his VHF radio set. Via the Garmin, Sharon is able to track Brent's progress on her cellphone. All three items had doubled up waterproof cases with lanyards attached. In his midships kayak compartment, Brent carried his cellphone, while in expedition mode he has a solar panel to charge a power bank, which had two USB charging ports.

I had to tell Brent about the good old communication days of the late 70s when we used mirrors for signalling from shore to kayak. For the 1978/79 North Island circuit, our new and improved (larger) signalling device was a piece of a broken mirror that Bruce Annabell has scrounged from the Patea dump.

Brent launched from the Grey River wave trap on 8 March, almost airborne off one big breaker and made the 40 miles (64 kms) to Fox River by late afternoon. Trashed next morning whilst trying to break out, he took a day off. On 10 March Brent launched easily for a long paddle up the rugged gneiss (nice) cliffed coast for Cape Foulwind, with a sharp turn to the east to the Buller River bar.

My expedition paddling mate Conrad was visiting for the weekend. Our cunning plan was for Conrad to paddle out from the Buller River at Westport in his Nordkapp to meet Brent off the cape. My role was to ensure the beers were cold when the paddlers arrived up the river.

That was the plan. For a coast that trends north to north-west from Puysegur Point to Farewell Spit, Buller Bay trends east-west with the river bar in the

very middle. Twin, long breakwaters project due north-south. Sheltered in the lee of Cape Foulwind from the prevailing ground swell, the Buller River bar used to be quite kayaker friendly. Back in 1985, while training for the Round Japan trip, I was working in the Buller Coalfield and, while based in a motel close to the river, after work I would paddle downriver, over the bar and out to sea for an hour, returning at dusk. I never had an issue when crossing the river bar.

For the heart stopping drama of two paddlers making their individual crossings of the Buller River bar, see *New Zealand Sea Kayaker* magazine No. 228, February - March 2024. With advice via his VHF radio, Brent did a big dogleg to the east missing the offshore bar breakers while Conrad (whose VHF didn't work) took a beeline on the river entry transit markers and looped most spectacularly. After such a long time with his kayak upside down, Conrad pulled off a successful re-entry and roll. His battery pump clearing the cockpit of water and then he paddled up the river, rather waterlogged. Worst of all, Conrad lost his favourite hat.

North from Westport, there are no sheltered lee landings. A mix of steeply shelving sandy beaches with monstrous surf breaks and a rocky shoreline and occasional reef breaks. From Westport, Brent paddled north to land at Waimaire, close to the mouth of the Mokihinui River. The video clip of this continuous surfing ride to shore is a long dry-mouth stunner of delicate balancing and boisterous bracing. Brent definitely deserved a beer after that ride through the surf!

On 14 March he broke out through surf from Waimarie. On a growing swell and an ebbing tide, he effected a bouncy entry to the Little Wanganui River bar, at the south end of the Karamea flats. This really is the only decent lee landing before rounding Farewell Spit into the security of Golden Bay.



Brent crossing the bar of the Little Wanganui River mouth on 14 March.



Brent Sharp cresting the offshore bar break at Waimarie on 14 March 2024

On 18 March he headed down river, over the bar, aiming for the road end at the Kohaihai River mouth, where the Heaphy Track starts its journey through the hinterland to Golden Bay. It was as far north as Sharon could drive north on the West Coast and is the usual starting point for paddlers heading north for Kahurangi Point and the start of Farewell Spit.

Kohaihai River mouth

Really steep golden sandy beaches set an intimidating scene for surf launching and landings northwards from the Kohaihai road end, most unlike the shallow shelving beaches to the south. Golden sandy beaches allude to images of the Abel Tasman National Park but these beaches to the north could have a book written about the very few sea kayakers attempting to paddle this coast.

Tara Mulvany's epic five day separation from her paddling partner Sim Griggs off the Heaphy River mouth is an absolute classic of nasty surf and eventual serendipity (See *A Winter's Paddle* 2007 by Tara Mulvany).

A steep gradient beach at high tide means nasty bumper dumpers rearing up and breaking with great violence. At low tide, those nasty bumper dumpers migrate seawards to the first offshore sand bar. Equal violence in slightly deeper water.

The tide was low when Brent neared the back of a line of huge breakers off the Kohaihai road end. Timing is so critical with landing through big surf. Sprinting in the aftermath of a big set, then broaching quickly to ride in with the broken waves. Heading straight for the beach invites a spectacular but violent loop when the kayak bow digs in as a brake.

Brent's entry to the beach was indeed most spectacular and violent as the photos from his wife Sharon show. In the old days, we called such a turbulent landing as being 'washing machined'! Upside down, jerked



Brent heading for shore off the road end at the Kohaihai River mouth, about to be monstered by a huge wave on the offshore bar break - 18 March 2024

from side to side, and very hard to tell which is the right way up. And holding on to those two vital bits, your breath and your paddle. Brent's brand new term for being seriously thrashed during a surf landing was 'being spanked!'.

That 'being spanked' landing marked the end of Brent's 2024 West Coast mission.



Brent well and truly spanked in the aftermath of that monster breaker

2025 - North from Kohaihai

The West Coast experienced a really wet 2024 spring, barely a day without rainfall of near biblical proportions. In August the Met Office predicated a 50% chance of a La Nina summer weather pattern – is that hedging their bets or what? By November, it was downgraded to less than 25% chance. We however on the West Coast predicted a corker spring, which kicked in at Xmas when the rain tap turned off.

Our emails crossed in mid-January. I advised Brent that settled drought like conditions were prevailing on formerly the 'Wet Coast' with an ideal time to finish the top end of the South Island. Brent advised he and Sharon were on their way to Karamea.

After waiting on 19 January for northerly headwinds to ease, Brent launched at 8:00 am next morning near the Kohaihai road end but had a cruel dousing in the shore break. He emailed:

> I got dumped twice by the Kohaihai shore break, before really getting off the beach. The first time was a miscalculation on my part. I wasn't quite far enough up the beach to get the sprayskirt secured before the surge picked me up and sucked me into the break and filled me up. I felt like a real amateur!
>
> On my second attempt, the strong surge shunted me off line and sucked me in at 45˚ angle; then spat me out on the beach again.



High tide at Kohaihai and the violent bumper dumpers

> The third attempt through the shore break was successful. Just behind the shore break and inside the outer break, there is a nice 'hollow' where you can patiently wait to time the sprint between sets. Well after the hard work of getting through the shore break, I wasn't patient enough and took the first opportunity I saw. Well, I misjudged again! A set rolled through that I couldn't survive. I got the fourth attempt pretty much 'perfect'. Getting through the shore break again, I waited patiently in the hollow for a full set to pass through before nailing the sprint. I was pretty buggered; and mighty relieved to have got out of Kohaihai.

Glassy conditions prevailed that day on the West Coast which was experiencing the best weather in the country. Brent's goal for the day was Seal Bay, some seven kilometres south-west of the Kahurangi Point lighthouse. Although topographic maps show no lee shelter along this rocky coastline, Google Earth revealed a potential sandy beach landing in Seal Bay where an offshore rocky island afforded marginal shelter from the prevailing south-west swell.

To Seal Bay

After a magic run, Brent rounded that rocky island early afternoon for a superb low surf landing. He emailed to say:

> And what a find Seal Bay was. One of the best locations I've had the pleasure of pitching a tent. Stunning place.

On 22 January Brent paddled past Kahurangi Point, surfing in to shore near the road end at the mouth of the Paturau River. A perfect two day run to pass the



This was Brent's first obstacle near the road end at the Kohaihai River mouth. The surf still 50 metres away



Brent's view of the Kahurangi Point lighthouse

that exposed rocky coastline at the top north-west end of the South Island. Perfect timing too, before a big low pressure system moved into the north Tasman.

Brent has to be back at work by 7 March. A La Nina summer weather pattern brings stationary big lows to the east of New Zealand. Those lows bring Cook Strait ferry sailing cancellations with a heavy southerly swell prevailing. Although Brent will clear the northern bit of the South Island in February, those southerlies may slow his progress down the east coast. Whenever he finishes his South Island circumnavigation back at Monkey Island in Te Waewae Bay, he will be well deserving of the celebration bubbles and pavlova.



Brent almost on dry land, 22 January, by the mouth of the Paturau River

Brent's website:
seacalakayakadventures.com



And what a find Seal Bay was. One of the best locations I've had the pleasure of pitching a tent. Stunning place

UPDATE: Brent has rounded Farewell Spit and arrived at Totaranui in the Able Tasman National Park at 5:15 pm this afternoon, 3 February. He will be so pleased to be off the big swell of the West Coast.

KASK, the Kiwi Association of Sea Kayakers (N.Z.) Inc., a network of New Zealand sea kayakers, has the objectives of:

1. promoting and encouraging the sport of sea kayaking
2. promoting safety standards
3. developing techniques & equipment
4. dealing with issues of coastal access and protection
5. organizing a bi-annual Sea Kayak Fest
6. publishing a bimonthly magazine.

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Articles, trip reports, book reviews, equipment reviews, new techniques, letters to the editor.
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Stewart Island
Bill Watt
Ph (027) 495 9288
email: williamwatt@outlook.co.nz

NZOIA Outdoor Instructors Assn
www.nzoia.org.nz

Coastguard Boating Education
Ph: (0800) 40 80 90 (09) 361 4700
email: info@boatingeducation.org.nz
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