

Cabins continued – Burnett Bay and Deserters

Over the next twenty years, people indeed found and used the Burnett Bay cabin, beginning with Feathercraft folding kayak inventor Doug Simpson who arrived there in one of his early boats in December of 1986! Doug and others that followed left their own notes in a ziplock bag which eventually grew into a series of notebooks, with dozens of entries each year. Along with kayakers, there were notes from pilots who landed helicopters and even wheeled planes on the hard sand at low tide (including RCMP's and Coast Guard helicopter pilots).

Of the several hundred entries left during that period, not a single one criticized building the cabin, or thought that it detracted from the wild beach setting. Quite the opposite. And its journals were a large part of its appeal. Here are a few excerpts from the journals:

It would be hard to imagine a more fitting complement to the incredible beach and forest surrounding it - but the cabin builder has done it.

We had heard of the cabin from various friends and they all spoke fondly of the little cabin in the woods. I could never figure out what would be so special but now I know the secret too.

You, little cabin, are wonderful as always. Never change. Always be here, for the next time!

...I gave thanks for my life and the wild desolation of this beach. I also give thanks for this dear cabin. After rounding the Cape in big seas and dense fog, I was very relieved for its comforts and stayed for three nites.

I can't tell you all how great it is to be able to stay in a place of such great community. I feel very lucky to be here and share reading about all your experiences.

What a gift it's been, arriving here and having the great good fortune to spend a day in the company of so many beautiful spirits. Its been a joy to read the words of those who have come before and to do that here, in this sweet magical cabin, built and cared for by such inspiration. Thank you to all who help maintain this beauty.

I've saved most of the journal entries for the Inside Passage Traveler chapter, since these concern their experiences. I'll put one here since it speaks so well for itself.

We twelve persons and two guides from diverse locations and backgrounds were graced by the majesty of your beach. We picnicked with white wine, crystal, salmon delicacies, and chocolate chip treats before stumbling across this diary of more hearty and vigorous folks. Shamefully we admit to dropping out of the sky in whirly birds - yes, helijets. But your tales of primitive pleasures and triumphs have made us to the man (and woman) vow to return without man-made crutches to help us grow fat as we infringe on nature's creation. Tomorrow we kayak and perhaps begin a discipline which will have us return powered by muscle, sinew, courage, and pureness of mind. We salute you, our brothers and sisters in flesh. Soon we will return brethren of the spirit. Good luck, hardy folk. You are a minority, a fortunate few. 4 from Sacramento, 1 Bermuda (the writer), 1 N.Y., 6 Vancouver

Expansion and Re-roofing

I'd built the cabin for myself and Linda as an occasional visitor. But it really wasn't suitable for couples, and most that stayed slept in a tent and used the cabin for sitting, cooking, eating, drying clothes, etc in wet weather, and storing gear on the top bunk (by far a better use for it than sleeping).



In 1999, Ed and Dennis came with me to Burnett Bay to expand the cabin to accommodate a double bunk. The concept was to add a low shed on the back with a roof sloping down from the level of the upper bunk, so that about 24 inches could be added to the lower bunk width, and leaving the upper wall and bunk intact. Ed and Dennis learned about all the usual cabin-building tasks – scouring the beach for dimension lumber, cutting cedar bolts, and splitting shakes. To accommodate our three tents I expanded and leveled the beach-front tent area so that we had comfortable room for three of them without need to use the beach.



Ripping out the lower back wall and framing the addition was easy. For the bunk extension, I found a huge slab of cedar on the beach nearby that had been roughly flattened with a chain saw. It wasn't nearly smooth enough for the sleeping surface, so I spent a half day with my hatchet and the spokeshave taking down the high spots. We man-handled it into place, and with a few minor extensions from pieces of shakes, it fitted perfectly.

Covering it the addition with shakes didn't go as smoothly, since the log that we used for bolts was really too small for good shakes. It took a lot of cleaning, removing waste, and trimming and didn't make nearly as nice a roof as I'd have liked.



While we were making shakes the clients from a kayak tour group camped at the far end of the beach came hiking down to see the “hippie cabin” they’d been told about. Most seemed to have some appreciation of building with native beach materials. One pointed at the shakes and asked how we made “those flat things”.

I’d noticed that the original roof was nearing the end of its life. Many of the shakes were thoroughly sufficed with moss and most of the upper layers were spongy. So in 2002 I returned alone to replace it.

I went up in early June ready to stay for two weeks. Due to a lot of bad weather and very difficult shake-making, it took the entire period to do half of the roof – the western side which took the worst beating.

I stayed inside the cabin during the entire period, pushing my gear into the lower bunk extension (under the new shed roof), and covering what was being replaced with tarps during rain or at night.



New west roof on Burnett bay. The shakes found this time are clearly inferior, and the skylight is regrettable. Lower left: auger handle for countersinking nails in the new ridgepole. Lower right: hauling the ridgepole and other lumber down the beach.

I also added a skylight, since I’d seen from the third Deserters cabin what a huge improvement overhead light made, especially in rainy winter weather. But it was probably a mistake, largely because of how I built it. I covered it with plastic sheeting and tucked the upper and side edges under the shakes and left the lower edge overlapping the shakes below (tacked down to them with battens as with the windows. This worked fine except that it would be hard to replace. Instead I should have built a box of dimension lumber, sealed its edges with flashing, and then tacked the plastic to the outsides of the box where it could be easily fixed by anyone with a hatchet. I did make a cover for the skylight that anyone could remove and put back into place, since the plastic would not survive long left exposed. All of this was probably too much to expect from the average visitor, and a leaking skylight would seriously detract from the cabin’s ambiance and life span. In short, I wish I hadn’t.

As I finished, I also learned from a kayak visitor about leaving a space between the shakes to flush debris, but too late.



In 2007 I came back again to finish re-roofing and replace the skylight. Ed Putnam helped me with the work, which made an enormous difference. We found an excellent cedar log for making shakes on the beach near the cabin. After ripping off the east roof, we augmented the rafters with new ones of 2 by 6 dimensional lumber and

added nailers made from Alaska yellow cedar (which we found in abundance on the beach this year). We put on new shakes, and having plenty to spare, added a third layer in places as added protection against storm damage. In There were enough shakes that we also covered many of the inferior shakes I put on the west roof in '02 and the shed roof in '99. I replaced the skylight (which someone had covered with mylar, an improvement over the original visqueen) with Lexan polycarbonate, which is tough enough that it shouldn't need to be covered for the winter. Though smaller than the original skylight, it still let in plenty of light. I brought in a new stove now equipped for 3" pipe instead of the 4" used previously and relocated the hole in the roof directly over it so that it no longer used the elbow at the side of the stove. The only problem was that we forgot about the stove when adding the shake nailers so that the pipe had to go much closer to the wall than we would have liked, but I insulated everything with aluminum flashing so I hope it will be alright if a small fire is kept.

I made a large quantity of extra shakes and stored them against the east wall for use in case of storm damage or leaks.





Sawing out and splitting shakes on the beach. Thanks to Ed and Sue Putnam for these photos.



Deserters Cabin

In 1986 I realized I would never get to Burnett Bay in the late fall to early spring seasons, the best time to have a cabin refuge. In spite of the example set by Feathercraft's Doug Simpson, the distance from Port Hardy was too far, the daylight too short and the weather just too volatile. I needed something closer.

I'd also come to a new perspective about where cabins should be, or not be. I could see that the coast was changing fast, and that its wildness was being diminished by increasing use, primarily by kayakers. Not everyone liked cabins, I knew.

Consequently, I would not put another one in a place that was in any way attractive for camping or even landing. Instead I would find a place that seemed impossible to camp at, and conceal the cabin to the extent of leaving no trace of any habitability. The primary impact of cabins is a perceptual one – if people didn't know it was there, it could not diminish their sense of wildness.

I needed a place that was within one winter day's paddle from Port Hardy – no more than ten miles. That led me to examine the Deserters Group, halfway across Queen Charlotte Strait. There was one place I had been ashore that had a gravel beach in a cove separated from an outer boulder beach by impenetrably thick salal brush. The outer beach, usually swept by waves from the channel, would not be attractive for landing kayaks. If I could use the inner beach, build a hidden trail across to the outer one, find a spot there, and find the materials on either beach, it would work.

It did work. I went out in November and squeezed my woodstove tent on to the upper edge of the inner gravel beach, which only worked because there were no spring tides then. I spent two days cutting a trail across through the six-foot high salal and clearing a new tent site just in from the boulder beach. The next night my tent would have been swamped by the increasing tides. (The next year I found signs of a kayaker campsite there which appeared to have been driven out by the high tide, unaware that a comfortable cabin and tent site were less than 100 meters away.)

I left the salal at the trail's entrance in place, and wired it back so that I could go through. When I departed and removed the wire, the entrance snapped closed. A year later I stopped at the gravel beach with several friends and challenged them to find the cabin. They looked hard for about ten minutes before spotting the trail, only because they knew there was one.

After moving camp to the new tent site, I picked the cabin site. It was perfect – located in a stand of small trees and with a thick screen of small spruce and salal screening it from the boulder beach, which contained all the building materials that I'd need. I only needed to remove one small tree and some salal to make plenty of room for the cabin. Later I cut some "viewing ports" in the outer screen so that I could see out to the channel, where ships and log barges passed a mile away. Even with these, the cabin was invisible from twenty feet away on the beach.



The front boulder beach at the Deserters cabin. From a photo taken by Audrey Sutherland.



Deserters Cabin, showing the good effect of the plastic roof on interior light. Water catchment on rear roof at bottom

This cabin was my smallest yet – only seven by seven feet, because I knew I'd be the only user. Largely due to the influence of Kayak Bill's shelters, and since it would be used during the darkest season, I made the roof almost entirely of clear plastic sheeting, which also substantially reduced the demand for shakes.

The result was a somewhat simplified and reduced version of Burnett Bay. The walls were only four feet high, since they needed no windows because of the roof. I finished it in less than two weeks, in spite of almost constant rain every day and daylight beginning at eight and ending at four. So I had plenty of time to enjoy it in the first season. It had the same 24-inch wide bunk, surfaced with half-inch thick shakes, and a small table with seating at the bunk. The stove was set in a bed of rocks from the beach, with the pipe exiting vertically through the single course of shakes on the lower part of the back roof (above which the plastic began). For flooring, I hauled in buckets of smooth pea gravel from the beach, and set two-by dimension lumber pieces into it.

The result was perfect. Water was something of a problem, since there was no reliable source in the island group. I depended on my catchment system off the roof, which drained into a found five gallon bucket.

Getting to the Deserters in late October or November was always uncertain. Before leaving Seattle, I'd try to figure out the forecast two days in advance to allow for the full day of travel to get to north Vancouver Island. Arriving too late to go anywhere, I'd camp at one of the private campgrounds around Port Hardy.

Once I stayed, during pouring rain, in my woodstove tent at a campground on the road to Coal Harbour. I took a shower in the campground's restroom and headed across the road to the nearby restaurant for dinner, clean but wearing clothes suited only for camping. The restaurant was called "Snuggles", and this was Saturday night. In the dead of winter, the more affluent of Port Hardy hire a baby sitter, put on their best, and splurge on dinner out at Snuggles.

Against their better judgement about my appearance, Snuggles admitted me. A fire burned in the hearth, and about a dozen well-dressed couples dined by candlelight. They were entertained by a pianist attired in tuxedo with tails. Accompanying him was a singer, similarly attired but with the addition of top hat and cane. We dined to Broadway show tunes, delighting the couples, while I lurked inconspicuously in my corner. The dinner was excellent and not too expensive, and I went back through the rain in a daze to start a fire in my tent stove.



By contrast – the next night. But first: getting there. The forecast calls for a gale late in the evening but light winds before it. I struck the tent at dawn, threw it all in the car, and drove out to Bear Cove, where I loaded the boat at the launching ramp, took the car over to the ferry parking lot, and ran back before the tide took my boat. Finally I was on the water by nine and out of Hardy Bay by ten. A little southerly wind sprang up crossing Goletas Channel, and it got rougher and colder across Gordon Channel to the Deserters, the most exposed and lonely part of the crossings. I landed at my beach about one pm, and had everything hauled into the cabin and the kayak stowed in the brush by three. Cut a little firewood and went down to the low tide level on the boulder beach to get some mussels.

Now the wind had risen. The full gale was in the works and rain blew by in sheets. In the last of the twilight I regained the shelter of my little grove of trees, while the wind roared overhead deflected by the high rocks to the south. I lit the woodstove and a candle, and steamed the mussels. I ate them while lying on my board and gravel floor in warmth of the fire, listening to the rain on the roof, and watching the branches of the small trees tossed by the wind overhead. This made all the work worthwhile.

Over the next three years I added a front porch with a shelter wall as a place to store and cut firewood out of the weather. I also cut a trail up and over the rocks and down the little peninsula to the south, where there were open rocks and heather where I could look all the way down the straits to the Broughten Group. The trail climbed through the brush just above the inner beach but hidden so that no one would guess it was there.

I didn't get there again until 1999, stopping with Dennis and Ed on the way to Burnett Bay. The area around my little cabin was completely changed – all of the brush screen in front and the trees overhead were dead. The cabin was now completely exposed in a wasteland of brown. What had happened? I couldn't imagine how my activity there might have killed all the vegetation.

Some time later I figured it out – it had been sprayed with defoliant, probably from the air. The cabin could certainly be seen from above, but I didn't think anyone would care. Apparently someone did, and that was the end of it.

So that ends my career as a cabin-builder, but maybe not as a maintainer. Re-reading the Burnett Bay journals encourages me to do all I can to keep that cabin serviceable as long as I can, or until the authorities decide to remove it. Keeping it in good shape and preserving and advertising its extraordinary journals seem to be its best defense against that happening. If you go there, please help with both of these as much as you can.