

Light Stations

Imagine you've been traveling the remote BC coast for days without seeing a single habitation. On the outer fringe of some island group jutting into the Pacific you find two or three buildings, perhaps a dock, and always a helipad. All of this serves a rotating beacon and probably a fog horn. There may be no one there - it's been automated. But for 27 other places, there will be two families each in their own residence - the Senior and Junior Keepers. Their job is constant maintenance - the beacon, generators, repainting, and countless other chores. Though a few of these light stations are linked by road, most are served only by boat and the regular Coast Guard helicopter that stops once or twice a day. The nearest neighbor may be fifty or even more miles away.

Some stations are located on relatively quiet channels along the Inside Passage. Others front on the open Pacific, often marking the entrances to interior waterways or major capes to be rounded. At these fringe stations the light sits where it is most visible, usually above the rocks scoured by winter surf. Just behind are the buildings that house the generators, maintenance shop, the fuel tanks, and the helipad. Further back, in the protection of trees or rocks are the residences - regular houses, perhaps with lawns and gardens. A boardwalk or cement walkways connect everything together.

On the lee side of the island, if there is one, or in a cove protected from the swells is a dock and perhaps a float for boats. At others the swells allow no safe haven for small boats. There will also be a large crane for lifting equipment and fuel off a barge, or perhaps a diagonal cable rising across a cove that serves the same purpose.

Many of these complex light stations have been automated, replacing people and almost everything else with a set of batteries to run the light and some sensors to turn the foghorn on and off depending on visibility. The cost savings are enormous. All the lights in Alaska have been automated, and many in BC. The debate about automating more of the remaining 27 is on-going.

The arguments against automation center on the human touch that can't be duplicated by electronics. All light stations, staffed or automated, submit local weather reports several times daily. The automated ones can't report much more than wind, temperature, and pressure. The light keepers contribute much more: visibility, sea state, and cloud cover. Beyond that, the staffed station proponents argue that having someone on hand to spot and direct rescues of mariners in trouble has huge intangible value.

Visiting an automated station is strangely forlorn. In 1987 I paddle south from Ketchikan to Prince Rupert. Rounding Cape Fox near the border, I landed and camped at Tree Point. The light station here fronts on Dixon Entrance, but the dock is deep in a rocky cove behind. There was no float, so I hauled my gear up steep rocks to the high dock and set up my tent inside the big empty shed behind it. (The building was still sound but a bit dirty, and I always sleep most soundly in the familiar coziness of my tent.)

I followed the boardwalk west through the woods toward the ocean, and arrived at two three-story residences. These were built to a high standard of sturdiness to take the weather, and beautifully finished in early-Twentieth century fashion. The doors were open and some of the windows were out, but the rooms still held their former character as parlors, dining rooms, and bedrooms and three quarters of a century of family life.

Continuing on a cement walk, I came to the helipad and the light buildings. Climbing the tower, I found the sum total of Tree Point's remaining functionality. Where the complex Fresnell lens once turned was now a set of twelve-volt batteries and a strobe light in a plastic shade.

At the staffed BC stations, light keepers are neither exceptionally gregarious nor hermitic. Competition for jobs on "The Lights" is stiff, and keepers are chosen for their mechanical competence, their independence, and their willingness to serve as goodwill ambassadors to the visiting public. Part of their job is to be open to visitors, and some accept this duty more willingly than others. Sometimes I've been invited ashore for coffee, meals, or even to stay, at other places I got only cursory pleasantries.

Contrary to what you might expect, the keepers are extremely busy - burdened by repetitive maintenance schedules, weather collection and reporting seven times a day, radio watch, and countless requirements for a complex operation and a household that has to be run essentially by mail order.

Some of my visits to light stations were especially memorable. At Carmanah Point I found that the junior keeper was an avid kayaker and I was invited to dinner together with the visiting warden from the adjacent Shipwreck Trail section of Pacific Rim National Park.

Another year, I stopped at Triple Island, a single high tower on a barren rock 25 miles west of Prince Rupert. The keepers told me that winter waves coming off Dixon Entrance regularly toss rocks up to the third floor parapet. They also told me that a kayaker had stopped there some time before on his way across Hecate Strait to the Queen Charlottes, and was never seen again.

Passing by the dock at Driad Point, just north of Bella Bella, I met the junior keeper, Harvey, and was invited in for coffee. We went to his dad's house, Henry, the senior keeper. I sat on a couch in Henry's formal living room with a cup of coffee and a plate of donuts, while we watched the Preakness Thoroughbred races on TV. Harvey, a big jovial man (and also reputed as the best outboard repair man in the region) burst out in loud guffaws at the line of jockeys hunched butt-up over their horses. "They look like mushrooms!" Henry wasn't amused. "Shut up Harvey." My opinion was not sought, and after thanks for this little civilized interlude, I continued north.

In 1985 I paddled out from Port Hardy heading across Queen Charlotte Strait on my way back to building my cabin at Burnett Bay, a few miles south of Cape Caution. Since the weather was fair, I took the more exposed but shorter "direct" route across the mouth of the strait from Nigai Island to the mainland via Pine Island and the Storm Islands. The longest crossing was the first six-mile one to Pine Island, and I pulled into the little cove next to the light station to rest.

Since there was no dock and some surge from the swells, I sat in my boat just off some steps coming down the rocks from the light station. The senior light keeper and his wife, Doug and Gwen, came down the steps to talk to me, a little occasion for them since, lacking a dock, they don't get many visitors. Gwen went back to her house for a tray of lemonade, and then we sat for a time on the lowest step chatting while fending off my boat from the rocks. I told them that I was heading over to the mainland for a week or so before returning to Port Hardy. They invited me to stop in on the way back and stay a day or two. "We'll even give you a house." That sounded way too good to pass up, so I agreed eagerly. I was to call on the VHF to let them know when I was coming.

The day to return came and we made our radio arrangements. I was to make a final call from the Storm Islands, a bit more than half way, so that they'd have a good idea when to expect me. I made my call from the Storms and Doug said they'd be ready. "We'll take you up in the bonnet." I had no idea what that meant.

I rounded Pine Island and came into their little cove. Gwen was waiting on the steps holding a small rubber raft on a rope. Doug waved from a window high in a tower above the light station.

And here came the bonnet. A heavy cable hung from the top of his tower and ran down diagonally across the cove. Controlled by Doug up in the tower, a pulley began to descend the cable, and hanging from it was a large fabric bag open on two ends: the bonnet. It stopped when the bonnet was submerged in the water. Gwen had me

grab the rubber raft, while she paid out the rope, and maneuver my boat into the bonnet. Then I climbed into the raft and she pulled me in.

My kayak began its first and only aerial voyage - sailing up across the rocks, climbing fifty feet, before being gently deposited on a concrete pad at the light station.

They showed me my quarters: a two-bedroom house normally used by visiting work crews or biologists working in the surrounding ecological reserve, but none were scheduled now. Since it was located conveniently right next to my boat on the cement pad, unloading was never so easy. After they showed me around a bit, and told me to report to their house for dinner later, I was left to myself to get settled in. I had a luxurious and long overdue shower in my own bathroom, and relaxed on my real bed.

Doug and Gwen lived a hundred yard's stroll up the path, and their home seemed like one you'd find in an upscale Victoria neighborhood. There were neat vegetable and rose gardens. Gwen ordered the ornamental gravel for the paths in bags and it was flown in on the regular helicopter runs. They had raised a daughter on The Lights, this one and others, and at one point she had returned from college to Pine Island. The Coast Guard helicopter started finding excuses to stay longer on his usual runs to court her, and I believe they married.

We had a terrific dinner and then relaxed in front of TV in their living room. There was always the background noise of the VHF radio, to which they always kept one ear tuned.

We heard the words "Pan-Pan" on the radio, and they immediately muted the TV. In international marine or aircraft radio procedures, there are three levels of emergency calls. "Mayday" is the most familiar, and always denotes a dire emergency. Less urgent is "Pan-Pan" (pronounced Pahn-Pahn), and the least is "Securite" (pronounced Secure-eh-tay), used for notifications about potential hazards such as an approaching storm, a dangerously large floating log, or a buoy light which is out of service.

"I hate Pan-Pan's" groaned Doug. This one was an all-points alert to be on the watch for a boat stolen from Port Hardy. He responded and we returned to TV. (The culprit was soon apprehended much closer to town.)

Gwen announced that at dusk they would have a treat for me. They wouldn't say what, but gave me a flashlight and we went off walking to the north end of the island, arriving at an open grove of trees on a slope above the ocean. "Now just watch."

It got darker until the last light outlined the trees to the northwest. Suddenly they came - a swarm of hundreds of flitting shapes winging in from the ocean. Into the trees they came, and not gently, crashing into the branches, sometimes the tree trunks with a loud "thwack", cascading down through the branches to the ground all around us. Now there was scurrying around our feet, and I was allowed a short peek with my flashlight.

They were Rhinoceros Auklets, returning to their burrows after a day of fishing far at sea. Their beaks were filled with fish even after their crash landings, and they dashed around, all soon finding their own burrows somehow. Not quite all. "Every night a few don't survive the landing," Gwen explained, picking up a couple of casualties and stuffing them into a garbage bag brought for this purpose. "We put them in the freezer in your house for the biologists." (Glad I hadn't gone foraging there for a snack.)

Then it was off to an early bed, since Doug had to get up for the first of his seven daily weather observation calls at 3:30.

Awakening came a bit earlier than I might have liked, and I found out why my house was the least popular at the station. The fog horn was located just outside my bedroom window, a sensor had detected morning fog, and the horn cut loose with a thunderous sustained grunt. URRRRRGGH... In spite of three layers of window glass, these repeated blasts at 30 second intervals soon had me up and about. "Didn't you see the ear plugs in your

bedside table?" Gwen asked later. I hadn't, but they would need to have been very, very good ones to make any difference.

The fog burned off early, the horn went back to sleep, and it became a glorious sunny day. Doug was scheduled to spend all day on some maintenance procedure, so I asked Gwen what I could do to help her. She said she did need to cut the lawn, so I eagerly offered to do it. But since it usually took her almost two days, and since there were two power mowers, we both went to work.

I never imagined that I might be working up a sweat pushing a mower in the middle of Queen Charlotte Strait. I never imagined that a wilderness light station could have so much lawn, but there was the better part of an acre of it at Pine Island, separated by concrete walkways, steep banks, and quite a few building obstructions to mow around. We both kept hard at it most of the day, but by late afternoon it was done, and so was Doug.

"Let's head for the pool!" they decided, and went home for their bathing suits. Luckily, I had a pair of shorts, so I was ready when they came back. We went down to the very front of the station above the winter surf-swept rocks. Here had been a building destroyed by a rogue wave in 1967. Most light station buildings have a cistern in their basement to store rainwater, and that was all that remained of this one. It was about chest deep, warmed perfectly from the sun, and with the best view imaginable. A salmon troller passed close offshore, the fishermen gawking up as we waved, splashed, and cavorted.

The next morning we reversed the procedure with the bonnet and raft, and I reluctantly went on my way home. I corresponded with Doug and Gwen for several years, and I'm eternally grateful to them for an unforgettable one-of-a-kind experience. I don't expect anything like this to happen to me again, but you never know. With so many of us kayakers popping up in remote places, keepers don't find so much novelty in us anymore. I suspect I'll never get to the remotest staffed station of them all, Bonilla Island. I doubt they get many visitors...