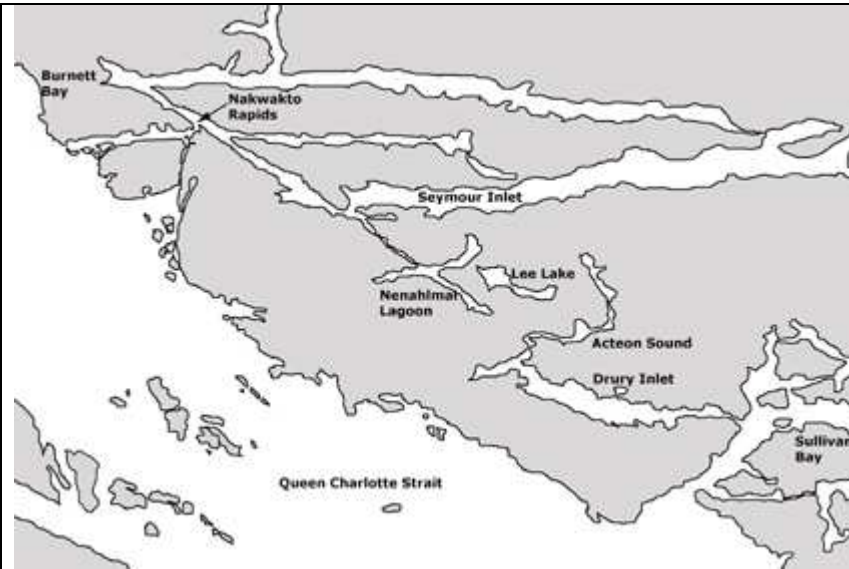


Seymour Inlet Portage



Looking at a map, inland from the blunt wedge of Cape Caution is a maze of waterways that incise for almost fifty miles into the Coast Range, and all connected to the sea through quarter-mile wide Nakwakto Rapids. There are a hundred miles of channels in here, some as much as a mile wide, others much narrower, and running straight for ten or more miles. Connected are as many more miles of brackish lagoons, where streams dilute the small amount of salt that the flood tide brings to them. To the north are still more waterways accessed from Smith Sound, and almost but not quite connecting to the central bodies. To the south a similar one comes in from Drury and other inlets.

Its appearance suggests that its flat, with only slight variations in elevation defining the edges between land and water. If you're a canoeist from the Midwest, you'd be reminded of the Boundary Waters area on the Minnesota-Saskatchewan border, where chains of lakes are separated by gentle hills allowing easy portages. It's not like that.

The first time I ventured inland through Nakwakto Rapids, I saw that steep mountainsides rose to a thousand feet or more directly from the inland seas. No easy portages would be found here. Nevertheless, I was intrigued with the idea of seeing this country without back-tracking by finding a way across from the inlets to the south, mostly by paddle, and with as little as possible overland by some means.

I asked around on north Vancouver Island, and learned that the inland area had been extensively logged, and that most of the logs went out from the central waterways to either Smith Sound or the southern inlets, trucked over on local logging roads that connected them. Few went out through Nakwakto, though log rafts were pulled through there on the short slacks, mostly the produce of hand-loggers. So there had to be roads going where I wanted to, and perhaps I could use them to carry my carted boat and gear across, or cadge a ride with a logging vehicle. But I really didn't know, and decide that when a chance came to try it, I'd go on speculation and accept the uncertainty.

The opportunity came when I was building the Burnett Bay cabin south of Cape Caution. Linda got a lift across Queen Charlotte Strait from Port Hardy to the bay. After staying there for a week, we'd paddle back to Port Hardy, drive south to Telegraph Cove in her car, and I'd find my way back to Burnett Bay via some inland route, exiting at Nakwakto. I had no inkling of the scale of what I was undertaking.

The territory through the Broughton Archipelago was familiar until I passed Echo Bay and entered the labyrinth of passages leading north along the widening Queen Charlotte Strait. I spent one night at what I believe was a Kayak Bill camp. I came ashore in a small cove backed by an old midden – mossy grass overhung by cedars. One of these had fallen to a low angle across the grassy area. Clear plastic sheeting had been laid over it and secured with rocks and driftwood into a tent. At the high end a rock fireplace had been built with a driftwood chimney to carry the smoke away. Inside was a sleeping area cushioned with dried ferns, next to a kneeling height table built from the remains of a wooden pallet. A few things were stored in it, including .22 bullets. I'd heard that Bill lived on deer and seals.

I spent a very comfortable night there. I was determined to leave no evidence of my visit – with one exception. The partly dis-constructed pallet had some small nails protruding in toward the center. They weren't really in the way or a hazard to using the table, but they seemed offensive to me in a way that they apparently were not to Bill. I got out my small vice grips and pulled them all out and laid them in a neat row at the edge of the table. My calling card. I never met Bill, so I have no idea about what he would have thought upon kneeling at his little table.

I moved on to Sullivan Bay. This small harbor, with a resort café and store along its boardwalk, had several yachts anchored. They wait here for the window of opportunity to cross the dreaded Queen Charlotte Sound, for them twenty or more miles of open coast with no refuge before Smith Sound. (Not so for kayaks, which find good landings and camping every few miles.) This would be my last chance to acquire anything before returning to Port Hardy, so I bought a six-pack of beer.

Continuing north, I entered the unknown. My intended route was into Drury Inlet, where successive narrows lead to possible overland connections. I had some hearsay evidence that there might be a road from its upper reaches into Seymour Inlet. Or, failing that, there was Lee Lake, which almost spanned the distance to a lagoon connecting to the inlet. Failing these, I'd just have to paddle back out, and continue up Queen Charlotte Strait. Knowing my inclinations, that option was unlikely.

In early evening I entered Drury Inlet and started looking for a campsite, which were typically sparse for this country. In Jennis Bay I saw a floating logging camp where I thought I might glean some information about my intended route and possible campsites. I headed for one float where convivial laughter emanated from what appeared to be the mess hall. A friendly fellow came out to greet me as I tied up and invited me in.

Six men were sitting inside, relaxing with what was apparently not the first of several post-work beers. "Hi, I'm Randy," I said. One of the celebrants replied, "I'll be you are, sitting in a kayak all day!" That brought guffaws from two companions and embarrassed grins from others who had perhaps come more recently to the assault on the beer supply. No ill will was intended, and after recovering, I took no offense. After all, this was Canada where, like Britain and Australia, my name is an adjective. In fact, that particular individual was the most helpful and supportive of what I was trying to do.

Yes, there was a road to Seymour Inlet at the head of Actaeon Sound. But, it was twenty miles long, went over a low pass, and was washed out in two places. That dashed any hope of catching a ride on a logging truck. Towing my boat on its cart for twenty miles of rough road would be a competition between whether the cart, the boat, or myself would become damaged to the point of unserviceability, and might take days or even a week!

So what about Lee Lake? They agreed amongst themselves that they'd heard there was an old road up to the lake, and that it would be much shorter, but had no idea how hard it would be to get from the lake down to the lagoon. There was a hand-logger based in Creasy Bay where the road started, and perhaps he might know more.

Thanking them for this invaluable local knowledge, I asked if they knew of a campsite anywhere nearby. One of the people was a quiet bearded man who turned out to be the camp caretaker. He had a whole house on a neighboring log float, and invited me to stay there. Grateful that I would be relieved of the chore of carrying the

boat and all the gear above the tide line and setting up my tent, I paddled around to his dock. All I had to do was tie up and bring a few things inside.

Yet I was sorry I did. This turned out to be the most slothful individual I've ever met. For some reason there was no water supply hooked up to the house. The kitchen was piled high with dirty dishes, opened cans, and half-eaten food. Since the toilet (which vented directly to the salt chuck below) had to be flushed by bucket, he only flushed once every few days. In light of these amenities, I decided to pitch my tent outside on the dock, claiming (not untruthfully) that I slept much better in open air. I did manage to clear a small corner of his table to cook my dinner. I offered him one of my beers, but a bit uncomfortably he said he didn't drink. I was unable to find out much about this man, and truthfully didn't want to.

In the morning I made as early a departure as gracefully possible and continued into the inlet, and into the narrow winding stricture of Actress Pass (Snake Pass to the loggers). The current picked up to a knot or so, making me wonder about how many logs they were able to haul out via this route from Actaeon Sound.

By early afternoon, I came to Creasy Bay where I'd been told to look for the way to Lee Lake. An old ferry-like hulk was tied up there, and a floatplane was letting off a passenger just as I arrived. It was good timing – he was the hand-logger, Gil, just returning from shopping in Port McNeal, and had been away for a week.

He invited me in for a cup of coffee. His vessel was actually an old ferry (Stuart Island, I think), which had also been used in the sealing trade in Alaska. In the kitchen (not “galley” since inside this was more house than boat), he found no water in the tap, so I volunteered to do my duty of following the plastic hose up the hill to put the upper end back under the rock in little pool in a stream while Gil unpacked.

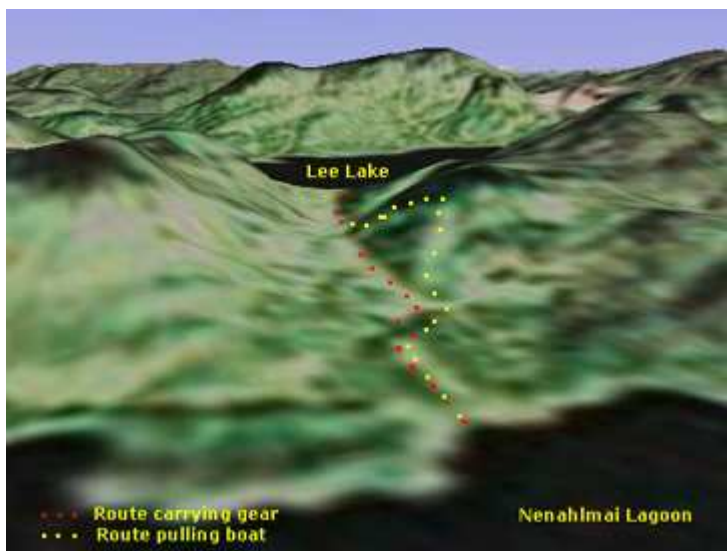
Gil told me that there really was a road up to the lake, and that he would even drive me up there! Our transport was a decrepit VW bus, whose license tags had last been renewed eight years before. That was the last year it had experienced third or fourth gear either, he said. The lower two and reverse were more than enough out here. Most of the windows and the back door had been removed. My boat went into the back door opening and forward so that the bow lay on the floor between the front seats.

The old bus was likely the only vehicle to travel this old road to Lee Lake in recent years. It was covered with leaves and small logs that we bounced right over. It climbed steadily for the three miles it took to get there. Not a good sign – I was in for a wild ride back to sea level, however that would happen. We arrived at the south shore, and I saw that Lee Lake was not a pristine jewel. The area had been clearcut about fifteen years before, and recovery had been slow and uneven. Discarded logs lay everywhere and floating ones crowded the shorelines. One of Gil's reasons for coming up was to bring down some pieces for firewood. I helped him load up, we shook hands, and suddenly I was alone in the middle of no where.

I paddled to the north end of the lake, camped, and climbed a small hill after dinner where I could look out to the north. The lagoons wound invitingly into the distance through foothills and minor peaks, toward Seymour Inlet beyond. A pretty sight, but from an elevated perspective that is alarming if you plan to get there in a boat.

Thankfully, the next day was clear and warm. I paddled south along the western shore to find the outlet. A shallow log-choked waterway would thread through the trees, and I started in, climbing out to slide the kayak over a log or two, and then back in to paddle a hundred feet or so before the next barrier. The logs became thicker, and the water narrowed into a stream that was now flowing steadily. But ahead it dropped away, leaving a clear view of the distant hills beyond my destination, Nanahmai Lagoon.

The Portage Route. The steepness of the canyon walls is not represented.



My waterborne progress was clearly done. I would need to find a way to portage. Walking ahead, I found the stream dropped into a rock-walled canyon. Beyond, about a half mile distant and several hundred feet below, sun light sparkled on the surface of the lagoon. I knew I would not be paddling on it today, and probably not tomorrow either.

This would take two stages. The first would be to haul my gear, paddles, and anything else I could remove from the kayak down to the lagoon and set up camp. The second would be the boat itself, which due to the sheer-sided canyon and numerous fallen trees in it would be the most daunting challenge.

I had a large back-pack dry bag, which I would stuff with as much as I could, leaving my arms free, as I'd surely need them. Down I went along side the plunging stream. At one point there were sheer walls on both sides of the rushing water. I found some footholds for a way, then had to step into the stream, well over the tops of my rubber boots, and continue edging along. At one point I lost my footing and went in chest-deep with still no bottom, stopped only by grabbing the rock from being driven deeper by my heavy pack (which I had thankfully closed tightly). This was the only route – I'd just have to be careful here on the next trips, and there would be many.

Then the canyon opened up a little and I was able to climb further down. But I could see that I needed to get to the other side, so I used a jack-strawed pile of downed trees to cross about thirty feet above the water, not really so bad, since I figured I could grab other logs if I fell off, or hoped so.

The last part was easy – just finding a way through the brush and into the forest by the lagoon. It led me directly to a good campsite and launch point. Old cable and bottles indicated this had been used by the loggers decades before. It was also popular with bears – the trees were heavily clawed and scat was abundant. I unloaded and went back. Any time I was in this lower part of the route I kept up a constant loud serenade for the bears and my own confidence. “Hey bears! Comin’ through!” A few marching songs from my old army days also filled the bill, and I think I invented some specialized verses for bears that I’ve unfortunately forgotten. It worked, and none appeared.

It took five trips to bring everything down to the lagoon. I kept going without breaks and didn't finish until 9:30 pm. There were no mishaps, and I figured out how to edge along the rock face without going under water. I was very tired. After a high-carbohydrate dinner, I crawled into my tent. I didn't sleep well, partly due to my location in a bear congregation area. Mostly, I was worried about tomorrow, whether I could finish this, and really had no idea about how I could get the boat down here without damaging it or myself. If I couldn't, I'd have an even harder job dragging everything back to the lake and then a walk out to beg another ride from Gil, if he was even there. And, if I should get hurt, it would be way too late by the time anyone figured out I needed a rescue or even where to look. I was truly on my own.

In the morning, thankfully another sunny one, I packed several lengths of rope, my folding pruning saw, water, and lunch, and a small tarp for emergency shelter into my back pack dry bag. Up with the kayak again, I removed the rudder and duct taped around the exposed cables to protect them from snagging on brush.

The way down the canyon was clearly impossible. I'd never be able to carry or push the boat down the rocky falls without damage, and getting it across the high jumble of logs was too daunting. So it would have to be up the steep side to the flatter hillsides another hundred feet above, and trust that there would be a way down through the old clearcuts from up there. This incline was too vertical to walk up, but there were trees and rocks here and there to grab. But how would I do that and carry the boat?

The solution was to climb up to the limit of my longest rope (about fifty feet), tie it off to a tree, and then attach the boat's bow line to it with a prussic knot, a sliding hitch used by climbers to ascend ropes. Then I climbed up to a point where I could hang on with an arm looped around a tree, pull the boat up by the bow line, and slide the hitch up the fixed rope as far as I could. Then climb up some more and repeat. By midway, each anchor point might only net a foot or two of progress for the kayak. The young cedars now became so thick that several times I had to use the pruning saw to cut a few to make a space wide enough for the hull to pass through. The top was steepest, semi-cliffs that required re-positioning the rope and careful work to hoist the boat without falling. I was now well above the level of Lee Lake.

It seemed an impossible job, and I really wasn't sure I'd make it. It was the greatest challenge of will and perseverance I'd ever faced. I encouraged and cajoled myself. Don't stop, it won't get done standing still. Just think about the short-term and what's to be done next. Think about Tristan Jones pulling his sailboat through sixteen miles of the Mata Grosa swamp.

After three hours, I came out onto a more open hillside at the lip of the canyon. I sat on a stump with a sweeping view, at lunch, and felt encouraged that the worst was over. In fact, it was. I was now able to slide my boat down the gentle slope with only occasional need to saw out obstructions. Then the hillside dropped more steeply, so I tied the rope to the stern, aimed the bow downhill, and gave it a push. It slithered down and out of sight into the dog-haired little trees, its progress continuing and controlled by the paid-out rope. At rope's end, I stopped it, followed it down, re-aimed, and pushed off again. It was so easy I had a chuckle watching it disappear into the brush, while just trusting that it wasn't about to drop over an invisible cliff. But there were none, and the boat and I emerged into the older forest below. Now shouting a triumphant greeting to the bears, I towed it through the ferns and salal and over old mossy logs to my camp, arriving about 4:30. I rested easy that evening – the remainder of this would just be fun.

At the water's edge, I could see that the tidal range of Nanahmai Lagoon was only a foot or so. So little sea water passed through the successive narrows from the ocean that its flow had negligible effect on the lagoon's level. The first such constriction was at Nakwakto Rapids, which reduced the eighteen foot range on the Pacific to about six feet on Seymour Inlet. Because of that, these inland waterways kept a level somewhere between the extremes of the larger outside waterway, and the slacks in the connecting narrows occur somewhere around mid-tide when the levels equalize. It is an excellent example of how tide tables are a poor predictor of currents.

There would be a high tide on the Pacific mid-morning, so I hoped to pick up an ebb current on the way out and try to make it through Nakwakto before the next rising tide brought the flood current.

It was truly a joy to be afloat again and sliding along so easily, covering in the first fifteen minutes the distance of the last two days' hard work. The weather was overcast but windless and peaceful.

I came to the first narrows and picked up a gentle current. A floathouse on a log raft was teathered with cables along the shore here. It was the mobile home of hand-loggers, and I saw them working on shore a mile or so beyond. The waterway opened up as I came out into Seymour Inlet, which lead east into the coast range as far as I could see. I turned west, continuing on for several hours. There was more evidence of logging now.

At the junction with Nugent Sound I stopped at Holmes Point to see the old native village site. There was beautiful lush forest and an open bramble-meadow that apparently covered the remains of long-house pits.

Now came Nakwakto. A logger's skiff passed me and sped out through the ebbing narrows. If he could do it, so could I, since it wasn't a particularly big exchange. I stayed to the south side of Turret Rock, rode down the fast sluice to the standing waves where the water slowed after the rapids – a little splashing but no trouble. The current was still going my way, so I pushed on into Slingsby Channel.

A mile farther on a hand-logger's skiff was tied to shore and a chainsaw was running up the hill, though I couldn't see the operator through the trees. So I waited to see what would happen. Soon, a big cedar slowly tipped out from the forest and plunged down the hillside into the water. The still-unseen logger shut off the saw, and in the silence, I clapped. Then I moved on, leaving him to wonder about the mysterious applause.

There was one last ride through the last of the ebb current at Slingsby Narrows, and I turned north along the Pacific shore toward Burnett Bay, thinking that I had no regrets about this adventure. It was out of my system now - I'd seem that country, knew that there was no kayaker's Northwest Passage back there. It could be done, but I wouldn't again, nor recommend it to anyone else.