

ISLAND TALES...SPRING TO SOLSTIC

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March, cool and windy, ripples on the bay which measures roughly 400m across, and is gently undulating mud and rock beach with eel grass and sea weed covering much of the lower inter-tidal zone. Something stirs just beneath the surface...there is a brief indistinct pale bloom, indistinct but just visible from the shore line and its veracity confirmed when one of the two resident bald eagles swoops down, flying directly into the water seemingly without regard to our expectations about just how deep down an eagle will go for his prey, his talons and lower body fully immersed emerging almost instantly wingtips beating the water as he raises into flight clutching...something. He flies away in a shower of briny droplets, sometimes back to the log by the cabin and at other times to a low promontory on the side of the bay, perhaps 250m away. For a long while, several years in fact, I thought the something might be a flat fish turning pale belly-up in the act of taking a fry or a prawn, but research where the eagle eats revealed only crabs. Eagles? Crabs? Seems unlikely. I wondered if he ate the bones but passed them elsewhere later. Why couldn't I bring myself to go with the crab? All in all, a bit of a puzzle.

Crabs mate belly to belly, according to my sources 'though when I've seen them at it, mostly Dungeness, they are usually snuggled up in a crevice or hidden in the eel grass. Now, copulating crabs may seem an odd starting point to Island Tales, but it's spring, the beginning of renewal...! About ten meters from the door of the cabin there is an ancient log, and often perched upon its distant end is a large, bald eagle, shaggy in his winter plumage haughty and upright in bearing - the master of his domain, and the male of the pair identified earlier. We call him Fred. Fred stares at the water from this



vantage point perhaps 2m above the high tide mark, turning now and again to cast a cold and baleful stare at me whenever he hears movement in the cabin, then suddenly launching himself at and seizing some writhing thing from just beneath the surface of the water whenever he spies that pale bloom. Now, after many hours of observation aided by a pair good of 7X50 binoculars the balance of probability suggests to me that the writhing thing is a pair of crabs "in flagrente" and the milky bloom is the milt fertilizing the female's eggs. The crabs are rotating and threshing widely in the water, all sharp claws and legs, a la Edward Scissorhands, and somehow they develop enough lift through their energetic contortions to rise to the surface. The eagle sees the bloom and that's his cue for a snack. Better still...it's a twofer!

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[Now, a "Twofer" must not be confused with "Happy Hour". The former is the work of the Devil himself, whilst the latter is just a gimmick: some bars have Happy Hour where drinks are half price but really good bars, you know...the really sleazy ones...have twofers where the barmaid, bra straps and cleavage surmounting over-tight yoga pants and a coterie of horny rednecks clinging drunkenly to their car keys, will bring you two drinks for the price of one: "yes, please, I'll have a double boilermaker...no, on second thought...make that a triple", the barmaid, oozing charm and heaving swaths of palpitating chest brings two identical drinks AT THE SAME TIME for the price of one - sinful and dangerously decadent.]

Anyway, Fred brings the crabs back to the log and proceeds to tear them limb from limb in very short order. After his snack Fred will fly off and can be heard calling for his missus. Quite often, as soon as Fred leaves, the raven flies in for a munch on what remains, these first two are the confident kings and princes of the air around us, followed by the slinky mink who devours what is left, arriving unannounced and carefully picking over the discarded morsels from beneath the log. I saw the kits playing around the camp, oblivious to my unexpected presence

until one of them was forced to acknowledge me as he tried to squeeze past my legs during a game of hide and seek. After a moment of bewildered hesitation as he arched his neck to see all of me he fled directly to the den (*bad boy*) and no doubt a not-so-playful nip from mum to remind him to keep a better watch in future. After this they are much more cautious and hard to spot amongst the salal and underbrush, but they often pass beneath my gaze, picking their way amongst the rocks of an old pier searching for morsels amongst the many residents of the protected crevices.

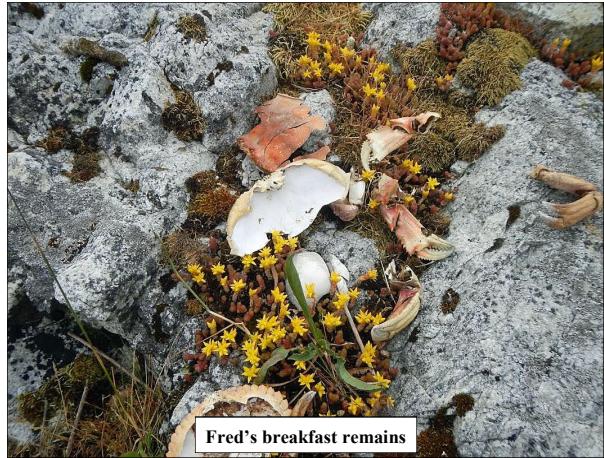
The beach is a busy village in the early spring: a 10 centimetre moon snail has a mantle of 30 centimetres or more and they compete with the starfish for oyster and clams,



A moon snail with mantle partially exposed

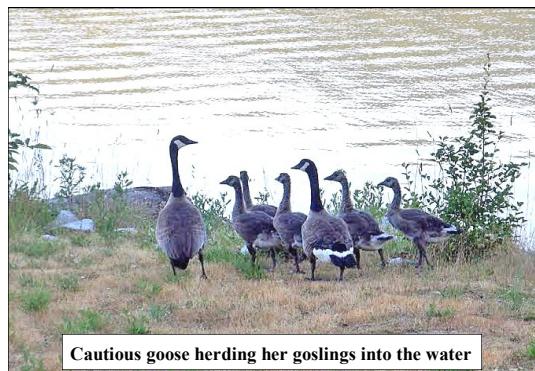
drilling holes in the shells and withdrawing the flesh from within. Their protective cloaks, formed from many secretions of gluey goo and sand, are everywhere along with sand dollars and such a plethora of lifeless crab shells from the spring molt that just for a moment one sees only the debris, but it really is spring renewal - everything is heaving, mating, blooming, crawling and growing - clams, oysters, starfish, lugworms, moon snails, sea cucumber, sea asparagus (*salicornia*) and sea urchins in such numbers that at first

their immature colours can be mistaken for gentle undulations and folds in the rock formations just beneath the lowest tides. Mature urchins the size of footballs can be spied here and there, and the otters carry them carefully ashore to feast upon. Kelp which looked ragged and dying in January is now broad and richly healthy, tear off a frond and eat raw - delicious. Clams populate the intertidal zone in large numbers suitable for chowders and sauces and sheets of chlorophyll-rich emerald green sea weed can be snagged from the shallows for salads and snacks.



Fred's breakfast remains

The geese have produced their offspring, lots this year, we have twenty six resident at the beach, of which seventeen appear to be juveniles, and a further fifteen or so visitors which appear to be from a late mating or are a second clutch. This morning (*21st. June, the first day of summer*) I counted sixty six of them marching in-line along the beach, mouthing the weed for nutrients and fertilizing the foreshore. The eagles eye them and the ganders flinch with every twitch, but the eagles ignore them in favour of the crabs. The peregrine falcon is another matter, hiding in the lower branches of the surrounding firs, a picture of studied insouciance but powerful and menacing. No matter how carefully one watches it is almost impossible for me to capture the moment of transition from watcher to hunter. The gosling guards honk and flap their wings, but it is already too late. Once before I have seen a lone wolf attempt to take a goose off the same beach and be beaten off by an attacking rearguard of furiously angry adult males whilst the females lead and herd the goslings into the safety of the water.

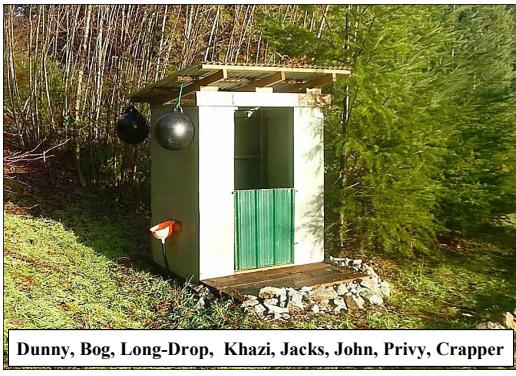


Cautious goose herding her goslings into the water

Yesterday, picking berries for Esther's breakfast at the most easterly point of the bay, I happened to glance up and for just a second I wondered why on earth the berries above my head were all picked and only the stalks remaining. As I moved up the hill through tiered nettles (*a substitute for spinach in the late spring*), towards the next bush I glanced down to see a mound of bear scat rich with salmon berry seeds. Aha, I thought, 'he' is here again. One of the hazards of re-opening the trails is that it encourages the descent of lone male black bears from the interior early in the year. I wonder where he hibernated – a cave or overhang somewhere, no doubt. I am confident but not certain that this is the same male bear Nikki disturbed whilst visiting the outhouse two years ago.

We first saw him departing from the clearing where the outhouse is located when we arrived to open the camp in late July 2012 - him glossy, black, fat, healthy, young and solitary. He exited swiftly up the trail making room for us during the day and returning at night to rest unbeknownst to us. Nikki, clutching her loo roll headed up the hill for relief, but found instead a sleeping bruin. She screamed twice and we all ran up to hear what sounded like an elephant lost in a dense thicket of bamboo. The crashing and snapping carried on for a good five minutes and I have to say I felt a certain amount of sympathy for the bear as the forest just here is thick with brambles, devil's claw, riven with fissures, fallen rotting wood and almost impossible to traverse, not to mention that Nikki's Scott's lilt turned into impenetrable Glaswegian - we caught some fruity expletives and something about black-hairy-bastards and her eyes were like saucers in the dusk. He did not return to his resting place, but Clarke saw him on the beach as he was passing not far from where the scat is now and he too commented on his size and beautiful healthy appearance. I hummed and sang out loud during the rest of my circuit back to the camp not wishing to precipitate an unexpected meeting and following his trail of paw prints pressed into the wet earth, broken grass stems and other small signs of the passage of his bulk. I brushed out the old orchard this year,

pruned the pear trees and cut back the plums, no doubt bruin will return in September for the fruit. A sow and two cubs came last year and caused much damage climbing the fragile fruit trees fracturing branches from the trunks and generally wreaking havoc. I've pruned the pears down to about four meters. The locals refer to bears as "walking stomachs".



After many years the outhouse needed freshening and so rather than rebuild the existing primitive log arrangement I decided to frame-up a ply skinned structure with a tin roof, vented and waterproof with long overhangs and a good view of the sound. A salvaged wood seat and cover provide a calming touch for needy bottoms. The urinal will be an old hard hat with a drain inserted in the base. It has an air solidity about it and I am confident the masses will come.

Louis, pronounced in the French manner, brought four large Dungeness crabs for us which Esther prepared over the outside stove. We ate them cold for early supper. One cannot do justice to undressed crabs in mixed company, and sat at opposite ends of the camp fully immersed in the finicky business of eating crab; of which Fred is the prime exemplar. I cannot say that I have ever eaten better: here is the recipe, get crab, place whole in boiling fresh water for six minutes, break into segments remove hairy gills, remove unnecessary clothing, eat whilst still warm, wash all over. No additives or dressing. Save roe and shell liner and make gumbo.

Louis was born here, and has lived here all his long life so far. Lumberjack mostly fell-ing, some real-estate, an eye for pretty girls, clamping, prawning and crabbing, and a limp from an accident on a wet barn roof fifty years ago. Louis doesn't own a car but puts as many hours on his seventeen foot DOUBLE-EAGLE, now with one of Evin-rude's state of the art 115 horsepower two-strokes as most of us do in our HONDAs and CHEVYs. Most residents here rarely go around Cape Mudge and up the Discovery Passage to Campbell River, preferring the logging road but Louis always goes where-ever the fancy takes him, usually once or twice a week, with no more fanfare than a nod to weather and tide.

Clamping is tough, hard work. Squatting on one knee holding the rake in one hand, grasped close to the shank, elbow resting on the shaft supported by the bent leg one pulls the rake through the compressed sand and rocks using the free hand to weigh down the tines exposing manilas, little necks, gooey, and so on. It usually takes me more than 20 minutes to gather a kilo, Louis once stopped by here on a frosty morning in November to warm his hands in front of the wood fire on his way to Dornop Inlet for one of the brief commercial clamping openings, usually of only 24~48 hours duration, and later told me he harvested a thousand pounds of clams; which he sold to the agent in Whaletown, on Cortez Island. We are unworthy.

The bucket Louis brought us our crabs in stands by the rubbish bin, sitting inside another bucket he brought over a month or so ago which had prawns in it...during the morning I kept hearing an odd popping noise. Ah! I thought to myself, it's the sun shining on the buckets and the heat is making them expand and contract hence the noises. At last, curious, I ambled over to find a deer mouse trapped inside. No doubt he thought he'd lick the rim of an evaporated milk can in the adjacent container and hopped into the wrong bin. Luckily for him I found him in time, and released him into the brush. Hantavirus, a nasty pulmonary infection, is carried by deer mice, and so when cleaning up after them watch out.



Deer mouse

Trapping for prawns is also not easy work. The ideal depth is about 80~100 meters, usually there are two traps and a ballast weight. The ballast stops the traps from being carried too far by the tidal currents and keeps the traps suspended in the correct attitude, mounted one above the other separated by a few meters, or one on the main line and the other tied off with a separate line to the main line and allowed to "swim" in the current. The bait is usually chicken necks in a cloth bag, tinned cat food with punctures around the rim, or "prawn bait" which resembles dry dog food held in a mesh bag. The traps are left from morn' till dusk, or overnight, and then hauled-up. We do it by hand, but Louis recently bought himself an electric trap hauler which takes all the fun out of hauling a 25~40 kilo weight up from 80+ meters down. The arrival of the trap upon the surface is greeted with studied nonchalance but whether you are eight years old or



Rock fish with one of our hard earned prawns in his gullet

eighty it is always important to maintain ones sang-froid in the event of disappointment or largesse. Arrival upon the surface can also be fun when interlopers such as swimming scallops, rock fish and other hungry prawn-predators have invaded the trap and can no longer escape. These are bonus stew items or returned to the sea as gauged by ones success. Fisheries requires one to keep a check on the numbers of prawns caught and one usually just counts them. Here, in the sound, we

see mostly spotted prawns, "spots" but also "stripes" which are much smaller but very tasty.

Virago has received a new propeller, this one is a Campbell Sailer built by Ron Campbell of Nanaimo. His father designed this propeller and he has produced it ever since, a local foundry casts them in manganese bronze and Ron tunes them at his shop. He is now 75 and says he is planning to slow down a bit. What differentiates them from other propellers is a significantly smaller blade area and lightness - 50% lighter than Virago's existing prop. Replacing the prop required not simply choosing a suitable diameter and pitch because V has an 1 3/8" shaft; which is large for a vessel of this size



VIRAGO's new propeller
from CAMPBELL

and props are not easily available. One cannot simply drill-out an existing prop as not enough hub will remain to safely carry the loads. At last, with correctly sized prop in hand, I careened V alongside our rock outcropping just beneath Fred's log popping off the existing prop and fitting and securing the new one all accomplished with a suitable prop puller provided by Rob and three tools: pliers to remove the split pin, a three foot long baulk of timber to hold the prop steady and a wrench to loosen the nuts. The result is a less squat, a modest increase in speed, reduced vibration and more control over the rate of speed throughout the range of RPM. I expect fuel consumption will be reduced too. V seems to like it. Esther and I cruised over to Campbell River for lunch with Louis at his favourite Chinese restaurant and to stock up on supplies. This is a four hour excursion each way without many distractions and having now experienced the flesh pots of Campbell River, it will be repeated only for special events.



VIRAGO at anchor



VIRAGO careened for hull cleaning and a new propeller

The more I use VIRAGO, the more I like her. One can always change what others have done before, but Steve really put some thought into VIRAGO's interior and it flows well, it works. She is tied-up at a neighbour's dock for a couple of weeks and will see good use throughout the summer.

The neighbour in Whiterock Passage just celebrated his 50th birthday and his wife hosted the party in the cathedral of trees on their steeply sloped property. The one-roomed-cabin is invisible from the pass, even though only 100 feet into the trees, and only the float and gangway attached to the rocks gives its presence away. He artfully developed their space under the canopy of hemlock, fir, pine and cedar: cabin, workshop, wood store, dunny, hot tub with wood burning snorkel stove, pad for visitors tent, look-out and so on without the usual fanfare of slashed timber and bulldozed stumps and the result is spread out over an acre or so under old growth forest trimmed with ancient fallen timbers, dusted with pine needles and moss, connected by narrow paths amongst the natural obstructions and dappled and stippled by light through the canopy far above.



Celebrating Paul's 50th Birthday under the canopy of trees surrounding his home

We enjoyed cheese from the goat farm close by, fresh salmon fillets from Calm Channel, and venison and hog sausages from Quadra Island, salads of vegetables from gardens around the place, and a plethora of fresh raspberries and strawberries. A spectacular venue and a worthy cause for celebration.

On the 21st of June we celebrated the Summer Soltice with a party aboard White Rock at the entrance to Whiterock Passage and on which the light of the same name is located. Last year we had twenty eight...this year only twenty but most enjoyable.

The highlight of the evening was the sight of a brand new STRYKER sports fishing launch about twenty six feet long; which zoomed smoothly towards us, rooster tail five or six feet in the air with smiling and tanned man at the con and beautiful girl at his side...he veered away from the main channel to pass on the inside of the light. "Aha," we thought, "a local out to impress us with his confident finessing of a difficult bit of navigation requiring local knowledge and nerves of steel at that speed". As he aimed for the widest part of the channel this thought turned quickly to "oh, he's not local", and this was in turn followed by a number of involuntary "oooh shiiits," and then expensive graunching noises of fibreglass and metal meeting barnacle covered granite at twenty five knots. Our birthday boy jumped into his little skiff and sped off to render much needed assistance. Later, he reported that the owner had purchased his pride and joy not two hours before in Campbell River and was showing off to his girlfriend. Furthermore, he thought he was circumnavigating Quadra Island when in fact he had "missed Beazely Pass completely", and so on. His chart plotter was off... Still, he managed to motor slowly away, back towards Campbell River, nursing his big diesel and counter-rotating VOLVO duo-props - a fifteen thousand dollar option. I wonder if his girlfriend will accompany him the next time? Apart from that we lit a fire inside a hollow log that still burned four days later, and received a lesson in the biology of goose eggs from the daughter of one party goer. Goose eggshells have the texture of plastic after the chicks hatch.

With evening fast approaching, Esther and I rowed back to our camp in the very last rays of the sun.