Log of Baidarka - Log 2001

Part VI: Gowgaia Bay to Louscoone Inlet: The Pacific High Pressure Breaks Down with a Vengeance!

by Don Douglass & Reanne Hemmingway-Douglass

Taking on water in Lousconne Inlet.

August 18. Dark clouds built to the south as we said our good-byes to *Gwaii Haanas II* (the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve boat) and rounded Gowdas Islands along Gowgaia Bay's south entrance. The extended weather report was now calling for a low-pressure front developing several hundred miles offshore. To date, we had enjoyed fantastic weather but, apparently, it was about to end.

The Pacific High Pressure system normally begins to break down about mid-September and, in our annual trips to Alaska, we have always tried to reach protected waters by then. But, as the end of August neared, it looked as if we were in for an early surprise.

The swells from the previous day's southeasterly winds had increased to what Don called "nice-sized" — the highest we'd seen to date.

"Do you want to put the stabilizer poles down now?" Don asked, as we began rolling from side to side.

"In these swells — no way!" I said, not even giving Kevin a chance to put in his two cents. "I don't want to stop now and flop around in this stuff. Let's just keep going. We can put them down in Wells Cove; it's not that far."

South of Gowgaia Bay, the coastline of Moresby Island is less indented. Wells Cove, 4.3 miles southeast of Gowgaia, is the only place until Flamingo Inlet where reasonable protection can be found in good weather. However, it is open to the southwest — the direction from which the swells and wind were now coming. We threaded our way between rocks and kelp in the middle of the "fairway" and tucked into the head of the cove to test the holding power of the bottom. Neil Carey had told us that, in a storm, shallow-draft vessels could find shelter by anchoring near the head and stern-tying to a tree. Both his comment that low-tide might leave a boat grounded on sand, and the sandy, rocky bottom with kelp (7 fathoms) which tested just fair for us didn't give us much confidence in the amount of "shelter." Referring to the head of the cove, Kevin noted on our data sheet: "White sand with lots of logs!" (We've found that a jumble of logs on shore always indicates a dangerous lee shore in stormy weather.)

We weighed anchor but, before leaving the outer cove, took advantage of the relatively calm water to

Nagas rocks off Flamingo Inlet.

Inside Nagas Rocks looking west.

deploy our paravane stabilizers. It was already mid-afternoon; before reaching Sperm Bay in Flamingo Inlet — our planned anchorage for the night — we still had hours of data to gather as we continued our close inspection of this rugged, remote coast.

Four miles south of Wells Cove, Upper Victoria Lake — a 4-mile-long body of freshwater — spills from an elevation of 140 feet into a smaller lake and, from there, cascades over a wide, rounded granite ledge into the Pacific. This falls is the last of the spectacular Charlottes' west coast panoramas. From here south the scenery, while still lovely and wildly remote, failed to elicit the "oohs and ahs" we'd been uttering non-stop. In addition, the clouding skies and graying seas were prying their way into our psyches.

Hand-drawn and marked *Surveyed by H.D. Parizeau and assistants, 1935,* large-scale Chart 3858 for Flamingo Inlet gives no horizontal datum and shows very few soundings; the scales even include cables — a measurement that has long passed out of navigational vocabularies! In preparing for our trip, Kevin and Don had talked with the Canadian Hydrographic Service about this particular chart, but CHS could not give them any idea about its horizontal datum or its accuracy, nor how useful the NDI electronic version of the chart might be. They expressed interest in whatever data we could develop concerning Chart 3858.

Sailing Directions reads: *Several dangers lie in the approach, some a considerable distance offshore. The inshore areas of Flamingo Inlet . . . have not been completely sounded and local knowledge is advised before entering.* We were about to create our own local knowledge.

I took one look at the entrance route Don and Kevin had projected for Flamingo and blanched. "You're not planning to enter *that* way, are you?" All I could see beyond us were breaking rocks and islets.

"We *have* to enter that way so we can determine the accuracy of our own data. But first, we need you on the helm while we take up the poles. Then we'll want you on the bow watching for hazards."

Adding a 1-inch thick back-up mooring line as storm intensifies.

I brought *Baidarka* into the wind as the two men took in the "fish" and raised the poles. Then I donned my boots and foul weather gear and installed myself at the bow. "This place is a mine-field of rocks," I thought, as we started in. I recalled Neil Carey's description of the entrance: "...sighting the scattered breakers slamming onto widely dispersed above- and below-surface rocks and shoals may discourage the skipper from investigating the wild beauty of this area." So far, the wild beauty had escaped me.

Baidarka made a 180° turn and retraced the route. "*What* are they doing?" I wondered, not daring to take my eyes off the water. As if reading my thoughts, Don opened the pilothouse door and shouted, "Kevin wants to recheck his calculations!" Taking measurements by radar range and bearings and DGPS and WAAS GPS readings, Kevin would compare them to the NDI electronic version of Chart 3858.

The boat reached her original entry point and made another 180° turn, heading east again. At midchannel we rounded up and headed north into Flamingo Inlet. "You can come in now," Don called. "We've crossed the worst part."

Anvil Cove and Short Inlet, the first two of four possible anchor sites in Flamingo (all of which are unsounded) are exposed to the south. We could still feel the throbbing of the southerly swells as we checked them out. In heavy weather we figure they'd be good for day-use only.

We continued north to Sperm Bay — a crooked thumb pointing northward on the chart. The only data on the chart for Sperm Bay are four tiny notations "dries at 2 ft. . . . ", etc. and no soundings! I could imagine one of Parizeau's assistants leaning over a chart table, magnifying spectacles strapped around his head and an extra-fine lead pencil in his hand, inscribing the minuscule numbers. These old charts are museum pieces and it disturbed me to see our own

Approaching Sperm Bay in the rain.

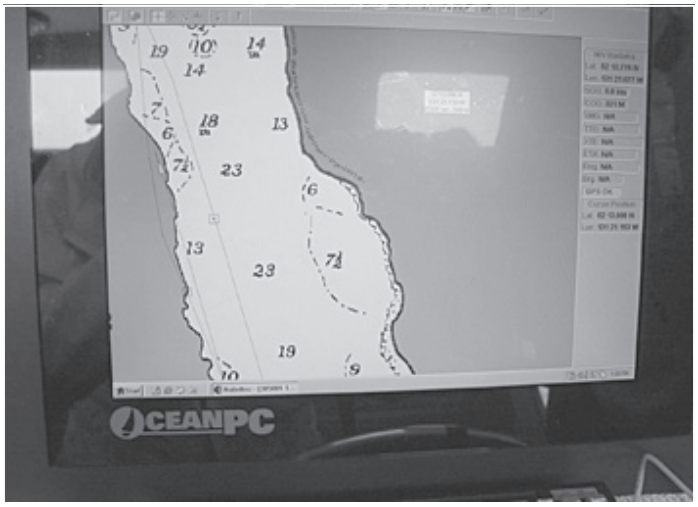
notes covering this lovely old black and white chart.

We had had a long and intensive day and were exhausted. Moving slowly and using reverse gear frequently, we entered rocky, uncharted Sperm Bay where irregular depths suggested a very rough bottom. We circled around the cove several times to determine the amount of swinging room we might have and dropped anchor in 6 fathoms over sand, mud and gravel behind a small island in the northwest corner. We spent a comfortable night, safe in moderate southerly winds. But, while we felt this site was very good in fair weather, we knew it might not be the best place to ride out a full southeast storm.

August 19. We took a half-day's layover so Kevin and Don could catch up on their data and I could work on my computer. The weather predictions now turned ugly; the front had been upgraded to "storm-force winds" moving in from the south, with barometric pressure expected to drop dramatically. Our exclamations now referred to weather — *not* scenery!

At noon, when stronger gusts began to occur, Don suggested we raise anchor and get going. Louscoone Inlet, to the east of Flamingo, is the better option in a storm. Also, we needed to fill our water tanks, and the third and last of the west coast sources lay within the inlet.

First, we turned north up Flamingo Inlet to check out the cove inside Staki Point — the safest storm anchorage in the inlet. Between Sperm Bay and Staki Bay, Flamingo Inlet narrows to about 300 yards. We were essentially navigating in the center of the channel, but the track on our electronic chart showed *Baidarka* crossing land! Kevin's calculations indicated that DGPS positions need to be moved both northward and eastward by about 150 meters. [*Note:* The 5-page report Don and Kevin later presented to CHS is available on both the Fine Edge website www.FineEdge.com and Kevin's www.Shipwrite.bc.ca] On several other occasions during our trip along the west coast of the Queen Charlottes, our electronic track had passed over land.



Note Baidarka's *track over land as we cruised mid-channel.*

Seas calm approaching north side of SGaang Gwaii.

Within the narrows, depths decrease rapidly and shoals and foul ground increase. North of Staki Point, Flamingo widens into Staki Bay where depths jump around anywhere from 12 to 2 fathoms. We had to give Staki Point a wide berth for at least 300 yards to the northwest to clear shoals and rocks before we could round into the cove east of the point. Again, I hung over the bow watching for underwater rocks. The head of the cove dries at 1 to 2 feet so we did our test-anchor in 6 fathoms and found fair-to-good holding. Visibility through the water was not good. Kevin noted: "Judging by the amount of flotsam on the beach there does not appear to be a great deal of water exchange here."

Although we exited Flamingo Inlet with a little less trepidation than we'd experienced the day before, as we approached Cape Freeman our anxiety increased. This prominent rocky cape extends three-quarters of a mile into the ocean, there are no soundings *whatsoever* in its vicinity, and the surrounding waters are turbulent with strong currents. Southwest swells were already visibly increasing ahead of the storm.

We made a quick detour to SGaang Gwaii (formerly called Anthony Island) — declared a World Heritage Site by the U.N. in 1981 — to check out the anchor site at the northwest side of the island where the National Park Reserve currently asks cruising boats to anchor. We found calmer waters now, out of the heightening southerly swells.

A visit to the abandoned village of Nan Sdins (formerly spelled Ninstints) is the highlight of Gwaii Haanas NPR. Set among tall cedars and hemlocks, the greatest collection of original Haida memorial and mortuary poles in the entire Park is kept in a state of arrested decay. Each summer Haida caretakers (known as Watchmen) live on the island and take turns guiding visitors who come by kayak, charter boat or cruising vessel. We had vis

SGaang Gwaii northwest cove is exposed in prevailing northwesterlies.

ited SGaang Gwaii on a previous trip so, with the storm approaching, we didn't dare take time to go ashore. We contacted the Watchman on VHF Channel 6 who, unfortunately, was new to the job and could not respond to our questions about anchoring.

Leaving *Baidarka* in the Park's suggested anchor site without someone aboard would not have been a good idea; it is wide open to prevailing northwesterlies, has a devilishly complex and rocky entrance, restricted swinging room, hard bottom, and no landing beach. Grays Cove — named for Captain Robert Gray to whom the Columbia River's discovery is attributed — along SGaang Gwaii's eastern shore, although also just a temporary anchor site, is preferred for cruising vessels. However, because this is where the charter boat operators now drop their clientele, there's often no room for cruising boats, and the shore along Nan Sdins village, where the poles stand, is off limits to all boats. We later relayed our concerns about the hazards of anchoring in the northwest cove to the Park service.

We left SGaang Gwaii and worked our way across an area that wouldn't make a kayaker blink twice. But I gasped when I looked at the small-scale Chart 3853 (1:150,000) — the only chart that shows the entire passage between Flamingo and Louscoone. It was another, "Réanne-on-the-bow" as we twisted and turned through shallow, rock-infested passage for 3/4 mile before we entered the deeper waters of Louscoone Inlet. We were back in semi-protected waters, happy to leave the heaving seas we'd encountered off Cape Freeman.

Charter boat heading to SGaang Gwaii.

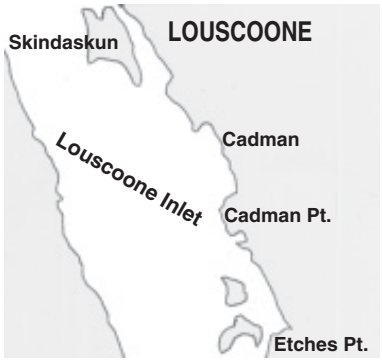
Baidarka *turns northeast into Lousconne Bay.*

Eight-mile-long Louscoone Inlet, which trends slightly northwest, looks on a map like a huge wedge lodged through the very center of Moresby's southern tip. Although north and south winds can scream up or down the inlet, there are several protected areas where cruising boats can find protection or where kayakers can plant a tent.

We headed directly to the water hose on the west side of Louscoone Inlet, across from Skindaskun Island (a little over halfway from its entrance at Louscoone Point). Periods of calm alternated with heavy gusts as we picked up the water buoy. Within fifteen minutes we had completed filling the tanks — the flow in this newest of Moresby's water hoses

was excellent! We then made a diagonal crossing, south and east, to a little cove 3/4 mile north of Etches Point (which we call Etches Point Cove) where a DFO (Department of Fisheries and Oceans) mooring buoy is located.

We entered the small, almost landlocked cove as strong gusts began to hit frequently and with force. On the bow again to spot dangers, I turned briefly to glance back at the center of the inlet from where we'd come. White caps, marching north up Louscoone, as if in formation, were already developing. But there, in front of *Baidarka* was the DFO buoy shown on the large-scale Chart 3857. Just in time!



I rushed back into the pilothouse to take the helm so Kevin and Don could pick up the buoy. Wind-driven rain began to pelt the boat, pushing *Baidarka*'s bow off, and I had to make a second try before I could get them close enough to get a line through the buoy. I opened the starboard-side pilothouse door so I could hear their commands.

They looped the line around the bow, through the chocks, and secured it to the cleats. "Half-throttle reverse!" Don yelled.

I gave the throttle 1200 rpm for about 30 seconds. *Baidarka* pulled smartly downwind; the DFO storm buoy lay completely over its side. Don signaled full reverse throttle. This time I took it up to 2000 rpm for a minute or so.

"The buoy is partially submerged," Don shouted. "Check the GPS for us." I called out our coordinates as Kevin and Don eyed the buoy. Some of the buoys we'd seen earlier in our voyage had looked as if they wouldn't hold even a dinghy under stress.

A gust of wind roared across the cove and *Baidarka* shuddered. Kevin gave me a thumbs up. The GPS and their visual sightings indicated the buoy was holding.

They both came back through the pilothouse, their foul weather gear slick with rainwater, their noses dripping. "We're going to rig some chain on the nylon line to keep it from chafing, Don said. "Leave the engine running. We'll need it in a while. Besides, it helps to keep the Red Dot heater going."

They headed down to the engine room to retrieve what they needed. I noted the time and coordinates in our logbook.

The men took a 30-foot piece of 3/8-inch chain, shackled each end to a 7/8-inch nylon snubber line and centered the chain on the buoy ring; this eliminated our worries that the nylon line would chafe through during the night.

The sky had darkened by the time the two of them finished. I hung

their foulies in the engine room and they each took turns showering — a luxury we could allow since we had full tanks of water.

"Break out the port!" Don exclaimed. "We're safely moored for the night." How long we would be here, we had no idea.

I studied the cove in the dim light while the men were showering. A series of small islets — two on the northwest and three on the southwest — protect the cove from the full brunt of storms; above the south shore of the cove where a stream empties into mud flats is an area that could serve well as a kayakers' camp site. Flocks of gulls were taking turns bathing in the stream. They dipped, then spread their wings and shook. Others, waiting to bathe, picked at the rockweed along the mud flats. Every ten minutes a dozen or so took off, circled around the cove and landed again. Each time a gust roared across the water, the entire flock — as many as three dozen — took off. When the gusts subsided, they returned. As the wind increased in force and regularity, they disappeared. *Where?* we wondered, were they taking shelter.

August 20-23. The winds during the night — we guessed from the strain on the buoy — had been a fairly constant 30 knots. The rain clattered all night on the deckhouse and the chain rubbing against the buoy reverberated through the hull periodically. Don got up often to check things on deck. "You silly," I told him. "Put something on. You'll freeze!"

"My foul weather gear is still hanging in the engine room. I don't want to wake Kevin by going through his stateroom," was his response.

I got up and pulled an old wool sweater out of his locker and insisted he put it on whenever he went out.

Although it had been a reasonably comfortable night, after brunch Kevin and Don decided it was time to back up the mooring line in case things got really nasty. Gale warnings had now been upgraded to storm warnings, with 4- to 6-meter seas and sustained winds in the 40- to 50-knot range.

They brought up the bin of 1-inch diameter nylon anchor line we'd kept stowed in the lazarette and managed to feed this second line through the mooring buoy ring and back to the midship's port and starboard cleats. Fine-tuning the tension on this second line to take about a third of the load during peak gusts greatly reduced *Baidarka's* tendency to sail madly back and forth. Don had discovered this technique when we were caught in an unexpected storm in Thurston Harbour on Moresby's east coast seven years earlier.

In addition to rigging the second line, Kevin and Don readied our 200-lb. bow anchor to be dropped quickly in case the mooring buoy gave way.

Storm intensifies – note white caps on the water.

Don felt we'd be secure in our little cove but, because of restricted swinging room, we'd have to react quickly if the mooring did fail.

We spent the rest of the day reading and resting — although we had loved every minute of our cruise down Moresby's west coast, we hadn't had much of either. Of the ten books I'd brought to read, I'd barely made it through the first.

Rain continued incessantly, along with the wind. We hadn't seen such a downpouring since a late-September storm in 1992. The storm took out the float in Bishop Hot Springs and caused extensive flooding along the Skeena River.

In the cove, itself, white streamers blew across the water. We could look out into Louscoone where the tops of 4-foot swells erupted into spumes that turned visibility in the channel to that of a winter blizzard. The wind whistled through *Baidarka's* rigging, but she held firm against the buoy, now tugging horizontally. Don wrote in the logbook: "There's now sea smoke in the channel outside as breaking crests roll northward. It looks like a desert dust storm." The North Pacific High had broken down with a vengeance not seen for may years!

During the second night, there was no let up. The wind howled; neither of us was sleeping well. The incessant grating of the chain and the tugging reminded me of our frightening experience in the

Rechecking the mooring lines.

Patagonia Channels. "I'm nervous," I told Don.

"Well, just think about our situation. If the buoy pulls loose, what's the worst that can happen!"

"Well, I suppose we'd just go aground on that little island on the north side of the cove."

"Yeah. Then we'd just wait for high tide to refloat us. That's not so bad, is it?"

Rational thinking took over again and I went back to sleep.

By the next morning the barometer had fallen over 20mb to date. Don's terse logbook entry for the day was: "Stormbound in Louscoone Inlet, but comfy."

Kevin commented, "It just never quits, does it!" He was becoming concerned about our ability to get back to Sandspit in time for his return flight to Sidney.

However, the barometer "bottomed out" the third night and began to climb again. By 0700 August 23, we had stowed the heaving mooring gear and were on our way toward the Hecate Strait side of Moresby.

We had spent three full days and nights stormbound in Louscoone Inlet, exceeding by a day Don's planned layovers.

Later, on our way south, and on our return to Anacortes, we would discover how serious and widespread this storm had been. At Shearwater, where cruising boaters usually find protection, the large T-float broke loose; damage was reported at Bella Bella and other settlements; and the Calvert Island weather repeater was knocked out of commission for over a week! A commercial fishing skipper with whom Don talked, was on his way home from the Bering Sea in Alaska when the storm hit. Hoping to find a lee from the huge southwest swells he was encountering on the outside, he cut inside Dixon Entrance and headed down Hecate Strait. But about 25 miles east of us, he was forced to heave-to for the night; his anemometer registered gusts of 80 knots!

More gales and storms were predicted. Would we make it back to Sandspit in time for Kevin's flight or not? The anxiety and excitement continued . . .

Next article: Kevin Monahan and Don Douglass update the diagram we made five years ago for Dolomite Narrows (Burnaby Narrows) where several vessels went aground in the past two years.

Detailed documentation of the results of Baidarka*'s voyage to the Charlottes' west coast found in 75 pages of the new 2nd Edition of* Exploring the North Coast of British Columbia *can be viewed online at <www.FineEdge.com>. In addition, the Douglasses have published four other highly respected guidebooks covering essentially all the places to tie up or anchor a boat from Puget Sound to Glacier Bay. Their newest book,* Exploring the Pacific Coast: San Diego to Seattle *is soon to be released. You can also read the entire 600-page* Exploring Southeast Alaska *on* www.FineEdge.com. *In addition to the books, FineEdge publishes two excellent route-planning maps of the Inside Passage, each with over 2000 GPS waypoints.*