

Paul Caffyn Around Alaska - Part II

## Bears & Diabolical Deltas!

False Pass to Nome

30 June - 10 August 1990



*Stranded in darkness by a drying tide, I used the spare paddle to dig a moat and build a platform on which I could lay out the aluminium space blanket, inflatable mattress and sleeping bag. And then wait for the tide to come back in.*

### **Bering Sea - The Sea of Bears**

I found the Bering Sea a total contrast to the heaving grey seas of the Gulf of Alaska. For the next few weeks, as I headed north-east along the top side of the Alaska Peninsula, the sea was often choppy but there was never a serious swell. I bumped into big mobs of both fishermen and brown bears during those weeks. Early to mid-July was prime time both for the Bristol Bay salmon fishery, and big brown bears fishing the river mouths for salmon that had escaped fishermen's nets.

For five years, during the planning of the Alaska trip, I undertook a heap of research and corresponded with Alaskans to find the best way to protect myself from black and brown bears. In early August 1980, a black bear attacked, killed and ate a 27 year old solo foldboat paddler in the Glacier Bay area near Juneau. All that remained of the poor chap was, 'an intact skull, shoulder blade, long bones and 4-inch section of spinal cord.'

For dealing with bears, I learned there were two polarized schools of thought which I termed the 'Rambo offensive' and the 'common sense'

approaches. The Rambo offensive school involved being equipped with a small arsenal, stopping short of heavy artillery. Heavy gauge rifles, pump action shotguns or powerful handguns were carried as bear protection. Kayak tour operators working out of Ketchikan and Juneau in S.E. Alaska carried pump action shotguns on every trip as the ultimate deterrent to black and brown bear attacks. However, I foresaw a few minor problems if I carried a heavy gauge weapon in the cockpit - firstly shaking fingers could discharge a weapon as I pulled it out, blasting a humongous hole in the hull, and secondly a poorly aimed wounding shot (shaking fingers again) would just really piss a bear right off. In my case, the overriding factor was the Caffyn minimalist weight factor - a weapon and projectiles were far too heavy to carry in the kayak.

The common sense school of thought involved applying many of principles that I'd used when camping in the saltwater crocodile country of tropical Australia. For bears it involved not camping either at the mouth of a salmon stream or alongside a bear trail, keeping food well away from the tent, and keeping well away from a sow and her cubs. My tongue in cheek game plan, for dealing with a charging brown



*My very first morning in the Bering Sea; a big brown bear wobbling down the beach towards me.*

bear, was to turn around, drop my survival suit, bare my posterior and the charging grizzly would find the sight 'unbearable'. This plan changed dramatically when I first saw how fast the brown bears could gallop.

In 1989, I did in fact carry a can of a new product called *Counter Assault*. An aerosol spray, it contained capsicum, which affects the respiratory system, mucous membranes and eyes. Tests in a laboratory environment and a few outside tests on rogue dump bears were very effective. Prior to the 1990 trip, a chap approached me after a slide show in Bellingham and asked what I was taking to deal with bears. When I told him *Counter Assault*, he offered to lend me a can of *Cap Stun*, which was the military/police version with a higher concentration of capsicum. He only had one can left, as the Bellingham police had used up all their stock to quell a riot at the local jail. I took up his offer with alacrity as I reckoned rioting prisoners were probably far more dangerous than brown bears.

Each night when I camped on a beach with heaps of bear sign, either tracks and/or scat (dung), I made sure the can of *Cap Stun* was beside me. I heard two stories about the misuse of *Counter Assault*. All the field workers employed by Exxon during the oil spill clean-up were issued with a can. One lass was playing with her can in a large Bell helicopter that was dropping her crew into a remote beach. She triggered a very short burst, which debilitated not only all the passengers but also the pilot and came ever so close

to causing a fatal crash. The second story was about a chap who thought the spray was not to be used to spray at charging bears but as a deterrent when used like a personal underarm deodorant spray. A vivid imagination can picture his response.

During the 89 days of the 1990 trip, I saw a total of 40 brown bears, one black bear, and had two brown bears bump into my tent during the hours of darkness. Alaska is still considered the frontier state of the U.S.A. and as such it is still attracting what I call a 'red neck' element from the lower 48. A maximum bag limit of 2,000 brown bears was in operation in 1990, that is up to 2,000 could be killed by trophy head and skin hunters. Larger bears don't stand much of a chance with guides and red neck trophy hunters searching for them by float plane. Thus, most of the bears I saw only needed to smell the slightest whiff of my scent and they were off over dune ridges.

One morning in the Bering Sea, three big brown bears were slowly plodding along the beach, with a spacing of about 50 feet between them. An onshore breeze was blowing. When my scent wafted to the first bear, he immediately stood on his hind legs and scanned the upwind horizon until he spotted my paddling motion. He dropped to four legs and galloped out of sight over the dune ridge. The two bears following behind repeated his action and I wished I'd had a video camera to record their reaction. I'm sure I didn't smell too badly.

All the literature about camping in bear country describes climbing trees to escape from charging bears and hanging all food suspended in bags from a line between two trees. I'm positive the writers had never visited the Alaska Peninsula or the Bering Sea coast. For, as a Bristol Bay salmon fisherman told me,



*The crew of a Bristol Bay salmon boat.*



“Women are as scarce as trees up here”. In this area, the topography consists of rolling tundra flats, with the nearest tree hundreds of miles away.

All I could do in the treeless tundra country was cook outside the tent and keep my food in the air-tight kayak compartments. Unfortunately, the night at Middle Bluff in Bristol Bay when a brown bear clawed its way into my tent, a near gale-force southerly wind was blowing. I'd backed the tent hard against the base of a big dune ridge. There was plenty of bear sign on the beach, huge plate-size paw tracks and scat or big piles of dung, so I built my usual Caffyn's patent pending 'bearcade' around the tent. This was whatever I could fabricate from driftwood, the kayak and paddle, so I would know if a bear was approaching too close to the tent. Unfortunately, because of the southerly wind, I had to move the MSR cooker and billy under the tent fly so they wouldn't be blown away, and lash the paddle to the kayak decklines.

Two hours after midnight, I was dead to the world, sound asleep with the alarm set for 3:00 am. With a horrendous sound of ripping tent fabric, I woke instantly. Realizing instantly it was a bloody great brown bear, I yelled, “Get out of it!” with just a tad of tremolo in my voice.

Quickly I groped around in the dark to find my glasses and the head torch. There was no need to unzip the tent door, since there was now a gaping hole through which I exited the tent. When I yelled out, the bear had fallen backwards over the kayak, then galloped over the dune ridge. It was only when shining the torch at the flapping streamers of nylon that I realized its



*11 July, Middle Bluff in Bristol Bay. The damage to the tent from the early morning bear attack.*

claws had missed my face by inches. The aluminium wind-shield of the MSR cooker had been flattened by the bear's paw.

Next morning I wasn't quite sure of what to do next. I didn't have enough duct tape to effect repairs. My needle and dental floss could keep some of the weather out but I still had over 1,000 miles to paddle to reach Nome. Caching the kayak in long grass, I set off with the rolled up tent under my arm to walk 15 miles back towards a fish camp in the hope of finding some duct tape or a sewing machine. I'd only covered 100 yards when a Piper Cub dropped out of the sky and landed on the beach beside me. The previous day I'd chatted to Brad Heile on a beach where he'd landed for a break from salmon spotting. After I explained my predicament with the shredded tent, Brad said, “Jump in, we'll have breakfast in town and see what we can do about the tent.”

It was the start of a magic day. Brad worked on charter as a salmon spotter to a small fleet of drift net salmon boats. As we flew up Bristol Bay, we passed over a horde of small but fast fishing boats, all jockeying for position to set their nets. It looked like the start of the Whitbread yacht race in Auckland except



*Brad Heile with this Piper Cub salmon spotter*

that ramming and towing of other boat's nets were accepted practice.

A maximum of 1,500 vessels was allowed to work this lucrative fishery. Some 30 million fish returned to these waters to spawn each summer, and 50 to 60% of these were caught within a three to four day period. Average catch per boat was 100,000 pounds according to Brad, for an average initial cash return of \$1.25 per pound. It is no wonder that permits went for a top price of \$275,000. In a six week period, fishermen made enough money to live comfortably for the rest of the year.

Brad shouted me a yummy non-dehi breakfast at the Red Dog Inn in Naknek and we found both duct tape and a sewing machine at one of the large canneries. With the tent patched, we went salmon spotting for a few hours and then Brad flew inland to a huge lake where we watched salmon looking for sheltered sites to lay their eggs. Late evening, Brad dropped me back to Middle Bluff and I made sure a large bearicade was in place before I crashed for the night. A magic day.

### **Walrus**

On 5 July, I had seen six brown bears during the morning and as I neared the vertical grey cliffs of Cape Seniavin, I was puzzled by a strange reddish band at the cliff base. Paddling closer, there appeared to be a cloud of steam hovering above this reddish band. Only when long white, curving tusks became visible did I realize I was looking at a very large mob of walrus. They were all clustered together, lying side by side, for warmth and company, all bull or male walrus with an immense body weight up to 1.5 tons. Their long ivory tusks, which can grow up to three feet long, and weigh up to 12 pounds apiece, were used for hauling out on ice, digging up the seabed for shellfish, fighting, keeping breathing holes in the ice open and for defence against polar bears, killer whales and man.



*Cape Seniavin, 5 July. A summer haul out beach for male walrus. A magic encounter in the Bering Sea*

Wary at first of how the walrus would react to the kayak, I drifted past with the wind, taking photographs. When I paddled close to the beach, the whole mob lumbered into the sea. I was surrounded by whiskery faces as they swam near the kayak.

Wounded walrus or cows protecting their young have been known to attack umiaks and kayaks. Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen in their frail kayaks were attacked several times by walrus in 1895 and 1896 as they paddled through the Arctic sea ice to Franz Joseph Land.

In former years, when walrus were hunted by the Inuit, nearly every part of the walrus was used. The skin was used for umiaks and floor coverings, the meat was eaten, blubber was burnt for heating, light and cooking, the intestines were used for parkas and window panes, and the tusks for hunting implements and carving. Sadly, today, the tourist dollar has changed the hunting of the walrus into taking only of the ivory tusks for carving. Heads are chain-sawed off while the rest of the body is left to float distended onto shore. In 1990, I was saddened by the sight of so many smelly, rotten headless carcasses washed up on the beaches.

### **The Diabolical Delta Country**

With a relatively smooth 50-mile crossing of Bristol Bay astern, I thought I was home and hosed with no major drama before Nome. But my pre-trip research left me totally unprepared for the most diabolical of torments known to a sea kayaker, the vast sprawling mud flats of the Kuskokwim and Yukon deltas. I had expected tidal flats during the Alaskan trip but not extending up to 10 miles offshore. I found the mental stress of dealing with shallow muddy water off the Yukon and Kuskokwim river deltas far worse than the violence of bumper/dumper surf landings in the Gulf of Alaska. My pet mild derogatory phrase coined to describe the problems I encountered was 'the diabolical deltas.'

One lady I met who had worked at a village school in the delta country sympathized with me over problems with drying mud flats, mosquitoes and the soggy, spongy tundra. She politely called this delta country the 'Armpit of Alaska.' I suggested that anatomically wise, it would be better termed the arsehole of Alaska. Embarrassed to relate how I'd spent two nights camped out on the mud flats when left stranded by an ebbing tide, I was relieved to hear her say, "Oh everyone round here has spent at least one night out on the mud flats."



30 July, Flat Island, Yukon River mouth. The Alstrom family at their summer fish camp.

No wonder the fishermen I met off the delta front were always in a hurry. They always stopped to look at the long yellow kayak but I never had a chance to ask more than one question about what lay ahead before they would say, "I'm in a hurry to catch the tide." The fisherman all wore ski goggles to keep spray out of their eyes as they planed their aluminium skiffs over short dirty seas off the shallow delta front.

My main problem was a diurnal tidal cycle in the deltas, only one big flood tide and one ebb per 24-hour tidal cycle. The more common cycle worldwide is a semi diurnal cycle, with roughly two six-hour flood, and two six-hour ebb cycles per 24-hour period. In Etolin Strait, my map showed tidal flats drying out 10 miles offshore. When I tried to sneak through Etolin Strait, with an overnight paddle on a big flood tide, the ebb tide sucked out at 2:45 am leaving me stranded high and dry on the mud flats.

Using the blade of my spare paddle, I scooped up a platform of damp sand some three inches high, spread out the aluminium space blanket, *Thermarest* mattress



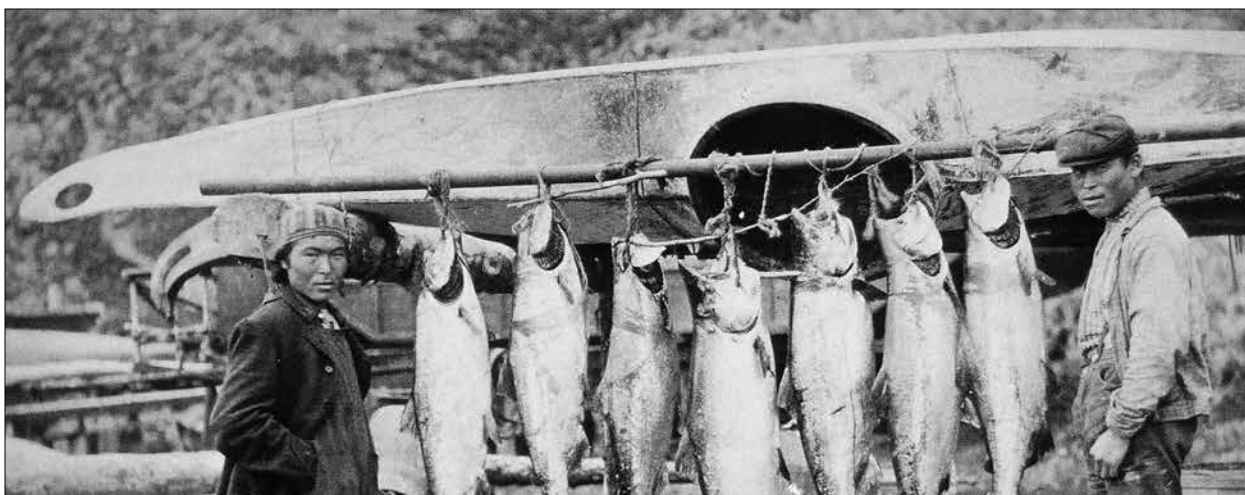
24 July, Tununak; Paul with one of the few old traditional style Hooper Bay kayaks he saw on the 1990 paddle

and holofill sleeping bag. Propping the kayak on its side, I slept with my head in the cockpit, where my paddling clothes were stashed in case of a very quick inundation by the flood tide. Then I tried to catch a few hours sleep before the flood tide scampered back across the flats. In daylight next morning, I could see neither sea nor coast, I was so far offshore.

Needless to say, my relief to reach gravel beaches and rocky shores again at Stebbins was immense. For many nights afterwards, I experienced nightmares of waking on mud flats with the sea inundating my tent and sleeping bag. Even when camped on dry ground.

### Old Skin Boats

Part of the reason why I chose to paddle around Alaska, was that it was the first area I had visited where skin boats were utilized for centuries as the main method of transportation. Various types of sealskin-covered kayaks evolved according to the vagaries of local sea and weather conditions. I was keen to photograph any surviving skin boats and talk to the Inuit hunters about their traditional hunting and paddling techniques.



What the Hooper Bay skin kayaks were used for in the old days - salmon fishing. Big cockpits, a hole at the bow and a lifting lug at the stern to help carry the kayak



*27 July: so good to see the enthusiasm of the Hooper Bay village kids to try out my kayak and paddle*

In the light of my trip, I hoped to evolve ideas and theories as to why specific designs had developed in different areas.

I was disappointed to find that aluminium skiffs and powerful outboard motors have totally superseded the ancient skin boats of coastal Alaska. I did see three beautifully crafted wooden frames of the Bering Sea kayaks at the Yupik villages of Tununak and Hooper Bay but these relics of a past era were not being given the tender loving care and attention that they deserved. Covered for the last time with canvas, a more durable skin than seal-skin, the rotting cloth hung in tatters. It was obvious the boats had not been near saltwater for years.

However, I was tickled by the response of the Yupik kids to my kayak. When I surfed to shore at Hooper Bay, I was quickly surrounded by a mob of excited kids who helped carry the boat clear of the beach. Boys and girls alike all wanted to try out the cockpit and feel the weight of the paddle. I can only hope my trip stimulated a resurgence of interest in the old skin boats.

### Steam Baths

I felt privileged at Hooper Bay to be invited by a Yupik family for a meqiq or steam bath. Since there was no running water in the smaller Eskimo villages, cleansing of the whole family was carried out in a steam bath. I was told that each village has an elder whose tolerance to heat was greater than anyone else. There was talk also of an invisible belt that is tightened as the temperature and humidity rise and how the elder, as he tipped another pitcher of water over the hot rocks, emitted a low throaty chuckle while lesser mortals hugged the floor where the steamy heat was not as bad.

Each house at Hooper Bay seemed to have its own meqiq out the back. They looked not much bigger than a kid's playhouse, with a small entrance door



*A backyard meqiq or wash-house for the family since there was no running water in the village*

at one end and a chimney at the other end. The small door led into a tiny cubicle where I stripped off my clothes. Before entering the steam room, I was given a bowl of cold water and a tube of thin sticks wrapped in cloth. Instructed to soak the tube in the bowl of water and then breathe through it, I was starting to wonder what I had let myself in for. I was told it was to stop the hot air burning my throat and lungs. In the steam room, a 44-gallon drum with an outside fire box had a steel mesh on top which supported a layer of volcanic rocks.

The wooden walls and floor were scorching hot to my buttocks and back, but worse was to come when Frankie poured a can of water over the rocks. A wall of steaming heat hit me and I lasted only 90 seconds before exiting into the wee cubicle. The others followed me and after cooling off we made several more forays into the steaming heat. The men boasted of the marvellous medicinal and recuperative powers of steam baths. The benefits for me were twofold. I slept like a log for the rest of the night and all the mud



*Frankie had a higher tolerance for the steamy heat in the backyard Hooper Bay meqiq - then Paul!*



*Traditional Hooper Bay style kayaks alongside the US Revenue cutter Bear, off Nome and ready for trading*

and silt that my body had absorbed in the Kuskokwim delta was cleared from my skin pores.

### **Last Days to Nome**

Whether it was this relief or a marked improvement in the weather, I knocked back the last 180 miles from Unalakleet to Nome in only four days, averaging a creditable 45 miles per day. And the last day into Nome was a veritable hummer. The wind at last swung onto my stern quarter allowing me to indulge in some early morning surfing. As the sun rose, the wind eased and the day warmed up. I ended up stripped down to just capilene long johns, hat and polaroids. When the sea went off, I was able to take off the sprayskirt. I was jogging along, conditioning my brain that this was indeed the very last day of the 1990 trip and trying to prepare for the anticipated post-trip depression, when I passed an aluminium skiff grounded on a beach. An elderly Inupiaq couple from Nome had been out berry picking and we chatted about time and tide. The conversation went something like:

“Where did you come from?”

“I started this year at Juneau.”

The chap shook his head slowly in disbelief.

“Where are you heading for?”

“I’m finishing this year’s trip at Nome today.”

“Well, where do you hope to get to?”

“Next year I want to follow the ice pack north to Barrow and then along to Inuvik in the Mackenzie delta.”

There was a lengthy pause here as the chap began to comprehend the full length of the task I had set

myself. He then looked me squarely in the eyes and said slowly, “Well, you better put some clothes on then.” It really broke me up, and we laughed for ages.

At 8:00 pm that evening, 10 August 1990, I entered the turning basin at Nome and landed on a scrap of sandy beach, ending 89 days and 2,760 miles of paddling. No one was expecting me. I asked an elderly Inuit chap if he would take my photograph by the kayak. I didn’t experience an overwhelming feeling of elation of relief. The weather was so good on that last day, I felt I didn’t want to stop.

### **Summary for 1990 Trip**

Distance Covered	: 2,756 miles	Elfin Cove to Nome
Start to Finish time	: 89 days	
Rest & Recuperation days:	8	
Weather-bound days	: 2	
All up average	: 31 miles per day	
Paddling day average	: 35 miles per day	



*Paul after completing the 1990 paddle at Nome*