

## 2009 Alaska Cruise Journal # 6

**A Storm is Forecast** As the inclement weather continued, our world turned into one of incessant rain colored in a monochromatic dull gray tone. We had been given plenty of advance warning from the National Weather Service of the arrival of a major weather front. Gale force winds are not uncommon several times during the course of our average summer cruise, but we could not have predicted the intensity of the storm that was soon to follow.



We chose to wait out the incoming weather in ultra scenic Thunder Bay, located just off of the Gulf of Alaska midway along the south side of the Kenai Peninsula. Thunder Bay is a picturesque inlet removed from ocean swells and boasts a huge snow field with ice caves in the most sheltered end of the inlet. On typical days, there is a constant roar from the many waterfalls. The bay is surrounded on three sides by tall mountain peaks and it was these mountains which became the cause of what was to happen.

**Gusty Winds and Waterspouts** It was evident that we were going to have to lay-over a full day, if not longer, as the winds picked up to a level such that we were content to stay until the storm passed. The first



morning Avery spotted a black bear sow and cub walking along the shoreline (**photo above**) appearing blissfully ignorant of the rain and blustery wind around them. With a cozy fire in the fireplace, we settled into a day of reading, editing photos, making final edits to the last journal, and occasionally watching the wind gauge rise and fall as the boat swung to and fro.

Kathleen, who is keeping her own journal, recorded every change in the maximum wind reading, announcing each time a new record for the boat was set. Hurricane force winds are defined as winds exceeding 64 knots (74 MPH) so we were approaching a new threshold when the indicator reached that level. At this point, Carl (**photo at left**) decided to let out additional anchor chain and add some lines to reduce the strain on the



## 2009 Alaska Cruise Journal # 6

anchor windlass. Upon his return, he announced that he was prepared to give a glowing testimonial to the impermeability of his Gore-Tex rain gear.

As the afternoon continued, it became a game of watching for the waterspouts and dark rippled spray that signified another intense gust headed our way. Throughout the afternoon, a new boat record was recorded numerous times until we reached a maximum of 80.5 knots (92.6 MHP).

Why did we experience 80 knot winds while the ocean forecast only called for winds of 45-50 knots?

The answer is the localized weather condition known as a *williwaw*. A williwaw can occur when strong winds are forced over the top of mountains. Dammed up on the windward side, they eventually flow over the top and down the lee side of the mountain at great force. Although Thunder Bay was not mentioned, the U. S. Coast Pilot has warned us of many anchorages that can experience these conditions and we should have realized the location's potential before selecting it as our anchorage.



**Moving On** By the next morning, the worst of the foul weather had passed and we were ready to leave our anchorage although we didn't really expect sea conditions to permit our departure.

Nevertheless, we decided to try and although the seas were still sizeable with twelve foot swells, the spacing between them was acceptable so we headed into Seward to refuel and take a respite from the several days during which it had been too wet to go ashore or



## 2009 Alaska Cruise Journal # 6



kayak. The newspaper headlines reported that the tourist season was not as dire as it was first feared, and cruise ships, although not fully loaded, were still making their regular scheduled visits.

**Procession Rocks** Leaving Seward and exiting Resurrection Bay, we passed massive jagged cliffs white washed with black kittiwake nests. We headed east through Blying Sound to approach the entrance of the channel leading into Prince William Sound. Procession Rocks, a collection of jagged islets near the entrance, gave us a chance to observe and photograph a large rookery of Steller sea lions (**photos on previous page**).

Surging swells, remnants of the recent storm, washed up and down the faces of the protruding rocks. The squawking of many birds and the raucous bellows of the sea lions added a special sense of wildness to this special marine setting.

The extensive cruising grounds of Prince William Sound were our next destination and this would take us off the open ocean for the balance of the third leg of our voyage.

### **South Central is Special**

South Central Alaska, where we have spent the last six weeks, has several characteristics that differentiate it from Southeast Alaska and British Columbia, the other waters we explore during our summer cruises. Of greatest importance to us is the abundance of wildlife. Although plentiful in the other areas, the wildlife populations appear to be much greater in South





## 2009 Alaska Cruise Journal # 6



Central Alaska. Sea otters (**photo on previous page**), are only occasionally viewed in the more southern locales, but are seen almost daily throughout this region.

This species continues to grow as populations recover from near extinction at the hands of early fur traders and the damaging impact of the Exxon Valdez oil

spill which occurred twenty years ago this past March. Humpback whales (**photo on previous page**), only occasionally seen in British Columbia, are quite common in both Southeast and South Central Alaska, but this region also has the larger fin whales.

**Glaciers** Another differentiating characteristic of this area is the number of glaciers. Alaska has approximately 100,000 glaciers which cover almost five percent of the state's land mass. Glaciers occur where the annual snowfall exceeds the annual snow melt, and develop over thousands of years forming massive sheets of compacted ice.

Included in this count are the more than 25 glaciers that flow from the vast Sargent Icefield located in the western region of Prince William Sound. One is the approximately 12-mile-long Chenega Glacier that covers more than 125 square miles and ends at the tidewater in Nassau Fjord. On yet one more overcast and rainy day, we motored back to this active glacier knowing that it would give us the chance to see hundreds of harbor seals floating on the ice with their pups in front of the glacier (**photo above**).

Our view from within a half of a mile of the face of the massive glacier did not disappoint. We listened to the rifle-like cracks of sound and watched the glacier discharge more ice to add to the accumulation between us and the glacier. The many shapes and patterns of the floating ice (**photo at right**) contributed to the continually changing panorama that is South Central Alaska.

