

## **AROUND BLUE HILL BAY & SWANS ISLAND**

### **By paddle power**

Why not Blue Hill Bay?

Over the years I have canoed around most every major bay along the coast of Maine: Casco, Muscongus, Penobscot, Deer Isle, Mount Desert, and even Cobscook and Passamaquoddy, but I only straight-lined it through Blue Hill Bay, and I never made it around Swans Island. It is possible that as a paddler one always looks for "far-away-great-adventure-venues", missing what is right under one's nose. Starting a trip in Ellsworth, barely 30 miles away from my home in Orono, never occurred to me. This place is where I paddle in early winter and spring when all freshwater lakes and rivers in my neck of the woods are already/still frozen over. The Union River in Ellsworth is tidal, i.e. is brackish, and to boot, has a significant run-off from a power dam, preventing or at least delaying the final freeze-up. Spring also comes early for eager boaters. Ellsworth also has a great put-in ramp with ample parking, the river is pretty and very remote looking, and when you get into Union River Bay after about 2.5 river miles, you can enjoy the significant skyline of Mt. Desert Island and the open vistas of Union River Bay.

So when in the middle of last winter I was thinking about where I might paddle this summer, Ellsworth came to mind as the starting point. It also would be a very short car shuttle for Nancy. I liked that. No more Cape Vincent, Chicoutimi, Tadoussac/Saguenay, Matapedia or Miramichi put-ins or take-outs. Granted, those were great venues with interesting names, but Blue Hill and Swans Island are pretty names also and definitely worthy of a week's excursion along its outer shores and around its many islands, a great 100-miler.



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Three days after this year's roughest Blackburn Challenge, a 20-mile ocean race around Cape Ann in Gloucester, Massachusetts, I was packed up and ready to go in my trusty Verlen Kruger Sea Wind sea canoe. The weather forecast for the day was typical for late July in Maine (July 28, to be exact): hazy to thick fog. But I have no problem with that, and I was off with a smile, anticipating all the many places I remembered from earlier sailing and canoe trips.



*Put-in at Ellsworth*

Into the fog

When I got out into the bay, visibility was about a quarter of a mile - very peaceful for me. Loons were yodeling in the mist, and now and then I heard the watery, gurgly barking of harbor seals hauled out on some ledge. Where I expected shore, I heard occasional hammering and sawing as well as some human voices and dogs barking. July and August are the two summer months in Maine. Everybody has arrived and is hoping for sunny weather. But the Atlantic has its own ideas.



*Ready to go*

After going basically south for 11 miles, I rounded Newbury Neck into Blue Hill and Morgan Bay. Burnt Point had a very enticing pocket beach, but the promontory looked very private, and I moved on till I got to Jed Island. I had stopped there in 1996, on my first Maine Island Trail (MITA) paddle from Portland to Machias. But a lot had changed, and the spot I had camped on was declared off limits because of an active eagle's nest. So I moved over on the seawall, hearing, but never seeing, the eagle. It was low tide, which the many harbor seals on South Ledge enjoyed, me not so much, because it meant a longer portage. Then the sun came out, and it got hot. Time for a swim.

#### Blue Hill Mountain & Harbor

Day two started sunny and calm. High tide was about 10:00 a.m. I crossed Morgan Bay, which may in the future raise oysters, I recently read in the papers. Seals were everywhere as I headed straight towards the Blue Hill mountain, clearly visible at the entrance to East Blue Hill. And smack dab in the middle of the entrance, as in so many Maine harbors, big menacing ledges were lurking below the surface. I always wonder how early explorers fared without NOAA charts, just equipped with a sharp look-out and a lead line. However, that can't have been enough for a prudent skipper. So I picture them anchored off shore and investigating a bight or possible harbor by rowboat and reporting back to the skipper.

Blue Hill Harbor was the same. First there is the "Kennedy Rock", so named after a Kennedy boat that once fetched up on it. And then again smack dab in the middle of the harbor entrance is Sculpin Point Ledge, making out from the right. Beware, boaters, the incoming tide is running real hard over it. So you better make sure you leave the red nun #6 on starboard before rounding up into the inner harbor. Nancy and I had sailed into this harbor many times with our first two children when they were little, and it was always a tense moment, since I grew up thinking you can sail off your mooring as well as anchor without power. I had grown up in post-war Germany where we simply did not have motors. Even our University's 60' steel-hulled ocean racing yawl "Peter von Danzig" did not have a motor, which was very exciting for us young students entering tight little Danish or Swedish harbors. So I also considered our 5-horse British Seagull motor on our 22' swing-keel sailboat "decoration". I hardly ever used it.



*Blue Hill Harbor and Mountain*

The sight into Blue Hill Harbor is stunning. The mountain, which really appears blue from a distance, fills the entire view, with the Kollegewidgewok sailing club and its fleet hugging the right shore. The left lobe runs dry at low tide and is studded with ledges. My advice: be very careful or avoid it completely. However, this was heaven for our kids in 1975, when we came in here, often in the thick of fog. Our 7-year-old son was allowed to row our little 8' dinghy anywhere he wanted inside of Sculpin Ledge, sometimes taking his 5-year-old sister along. They each wore a PFD with whistle; I had the tin fog horn, and we had agreed on a communications code.

Nice, happy memories of our young family. But I had to push on, again almost straight south for 7 more miles to the mouth of Allen Cove. Before I got there, though, I suddenly caught sight of the arched bridge over Blue Hill Falls, a short, but vigorous tidal reversing falls. The tide this morning was running in hard, just as it did in 1973 (and every 12 hours since then, of course). We had been invited for a family picnic and swim off the rocks by a faculty friend of ours. He was an avid canoeist, but without a partner to run the big tidal waves of the falls. So he asked me to be his bow man and LEAN downstream on my paddle as we entered the fast current from behind the bridge embankment. That was a good one. I had never been in a canoe before, but was willing to try my luck. I watched a few other canoes shoot the rapids, visualized the process, and pushed off with conviction. Voila! I hung out on my paddle, we shot into the haystacks and bounded through them with joyful shouts. This was real fun. We did it many more times, till the tide eventually fell slack at high tide. And when there was no boat in the way, some older kids and even Nancy would jump into the maelstrom from the bridge, clutching their life jackets as they splashed into the waves. A safety boat would make sure everybody made it back to shore OK.



*Blue Hill Falls*

Yes, this day was the beginning of my canoeing career. I joined the local canoe club, the Penobscot Paddle and Chowder Society, and built my first canoe off the club mold the following spring (1974). Nancy and I both have many very fond memories of family canoe camping trips in that boat.

With a smile, I tore myself loose from that place and headed further down the bay towards Allen Cove, inside of Herriman Point. Unfortunately there was no MITA overnight spot in the area, but I found a lovely, shaded pebble beach, which should do just fine. I lucked out. The owners came by, walking their dogs, after I was all set up with my minimal tent and neat gear. I identified myself, gave them my card, and they let me stay. I always wonder whether any of them ever took the time to look at my articles on my website. Ah well.



*Sunrise at Allen Cove*

More thick fog

Day three was relatively short, but around three points, and the fog was "legendary". I crossed over to and rounded Herriman Point, then Flye and finally Naskeag Point. At Flye Point I noticed that there was enough water on the bar to paddle across it into Herrick Bay, saving me going around ledge-studded Flye and Green Islands, a nasty stretch, especially in this fog. And my, was the fog thick! I had hardly ever had so little "visbi", as



weather stations like to call it. My Ritchie compass, though, was accurate, so was my navigation, and I finally made it to Naskeag Point, Naskeag Harbor as well as to Naskeag Island. Moments later the tiny MITA island Little Hog appeared out of the fog, which triggered a loud "YES!" on my part.



*Foggy arrival on Little Hog Island*

Little Hog, a tiny wooded island with a one-tent-only campsite, was another of my all-time Maine favorites. I had camped here in 1996 and remember enjoying a feast of blue mussels. I looked at low tide, but found none. However, the large ant-hill in front of the campsite was still there. Swimming was great, though. A black-hulled schooner anchored for the night this side of Babson Island, barely visible. I hope their evening fare was good to make up for the bad visibility.



*MITA island site*

### The big jump

Day four was going to be a significant day: crossing over from Naskeag Point to the SW corner of Swans Island, a 6-mile open water crossing. The weather report was great: clear sky, light winds from the SW and the flood tide coming in. I could see my target as soon as I cleared Naskeag Island. It was a long 6-mile, 2-hour haul across a big open bay, Jericho Bay, against a rather strong tide, which added an extra half hour to the

expected 1.5 hours. After the foggy day yesterday, the bay was full of lobster boats, dancing across the bay from buoy to buoy, picking up only their specific color and number. They would put the boat in a starboard spin, pick up the buoy with a boat hook, winch up the lobster pot (trap), take out the lobsters, keep the proper sized ones, throw back the others, tie in a fresh bait bag, toss the trap back into the water, and rush off to the next buoy of theirs. All day, every day, always the same efficient routine; only the weather changes, making it easier or harder to earn a living off the sea.

Some areas have so many lobster traps in the water that I feel the whole thing is like a "lobster nursery". The young lobsters get fed good fish bait and have nothing to worry about. They get thrown back into the water to grow up, till their carapace (body shell) reaches a certain size. Then the fun is over. They become keepers and end up on some tourist's dinner plate. Those few lucky ones, who make it to a certain larger size, are also thrown back into the water like the short lobsters (or "shot" lobsters, as coastal Mainers would say), but this time as breeders. So now you know all about the life of a Maine lobster. (In Canada, lobsters are caught following a completely different set of rules.)



*Hockamock Head Light, Swans Island*

I had lots of energy this morning. Good weather helps. I made it fine past Smutty Nose and Mahoney Island into the open bay. Two porpoises greeted me as I finally approached West Point from whence I hopped over to Irish Point and Hockamock Head eventually. It has a prominent lighthouse on it, guiding boats into Burnt Coat Harbor/Minturn, Swans Island's major harbor. I knew I had made it. I was delighted. The rest was a piece of cake: just paddle all the way up the long narrow harbor arm to the MITA site at City Point. However, I had a hard time finding this place in the woods and shore brambles. It definitely needs a sign at the water's edge. The promised green tent platform was also nowhere to be found, the ground was very uneven and wet, and the whole site was under big, ancient trees, about to drop heavy dead branches. The tidal mudflats surrounding the take-out/put-in place were also much more extensive than indicated.



*Burnt Coat Harbor, Swans Island*

I found out the hard way next morning. It looked as if I was going to be stranded here for at least 2-3 hours. I did not like "the situation" at all. I had to get out of there sooner, since I had a significant paddle planned for the day, namely rounding Swans Island along its bold eastern shore to North Point and from there jump across to Black and Pond Island eventually. So I devised a doable portage plan. Most of the mud flats were deep, soft, bluish-black, sandal-eating muck. Yuck! But maybe I could portage a bit further down the shore along a thin, seaweed-covered rocky cleft. I slid my boat down to the water's edge, followed by strategical armloads of my gear, which I stowed right into my boat. With my last load, my boat began to lift off the mud with the incoming tide. I pushed some more and got in, leaving my nasty looking sandaled feet, caked in oozing mud, dangling outside my boat, to wash them off once I got to deeper, cleaner water. This place goes down in my book as a no repeat.



*Low tide at City Point, Swans Island*

But my trip picked up again nicely when I got to Harbor Island. The sun came out, and there even was a chemical toilet on the lobster pier, which I took advantage of. This beats carrying out your waste, which is MITA policy, let me remind you. More and more little harbors or lobster coops have those little blue "comfort stations". So, my boater friends, look for them and keep our island world clean and fresh smelling. Thanks!

#### Around Swans Island

At the narrows between Harbor Island and Stanley Point the shore turns very bold, interspersed with steep seawalls of rounded granite rocks. I saw only very few houses on shore, but on my right was a wide open stretch of ocean reaching towards Long Island and the two Sister Islands eventually. This is a very formidable shore, which could be downright intimidating in any bad weather. The tide was also coming in hard, creating rips off Red Point, and even bigger rips further off shore, my chart indicated. I moved along with urgency till I rounded East Point. Then suddenly the hard, steep

rocky shore turned more into a gravelly, drumlin-type of ocean edge, and lots of houses crowded down to the shore, all the way up to North Point.

And as I was rounding that point, cutting inside of a huge rocky ledge, most likely the former tip of this point, I saw a couple waving their arms frantically in the air and shouting something in my direction. I headed a tad towards shore to hear what they were saying, and when I saw their poodle, I knew it was a colleague of mine from up the street in Orono, vacationing here for a week. We were both surprised to see each other. We talked, I was offered coffee, but I was eager to head across Casco Passage to Black Island and Pond Island eventually.

It was suddenly a very busy scene on the water. The ferry boat was leaving Swans Island for Bass Harbor on Mount Desert Island (MDI), several cruising power and sailboats were traversing from Blue Hill to Jericho Bay via the Casco Passage, and there was a significant sailboat race for wooden boats going on in Mackerel Cove. The wind was also picking up, as it does most every morning around 10:00.

I was glad to fetch Black Island and from there scoot up along the western shore of Sheep to Pond Island. But since I did not like the exposure of the MITA site on the southern point, I went on to the SE indent of the island, another boaters' overnight spot. It was high tide by now, and the take-out was easy. Swimming was also great, and since nobody else was here or dropped in later, this was a nice stop with great, open vistas towards the mountains of MDI.

Crossing Blue Hill Bay to MDI

I had a peaceful, quiet and calm night, only "interrupted" by the gurgling howling of a group of gray seals on the ledges off Eagle Island. They are so much bigger than our usual Maine harbor seals, and sound completely different: harbor seals have not only a watery bark like a dog, but also a nose ridge like canines, while gray seals howl more like coyotes in a continuous joyful chorus. Some people call them sea wolves for this reason. They have a much bigger, torpedo shaped head, and can weigh up to 750 lbs. They are big bruisers, and might fake you out with a splashy warning with their front flippers, if you get too close. And yes, harbor seals submerge back into the water like a dolphin, whereas gray seals mostly go back-in tail first, assisted with a big swish of their powerful front flippers.

Since the weather looked good, I set my course from Pond Island towards the NNE, all the way across Blue Hill Bay to Moose Island, off MDI, a good

5-mile open water crossing. At about the half-way point I came close to the SE corner of Bar Island, always enjoying the great mountain ridge of MDI, getting closer with every stroke. A huge thunder cloud hung over the bay for the longest time, ever so slowly drifting to the east, but staying nicely ahead of me. Long wispy streamers told me it was dumping lots of rain onto the island.

Then the sun came out, the shore got closer, and two porpoises greeted me near Moose Island, the same way they had welcomed me to Swans Island. I stopped paddling for a while and watched their elegant dives. I could even hear their breathing, a quick loud exhale followed by a quieter, slower inhale. It was also time for a water and granola break. At that very moment I felt perfectly at peace with the world.

Soon thereafter I became aware of the fact that it was Sunday. All MDI outfitters seemed to hit the ramp at Bartlett Narrows, so it looked, fitting eager tourists mostly into 5 or more very conspicuous red double kayaks. It looked more like a hasty production number. The boats then drifted south, most of them looking like spastic spiders. They briefly dipped into Pretty Marsh Harbor, rounded tiny Folly and John Islands, only to return for the next group of paddlers, eager to enjoy the beauty and solitude of the Maine coast... Next!

A blue comfort station was also provided there, for the many boaters.  
Last night on the trail at "The Hub"





*The Hub and MDI mountains*

North of Bartlett Island is a most charming little hub or nubble island, properly named "The Hub". It is a solid chunk of steep-sided granite with sparse vegetation. The only shaded one-tent site is right in the middle of the island under a very old ant-ridden pine tree. This has not changed since I first camped here in 1996. No big deal; just keep your tent zipped! Landing on this big rock can be hard, though. MITA suggests the western shore at high tide. OK, but there is no way to get back to the water at low tide from there, unless you toss your boat over the edge, the way the Old Town Canoe Company did in their ad for their first Royalex boat. (They tossed it off their 3-story factory building to prove its indestructability. Folks, please do not try that at home with a fiberglass, kevlar or carbon fiber boat!) I always land and launch at the northern tip. It is a delight at high tide. There even is a patch of tall grasses above the tide line for the boat to rest on. Launching at low tide gets a bit more taxing, but is doable. If you have a paddling partner, it is a cinch.

I enjoyed my last afternoon and night "on the rock" immensely. I wished I had packed my cocoa, though. (Readers of my previous articles know how much I like that in the afternoon :-), and my 12-grain bread suddenly tasted and smelled very beery (i.e. fermented) – not so good. But other than that, I had packed everything, even enough reading material, and did not miss a thing. A very successful trip so far, only one more day tomorrow, back to my starting point in Ellsworth. My SPOT locator beacon, which I press whenever I land, also worked flawlessly, even though it reacts a tad too slow for me (or am I too impatient? Nah!). My satellite phone (which I purchased in 2001, as an already older and reconditioned model), on the other hand, still worked like new. However, I have to put up with some of my paddling and sailing friends facetiously calling it "Reinhard's shoe phone" ("Get Smart", folks!). It is Nancy's delight each afternoon at 5:00 p.m. sharp, when I make my brief safety check-in call with her. (And I like it too.)

Before turning in for the night, I listen one more time to the NOAA weather report on my VHF radio. A front was approaching. There would be more wind during the night, but even more during the day tomorrow: 10-20 knots with gusts to 30, from the SSW, almost from behind for my course tomorrow. But it was only 1.3 miles across from my island perch to the next tip of land, Oak Point, on Union River Bay. I'll do fine, I mused, as I finally fell asleep.

#### Low tide and a fresh breeze

I watched a beautiful sunrise through my tent door, just as I was getting up at 6:00, as usual. The wind had already freshened. The Hub looked like a tall ship at dead low tide. Oh my, this will be a hard take-off!



*Low tide take-off from The Hub*

But I enjoyed my usual breakfast of premixed-at-home "müsli" and coffee, packed up and started carrying my packs to my boat, the usual three runs for all gear. Then I had to figure out a way for my boat to get to the water, which required some careful carries over the sharp rocks, some sliding on seaweed beds and more portaging. I was then very eager to get going. The wind was already at 15 knots, almost straight from the south, and whitecaps were forming. It looked like an exciting last day on the water. I was looking forward to the challenge.

My 1.3-mile open water crossing went great. Wind and waves were nicely carrying me to my goal. The force was definitely with me. It was nice, though, to have a foot-operated rudder, since I only use a single-bladed canoe paddle, unlike all kayakers. Not too long after I reached shore, the wind increased to 20 knots. I loved it and swiftly made it to the mouth of the Union River and up to Ellsworth eventually.

At 11:00 a.m. sharp I landed halfway up the boat ramp, since the tide had

come in with me. Nancy was there to greet me. What a cheerful sight. Thanks dear! After a quick hug and a kiss, I started transferring my packs to our little VW Golf, washed my boat and swung it onto my head in order to transfer it to the roof rack. Done! Nancy had promised me a crabmeat roll from the harbor food stand, but "Sorry, we are closed on Mondays". So it was plan B: stop at the fish man in town, and their crabmeat roll was just as good as the one I had tasted weeks earlier at the harbor stand.



*Willoughby: "Welcome home, Dad!"*

So ended my one-week (seven days on the water with six overnights), 100-mile solo canoe trip around Blue Hill Bay and Swans Island. And what a great and stunningly beautiful trip it turned into again. I can recommend it. And it again seemed as if I had the entire ocean to myself. I never had to share an overnight spot with other boaters. But please be prudent with the longer open-water crossings! Blue Hill Bay can get very rough indeed. It is wide open to the usual strong southwest winds of summer, and remember, the water never really warms up for comfortable unintentional "swimming", especially in the wave-slop, holding on to boat, paddle and gear. The only time this ever happened to me was in this year's brutal 20-mile Blackburn ocean race around Cape Ann, in Gloucester, Massachusetts. No fun, folks! But don't worry: I scrabbled right back onto my solo outrigger canoe and completed the race in good standing. All's well, that ends well! I like that.

Happy paddling!  
Be safe and enjoy!

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