

Exploring Home

by Erik de Jong & Krystina Scheller-de Jong,
Bras D'Or Lakes Station

THE GULF OF ALASKA IS INFAMOUS FOR ITS unpredictable weather, fast-passing lows and erratic seas, not exactly ideal for introducing our 6-month-old puppy, Fukimi to life at sea. Luckily for her, the weather gods understand her predicament, and the gulf that greets us is smooth as a mirror. Our sails fill for only six hours during the two weeks we spend getting from our home base in Sitka to Whittier in Prince William Sound.

Aside from a local patch of wind created by one of the many glaciers in the area, the four weeks we spend in Prince William Sound are hot and airless. To keep from melting and being eaten by the mosquitoes that have nothing to fear in the breathless air, we focus on inside boat tasks during the day and keep our shore adventures to morning or evening. Our schedule works perfectly until *Bagheera* decides her gearbox needs immediate attention, sending us outside in the cloudless midday sun to winch the gearbox into the cockpit so we can inspect the seal on the engine shaft that we expect is the source

of the leak. It's only 78 degrees, but it feels like 90 and the heat slows the speed of our work.

In Quillian Bay, a small shallow cove on Esther Island with a negligible amount of water running in and out on the tides, we notice the water temperature indicator registering 70 degrees. After cautiously dipping a toe in to verify the lack of frigid temperatures, we jump over the side for a swim without wetsuits, leaving on deck a very confused puppy who already knows better than to jump overboard into deep water.

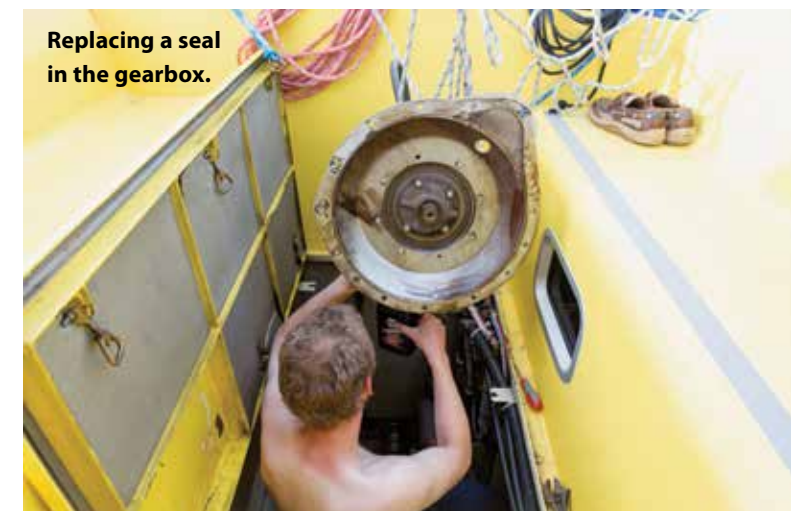
Bagheera and *Snow Dragon II* are once again sailing in each other's company. Krystina and Frances have sailed south and southeast Alaska extensively and want to show Erik their favourite spots, including



Perfect reflections on a very calm and warm morning in Prince William Sound.

“Many leave inspired to make his or her own positive environmental impact, which for us is an added bonus for a task that comes naturally to us.”

Columbia Glacier. When Frances first visited Columbia Glacier 25 years ago, she could not even make it past the entrance of Heather Bay due to dense floating ice that calved off the glacier. Then in 2007, Frances and Krystina were able to make it into the Columbia Forebay and were almost trapped by the dense large icebergs that filled the bay. This time, we make it easily up to the glacier face with only a few bergs larger than *Bagheera*, a full three miles past where the glacier



Replacing a seal in the gearbox.

face is indicated on our 2011 chart. We are now off the chart in a new fjord arm that has appeared from under the glacier.

That evening we watch the documentary *Chasing Ice* by James Balog, a professional photographer who is determined to show the world how fast glaciers are retreating in a more pronounced way than just a few still photos are able to demonstrate. James and his team

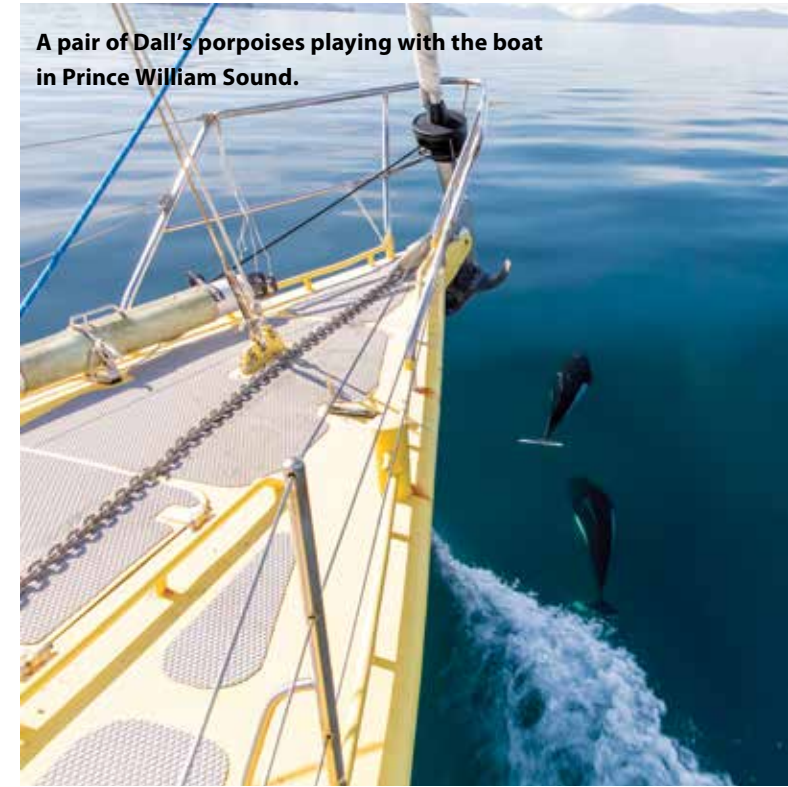


Krystina and Fukimi on *Snow Dragon* near Columbia Glacier.

use special cameras to take hourly photos to create a multiyear time lapse that gives a moving visual of glacial retreat. Columbia is one of the five glaciers where they installed cameras, and what we see is very confronting. The documentary is only four years old and according to the footage we see, we are supposed to be lying under 600 feet of ice right now.

The sadness we feel over how fast our home waters are changing due to warming temperatures is offset by Fukimi's sense of wonder at the world around her. While walking along the beach in Yakutat, a small fishing town on the coast of the Gulf of Alaska, we spot a fawn. Both Fukimi and the fawn look startled at first, but they are intrigued by each other. The fawn slowly approaches, completely disregarding our presence. Fukimi and the fawn sniff each other inquisitively before playfully pursing each other. The fawn runs in circles around us, coming so close that we can touch it. Never have we seen a wild animal so close and so unafraid. The fishermen in the harbor dropped what they were doing and watched the two animals play.

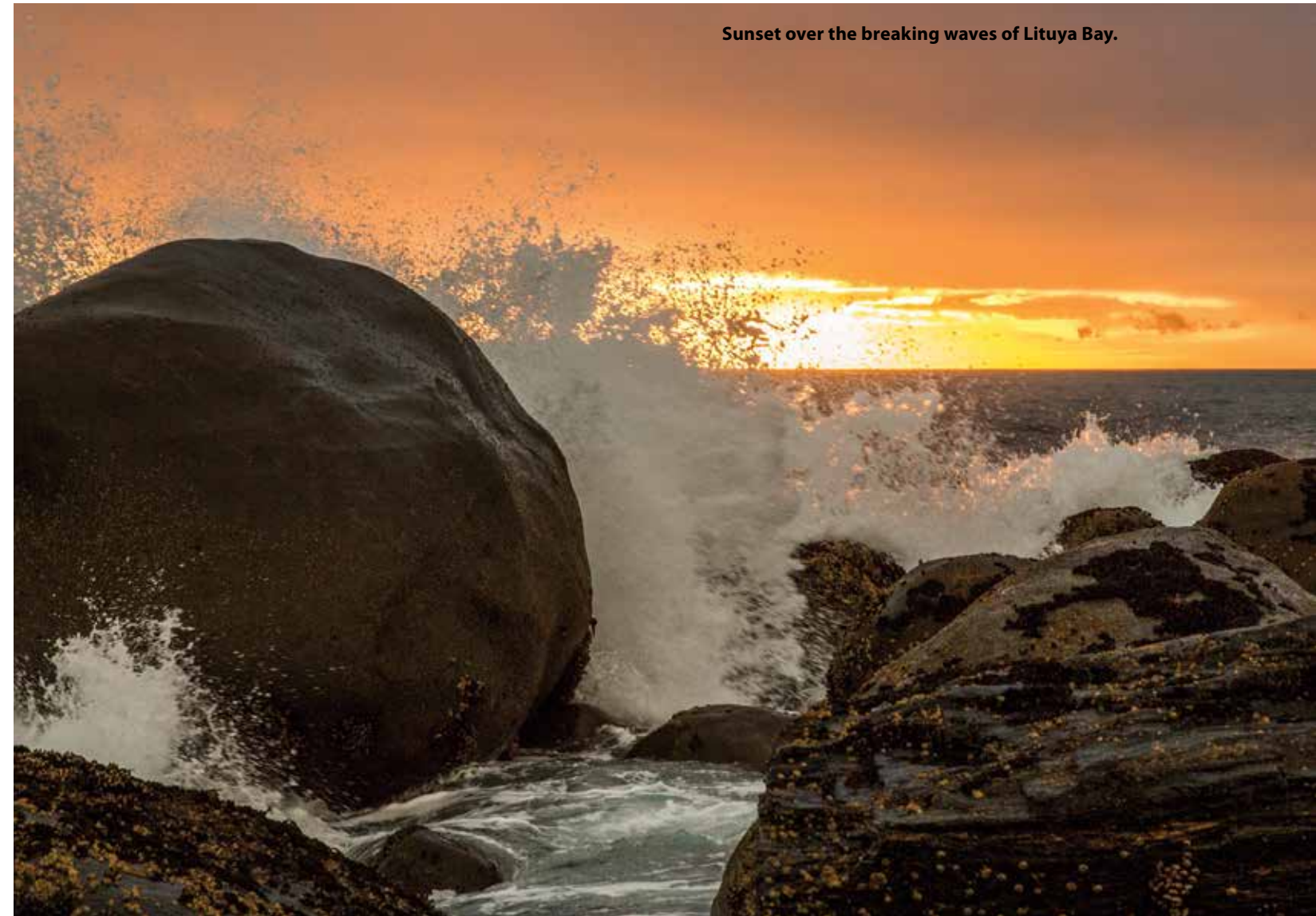
August comes and introduces itself with a drizzly day. We come up with the plan to leave *Snow Dragon* at anchor in McArthur Cove and take *Bagheera* to the other side of the Pye Islands for some bird and sea lion watching. It takes about an hour and a half to get to the



A pair of Dall's porpoises playing with the boat in Prince William Sound.



View over what is left of Columbia Glacier.



Sunset over the breaking waves of Lituya Bay.



The result of a few hours of beach cleaning, Pye Islands.



One of the many brown bears we saw in Geographic Harbor.



A sea otter is curiously observing us while we drift by under sail in the light air, Uganik passage, Kodiak Island.

cove where we drop anchor and get ready to head for shore. This part of the coastline is very rocky and landing a dinghy can only be done on one small stretch of beach. We start walking through the drizzle toward the rocks where the sea lions are lying. At the end of the beach, we find an old and empty water bottle. Erik takes the lid off, dumps the dirty water, compresses the bottle, puts the lid back on and stuffs it in his pocket. Only 10 feet farther there is another one between the rocks, and another one. Higher up the tide line we can now see

plastic crates, jerry cans, thermos cans, fish floats, Styrofoam, ropes, and nets. *Bagheera's* lazarette and forepeak are practically empty as we are traveling light since we are not venturing into remote waters this year. It takes a half-hour with four people to collect what we can. The beach is now almost clean except for the items that are stuck between huge boulders or under washed up trees too big to lift.

The drizzle turns to rain, but we continue our walk toward the sea lion and bird colonies. On the other side of the cliff, we stumble upon another beach covered in commercial fishing gear and plastic. The amount of trash on this beach is unfathomable. We find ourselves

“The sadness we feel over how fast our home waters are changing due to warming temperatures is offset by Fukimi’s sense of wonder at the world around her.”

wondering how long it had been sitting there, and more importantly, what are we going to do with it? The amount we collect from the first beach is enough to completely fill our lazarette. We decide the fish floats can be tied to the railing on the aft deck for the week we have left to reach Kodiak, and we will stuff what we can into the forepeak. Instead of photographing the sea lions, we spend the rest of the afternoon taking trash up one side of the cliff and down the other to our dinghy.

Twelve miles west of the Pye Islands is the long white-sand beach of Petrof Point in Nuka Passage. Fukimi is leaping and running around in pursuit of stones and twigs in the sand while we watch a black fish float bobbing around between the gentle surf. We try and anticipate where the float will land, but just as we position ourselves to grab it, the tide sweeps it farther up the passage. Fukimi has taken a more proactive approach and comes running up to us carrying an



Fukimi assisting with cleaning up the beach.

empty water bottle. When we take it away from her, she finds another. Obviously she has decided the beach needs cleaning, and we follow suit even though we do not have space to store it. The trash we pick up is mostly clean and since we do not currently have guests onboard, we decide it can be stowed on the floor of the forward cabin.

In Kodiak we see normal trash bins at the harbor, but nothing marked for plastic recycling. The nets and ropes we picked up can't



A pod of orcas along side in Lisianski Strait, Chichagof Island.

Bagheera in front of the Hubbard Glacier near Yukatat.



“In Kodiak we see normal trash bins at the harbor, but nothing marked for plastic recycling. The nets and ropes we picked up can't really be recycled so we put them into the bins knowing that at least birds and other small animals will not get stuck in them.”

really be recycled so we put them into the bins knowing that at least birds and other small animals will not get stuck in them. Everything else we have picked up off the beaches will have to stay onboard until Sitka, where we have easy access to a recycling station. The change in plan requires some additional thinking and re-organizing, but it is important to us to make it work.

Nature is wonderful, unpredictable, and often unexplainable. Salmon are strange fish. They only live long enough to spend a few years in the ocean before returning to their native stream where they spawn and die after fighting their way upstream. This is a circle of life that you see happening in pretty much every river and stream in Alaska. A whole food chain depends on this cycle. Eagles, bears, gulls, otters, sharks, and many more creatures feed on the dead or dying fish. The feast usually starts around June, and lasts until well in to September. This summer, however, the salmon only showed up in limited numbers. Where the Alaska Department of Fish and Game usually counts them in units that consist in millions, they now have

to count them in in groups of thousands.

For many Alaskan fishermen, the salmon season has been an economic disaster while the wildlife that depends on this food source is left with limited options to survive. Coastal bears in Alaska need salmon in order to build up enough fat reserve to hibernate. Without it, they are left with little choice other than making their way to inhabited areas to hunt for food. Most of the time they are just interested in what's in people's trashcans, but their presence is often seen as a threat, leaving lethal force as the preferred option.

Geographic Harbor on the Katmai Peninsula is well known for the number of brown bears that live on its shores during the summer. We visited this micro fjord system last fall, but it was already late September and the bears had left the salmon streams and moved inland to prepare for hibernation. This year, as we enter the harbor, we spot a bear roaming the beach along the narrow entrance. The bear does not show any interest in our boats floating 100 feet away,

or Fukimi growling softly on deck. At anchor, we watch another bear hunting for food along the shore, and wake up to a sow watching her two cubs play on the beach.

Due to the shallow depths in the east lobe of the bay, we decide to leave *Bagheera* at anchor and explore the bay with *Snow Dragon* and her 5-foot draft. To our surprise, the beach is full of people surrounded by bears. We count at least 10 brown bears and 12 people. We are surprised that the bears do not seem to mind, especially the mother with cubs, as they usually try to avoid humans.

Before leaving, we meet a couple of park rangers who explain that Geographic Harbor is one of two places on the Katmai Peninsula where people can view bears up close. The bears have gotten used to the annual pilgrimage of people who come to see them, and there is enough food for them to forage. Still, being surrounded by 10 bears is something we prefer to do from the safety of our boat.

September is approaching, and it is time for us to start making our way back to Sitka. This summer is the first time in many years that we have not sailed north of the Arctic Circle, and to compensate we decide to make another stop at Hubbard Glacier near Yukatat. Unlike most glaciers, Hubbard is actually advancing and is the largest tidewater glacier in North America. What appears to be good news is still the result of warming temperatures creating more precipitation that is turned into snow by the cool air surrounding the St. Elias Mountains. As darkness falls, we reduce our speed to compensate for the limited visibility as we navigate through the ice-filled approach to our anchorage on the southwest side of the glacier. The outgoing tide causes the ice to brush against

the hull with loud bangs during the night, making us feel more at home than we have all summer.

Lituya Bay is the only refuge for 120 miles between Yakutat and Icy Point. While the bay does offer good protection, it is only accessible in settled weather and still a challenge not to be taken lightly. The entrance is guarded by an old terminal moraine with breaking waves and a brisk current, no matter the tide, that makes entering and leaving feel more like a whitewater rafting trip than a pleasurable sail. In 1958, the biggest landslide-caused tsunami ever recorded took place in Lituya. The initial 1,700-foot-high wave stripped the inlet opposite of vegetation as a localized tsunami swept across the rest of the bay. Almost 60 years later, the damage done by the tsunami is still visible both in the rubble lining the shore and the sharp line between the old vegetation and the new. After making a full tour of the seven-mile long fjord, we drop anchor just inside the entrance. The peninsula that forms the entrance is covered in awkward boulders and fallen tree trunks that have been hurled onto the shore by the sea. As the sun sets over a peaceful gulf, we stand there mesmerized by the raging surf pounding the boulders.

In Sitka, we deposit all the plastic waste at the local recycle station and give away the 40 fish floats we brought back through a local Facebook page. Within hours, all the floats are taken. Many of them will be turned into planters and others will be used for art projects. The people picking up the floats are surprised that we are not being paid by the government and are cleaning up beaches just because it is the right thing to do. Some of them get out their checkbooks and insist on paying us, but we decline their generous offers. Many leave inspired to make his or her own positive environmental impact, which for us is an added bonus for a task that comes naturally to us. ♻️

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS

Both Krystina and Erik started blue water cruising as infants onboard their parents' boats. Being drawn to the Arctic waters, they met each other in Greenland and have sailed together ever since, either on the same boat or on separate boats in company of each other. They got married last year at their home in Sitka and plan to continue sailing in the Arctic, where new waters are constantly opening up with the ever-retreating ice

