

WEEKLY

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OUTDOORS

Bones on the Beach

A VISIT TO CAPE ALAVA

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, March 21, 2012



The weather report was lousy.

A mix of showers and rain. Chance of locusts.

What the hell, we were going anyway.

Off to walk the beaches, we were. Off to Cape Alava, the most western point of these United States. Off to breath deeply the salted wind, off to be pacified by the Pacific, off our rockers, maybe. Weather be damned.

We rode a new-fangled ferry over to Port Townsend (I miss the rusty old *Klickitat*, scrapped in '09) and hustled across the Olympic Peninsula, turning north at Sappho, lonely, forlorn and damn near non-existent in the rain. Through Clallam Bay: the ramshackle old liquor store is still there, leaning in the wind. Hanging on, barely.

Up the Hoko Road to Lake Ozette, the end of the line. The National Park campground was empty and half underwater. We strung a tarp on scant high ground and cooked dinner over the fire as the rain pattered overhead. Donn regaled us with stories from his long-ago days as an archeologist at the Makah village site out at the point. He lived out there on the beach in a hut for three years some thirty-odd years ago. Some of the stories involved hiking in with kegs of beer. Apparently, those archeologists liked their beer.

The fire burned down and an owl pontificated in the darkness. Things got quiet, a lonely Brooks Benton-kind of night out at Lake Ozette. It rained and then it rained some more.

In the morning we packed up camp, loaded our backpacks and crossed the Ozette River on the lichen covered footbridge, headed for the sea. We headed west through the dripping forest across puncheon made slippery by the relentless seasons until gradually we could hear the distant roar of the surf, a siren's cry.

We slipped and slid down the muddy face of the headland to the beach and took shelter from the rain beneath some gnarled trees. After a short rest, we hauled our packs to the extreme end of the point, near Cannonball Island, where a circle of trees was well-suited for tarp-stringing, and set up our camp.

In the morning the tide was out and we headed north up the beach. Soon we came to the Makah Ranger Station, looking mostly abandoned and given over to the elements. A ragged piece of paper towel taped to the grimy window said, "Gone for a few. Went for supplies." Indeed.

The ramshackle cabin occupied the site of the long-abandoned archeological site, Donn's home all those years ago. He led us to a small shed-like structure filled with bones and talismans, a memorial to the vanished Makah village that had once been there. It was dark in the shed and after my eyes adjusted to the gloom I could see the stacked whale bones, hanging beads and rocks strung like a necklace. Thin shafts of light streaming through the wall boards gave the interior a surreal appearance. Outside, a raven croaked, the sound like billiard balls knocking together.

Back on the beach, I walked out on a strip of rocks exposed by the tide to the base of Cannonball Island. The Makahs call this island Tskawahyah. Climbing the steeply eroded slopes of the island is forbidden due to the presence of burial sites on top.

Heading back to camp at day's end, the sun briefly emerges from the roiling clouds, casting operatic light on the grey sea, before being overwhelmed by the clouds. As night falls, the rain picked up and we huddled beside the driftwood fire. The tide came up, crashing waves making for strange and tender dreams.