

## Up North: Chapter Five -- Between the Rock and the Deep Blue Sea

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Alaska is the Great Land consisting of a huge continental land mass with mountains, islands, peninsulas and vast stretches of tundra. Much of its wealth lies in and under the seas that surround it. In the north is the Beaufort Sea. Frozen over most of the year it contains significant oil and natural gas deposits. To the west are the Chukchi and Bering Seas. Both also contain large as yet to be exploited oil deposits. The North Pacific Ocean lies to the south. All of these waters contain a huge wealth of fish and marine mammals.

What we call Kodiak Island is actually an archipelago made up of one very large island, several large islands and a host of small islands in the North Pacific and south of the Alaskan mainland. Human occupation goes back more than 10,000 years with remnants of the Russian, Aleutian and Koniag people still living there. The city of Kodiak in 1984 had a year-round population of about 6,000 folks. Scattered around the archipelago are other settlements with five being large enough and of sufficient duration to be designated as villages. Big enough means between a hundred and three hundred souls.

In Kodiak, commercial fishing is king and hunting, sports fishing and subsistence fishing are the princes and princesses. There is a cannery row with a dozen or more fish processing plants and the small boat harbor is packed with commercial as well as sports fishing and pleasure craft. For a guy like me who likes boats, walking the docks was always a fascinating way to pass time. Located just outside of town is the largest United States Coast Guard base in the world with more than 6,000 residents. From there they patrol large tracts of the North Pacific in C-130s, various helicopters, other aircraft and vessels conducting search and rescue operations and saving lives every year. The summer season usually saw the island's population swell to three times its normal size with the influx of fishermen, cannery workers and outdoor enthusiasts.

The island is mostly a mountainous wilderness with an extremely limited road system. The rugged mountains seem to rise directly out of the sea and reach heights that sometimes remain snowcapped into late summer. The steep slopes are for the most part covered with dense alder. At higher elevations the next to impenetrable vegetation gives way to alpine meadows. All manner of North Pacific marine life inhabit the waters surrounding the archipelago. Fin fish, shell fish and marine mammals abound. The bays, rivers and streams teem with salmon from June through October and November. Without even venturing out from town a nature lover can watch huge Stellar Sea Lions feeding from the scraps at one of the canneries or Bald Eagles diving for a trawler's cast offs in the channel. Sea otters once prized and hunted for their water repellent pelts are a delight to watch diving for clams; lazily floating on their backs and cracking the shellfish open with a rock perched on the belly.

The most majestic and dangerous critter was the beast that bears the islands name, the Kodiak Brown Bear. A million or so years of isolation from the brown bear populations of the mainland allowed these monsters to become the largest brown bears in the world. The biologists say there are more bears than people on Kodiak. The Sitka Black Tail deer, introduced in 1901, mountain goats, fox and other wildlife make up the natural menagerie.

The earliest known human inhabitants known as the Koniag from which the name Kodiak derives were wiped out by disease and war when the white man arrived. The Russians later enslaved the Aleutian people of the Alaskan peninsula and brought them to the island to hunt the sea otter. The descendants of these three people have mixed together and still inhabit the islands today. The legacy of the Russian occupation can be seen in both the Russian last names of most Alaskan natives and the blue onion domes

of the Orthodox Church and Seminary.

Kodiak can be a paradise to visit but also be a tough place to live year round. Summers are warm and bright for the most part without much humidity but short. Winters are long and while not known for the deep cold of the arctic regions they are cold, wet and dark. Thirty degrees and freezing rain is pretty much the standard forecast from November to May. Wet and muddy conditions make rubber boots, known as the Alaskan tennis shoe, standard foot wear. Muddy roads with potholes deep enough to lose a Toyota in and constant rain make for what is called the Kodiak Car. If mud splashes up through the rusted out floorboards, you may be driving a Kodiak Car. Nobody carries an umbrella. What's the point? Wintering over in Kodiak definitely takes some getting used to.

My wife Helen, being from the Clearwater Florida, is used to floating in the bathtub warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. When she arrived in Kodiak she went into culture shock. It was dark wet and cold. Everyone is always warned that the waters around Kodiak are treacherous. If you have the bad luck to fall in the shock to the body is immediate and hypothermia is followed shortly by death. It was all too hard for her to accept.

In order to save the marriage I got an idea. I took her down to the Green Hope and showed her how to don a survival suit. These full emersion suits are carried on most vessels in frigid waters and give at least a chance of surviving an accident at sea. The suit is made from neoprene, is put on over clothes, zips up to the throat and covers the head with a hood. It is almost water proof and gives enough floatation to allow the wearer to wait for rescue for many hours. On that bright cold day we both put on a suit and jumped off the stern and floated around the dock. Although there was a trickle of cold water dripping in we were for the most part comfortable and she overcame a big obstacle to living in Alaska.

My dad wasn't a fisherman and so I wasn't either as I grew up. When I was about nine years old my uncle Wayne gave me a rod and reel and showed me how to cast a lead weight. It was the damndest thing, a steel rod. I've never seen anything like it since. I cast that lead weight several hundred times without ever getting near any water.

A couple of years later one of my friend's dad took us fishing on a stream in Maryland. The night before we soaked a patch of ground outside the back door and harvested a coffee can full of earth worms for bait. The next day on the stream bank I got the full course on how to attach the hook, sinkers and bobber to the line. The most important part apparently was how to bait the hook. After many hours of watching that red and white plastic ball bob up and down I finally got the tug on the line that I was warned about. With little trouble I cranked in a little sun fish. Later we built a fire and pan fried it. It was full of tiny bones that in my opinion made it inedible. I still wasn't a fisherman.

Some years later I found myself in Gloucester Massachusetts participating in an outdoor training program called Ocean Challenge. Modeled on the Outward Bound program, it brought together young people from around the world and sought to give them a character building experience through practical and moral challenges on the ocean. The core of the program was hunting the giant blue fin tuna in small boats. After two days of basic seamanship and hands on training in building tackle to catch the huge marine animals we were assigned in two man teams to twenty-eight foot, open fiberglass boats and sent out.

By the luck of the draw my boat mate was an old friend Dr. Tyler Hendricks. Dr. Hendricks, an up and coming academic with a PhD. from Baylor Theological Seminary and me an ex-Marine with an affinity for small boats made a pretty good team. We left the dock every morning before dawn for the forty minute run out to the fishing grounds and spent all day in every kind of weather in the open boat.

From the early morning chill through the blazing sun of mid-day we were exposed to the elements. At night we tied up at the dock, put up the canvas and slept onboard. Every morning was a little different. Usually cool enough to wear a sweatshirt; sometimes clear and sometimes overcast or raining. We always left the harbor at dawn. Once in a while it was more dramatic with dense fog and we would have to navigate out to the grounds by chart and compass. Other days the wind blew and the heavy seas were like moving walls of water that we had to rise above or slam through. Being aboard a boat heading out to sea in the early morning was always exuberating. The powerful movement of the boat through the water, the smell of the salt air and even the spray coming over the bow made a guy feel alive.

On the grounds we were not alone. Everywhere there were other vessels like ours, cabin cruisers, sports fishermen and even yachts all angling for the chance to hook up a giant Bluefin. The morning ritual was the same; we found a spot, dropped the anchor and set out the baited hooks on long lines. Then the wait began. We waited for many days before we actually got one on line. We spent the long hours talking, chopping chum and dropping it in the water and day dreaming.

Often when I stood at the rail chopping up trash fish and chumming it into the water I would, twelve inch butcher knife in hand, have day dreams about men at sea, pirates and boarding parties. What was going on deep below remained a mystery. We novices had to take it on faith that there were real live tuna

swimming below and that they would, when the spirit moved them, take one of our baits. It would be an understatement that after many long days coming up empty we came close to losing our faith.

Then one day out of the clear blue it happened and it happened so fast it was hard to get control of events. First there was a distinct snap as the clothes pin holding one of the long lines released and the line began to play out of the basket and into the water at a steep angle. We had hooked up, we had a tuna on and we had to land it. I quickly pulled on gloves and took hold of the line. The next order of business was to get the other three lines into the boat so the tuna couldn't free itself by circling around and tangling all the lines. These were not dumb beasts.

As the Doc hastily retrieved the lines I tightened my grip and felt the heat of friction through the gloves. Not knowing for sure when was the right time I figured it was now or never, braced myself and yanked as hard as I could three times to set the hook. Then the fight began. The line started to run out even faster now and the line entered the water at a shallower angle as the fish ran away from the boat. All the time I keep some drag on the line with my gloved hands but there was no way I could hope to stop the giant at this point. Before long it was clear that the fish was circling towards the bow and I moved with it.

The next problem was the anchor line running off the bow. If the fish could make contact with the line, the tension would cut the line and he would be home free. Tyler took over the fishing line and I moved to the bow and stood by to pull the anchor as fast as I could if needed. Lucky for me the fish opted to head straight off the bow and not circle back.

As the tuna made his dash away from the boat the line continued to play out. With no guarantee of stopping it any time soon we had to prepare to run out of line in the basket. It was tempting to tie the line off to a cleat but this was a fool's mistake. The muscular fish would have no problem bending the hook or simply ripping it out of his mouth if we tied the line off. This was a life or death struggle for him. Instead I got an orange ball buoy and tied it to the loop at the end of the line in the basket that was quickly emptying. As I watched the tuna take the last of the line I tossed the buoy overboard and the tuna dragged it off. As I attached another buoy to our own anchor line Tyler fired up the engine and got ready to follow the fish buoy.

Following the buoy through the seas may seem to be pretty straight forward but it was far from that. There were as many as a hundred other boats riding at anchor in the vicinity and the anchor lines and the vessels themselves were all potential obstacles. Ethics demanded that other vessels take whatever action is necessary to get out of the way of a boat fighting a fish. This required them to get off their anchor and motor out of the path. Most guys complied but not always. Once I had to cut the anchor line of a cabin cruiser that refused to move and there were a lot of nasty words and threats exchanged.

On this day we had no problems and after following the ball for more than twenty minutes the ball slowed down, we picked it up and began to recover line. Although tiring the tuna was not finished and ran two more times. In the end the line went straight down and we took turns hauling the dead weight to the surface. When the huge silver blue beauty appeared I put a harpoon dart in behind the gills to make sure. The fish was over six feet in length and there was no possibility of getting it into the boat. With one line through the gills and another looped tightly around the tail we began the long slow trip back to the dock for the weigh in and photos.

The beauty weighed in at over nine hundred pounds and we caught eight more of similar size that summer. After photos the guys on the dock cut the tuna's head off, packed it in a coffin shaped wooden box with ice and drove it to the airport on the first leg of its trip to the Tokyo fish market. I was hooked. From then I was a fisherman and when I arrived in Kodiak I tried my hand at all the sports fishing available.