

RUSSELL FJORD





St Elias and Mt. Logan

It's early even by a fisherman's watch. The sun has been out for hours, but this is Alaska and it is summer. Still, the arrival of Doug in his truck comes as a surprise. He is slowly making his way across a bridge over Dangerous River. The bridge is the end of a 35 mile long road from Yakutat. Crossing the bridge puts you in the Russell Fjord Wilderness. My traveling companions and I drove the same road yesterday and saw only one other car on the road- a Forest Service vehicle.

The Russell Fjord Wilderness is the 19th wilderness area in the Tongass National Forest. It is not in the Alexander Archipelago. Pretend that you are about to shake someone's hand. Now turn your thumb down. The Russell Fjord Wilderness

is located where your thumb connects with your palm. Located on the outer coast of Alaska in a spectacular setting, the entrance to Russell Fjord is guarded by the highest coastal mountain in the world - Mount St. Elias at 18,000 feet. At the base of Mount St. Elias, is Alaska's largest glacier by area - the Malaspina Glacier. The Hubbard Glacier, in the Russell Fjord Wilderness itself, is Alaska's largest tidewater glacier.

The dynamic Hubbard Glacier is 50 miles to the north of Yakutat. It is visited, on average, daily by cruise ships. They are unnoticed by town-folk and are prevented from entering the Russell Fjord Wilderness by the glacier itself.

In 1988 nothing entered Russell Fjord when it was sealed completely shut by the advancing glacier. The glacier was not only advancing but galloping at rate of 40 feet per day. It was so fast that killer whales were trapped in the newly created lake. On top of that, the new lake had begun to rise because of a lack drainage. The city of Yakutat began to prepare to evacuate when scientist predicted that the eventual drainage path was through the city. The plans were shelved when the glacier stopped surging, and the dam of ice broke free in a massive out wash.

As the state ferry Kennicott approached Yakutat, I can't help wonder what Western explorers thought when they first came upon this land. All this grandeur was unveiled to an exploring sea captain in 1741 when the fog cleared like a curtain being raised on a stage. Vitas Bering's first impression of this new land must have been awe inspiring - especially since he had no perspective on what he was seeing. Were these mountains foothills?

Teresa Hunt manages the Russell Fjord Wilderness for the Forest Service. She describes a defining characteristic of the wilderness as remote. Her



Hubbard Glacier

point has already been well illustrated. We have arrived by a ferry that visits once a week. There is also daily jet service that seats passengers as well as serves as a cargo plane. No one just “passes through” Yakutat. In the summer, most of the visitors are here to fish. The charter boats in the harbor are all geared toward sport fishing. Anything else for visitors is an afterthought. Even simple signage for trails is lacking. There might be a demand for trail signage if there were anyone from out of town that used them.

The truck pulls up and Doug rolls down the window and introduces himself. From his accent I believe him when he claims Virginia as his home. The strangeness of meeting anyone out here at this hour is not lost on either of us. He

explains that he left his fishing buddies to follow an urge to see the Yakutat Glacier. It is their third trip to Yakutat but it seems only Doug has the inclination to see the glacier. I have seen it twice in the last 24 hours and offer to accompany him along the mile trail to Harlequin Lake and the glacier. My traveling companions are still sleeping at a nearby cabin and I welcome the opportunity for company. The trail is marked well with what our party calls euphemistically “donkey dung.” The area is known for its bear population including the rare glacier bear - a bear with almost silver blue hair color. This morning the only fresh sign we see are moose tracks.

The trail is classic Alaska rainforest. It is so vibrantly green that it almost demands sunglasses to look at it. The trail is often covered in water and over-the-ankle muck. It’s why weathered people of the rainforest wear XTRATUF rubber boots everywhere (including the governor’s inaugural ball). Doug from Virginia isn’t wearing them, but sashes his way through anyway. At times the trail winds its way through some inter-

Left: Trail to Harlequin Lake
Right: Harlequin Lake



esting trees.

As we started to drop down to the lake, Doug catches a view of the impending spectacle and his pace quickens. We break out onto the beach and I again I am taken by at the magnificence before me. I mean its not like I've never seen anything like it. I live here, my father was born here, I have seen more Alaskan wilderness than anyone I have met. Still, it pounded me. I looked over at Doug and he was likewise embracing the moment. I was glad for him. Everyone alive should experience such a moment- as a human right. If we had stepped out on the same beach 500 years ago there would be little different from what we saw.

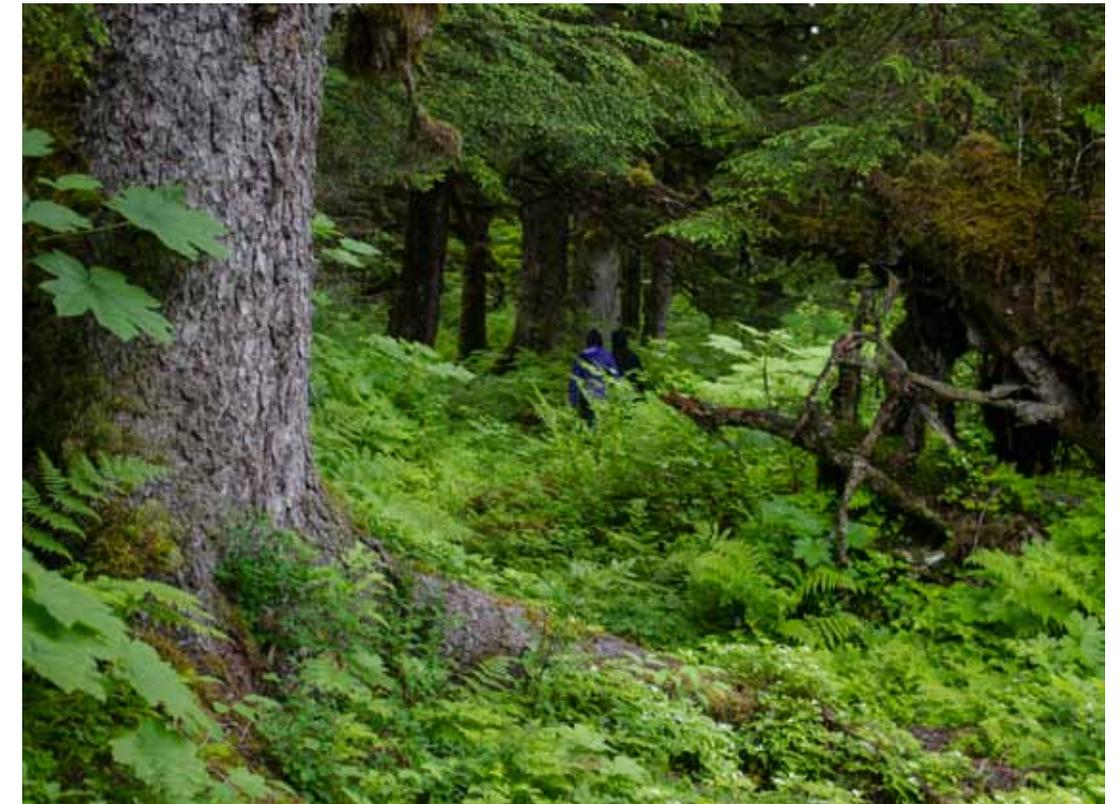
Doug had broken out his camera and was trying to capture the moment for Virginia. When he gets home, the video will try to convey a scale so grand that IMAX couldn't touch it. You need to be in the place to be put in your place.

On the drive back the road took on a



hypnotic allure. Perhaps it is the fact that for 30 miles there is only one curve. Despite being so remote, Russell Fjord is the only wilderness in the Tongass which you can drive. It has also been the only road I have driven on where bears were more prevalent than automobiles.

We stop and turn down a road described only as the second left past the bridge. Only through the help of the locals are we able to find the trail that leads to Russell Fjord itself. We reach the fjord to find a graveyard of dead trees. These were the unfortunates that were submerged by the lake caused by the 1988 advance of the glacier that closed off the fjord. A testament to the power of this place.



Above: Trail to Russell Fjord

Left: A Glacier Bear takes the highway.

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