



Dirona anchored at Hart Group Cove at the far west end of Kildidt Lagoon.

EXPLORING Kildidt Inlet

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON

Daunting overfalls and treacherous reefs mark the narrow entrance to Kildidt Inlet, but the rewards are well worth it in this little-explored, mid-coast gem.



Standing on the recently underwater reef at the neck of Kildidit Narrows, the author watched a log shoot through in about 20 seconds.



Putting northward from Kildidit Sound deep into Hunter Island in the Hakai Conservation Study Area, Kildidit Inlet extends roughly three nautical miles before branching into two secluded lagoons connected by a narrow channel studded with islets. The waterways are a joy to explore, but entry is blocked by the perilous Kildidit Narrows, where 12-kt tidal streams and many hazards en route require careful planning to transit.

As a mountain challenges the climber, the waters guarded by Kildidit Narrows beckoned whenever we spread out CHS Chart 3937. The description in *Sailing Directions British Columbia Coast (North Portion)* merely increased the draw: “Kildidit Narrows has a least depth of 21’ (6.5 m) in the fairway but is only suitable for small craft at HW slack. Tidal streams are strong and islets and below-water rocks are on both sides of the fairway. Local knowledge is advised. Tidal streams in Kildidit Narrows may attain 12 knots.” Alan Hobler, mid-coast area supervisor for B.C. Parks, cautioned that there were several uncharted rocks in the narrows and that it was a challenging passage. The only other reference that we could find, in *Exploring the North Coast of British Columbia* by Don Douglass and Réanne Hemingway-Douglass (2002), was equally discouraging: “Kildidit Narrows is daunting at best. We have not tried it but would like to receive local knowledge from those who have. Currents

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as high as 12 knots on spring tides are now reported on the new Chart 3937, which is a 50% increase over charts of 50 years ago. Caution: let the buyer beware. Overfalls are said to form on both flood and ebb tides.” While we would not be the first pleasurecraft to enter, we and our 40' powerboat Dirona would certainly be among the few.



The water level had fallen several feet in under half an hour leaving the authors' dinghy high and dry.

ENTERING THE INLET Our calculated high slack window was at 0515 hrs, requiring a caffeine-essential 0430 departure from our anchorage on nearby Hurricane Island and a tricky dawn transit of Brydon Channel. To our dismay, the current was ebbing at several knots when we approached at 0520 hrs, with whirlpools and overfalls just starting to form. We judged that we could still safely pass against the flow, but the transit required a concerted effort at the helm, one to navigate through the current and the

other to read the chart and double-check the depths to ensure that our position was correct. We kept close to the eastern shore until the constricted neck, traversing this most narrow point of the channel still favouring the eastern shore, but giving some space for the reef. Ten minutes later (although it felt like much longer), we were safely through.

A constant fixture in the landscape, 3,000' Mount Merritt dominated the skyline as we cruised slowly north into Kildidit Inlet with

the morning sun casting its glow. We felt both exhilarated and relieved to be past the narrows and eager to explore the now-attainable islets and lagoons. The first to venture inside were undoubtedly the Heiltsuk, from whose language the name “Kildidit” is derived, meaning “long inlet.” The Hakai region (now designated under the Environmental Land

Use Act and co-managed by B.C. Parks and the Heiltsuk) has great cultural significance for the Heiltsuk First Nation. As such, visitors to the area should be respectful and not remove any artifacts or camp ashore at heritage sites, most notably at shell middens. Evidence of past handlogging operations indicated later arrivals, perhaps the Icelandic immigrants who briefly settled Hunter Island's north end around the time of the First World War. The entire waterway was otherwise completely devoid of any sign of



human presence. While typical for the Hakai area, we felt particularly far-removed from civilization here.

We were hoping to find a central anchorage in the Gnat Islets at the northern extreme of Kildidit Inlet, but nothing appealed to us. There was one enticing spot amongst the group to their southeast, however, the limited swing room required a stern anchor. We continued north into Kildidit Lagoon and found a sheltered cove behind the Hart Group. From here we had a clear view of Mount Merritt, one of our goals in selecting a moorage.

THE RAPIDS Our anchorage was surrounded by a lush green forest through which several streams carrying tannin-brown

water flowed. We toured the western end of Kildidit Lagoon by dinghy, poking into numerous interesting nooks and crannies and finding what appeared to be an ancient fish trap, before setting off on the 5 nm trip to view the rapids at maximum ebb. Based on the non-slack conditions that we saw upon entering, we were a little concerned that our estimates were completely off, but we soon discovered that this truly was the bad time. Well above the narrows our small craft was propelled ever more quickly by the swift current, while a loud roaring sound became apparent as we drew near. Wanting to get a good view, but not risk coming close to the rapids, we tucked the dinghy into a small protected bight at a stream mouth on the eastern shore and clambered onto the

slippery rocks. The fierceness of the rapids is not exaggerated. The passage that we had just transited was now a churning river with standing waves, whirlpools, upwellings and overfalls. The tide level was dropping rapidly, with the water pouring visibly downhill. Standing on the recently-underwater reef at the neck, we watched a log shoot through in about 20 seconds. The turbulence was both spectacular and a little frightening—we were very cautious being so close.

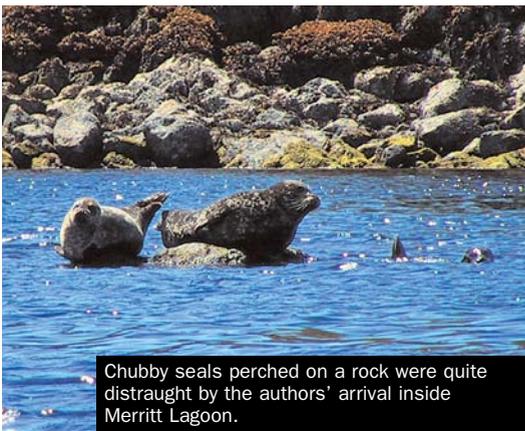
While the rapids themselves were thrilling, an unexpected treat was the sea life revealed by the falling tide. The reefs were coated with vibrant pink coralline algae and packed with creatures: strawberry, aggregate, and giant green anemones; soft, cup and tidepool corals; purple and ochre

IF YOU go

The major concerns in transiting Kildidit Narrows are the strength of the current, combined with the confined waterway and uncertainty regarding the accuracy of charted depths and marked hazards. We toured the area by dinghy at low-water slack and found the hazards shown on the new Chart 3937 (issued 07/2000) to be where expected, with no obvious surprises. On the western side, the mass of recently-covered reefs corresponded with those charted and should definitely be avoided. On entry, favour the eastern side of the channel, which at low tide drops steeply down to a believable minimum charted depth of 21' with no visible protuberances, until the northernmost section of the narrows. Here the channel constricts into a tight neck perhaps 50' wide with the reefs on either side clearly visible at low tide (see

photo of neck at low tide, page 29), but hidden at high. This is the trickiest part of the entry. By still favouring the east shore, but allowing a roughly 20' berth, there is sufficient space and depth to pass through. Once beyond the neck, the channel widens and deepens considerably. There are some minor hazards beyond, but they appear well-charted and easily avoided. Our experiences indicated that the turn-to-ebb calculation given in Sailing Directions British Columbia Coast (North Portion), was late by roughly 40 minutes. We subsequently discussed this inaccuracy with CHS, who concurred and issued a correction in 12/2002 to the effect that high water slack occurs roughly 1.5 hours after high water at Bella Bella, while low water slack differs with the tide height, occurring one hour and two or more hours after a low water at Bella Bella of

roughly 8' and 1' respectively. (Note that both the reference station and timings were changed.) The depths we read during the transit on a 12' tide were mostly in the 40' range, with the lowest being 32' at the neck; the least-depth sounding of 21' on new Chart 3937 appears reliable. The uncorrected 1991 version of Sailing Directions, and presumably the old Chart 3786, indicated a least depth of 30', which would have resulted in a very distressing loss of 10' when passing through the neck. In 2002, CHS issued an updated Sailing Directions edition for this area—our 1991 issue was so full of corrections that anyone travelling here is well-advised to obtain the newer publication. The slack water correction (<http://notmar.ca>) must still be applied to the current edition however.



Chubby seals perched on a rock were quite distraught by the authors' arrival inside Merritt Lagoon.

The neck viewed from the south at low slack where a reef hidden at high tide extends 15 to 20' from the eastern shore.

sea stars; leather stars; chitons and limpets. Returning to the dinghy, we found it high and dry—the water level had fallen several feet in under a half-hour. Once re-floated, we crossed to the western side, where the receding waters had left a calm, sheltered bay between reef and shore. The tide pools here held more treasures, including giant red sea urchins, pink branching hydrocorals, tiny tide-pool sculpins, coralline seaweed, sea staghorn, giant barnacles, California mussels, purple shore crabs, ribbed whelk snails and, in the deeper pools, kelp crabs and sea pens. It was like scuba diving without the tanks. The colour, variety and quantity of life here is impressive enough to warrant a visit by dinghy or kayak at low slack even if the main vessel were not brought through.

THE LAGOONS After spending several hours at the narrows, we returned north to explore the inlet's head. On the northeastern shore, a small 37 m high islet is separated from Hunter Island by an intertidal strip, forming a delightful, sun-dappled cove where we found a grey, doughnut-shaped moon snail egg case. One might anchor here if the afternoon westerlies do not reach in. The channel through to Merritt Lagoon appears passable by a deeper-draft vessel—there were no surprises when we brought the dinghy through at low tide. Avoiding the rock off its southern shore, favour the east side of the 31 m high islet; the 2.3 m reef to the east is very much a hazard, the location correctly marked on the chart. The channel is quite pretty, with several possible one-boat anchorages along the southern shore before it turns north into Merritt Lagoon, with a potential anchorage at the southernmost extreme of this body of water. The charted rock directly north of the 49 m high islet was barely visible—the three

chubby, sunning seals perched thereon quite distraught at our arrival. We pulled the dinghy up to the islet for a picnic lunch on a sun-warmed shelf, with a clear view across the lagoon to Mount Merritt. Both were named for Lieutenant Colonel Charles Merritt, the first Canadian WWII Victoria Cross recipient, who was cited for heroism during the tragic 1942 landing at Dieppe. On an adjacent hilltop, a barely-visible radio antenna reminded us that other humans did in fact exist, while also emphasizing the isolation of this pristine wilderness. The tidal flats along the lagoon shore appeared to be ideal bear territory, but B.C. Parks' Hobler had assured us that these animals were not among the region's abundant wildlife. Other predators, however, are quite common. One of Hobler's most memorable times in the vicinity was spent anchored just south of the rapids at Bremner Bay, surrounded on three sides by howling wolves.

The afternoon westerlies were blowing quite strongly across Kildidit Lagoon as we retraced our path. The waterways and islets



at the west end of the channel to Merritt Lagoon make wonderful territory to explore by small craft, although less so with the wind and fetch we were experiencing, as do those around Canso Island to the north, which was named after the successful Canadian-built WWII bomber. We had assumed that the winds were blowing over Kinsman Inlet, and that our snug anchorage well to the north would be calm, but the anchor chain was taut when we returned to Dirona. As it turns out, Hunter Island north of Kinsman Inlet consists of two large lakes stretching across to the outermost shore. Covered by the compass rose on Chart 3937, the lakes offer little resistance to the Pacific winds which blew through strongly, frequently

attaining 30 kts. We held well in the thick mud bottom. There was no fetch, and the winds dissipated by evening, so this was neither uncomfortable nor a concern, but a moorage with more protection from west winds might be preferable for some. On a practical note, our wet jeans dried quite nicely after being hung out.

We departed early again the following morning at 0500 hrs, arriving at the rapids in just over 30 minutes. Skeptical of the calculation, we had timed our approach for a half hour before high water slack only to find that we were late again (see sidebar). The tide had already turned, but our exit was undemanding in the still-gentle flow. With Kildidit Narrows vanquished, we continued south into Kildidit Sound, the distant clouds made cotton-candy pink by the rising sun.

Jennifer and James Hamilton are correspondents for the Waggoner Cruising Guide and boat year-round throughout the Pacific Northwest. Jennifer is currently writing her fourth book, *North of the Rapids*, a history of the Broughton Archipelago and the North Island Straits. 📖