

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON

Smith Inlet. Surprises

In this third article of a three-part series, Jennifer and James Hamilton uncover Smith Inlet's closely held secrets

We capped off each day in the Achlakerho Islands watching the evening sun's final rays light up the mountains to the east.

Smith Inlet was the last stop on our tour of mid-coast inlets. The waterway is not covered much in the guide-books, so we didn't know what to expect. We had left Rivers Inlet feeling that its tributary, Draney Inlet, would be our favourite locale of the trip. But we were wrong—Achlakerho Channel in Smith Inlet won that title. Here we discovered two of our all-time favourite anchorages. And there are other attractions too, including a massive DFO salmon-counting fence and the most impressive pictograph display we've ever seen.



Smith is the southernmost of two inlets that branch from the mouth of Smith Sound, directly north of Cape Caution. After exploring Boswell Inlet to the north, we travelled to the head of Smith Inlet and worked our way back out.

SMITH INLET HEAD We weren't planning to visit the head first, but the mountain views on that warm and sunny day drew us up-inlet. Most of B.C.'s coastal inlets terminate in the swampy lowland of a river delta, where the depths rise from several hundred metres to the intertidal zone in the space of 10 or 20 metres. In the afternoons, strong up-inlet winds can generate an uncomfortable chop. Anchoring is difficult in these conditions, and Smith Inlet is no exception, but one anomaly makes it work: two islets sit just off the Nekite River delta. Using a stern tie, we tucked in behind them for wind protection in reasonable anchoring depths. The anchorage was dramatic, with a view north across the river flats and beyond to high, snow-capped peaks that glowed pink at sunset.

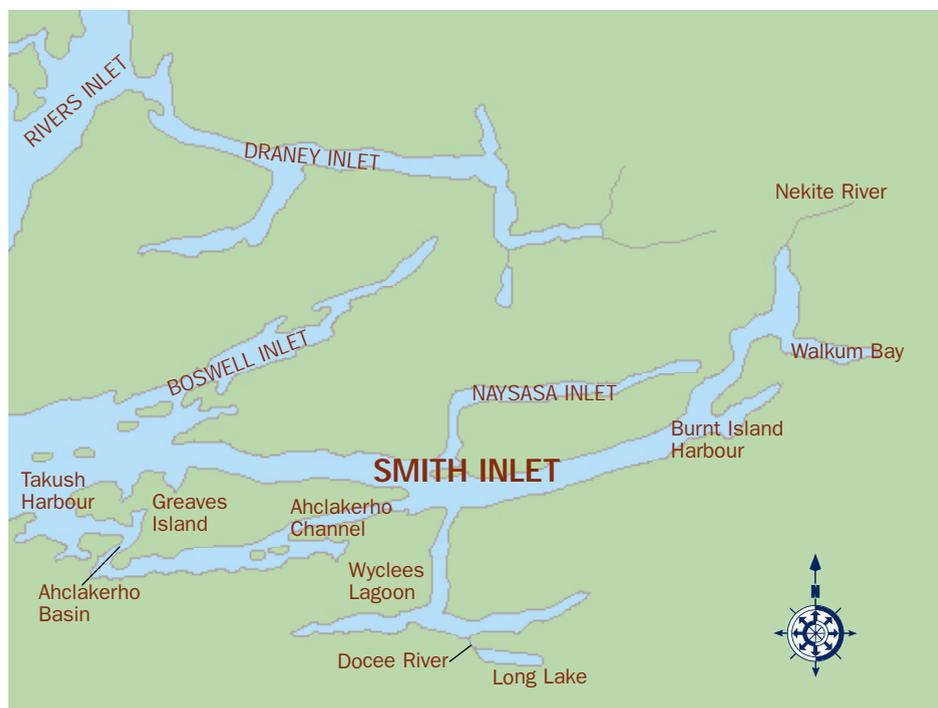
At high tide, we set off on a dinghy tour of the Nekite River. Serpentine paths weaved through the metre-high grasses of the tidal flats, which were full of life. The river itself was wide, cool and deep. We

worked a kilometre upstream before running out of depth. Had we wanted to explore by foot instead, a Forest Service road and numerous logging roads lead more than 15 km along the west shore through the river valley.

WYCLEES LAGOON Twelve miles from its mouth, three waterways branch from Smith Inlet: Wyclees Lagoon, Naysash Inlet and Ahlakerho Channel. Wyclees Lagoon is a classic tidal basin with an entrance perhaps eight metres, and

wide and navigable only at high-water slack. This channel is charted at only 0.8 metres. Depths don't improve much at high water—we sounded the entrance by dinghy at high-water slack and found little more than two metres.

Our 40' powerboat *Dirona* draws just over a metre, and there was enough water to pass...barely. We tiptoed inside, but it was not a relaxing transit. Watching from the bow, I could see the bottom the whole way through and was not confident that I could discern if a rock





The mountain views on a warm and sunny day drew us up Smith Inlet.

was either two metres under the surface or one.

We returned later by dinghy to view the rapids at maximum ebb. The passage was whitewater, and the water level abruptly dropped a metre at the centre point. Given the tidal exchange was just under four metres, the rapids must be spectacular on a maximum 5.5-metre exchange.

Wyclees Lagoon is T-shaped. The waterway extends southward for two miles, then branches into two arms, each

about 3.5 miles long and deep with steep shores. Good anchoring depths are near the T-intersection and the head of each arm. The eastern arm terminates at a healthy river delta. Scenic and calm in the morning, the afternoon westerlies generated an uncomfortable chop, making this a fair-weather anchorage only.

The western arm was more protected and appealing. Partway along, a 50-metre waterfall gushed and spilled through an overgrown landslide. We had intended to anchor behind a small islet near the head, but a large float home was moored there. We anchored off the head instead. Later that evening, a young man came

by skiff from the float home to chat with us. As we had seen at Draney Inlet, he lived there with his family, who were salvaging cedar left from earlier logging operations.

DOCEE RIVER COUNTING FENCE Besides exploring the waterway itself, we had another reason for entering Wyclees Lagoon: Long Lake. This lake drains into Wyclees Lagoon through the Docee River. Sockeye from Long Lake supply the important Smith Inlet gillnet fishery. To gauge stock health, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) has built a massive counting fence at the Docee River head. We wanted to visit the fence and also look for an impressive pictograph display about halfway down the lake.

DFO maintains a float off the mouth of the Docee River, where we anchored off and took the dinghy ashore. A large sign

ANCHORAGE NOTES

NEKITE RIVER OUTLET: Anchor in 12 to 13 metres off the northeast tip of the 76 metre-high islet. Position the boat in 10 metres, opposite the passage between the two islets, with a line ashore. Good holding in mud.

WYCLEES LAGOON: The entrance channel is navigable for roughly two hours after high tide at Bella Bella (see Notice to Mariners 09/04). At the western head, anchor in 16 metres, where there's moderate holding in soft mud. Off the Docee River, anchor in 16 metres, biased slightly west of the river mouth. The holding is moderate in soft, silty mud. The Long Lake pictographs are at 51° 14.668' N by 127° 05.949' W.

AHCLAKERHO ISLANDS: Anchor at the head of the V-shaped nook on the eastern shore of the largest island, with a line to the south shore. Good holding in three to four metres.

AHCLAKERHO BASIN: The passage from Broad Reach to Ahclakerho Basin is best run at high tide, favouring the east shore. Anchor in three to four metres in the basin. Excellent holding in mud and sand.

The anchorage at Smith Inlet's head was dramatic, with a view of high snow-capped peaks that glowed pink at sunset.





At maximum ebb, the passage to Wyclees Lagoon was whitewater, and the water level abruptly dropped a metre at the centre point.



The Docee River counting fence looks like a dam, which it effectively is.

reading “Do not feed the bears” reminded us to be bear-aware. A well-worn dirt road led to the DFO facility. The Docee River is less than a kilometre long—the walk was perhaps 20 minutes. Partway along, we found the remains of an old corduroy road. Long Lake was logged, but decades ago, and not extensively.

The DFO facility included a house and several work buildings. DFO observers live on-site during the summer salmon runs. The counting fence spans the river and rises about 10 metres above the surface. It looks like a dam, which it effectively is. During the salmon run, the fence is rigged to prevent any salmon from reaching Long Lake except when observers are present. This yields accurate stock counts.

LONG LAKE From the Docee River, Long Lake extends 13.5 miles eastward into the Coast Mountains. In *The Great Bear*

Rainforest (Harbour Publishing, 1997), which had inspired our inlet tour, Ian and Karen McAllister describe an impressive pictograph display in Long Lake. The day after visiting the DFO site, we set off to find the pictographs. We were armed with encouraging, if not particularly detailed, directions from Ian: “You really can’t miss them on the north side of the lake halfway up.”

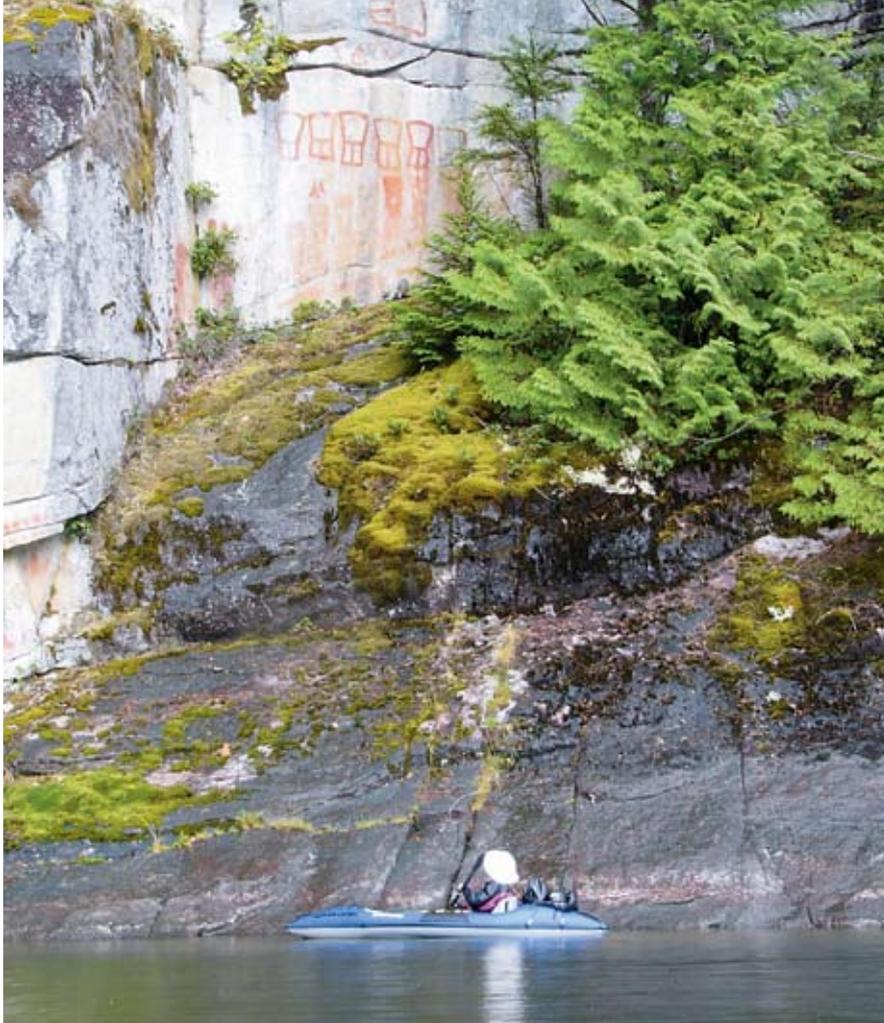
Our transportation was a Stearns inflatable kayak, which we carried along the dirt road from Wyclees Lagoon to Long Lake. We’d not spoken to anyone the day before, but this morning two DFO observers, both college-aged women, saw us from the house and came outside to talk with us. They warned us that the pictographs were a long way, and that afternoon headwinds can be strong and impossible to work against. If we needed assistance, they offered, we could radio them on VHF Channel 7 and they would come get us. We’re not sure if the conversation made us feel better or worse.

We launched into Long Lake shortly past 0800. The lake was beautiful—steep shores ribboned with waterfalls soared on either side. Snow-covered mountains were visible at the head. The weather frequently switched between sunshine and light showers. But the temperature was warm, and we were never uncomfortable.

Using a chart marked with GPS locations and a handheld GPS, we gauged our position. By noon we were at the eight-mile mark. We’d found some faint pictographs, but not the good ones. We needed to turn back to avoid the headwinds, but were loathe to give up. We did the “around one more point” thing a couple of times, and in the distance saw a bluff rising several hundred metres straight up from the water line. Score! The pictograph display was truly the best we’d seen. Brilliant red drawings, in



The Ahlakerho Islands are like Prideaux Haven, but without the crowds.



We found that the pictograph display was the best we'd ever seen—and well worth paddling 18 miles to see them. Note the row of six "coppers."

a variety of shapes and patterns, covered the walls. Most distinctive was a row of six "coppers," eight-sided shield-like objects that represent wealth in Native culture.

We headed back at around 1300 and finally arrived back at the DFO site around 1700—nine hours and more than 18 miles later. The weather had switched between torrential squalls so severe that we could hardly see and sunshine so hot that our kayaks steamed. But fortunately, the wind mostly blew with us. We returned to *Dirona* tired and wet, but we'd had an awesome adventure. (James, however, has since limited my crazy paddling expeditions to nine-mile round-trips.)

AHCLAKERHO CHANNEL We didn't think anything could top Wyclees Lagoon, but the best was still ahead. Ahclakerho Channel turned out to be one of our

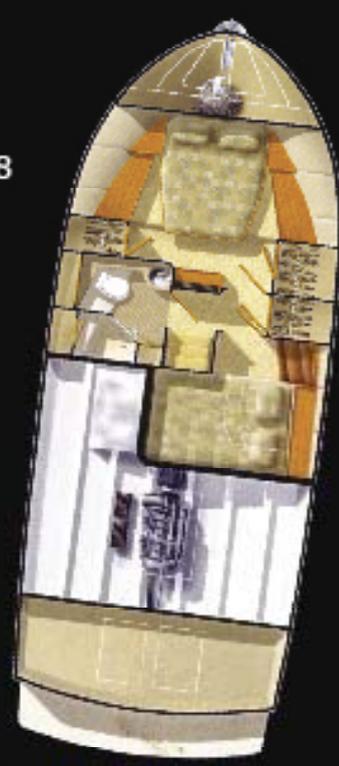
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favourite places on the B.C. coast. We rarely spend more than one night in a given locale, but we stayed an extra night at both anchorages here. It was that beautiful. Other than the occasional plane flying overhead, we did not see or hear any signs of the modern world.

Roughly halfway down the channel we discovered the wonderful Ahklakerho Islands, which are like Desolation Sound's Prideaux Haven, but without the crowds. The setting was warm, calm and magical. We spent hours exploring the intricate shorelines by kayak. Behind our anchorage, an intertidal channel that jutted into the island was perfect for a lazy afternoon paddle. We capped off each day watching the evening sun's final rays light up the mountains to the east.

Navigating Ahklakerho Channel from Smith Inlet to the Ahklakerho Islands requires careful piloting, but fortunately Chart 3931 seems accurate here. It was the 90° bend at the west end of Ahklakerho Channel that surprised us—on the positive side.

We wanted to explore the basins at the extreme head, but the entrance to this final reach is narrow, and charted at 0.9 metres. However, we sounded a zero-tide depth of seven metres. (We reported this to the Canadian Hydrographic Service, which issued a correction with our findings in September, 2004.) The chart was accurate for the rest of the route to the head, though.

We anchored for two nights in Ahklakerho Basin (our name for the basin connected through an intertidal gap to Takush Harbour in Smith Sound). It was hard to reconcile how remote this anchorage felt, given that we were just off the Inside Passage route to Alaska. Afternoon westerlies ruffled the surface here a bit, but conditions were mostly so calm that we felt as if we were tied to a dock. The boat just didn't move. If you want a "boat reflected perfectly in the water" picture, Ahklakerho Basin is the place to take it.

The passage to Takush Harbour is quite the opposite. Between low and high water, tidal rapids exceeding four knots form. This intertidal channel is

impassable except near high-water slack (roughly high water at Bella Bella). Unable to paddle through mid-tide, we instead spent a couple of hours practising whitewater kayaking skills. We'd paddle furiously upstream, then spin around and blow back down with the current.

Smith Inlet, packed between better-known Seymour Inlet and Rivers Inlet, appears to be the ignored younger sibling of the other two. With little coverage in the guidebooks, the waterway would seem uninteresting and not worth visiting. We discovered quite the opposite. Smith Inlet, with its wonderful anchorages, beautiful scenery and unique attractions, was our favourite of the three...surprise, surprise.

Jennifer and James Hamilton are correspondents for the Waggoner Cruising Guide and regular contributors to Pacific Yachting. Between them, they have logged more than 30,000 miles cruising year-round throughout British Columbia and Washington. ●

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