

Looking from Schwartzberg Lagoon to the Hamilton's anchorage in Nugent Sound. They had hoped to bring Dirona through the lagoon entrance, but it proved too tight.

Cruising Seymour and Belize Inlets

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JENNIFER AND JAMES HAMILTON



This is the first of a three-part series by the Hamiltons on cruising the mid-coast inlets of Seymour, Smith and Rivers. They promise to share not only their adventures but also some excellent anchorages you won't find in any guidebook.

Last winter we read *The Great Bear Rainforest* (Harbour Publishing, 1997), Ian and Karen McAllister's chronicle of B.C.'s raincoast from Knight Inlet to the Alaska border. Ian's vibrant photographs inspired our summer cruise to the southern portion of this region: a tour of Seymour, Smith and Rivers inlets.

The territory is off the beaten track, with minimal coverage in the guidebooks. But this was appealing—it would give us solitude, plus a chance to explore new territory. Our first stop was Seymour Inlet and its sibling, Belize Inlet.

SEYMOUR AND BELIZE INLETS

Relatively few pleasure craft cruise Seymour and Belize Inlets. Over seven days, we saw other boaters only once. Besides solitude, the scenery is grand, wildlife abounds and we found many excellent anchorages. While these waterways aren't entirely deserted—several logging companies operate camps here among scattered residents—no facilities are available for pleasure craft. We had to carry all our necessities on board our 40' powerboat *Dirona*. For the most part, though, we could still receive weather radio reports and contact the



In the centre of Nakwakto Rapids sits Turret Rock, a tiny islet covered with trees. Placards nailed to the trees name the boats whose skippers have braved the rapids.

Coast Guard, since Port Hardy and Alert Bay are nearby.

NAKWAKTO RAPIDS Besides a lack of facilities, there are two other reasons that pleasure boaters rarely visit Seymour and Belize inlets. The first is that no detailed charts of these waterways existed until Chart 3552 was published in 1993. Few dared venture inside unless there was money to be made.

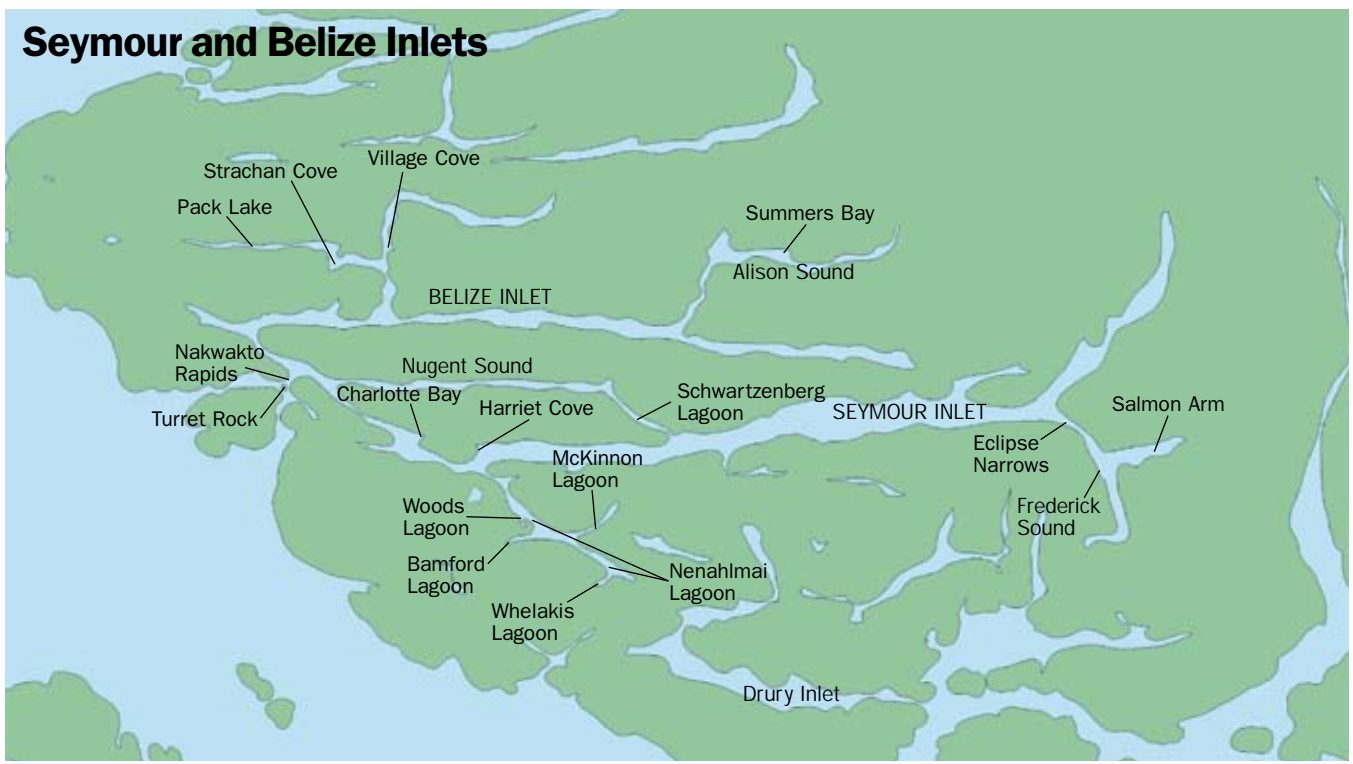
The second reason is the Nakwakto Rapids, which guard the entrance. Currents here can reach 11.5 knots on the flood and 14.5 knots on the ebb

(see sidebar). Smack in the centre of the rapids sits Turret Rock, a tiny islet covered with trees. Placards nailed to the trees name the boats whose skippers have braved the rapids. The islet is known locally as Tremble Island because the current flows with such ferocity that the rock shakes

Nenahlmai Lagoon is a serious tidal basin. Jennifer stands on the uncharted reef off the south shore.



A tugboat beyond the narrow Nenahlmai Lagoon rapids.



perceptibly in large ebb tides, or so they say. While filming of the documentary *Maelstrom*, researchers installed a geophone on Turret Rock to measure ground motion—the readings at slack and during a 12-knot ebb current were indiscernible.

The rapids should be transited at slack water, which lasts about six minutes. This sounds daunting, but the rapids are easily run in any vessel if you time it right. We planned our transit for low-water slack. As we neared Turret Rock, the current had already turned to flood and gave us a gentle boost inside. Another good time to enter is slightly before high-water slack, to ride through on the last of the flood current.

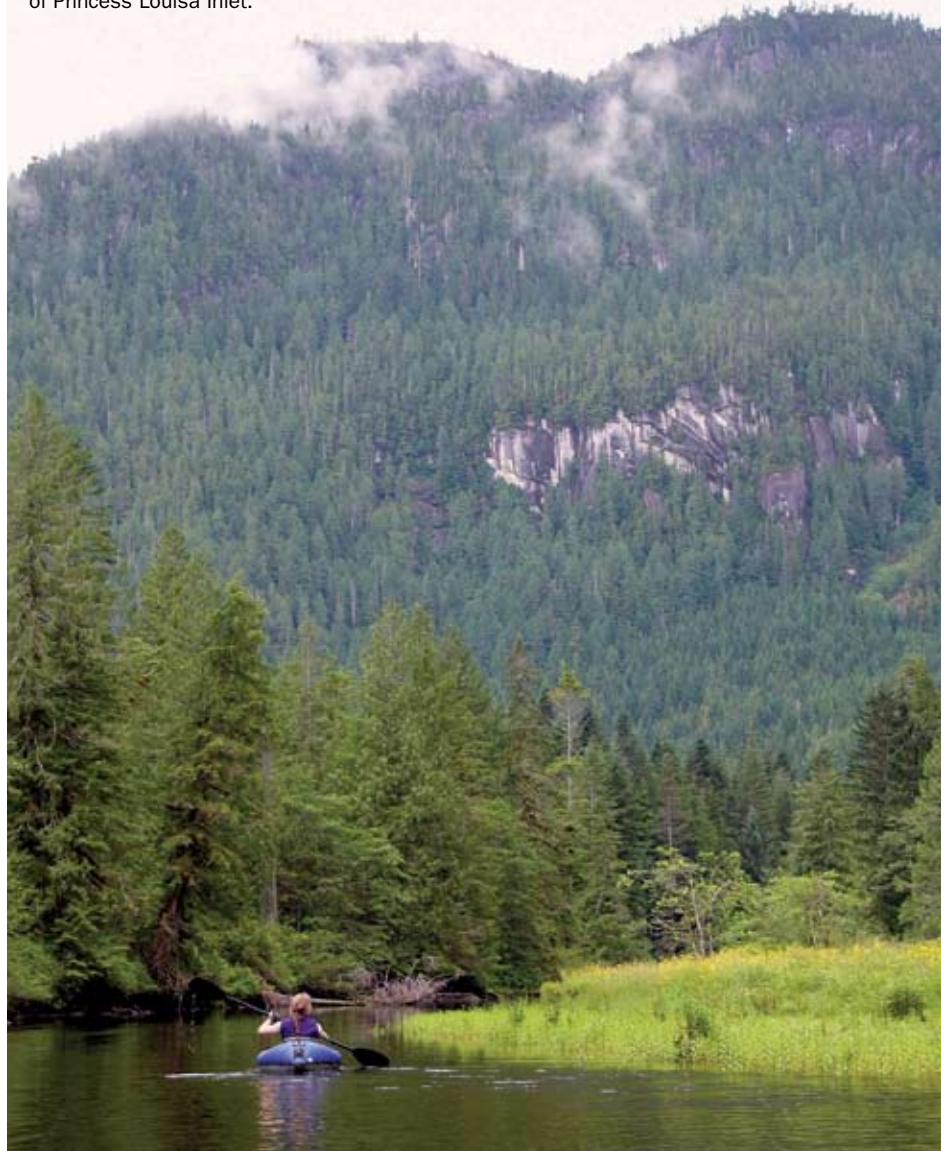
Beyond the rapids, Seymour Inlet extends 43 miles and Belize Inlet stretches 25 miles into the Coast Mountains. Each inlet branches and sub-branches into numerous sounds and arms that almost join each other and the waterways of Drury Inlet to the south and Smith Inlet to the north. The territory is wonderfully convoluted. While a few coves and anchorages lie directly off the main inlets, most of the interesting territory lies in these secondary waterways.

NUGENT SOUND extends 10 miles eastward immediately south of Nakwakto Rapids. The waterway terminates at the narrow entrance to charted Schwartzenberg Lagoon. We had hoped to bring *Dirona* through, but the lagoon entrance proved too tight, even for a dinghy. Instead, we found a perfect anchorage just outside. A logging company

» FASTEST RAPIDS

The Nakwakto Rapids are listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the strongest in the world. They're no longer the record-holder, though. The Canadian Hydrographic Service, using more accurate observations and an upgraded calibration program, recently downgraded Nakwakto Rapids from a maximum ebb of 16 knots to 14.5. The 16.5-knot Sechelt Rapids (Skookumchuck) are now officially the world's fastest tidal passage.

The scenery at Alison Sound's head rivals that of Princess Louisa Inlet.



Approaching the dramatic head of Frederick Sound.



crew boat was docked nearby, but the loggers were working inshore, and we couldn't hear anything.

We took the dinghy through the narrow entrance to explore Schwartzberg Lagoon. On the northeast shore at the far end, we found a once-substantial dock, undoubtedly a base for transporting logs from the lagoon. A brief push through the saplings led to an old logging road that connected to a freshly bulldozed one. The road led a half-kilometre to a dock at the edge of Seymour Inlet, with sweeping views either way.

This was the one place in all of Seymour and Belize inlets where we actually saw another pleasure craft—three of them, in fact, travelling together. *PY* readers Tricia and Brian Jones, aboard *Soo Valley*, caught sight of us and came over to investigate. They were all cruising to the head of Seymour Inlet and then to Frederick Sound.



Longtime Belize Inlet resident Charlie Chilson, along with Lady and Montana, stop to say hello.

NENAHLMAI LAGOON is another branch to explore farther along Seymour Inlet. Partway, a large permanent logging camp occupies the cove north of Woods Lagoon. When we went ashore, the place seemed strangely and suddenly deserted, as if there had been an emergency evacuation. Windows and doors were

open and equipment and parts lay everywhere, but not a soul was in sight. Some loggers we spoke to later said the cooks were probably sleeping while everyone else was out logging.

Serious tidal rapids block the entrance to the Nenahmai Lagoon—you can only get in at high-water slack in anything other than a skiff. Even at high-water slack, there isn't much water. We sounded a minimum depth of two metres

when we brought *Dirona* through. We had no trouble getting in or out, but on our return a tugboat captain hailed us, asking about our draft and the depths. The captain was testing the waters, as the logging company had hired him to bring a barge through. He had hit bottom coming through the day before and said he was feeling a little gun shy. There's a task we didn't envy.

Nenahmai Lagoon branches into three

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sub-lagoons: Bamford, McKinnon and Whelakis. We anchored for the night at the extreme head of Whelakis Lagoon. The entrance was spooky-still and quiet. The trees crowded the shore, reflecting the surface perfectly. Our exhaust and idle-speed wake echoed so loudly among them that we thought a large animal was nearby. Even with people so close at Woods Lagoon, we felt a million miles from civilization.

If you don't want to bring your main vessel through, Harriet Cove and Charlotte Bay are alternative anchorages for touring Nenahlnai Lagoon by dinghy. Harriet Cove has good west-wind protection and a great view down the channel towards Nenahlnai Lagoon.

SALMON ARM One of our favourite stops was Frederick Sound, way up near the head of Seymour Inlet. From wide-open Seymour Inlet, we passed through



An impressive pictograph painted on north shore bluffs in Alison Sound.

the constricted Eclipse Narrows into a world of giants. The mountains, which felt distant and remote in Seymour Inlet, suddenly towered above us on either side. The scale felt all wrong, as if we'd suddenly been shrunk to a tenth of our size. The shoreline was steep, perhaps at an 80% incline. Several massive slides

had left wide swaths of exposed rock and jumbled trees.

We spent a night at the head of Salmon Arm, enclosed on three sides with thick, vibrant green woods to the north and east, and the grassy banks of the Taaltz River delta extending to the south.

STRACHAN COVE After touring Seymour Inlet, we visited Belize Inlet. A popular anchorage here is the almost landlocked inner basin of Strachan Bay in Mereworth Sound.

At the head of the bay, we followed a logging road up a short distance to an elevated viewpoint. From here we could see east across Strachan Bay to Mereworth Sound.

Off the bay's north shore is the intertidal entrance to Pack Lake, a large and interesting place to explore. Just inside are an old A-frame logging rig and an engine on skids. A traditional upcoast



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The view across Strachan Bay,
a short way up a logging road
at the head.

logging camp lies off Pack Lake. Long-time Belize Inlet resident Charlie Chilson lives here, with his beachcombing partner Buck and their dogs Lady and Montana. Charlie came over to say hello as we toured around in the dinghy. He seems to really enjoy visitors—everyone comes back with a picture of him.

We took the dinghy up Mereworth Sound and went ashore at the elbow to watch some loggers load equipment into a barge. The men were skilled in maneuvering those massive vehicles into tight spots. They were friendly and didn't seem to mind our presence. While we watched, a crewboat arrived and dropped off another group of loggers. Each carried signature orange rubber caulk boots with spikes in the bottom for traction.

ALISON SOUND Anyone who's written about Seymour and Belize inlets says that Alison Sound, off Belize Inlet, is the most beautiful spot here. We agree.

Two impressive pictographs are painted on the north shore bluffs—one just outside the entrance and the other in a crevice directly west of Summers Bay. Provincial archaeologists believe that both may commemorate an 1868 attack by First Nations on the trading vessel

>> ANCHORAGE NOTES

This list includes only the less common anchorages. Any others we mention are well-covered in the guidebooks.

NUGENT SOUND: Anchor in 13 metres, moderate holding, at the southeast corner, opposite the dock and near the charted M on chart 3552.

WHELAKIS LAGOON: Anchor in five to nine metres at the extreme head. Holding is poor in soft mud. Note: In our experience, the Sailing Directions calculation for high-water slack at Nenahlmia Lagoon is 30 minutes early. Favour the north shore through the rapids. An uncharted reef extends a third of the way across from the south shore, while the north shore seems sheer.

HARRIET COVE: (our name for the cove opposite Harriet Point, directly northwest of Nenahlmai Lagoon.) Anchor in three metres behind the 26-metre island with moderate holding over rock.

SALMON ARM: Anchor at the bight in the northwest head in 14 to 16 metres. Excellent holding in sticky mud.

ALISON SOUND: Anchor at the head in 22 metres. Good holding in silty mud, on the 10-metre line directly south of the marsh symbol on Chart 3552.

—J & J Hamilton



Thornton and a retaliatory British gun-boat shelling of the settlement at Village Cove in Mereworth Sound.

We anchored at Alison Sound's head, where the scenery rivaled that of Princess Louisa Inlet. Here, waterfalls spilled down kilometre-high slopes. The two creeks are wonderful kayaking territory, emptying into lush lowlands below towering black cliffs, with snow-capped peaks visible through the delta. The flora and fauna were thick and healthy, and those big cliffs stood above us at every turn.

We spent a week in Seymour and Belize inlets, and could have easily spent two or more. The scenery, both en route and at our various anchorages, was stunning, and the people we met were friendly and interesting. Stay tuned next month as we continue our tour to Rivers Inlet.

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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