

MAINE'S MANY COASTAL ARMS BETWEEN
CAPE SMALL AND PEMAQUID POINT
July 2016

Looking at the coast of Maine, the stretch between Cape Small and Pemaquid Point is without a doubt one of the most intricate, most convoluted coastlines anywhere along the US Atlantic shores. It is clearly the result of glacial activity. Those long watery fingers reach far inland, to the towns of Bath, Wiscasset and Damariscotta and are wickedly tidal, as I was going to find out. In past ocean MITA trips (see end notes), I had only crossed those many arms, but each time I did so, I told myself, some year you will have to explore these areas also.

Well, 2016 was the year. But where would I start my trip? Since my mind tends to go left to right and north to south, it seemed logical to start somewhere up the Kennebec River. Since I am a Penobscot Riverkeeper, this other big Maine river had also been on my mind for some time. And yes, I could put in below the first upriver dam in Waterville, near Fort Halifax, just one hour's drive from my home in Orono, for an easy car-shuttle for Nancy. How convenient is that? Thanks my dear!

In recent years, two dams were removed on the Penobscot River, near where I live, so it is now free-flowing for about 40 miles, all the way from Old Town to the sea. This was duly celebrated by the citizens of Bangor/Old Town and other Mainers, but especially the Penobscot Nation, and us Penobscot Riverkeepers of course. On one of our last Riverkeepers' trips up Pushaw Stream, our group of about 60 local high school students in 8 war/voyageur canoes was delighted to witness the return of the alewives (a herring-like fish) all the way into Pushaw Lake, an event that had not happened for 120 years. Even Atlantic Sturgeon (according to Wikipedia "one of the oldest fish species in the world") have returned to the Penobscot, and we hope the salmon, an equally endangered species, will follow soon.

A similar rejuvenation had happened to the Kennebec River, I read in the papers, when a significant dam in Augusta was removed. This made the Kennebec free-flowing for 60 miles. So this trip, I had decided when I first thought about it, would start as my personal celebration of free-flowing rivers. OK, let's get going and check it out!

60 miles down the mighty Kennebec River

Start date was July 20, 2016 (four days after my 15th Blackburn Challenge ocean race in Gloucester, MA). My put-ins are always very quiet. My mind is racing through a last minute check-list. Did I pack everything? Loading my Verlen Kruger SEA WIND sea canoe is done on auto-pilot. I had done it so many times: Compass, stopwatch and chart right in front of me, spare paddle, on the bow, radar reflector and wiggle stick with red flag on my stern, and two 10-liter water containers under my seat. I was ready to go. A hug and a kiss, and a bit later a wave with my paddle, and I was off on my 100-mile, 8-day venture.

Except for an occasional small fishing boat near each town landing I passed, I had the river all to myself. The Kennebec was amazingly void of small towns or even houses, except for the Augusta/Gardiner area, and of course Bath further downriver. The banks were rather steep and wooded, and the river much wider than I had anticipated. I saw lots of eagles, and big sturgeon, jumping clear of the water, only to crash down with a startling big loud splash. I had read Atlantic Sturgeon can grow up to 15 feet, weighing as much as 800 pounds (about the size of my boat, only heavier). However, the ones I saw were mostly up to 3 feet long and maybe about 50-100 lbs. Most people know sturgeon for its roe/eggs, sold as caviar, a true delicacy. I saw them almost as soon as I had put in, a very good sign that this river too is recovering from the earlier abusive years preceding the 1977 national Clean Water Act, initiated by Maine Senator Edmund Muskie.

After 15 miles, about a mile above the first Augusta bridge, I found a small more or less level sandbank river right, just big enough to accommodate my little Eureka tent. Swimming and reading felt good that afternoon; so did my Dinty Moore supper, heated on my little propane stove. (As you know, I never build fires on my trips.)

Next morning I was looking for the remnants of the Augusta dam. It was clear where it had been, but the river itself was flowing nicely through this area towards Fort Western. It had mostly served as a British supply fort during the French and Indian Wars, I read, servicing the next upriver fort in Waterville (Fort Halifax) and the hinterland beyond. Here I also noticed the effects of the tide for the first time, admired a replica of one of the old supply ships, and took care of my personal needs in the public wash house. I planned to do so at any public ramp or marina in order to keep all campsites clean and fresh smelling.

I had planned to stop for the night at my trip mile 30, on one of those long thin The Sands Islands. I thought I had found the right spot, put up my tent after some minimal landscaping, i.e. removing rocks and leveling the ground, when to my chagrin the tide rose and kept rising, eventually flooding my site. OK, pack up, and get back on the river! Two miles later, on the last of the Sands Islands, I had better luck: a sandy landing and a higher, level shoreline under trees. But by now it was 5:00 p.m., time to call Nancy for my daily safety check-in on my satellite phone. That old "shoe phone" still works. I am impressed and thankful.

The further downriver I got, I knew right from the beginning, the more difficult it would be to find an overnight spot. The MITA campsites are only along the immediate coast, mostly on islands, as the name implies. The third day would be my most challenging day. So this is how it went. High tide was at 5:00 a.m., and I was off as soon as possible in order to take advantage of the ebb tide express. After Richmond, I entered the upper arm of big Merrymeeting Bay. The tide was still ebbing nicely, but a strong 15-20 knot south-westerly wind was kicking up whitecaps as well as tidal rips. I was working hard and for a moment mistook the power line across the bay at Abagadasset Point for the line across the notorious outflow, The Chops. But the surroundings and course did not

feel right. I had to go southeast. And then after almost 2 more miles I saw the second high tension wires spanning the narrow gut out of Merrymeeting Bay. If tide and wind are wrong, this can be a very challenging spot, but I flushed through The Chops without a hitch, noticing picnickers on the high banks cheering the lone boater.

I pulled out at the well-established public boat launch in North Bath. I was ready to call it quits for the day, but big signs made it very clear that that was no option (NO CAMPING!). When I was ready to get back into my boat, not only had the tide turned, but a strong 20 knot southerly had sprung up. Tide and wind were against the tired paddler. To boot, I had to stay away from the security area for Bath Iron Works, the big shipyard presently building several modernistic looking guided missile destroyers (the Zumwald class). The two ships had thin, sharp, reverse bows, inward slanting sides, hardly any windows or portholes – to me they looked very menacing, unfriendly and unseaworthy. I pitied the crew condemned to these modern steel ironclads.

Then a patrol boat raced towards me, reprimanding me for missing to round the first of their many "KEEP OUT" buoys. That was too bad! I was barely making headway and was not going back. Their buoys were leaning vigorously towards me. Wind and current were that strong. At nun # 34 I finally decided to ferry across the big river, hoping no fast boats were coming by. Well, I made it fine, but pulled out almost immediately on the first little point on river left, way before the maelstrom of Fiddler Reach, two tight 90° bends in the river. I was bushed/spent.

There were grasses, even a tiny patch of beach sand, no steps coming down the steep bank, no house in sight – a perfect spot for my little Eureka tent. But it was hot (mid 90s), necessitating several swims. After supper, dark clouds formed in the west, and we had a doozy of a thunderstorm, with significant lightning and gusty winds, taxing my tent to the max.

The morning was surreally calm, as I rode the ebb current toward the elbow of Fiddler Reach, passing the Percy & Small Shipyard at the Maine Maritime Museum, river right. It is impossible to miss the full-scale skeletal mock-up of one of their large six-masted schooners they built here between 1894-1920. Bow, stern and the 6 masts of the Wyoming (the biggest wooden ship ever built in the U.S., at 329.5 feet) tower over everything. Have to stop by here next time I am in Bath.

I eventually passed picturesque little Phippsburg, paddling all the way to Perkins Island, near the mouth of the Kennebec River and Fort Popham. The Perkins lighthouse is a cutie, and the little rocky island it stands on is a MITA site – phew! Finally an official, legal stop-over! But taking out at low tide was not easy. So I waited in the shady campsite, wrote my trip diary, walked across the island to the lighthouse, took pictures, and even got some easy Clive Cussler reading done. Tides take their time coming in or going out on their 6-hour cycle. You've got to be patient. Unloading all my gear and carrying my boat above the high-water mark through ankle-deep sandal-eating muck is no option for me.

Up to Wiscasset

From my first MITA trip in 1996 I fondly remembered paddling up the Back River from Perkins Island into Hockomock Bay. It is a most delightful narrow shallow river, winding its way through tidal wetlands. I again saw Floridian birds like egrets, ibis and white herons, before the river spat me out near Castle Island, my next MITA stop. By then the tide was up, and take-out was no problem. The campsite was large, shady and level - life was good. I even had the chance to meet with the MITA caretakers of this place, as well as chat with 4 kayakers dropping by for a rest.

However, getting off this island the next morning was not as easy as when I arrived. There was an extensive, impenetrable mud bank at the put-in. So I had to wait again for the tide to come in enough for me to slip out of there. It then was a long paddle up Montsweag Bay to Wiscasset before the tide turned. But to my surprise, the strong and much deeper tidal Sheepscot River, running parallel to my course, a tad to the east, was carrying so much more water up to Wiscasset that it spilled down into Montsweag Bay from the north, making it almost impossible for me to make it through Cowseagan Narrows and under the #144 bridge to the town. I was eddy-hopping and sprinting from one point to the next, till I finally made it into the last bight, where the now defunct nuclear power plant still sits. Several ospreys had moved into the old docking area with elaborate stick-nests filled with noisy young chicks. I smiled and "approved of their message".

The Wiscasset public boat launch was easy to find: right beside the yacht club. I needed a break. I took care of my needs, topped off one of my water containers, and splurged, ordering a double scoop of ice cream on the public dock. I needed that! It was another very hot day, especially so far inland. The long, low route #1 bridge was choked with tourist traffic, and I was glad to be sitting in my boat. "No traffic jams for me," I mused with a smile, as I pushed off again.

Down the Sheepscot River

At about high tide I headed over to Fort Edgecomb on Davis Island and began my long haul down the entire Sheepscot River. I got a nice boost towards big Barter's Island, where I decided to take a little detour into Cross River and down the Back River (the second Back River in this area). At the defunct wooden bridge to tiny Tibbet Island, I ran out of steam as well as water for an easy take-out. A small more or less level ledge attached to a patch of dirt and weeds would have to do for the night. It was a Canada goose hang-out, I noticed, but not tonight. As soon as I had set up, I was in for yet another violent thunderstorm, which got most everything wet.

THICK FOG greeted me the next morning. I could not even see the other shore of this narrow Back River. High tide was at 5:00 a.m., and with all the shallows around me, I had to scoot out of there in a hurry. Breakfast was reduced to a granola bar and a swig of water. Everything, wet or dry, was packed up in a hurry, and I was off, on compass course, even across the river. I then felt my way down Back River along Barter's Island

till I got to the little swing bridge to Hodgdon Island. From there I rounded Sawyer Island, kept the two Ram Islands to starboard (even though I never saw them), and the Isle of Springs to port (what a delightful name for an island, don't you think?). One more short foggy compass-course hop headed me across to Powderhorn Island, my MITA stop for today.

And what a wonderful choice this was. I found a wide sand beach facing north towards a tiny, picturesque hub island. And as the tide waters receded, a gravel anchorage with ledges on two sides invited power boaters all afternoon to come by and anchor for a picnic and swim. I counted more than 10 boats, all vacationers from around this area with far-away homes like Austin, Texas, Baltimore and Boston. The many kids were having fun, as were the many water dogs. No loud ear-splitting screaming or screeching, hardly any barking – everybody was just having FUN. And I even got all my gear dried, especially my sleeping bag. Life was good again!

The home stretch

All day, though, I noticed that my left knee, where I had been operated on for a torn meniscus a few years ago, was acting up again. It was hurting, buckling and swelling big-time, all the way down to my ankle. Even an ocean cool-down did not help. By next morning it had gotten even worse, and I could not see myself "having fun" paddling up and down the Damariscotta River for the next two days, just because it was there and I had initially thought of doing it. Instead I decided to head right down to Boothbay Harbor and from there more or less straight-line it to Pemaquid Harbor, my planned take-out spot, before my knee got even worse. I phoned Nancy on my satellite phone at around 7:00 a.m. and arranged for a pick-up in Pemaquid at high noon that same day. "No problem! Can do!" What a sweetheart!

Looking at my charts, I cheered up again and was suddenly looking forward to paddling this 15-mile stretch, rather than bucking the tides up to Damariscotta and back. First I would head for Boothbay's Townsend Gut swing bridge. The tide was still ebbing, i.e. was running with me through those narrows. OK, I did not loop through the inner harbor either, as originally planned, but touched on Mouse Island, Spruce Point and Ocean Point instead. I was suddenly on open water, and loving it. The weather was great, maybe a tad on the too-hot side, but there were no big waves to contend with. From Ocean Point I traversed the Damariscotta River to Inner Heron Island and into the Thread of Life, just east of Christmas Cove, a delightful string of little islands and ledges. It eventually spat me out into Johns Bay. At the northeastern point of Rutherford Island I headed across to Johns Island and past Fort William Henry (my 5th fort of this trip) into Pemaquid Harbor.

I got to the wide gravel-beach public landing early, which gave me ample time to carry my gear and boat from the low water mark up to the paved ramp, where Nancy could back down the car for loading. I was hurting all right, limping and grimacing, but inwardly smiling about having made a good decision, straight-lining it to Pemaquid two days early. Today's paddle even turned into my most beautiful and rewarding day of the entire trip.

And then Nancy arrived, also a tad early, and automatically backed down to my gear. After a hug and a kiss and a quick evaluation of my knee ("Take 2 Tylenol and call me in the morning!"), the trip was suddenly over. We packed the gear into the trunk of the car, and I got some help from a local retired coast guard skipper, who had been asking me questions about my trip, my boat and my thoroughly modern radar reflector on the stern deck. We swung my 65-pound boat overhead onto my car roof rack, tied everything down, and we were off. Special thanks go again to Nancy as well as the helpful Coast Guard skipper. My knees would have buckled for sure, heaving my boat by myself - not a pretty picture.

See you next year, my paddling friends. Till then be safe, be prudent, make good decisions, and don't forget to HAVE FUN!

Reinhard

Reinhard Zollitsch
reinhard@maine.edu
www.ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com

Info:

www.mita.org (Maine Island Trail Association)

For history buffs, here are the names of the 5 forts I paddled by:

Fort Halifax (Waterville/Winslow)
Fort Western (Augusta)
Fort Popham (mouth of the Kennebec River)
Fort Edgecomb (Wiscasset)
Fort William Henry (Pemaquid Harbor)

For more information, see:

David B. MacNab: 15 Interesting Historic Sites to Visit Along the Coast and Rivers of Maine. Maine Authors Publishing, Rockland, Maine, 2013.

Harry Gratwick: The Forts of Maine. The History Press, South Carolina, 2013.