

Into the Storms - Excerpt from A Long Trek Home

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Ground Truth Trekking

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Erin: "I have never felt so intrepid.
And I have never been so incredibly sandy. "

BROWN LUMPS SPECKLED the shores of the narrow gravel island at the mouth of Glacier Bay. We squinted. But the cacophonous grunting, bellowing, and roaring soon left no doubt as to what we were seeing. The island wasn't composed of gravel. It was composed of sea lions.

Crowded onto the same small patch of highly prized beach, the sea lions argued constantly, waving their massive necks from side to side, roaring in the faces of their rivals, waddling forward and backward on the ungainly flippers that seemed unlikely appendages for supporting such massive, blubbery bodies. Sea otters bobbed in the kelp beside us, the first we'd seen all journey. A flock of cormorants wheeled overhead. As we floated past with the tide, Hig pulled out the video camera and began to film.

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ICY BAY — Staring across the ice-choked waters of Icy Bay in November 2007, afer the first failed crossing attempt. — Get Photo (/photos/icy-bay/)

Perhaps they liked cameras.

A hundred sea lions reared up, all heads pointed toward us. A hundred sea lions charged down the beach, splashing into the water in an awkward rush that was faster than seemed possible. A hundred sea lions started

Their brown heads protruded from the water, pink mouths gaping wide with rows of sharp white teeth, letting out their honking guttural roars. They surrounded us in a great wall, a

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quickly contracting semi-circle of bellowing brown flesh and churning water. The head of one large bull seemed larger than my entire boat.

“Sea lions eat fish. Sea lions don’t eat people. Sea lions eat fish.” Those were the words playing in my mind as the wall closed in–a hundred feet, fifty feet, thirty feet…

I briefly tried to paddle away, before realizing there was no way we could outrun a hundred sea lions. We put down the paddles and picked up our cameras. Twenty feet away…

And suddenly, they dove. In one giant choreographed splash, our encircling wall of sea lions was replaced by rippling, grey-blue water. Backing off underwater, they reappeared, repeating their encroaching circle. Each time, they dared approach only to twenty feet. Sea lion faces are inscrutable, and it was impossible to tell if they were trying to drive us away or just wanted to play. The group slowly dwindled, but some of them followed us for half an hour. No longer terrified, we were free to be simply amazed.

As fall descended on us, we spent more and more time in the dark. Each day, our light shrank a little further, and our eight hours of daylight and twilight became ever more precious. When the skies were clear, we often woke under the light of the moon or the stars, shivering against the cold-frosted air as we broke the darkness with a fire. And when clouds blotted out the glittering sky, darkness crept up on us.

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One long evening in late October, we watched the landscape fade into indistinct greys, only fuzzy outlines of the bear and wolf tracks still visible as black shadows on the dark grey sand. We were left on a black beach under the black heavens above, nothing separating sand from sky. Ocean waves approached from the left, coming in as vague dark lines that suddenly broke, hissing as they crumpled into a dim white. Bright patches of ghostly sea foam blew past our feet, making it seem as though the ground itself was
blowing.

As surroundings disappeared, our minds strayed from our formless world, and our conversation leapt thousands of miles away. Is China the oldest nation? What exactly happened with the fall of Soviet communism? How do bombs work?

Even when walking in the dark is physically easy, psychologically it’s hard. The sound of the ocean was still with us, as was the feel of the sand underfoot, but much of what makes the world interesting was shrouded and hidden from our diurnal eyes.

We had entered the remote expanse of the Lost Coast, where over 600 miles of travel would be broken by only one town–Yakutat. We were hoping to make the whole distance in a month of traveling, with Yakutat our only resupply point. To meet that goal, we would have to walk more than 20 miles a day. So far on the journey, we’d only managed to average 14.5 miles in a day.

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With each day, the darkness lengthened, making long days of walking more and more difficult. With each day we walked further into darkness and cold.

At Glacier Bay, we had reached the end of the Inside Passage. Suddenly, there were no more little islands. Suddenly, we were no longer in a complicated maze of protected waterways. We looked southwest across the vast Pacific Ocean, with nothing between us and Hawaii. Nothing between us and the brunt of the weather.

It’s hard to describe the Lost Coast in anything but extremes. Giant peaks of the St. Elias Range rise almost straight from the ocean, creating some of the highest relief in the world. Flowing down from their snowy ice fields, North America’s largest glaciers spill onto the beach plain in huge, rapidly melting lobes. Storms whipped up in the Aleutians whirl down the coastline, funneled onto the narrow strip of beaches between the roiling ocean and the towering peaks.

Compared to these raw shores, the Inside Passage felt like a much smaller world, defined by islands and enclosed by the rainforest. Out here, everything was open, and the weather was the fabric of the world.

We’d prepared ourselves for the rains of the Lost Coast. Before we left Seattle, I had looked up historical statistics on weather patterns, reading about average temperatures and precipitation for every town along our route. Yakutat quickly jumped out:

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twenty inches of rain in October! That was even rainier than the rainforest we'd just left. As fall progressed, we quoted the statistic back and forth to each other, trying to prepare ourselves for the inevitable sogginess.



STORM WAVES IN SUNLIGHT — The waves peaked a day after the storm peaked, providing pleasant weather for viewing. — Get Photo (/photos/storm-waves-in-sunlight/)

But we had underestimated the Lost Coast's weather. We had underestimated its fickle changeability, its overwhelming power, the constant tension of waiting for what the next gust would bring. And we had underestimated the excitement, the intensity,

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and the wild aliveness the swirling storms could bring. It was terrible. It was all-consuming. And it was the most awesome thing in the world.

We didn’t just get rain. We got Weather.

[for more, get the book! (/Book/)]

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