

The Dead and the Dying

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Ground Truth Trekking

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A trip through the glaciers of Tutka Valley

Last winter’s meager snowfall was followed by volcanic ash, then a warm sunny spring, melting the mountains back to bare ice and rock. Even amongst high peaks, the usual snow slopes were boulders and scree, bare rock fields with barely a hint of vegetation. Some of the dime-sized patches of moss might not have seen sun in years. Some of the rock might never have seen sun at all. It was a good time to visit the dead and the dying - the glaciers not long for this world.

We were walking through brand new country. From a viewpoint on a gravel ridge, we stared across the crevassed expanse of a glacier that might melt away without ever being given a name. On our maps, the white blobs of glaciers crisscrossed our route. Once imposing obstacles, but now only withered remains.

We walked on ice. We walked past newborn lakes. We skated down slopes of sharp scree, past cliffs scratched by vanished ice.

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We were scrambling high in the passes above Tutka Bay, on a route chosen mostly for my mother Niki, who was visiting from Seattle. We were initially planning to backpack with a crowd of friends from Seldovia, but all of them had to duck out at the last minute, so we canceled our plans and schemed a new trip with Niki.



GLACIER MISTS — The view changed every minute, mist rising and falling, shadows shifting… — Get Photo (/photos/glacier-mists/)

Bushwhacking

She’s an avid kayaker, trail hiker, and international wanderer - and bushwhacking is her one complaint about Alaska. In every phone conversation, she impressed upon us how much she

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disliked bushwhacking, and how she wasn't willing to tolerate more than a tiny dose of the steep alder and devil's club morasses we'd dragged her through on previous visits.

Without trails, some bushwhacking is inevitable. On our way up from the water at Tutka Bay, we wove through the devils club and sickly-looking blueberry bushes (devastated by last winter's low snow) beneath the spruce forest. On our way down to the water at Tutka Bay, we scrambled down steep gullies of slippery grass and brush. Our chunk of the Kenai Peninsula is a lushly vegetated place. But in between, our route was high above the brush in the ice and rock - high in the land of yesterday's glaciers.



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SNOW'S EDGE — Sunset was fast approaching, but we hoped for nicer campsites and pushed on until deep dusk, walking over wriggling ice worms. This land of ice and rock provided little in the way of wind-blocks. — Get Photo (/photos/snows-edge/)

Weaving through the puzzle

“What do you mean it doesn’t look too bad?”

“What do you mean there’s probably a way?”

Minimal straightforwardness. Maximal uncertainty. I tried to explain to Niki that the fact that we had no idea if our proposed route was possible wasn’t really a problem. It just meant that for every climb, and every descent, we’d just have to wait and see. 100 foot contour lines are much too vague to show a 30 foot cliff. And if the map marked ice, we might find walkable ice. Or un-walkable crevasse-filled ice. Or walkable rock. Or un-walkable cliffs. There was no way to know, really, except to go there.

It had been a while since we’d done a trip like this. On our Journey on the Wild Coast (articles/IntoTheStormsExcerpt/), we almost never went anywhere so complicated. In the big picture of walking from A to B, it rarely makes sense. But the Tutka trip was just four days, and all we had to do was get back to where we’d started.

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GRAY ASH, WHITE SNOW — We considered camping on the shore of this small lake. I saw it from the ridge above, flat beaches inviting, but it was late and we camped on a patch of gravel on the slopes above. In the morning we came down for coffee and admired the crisp edges to blocks of snow fallen in the lake. There were bits of icy snow stranded high on the beach, and rills in the sand where water from a wave–a tiny tsunami–had washed the beach. Perhaps if we'd made the rest of the descent to camp at this shore, we would have had a rude awakening. — Get Photo (/photos/gray-ash-white-snow/)

I still remember the first time I looked out over a corner of the Harding Icefield, in the summer of 2000. In my childhood of backpacking in Washington State, glaciers were only minor decorations on the flanks of giant mountains. But here, it was reversed. I saw tiny mountains poking out of a giant sheet of ice. I was awestruck. I still am. But the glaciers spilling out over

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the edges of the icefield are shrinking quickly. Where our map marks “Southern Glacier,” we know a rocky saddle we call “Southern Glacier Pass.” We know tricky routes that would have been impossible without glacier gear a few decades ago.

Walking the edges of shrinking glaciers, I feel like an explorer. In some places, we’re probably leaving the very first human footsteps, on very new land. Sharp rocks and mud pile on the edge of patches of dead ice, slippery underfoot. Tiny spots of green speckle the edge of rock fields, where lichens and grasses are spreading.

From the alpine ridges, it’s hard to see the negatives of global climate change. We can see the shrinking ice, but not the ocean acidification, or the erosion, or the sea level rise, or the shifting weather patterns that leave both crops and native species struggling where they used to thrive. We’ve been spewing ever increasing amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution got rolling. The climate is already changing.

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SCREE GLISADE — When Katmai was younger, we wore him in a homemade wrap on mom or dad's chest while backpacking, allowing a normal pack to be carried on the back. Katmai seemed to enjoy the stuttering step of Hig's glisade. I don't know how

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much he helped with balance, but he seemed to be trying. — Get Photo (/photos/scree-glisade/)

There will be some winners. Perhaps the alpine lichens that take over the former realm of the glaciers will thrive. But most of us - plants, animals, people, civilizations - are adapted to the way things are now. Change brings pain and extinction, upheaval and hardship. Our fossil-fuel intensive society seems stuck in a hopelessly entrenched pattern. We've been doing this for a long time compared to a human life. But it's a short time compared to the life of humanity. We can't escape climate change altogether - but if we jump on it now, we might soften the blow.

A delightful encumbrance

This time we counted. About 17 pounds for a diapered and dressed baby. 1 pound for the wrap to carry him in. Another 4 pounds of extra clothes, diapers, and sleeping gear for Katmai. Altogether, it was 22 pounds of additional weight to add to the 65 pounds or so we were already wearing or carrying between the two of us (food for 4 days, water, packrafts, clothing, camping gear, etc…). And he's only getting bigger…

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GLACIER STROLL — Hig looks like he's out for a stroll on a sidewalk built of hard snow. But he's actually carrying Katmai (notice the legs) and a fairly heavy pack. — Get Photo (/photos/glacier-stroll/)

Katmai loves hiking. He doesn't bat an eye when daddy skates down a steep scree slope with him. He doesn't notice or care about the difficult terrain. He trusts us to keep the bushes out of his face, not to fall on the boulders or ice, to keep him warm and fed and dry. He rides in his snuggly spot, watching the world go by, occasionally being set down to play in it. And what an interesting world it is! Always new bushes, always new rocks (why won't mommy and daddy let me stick those little ones in my mouth?). Packrafting is more boring - I suppose he'll have to be a little older to truly see the light on that one. I wonder what impression our adventures are leaving on his little brain.

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ENTERTAINING KATMAI — Beautiful vistas are of little interest to a 6 month old, but bushes swishing by or the feel or tundra in tiny hands… those are inspirational. And if your parents are walking most of the time, that means you get to nap snuggled up as they sway along, waking only to complain a bit about an unexpected slip or leap. All that's great, but when you also have a grandma to entertain you… well that makes for a perfect hike. — Get Photo (/photos/entertaining-katmai/)

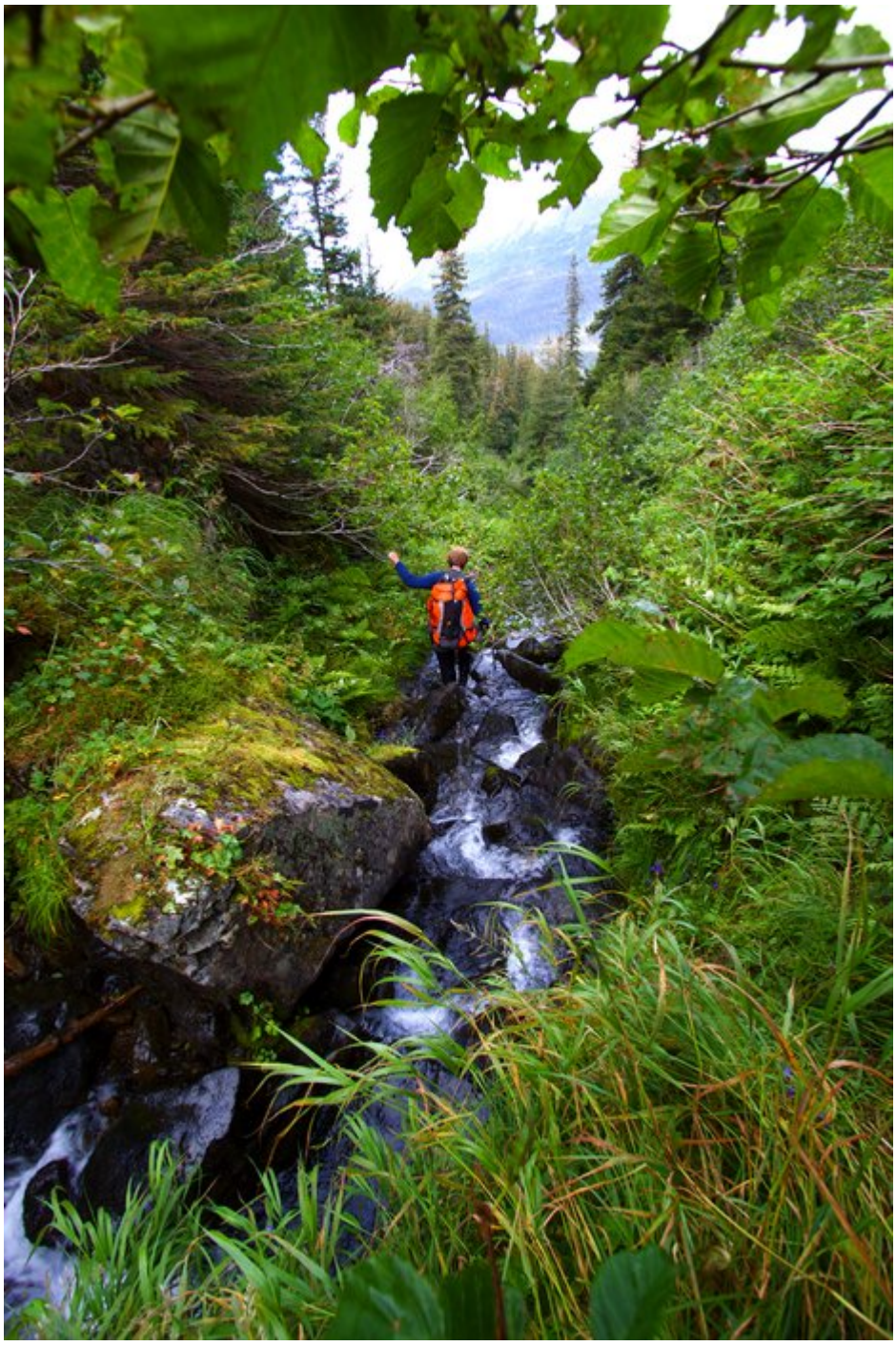
Everyone tells us it'll get harder before it gets easier. Toddlers are heavy. And not very inclined to walk long distances. But we're planning on taking him to the Northwest Arctic for a 2+ week trip next year. We've done a lot of improbable things already - I suspect we can find some way to make it work.

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DEW — On a moist and sunny morning, the whole meadow glowed - each blade of grass and strand of spider silk covered in a heavy coat of dew. We left the meadows behind to crash through the alders on the side of the steep hill, reentering meadows only hours later, long after the dew had evaporated. — Get Photo (/photos/dew/)

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DESCENDING — Despite carrying Katmai, Hig moved nimbly through the slippery grass and salmonberry thickets on the final day of the trip, descending steeply towards Tutka Bay. — Get Photo (/photos/descending/)

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