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## Disability No Barrier to this Remote Region

*Wild places can provide the inspiration to bring people together to achieve a common goal.*  
by David Sanders, Region 10

Prince William Sound is renowned as one of the finest places on earth to explore by sea kayak. Dense coastal forest interspersed with alpine meadows and hummocky muskegs provide refuge for deer and bear, eagles perch atop old growth Sitka Spruce watching patiently for salmon and the plankton rich sea abounds with marine life. Sinuous waterfalls dangle like white shoestrings over steep, grey walled fiords while raucous sea birds wheel and dive for fish.

This combination of temperate coastal rainforest and glaciated landscape is unique on the North American continent and has remained unchanged by human activities. A labyrinth of passages, coves and islands provide protection from rough seas and hide secret beaches and campsites that beckon to the adventurous explorer.

Perhaps surprising to many, this remote region is accessible to those with disabilities. Challenge Alaska, a well recognized adaptive recreation organization based in Anchorage, and the Chugach National Forest have partnered since 2004 to bring a group of intrepid Alaskan's here for one week each summer to explore this rugged, pristine environment.

Brandon Harker and Lauren Williams scanned the far shore from our campsite on Derickson Spit in Prince William Sound. "Boy, it seems like there's a pretty good current coming out of that lagoon and those bergs are really moving fast eh?" Harker said suddenly.

Although not familiar with coastal Alaska, years of canoeing in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (MN) has given Harker respect for the power of moving water. Harker and Williams are summer interns working for *Challenge Alaska*.

Leah Stiebing and Jeff Dick, *Challenge Alaska's* two certified therapeutic recreation specialists and Heather Hall, the Chugach National Forests zone archeologist, agreed with Brandon's assessment and an instructive discussion ensued about how we were going to tackle the tricky entrance into the lagoon.

The current switches direction every six hours with the tide creating river-like conditions. This tidal anomaly is called a "skookumchuck" by northwest Indians and it means "strong water" for good reason since some extremely powerful skookumchucks can produce dangerous rapids and even swirling vortexes that have capsized boats.

This is the type of knowledge that is needed to safely travel by kayak in coastal Alaska and participants on the *Challenge Alaska* sea kayak trip would soon be gaining this knowledge by practical application in a real world setting. In other words, we were going to blast into that lagoon riding a surging mass of sea water loaded with icebergs as if we were just spilled out of a giant glacial margarita.



**Success is always a team effort in Prince William Sound and the Challenge group showed that by using cooperation and ingenuity any obstacle can be overcome.** ENLARGE



**Although the terrain is challenging, Nick Grosskurth and other trip participants, with assistance, conquered the elements and had a great adventure.** ENLARGE

After consulting the tide tables and comparing the conditions in the strait to what the numbers on the tide chart showed, we formulated our plan. We would wait until just after slack low tide, the time where the tide has reached its lowest point and where all water movement has ceased, and enter the lagoon right as the flood tide started to refill the lagoon. Tidal power peaks at mid-flow so entering at the beginning of the flood tide would provide a steady push into the lagoon while avoiding potentially dangerous rapids.

Our participant group spanned a wide range of ages and abilities. Some were trip veterans and were familiar with much of what this trip entailed while others were brand new to this trip and to sea kayaking in general. Having a combination of experience levels within the participant group is beneficial as it creates an environment for mentoring that allows previous trip participants to assist newer ones.

One of our new participants, Skyler Twitchell has limited mobility below the neck due to a recent accident. Skyler is 23 and is an enthusiastic outdoorsman. He loves Alaska because, as he says, it's such a vast area where you can seek out and find beautiful places to ski, raft and climb in an area that most people have

only read about. This kayaking trip appealed to Skyler as a way to continue to pursue his love of the outdoors while accommodating the challenges posed by his injury.

In Skyler's words "strapping a quad into a kayak" was the most formidable challenge of the trip and paddling among the massive chunks of ice was one of the many highlights of the trip for him. Skyler's tip to future participants is to "relax because *Challenge Alaska* has it under control".

Ally Beischer, our youngest participant, is 17 and moved to Alaska from Canada when she was two years old. She loves Alaska's beautiful scenery but doesn't much care for it when it gets really cold. Ally has cerebral palsy and uses crutches for walking assistance so traversing rocky beaches was a challenge. She was able to overcome this obstacle by making sure she had someone's arm to hold onto as she made her way down to the water. The highlight of the trip for her was kayaking because she had never paddled in Alaska before. Her advice is to be prepared for all types of weather, particularly cold winds and rain which are commonplace in Prince William Sound even in the summer.

Nick Grosskurth is 25 years old, has lived in Alaska for nine years and is a trip veteran. Nick is a paraplegic and likes to seek out adrenaline sports like hockey, skiing, basketball and kayaking. The most challenging part of the kayak trip for Nick was pushing through the fatigue of paddling all day long even after you feel like you've "hit the wall". Sitting on a beach eating lunch in the sunshine with a glacial view was a highlight of the trip for him. Nick's tip to future participants is to be prepared for Alaska's unpredictable and sometimes extreme weather.

Dan Derosa is from the military's Wounded Warrior program and served in Iraq where he suffered a traumatic brain injury.

He is an extremely avid outdoorsman and relishes the excitement of high octane outdoor pursuits as well as the solitude and peace of wild places. He is super outgoing and really enjoys interacting with new people. Dan says that a potential trip participant should go with an open mind and be ready to have tons of fun and as with any trip in Alaska bring appropriate clothing to deal with any and all types of weather.

This was Stephanie Duke's third trip, making her the most experienced participant in the group. As a single leg amputee she uses a combination of crutches and a wheelchair for mobility depending on the circumstances. Stephanie has become very good at navigating the rocky coastline with her crutches and is a hard charger in the kayak, often propelling her boat to the front of the pack.

Charlie is a second year veteran of the trip and is visually impaired. He's an experienced paddler and skilled flutist which, if cajoled enough, he'll play in the evenings. One of the challenges for Charlie was getting around the campsite on his own to access his tent, the group gathering area and toilet facilities.

We were able to accommodate the various needs for participants in several ways. Astroturf was laid down to smooth over the cobbled beach so wheelchairs could access the primary camp areas.

Someone who is visually impaired can easily feel the turf under their feet or with a cane. Differently textured material can be placed at the entrance of tents or other areas which allows for identification. The backcountry toilet system is supported by large action packers on each side to add stability and a solid transferring surface.

Specialized tents that have oversized vestibules allow for wheelchairs to roll under the vestibule for weather protection while preparing to exit or enter the tent and are also useful for those who need a little more time and room to get dressed or undressed. Raised cots for sleeping in the tents allow for an effective transfer from wheel chairs and are easier to get on and off for those with other mobility limitations.

Adapting sea kayaking for inclusive recreation is relatively easy and primarily relies on using available materials creatively to meet whatever need arises. The key component to making kayaking fun and safe is using double kayaks and a partner system. This allows for flexibility, accounting for a wide range of abilities.

Double kayaks utilize a rudder system for steering that is controlled by foot pedals in the stern cockpit of the kayak. The stern paddler tends to be the most experienced as they are responsible for steering. Sometimes the most experienced kayaker may not be able to use their feet to steer so in this case we may have an experienced paddler in the front where they can see well and instruct the less experienced paddler with regard to navigation.

Use of a triple cockpit kayak allows for even wider flexibility. The center cockpit is the best place for someone who has limited steering or paddling ability and is great for transporting support equipment such as a wheel chair, cots or folding camp chairs.

Derickson Spit is a mile long terminal moraine, (ridges of unconsolidated debris deposited at the snout or end of the glacier) made of gravel bulldozed into place by the leading edge of the Nellie Juan Glacier. Due to glacial recession, the moraine is now exposed providing an excellent place to camp on durable gravel surfaces. The spit however is not an easy beach to land and launch a kayak.

Our immediate challenge was to get Skyler down to the shore and secured in the customized middle hatch of our big triple kayak. With some adaptive augmentation of the middle cockpit using a combination of a therma-rest lounger, closed cell foam pads and duct tape we managed to create a supportive base from which he could paddle.

We were able to transport the entire triple kayak with Skyler aboard over 50 yards of slippery, sea weed covered boulders down to the water which is a testament to what can be accomplished with a unified effort by a determined group.

After Skyler was comfortably settled in the kayak with his paddling partners we turned our attention to assisting our other participants. As it turned out little assistance was needed.



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During the course of getting Skyler settled, Stephanie, Nick, Charlie and Ally had managed to make it down to the kayaks over the difficult terrain on their own. While being helped into the kayaks they were providing encouragement and advice to some of trip assistants who had never kayaked previously.

Andrew Swanston from the Wounded Warriors program was a great help as was Sam, Skyler's loyal best friend and personal care attendant. Kate Walker, our district ranger and great supporter of expanding the Chugach National Forest's accessibility to diverse populations was right there in the mix getting everyone squared away.

After a few adjustments and a final safety review the group cast off heading for the lagoon entrance. Traveling in a tight group with lead and sweep boats in place we rounded the point and hung just outside the entrance in an eddy. A group of harlequin ducks, spooked by our sudden appearance, scuttled away in a flurry of flapping wings. At the entrance we could see that low slack tide had just begun to shift and, as planned, the water was noticeably moving into the lagoon rather than out as it had been two hours earlier. This was exactly the condition we were waiting for, not too fast and not too slow, just enough for a good, steady push.

After a final check to see that everyone was ready for the ride into the lagoon we stroked ahead and immediately felt the surging power of moving water at our sterns. The group stayed in formation behind the leader as instructed, using rudder steering and paddle strokes to navigate past a large boulder, nearly invisible in the coffee with cream colored water. Ice bergs rode the current into the lagoon as well but we gave them a wide berth knowing that 80 or so percent of their bulk lurked beneath the surface and that they could roll over unexpectedly.

The channel steadily widened and the current slowed as we entered the broad lagoon. A shifting maze of icebergs ranging in size from something you could put in a drink to something that would easily crush a motor home was our next navigation challenge. We made our way through the ice listening to the crackle and pop of untold millions of air bubbles escaping from their 10,000 year confinement.

Seals surfaced on all sides of our group, curiously inspecting us with their dark, bulging eyes sometimes slapping the water with their hind flippers in alarm as they dove beneath the surface. Spotting a beach and an opportunity to rest our sore



The Challenge team celebrates after moving the big triple kayak with Skyler aboard over 50 yards of slippery boulders down to the waters edge.

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muscles and eat lunch, we picked a route through the bergs and landed.

The beach provided a first rate view of the sweeping, icy flanks and deep blue face of the Nellie Juan Glacier. A low rumble, so deep that you could feel it in your chest, was occasionally audible and we realized it was emanating from the glacier. The austere landscape we now gazed upon was created by the extraordinary force of an unimaginable volume of ice pulverizing solid rock into dust over untold eons of time. There is nothing like gazing upon the process of creation itself to cause one to feel rather insignificant and humbled.

After refueling our internal engines with food and warm drinks we set off again. We paddled steadily, pulling against the gathering force of wind issuing from the glaciers icy lungs until at last the towering ice edge came into view. A timeless battle pitting the forces of ice, rock and sea against one another had twisted the face of the glacier into a tortured visage indicative of extreme pressure and occasional cataclysmic calving events. Time tends to distort and bend like the ice itself when viewing something as ancient and massive as a glacier, so who knows how long we actually sat there in our kayaks taking in the view.

Some of our more adrenaline motivated participants like Nick and Dan were secretly hoping for a huge chunk of ice to collapse into the sea which would send a large pressure wave toward us while others were perfectly happy to see nothing of the sort. In the end no massive calving event took place while we were there but the glacier entertained us with a concert of sub-sonic booms and deep rumbles.

Our ticket to getting out of the lagoon was to catch the outgoing tide at just the right time and if we missed our window we would be stuck inside the lagoon for another 6 hours. The tide, as planned was just beginning to pour back out into Port Nellie Juan so we reluctantly turned away from the glacier to make our way back to camp. Approaching the channel once again, we felt the tractor beam of the current sucking us in. Soon we were helpless against its pull and could only steer our kayaks as we were shot out of the lagoon riding the tide back toward camp.

One last surprise awaited us however. A black bear with sleek, shiny fur, little ears, barrel shaped head and big belly was spotted. We approached quietly for a view. The animal was characteristically engrossed with foraging for fresh grass shoots and since the winds were blowing lightly from the bear toward us, the bear did not notice our approach. Soon we were within a stone's throw and yet safe in our kayaks floating in deep water. After a while the bear caught a whiff of our scent and stared in our direction, testing the air with its sensitive nose. Seemingly unconcerned, it shuffled off into the uplands. Feeling we had just topped off the day in the best way possible we headed for camp.



(l to r) Ally Beischer, Leah Stiebing and Heather Hall are happy to be done with breakfast and are looking forward to the day's paddle into the lagoon and to the Nellie Juan Glacier.

Clambering out of the cramped kayaks back at camp we all felt mildly damp and chilled. A hot dinner, warm fire and a cozy sleeping bag were sounding pretty good. After dinner the group gathered around the campfire and most people caught a second wind.

Eyes glistened and wind kissed faces crinkled in laughter as the adventures of the day were retold in the comforting glow of the fire. Over the last four days we had become a tribe of sorts. Far away from civilization we had learned to rely on one another to overcome challenges that would have proven insurmountable as an individual but were manageable as a team.



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Wild places can provide the inspiration to bring people together to achieve a common goal. They can help to increase confidence and self reliance, can humble and inspire and offer people the opportunity to seek personal growth within themselves and with others.

*Challenge Alaska* participants understand that the nature of wild places is such that all people can't expect to access all places. But this trip demonstrated that where the desire is strong enough and where partnerships are forged with a guiding vision, many wild places can be visited by people with disabilities. We are truly fortunate to have such an accessible wilderness opportunity right in our own back yard in Prince William Sound and are looking forward to many more adventures to come.

**Author's note:**

***In 2009 the Glacier Ranger District secured a matching diversity grant of nearly \$10,000 to fund the 2010 kayak trip and an intern for Challenge Alaska whose primary focus will be to assist Challenge staff with trips that take place on the Chugach National Forest. This grant will improve access to the second largest National Forest in the country for Alaskans with disabilities. As a result of this grant several new trips highlighting special areas of interest on each of the three forest districts on the Chugach National Forest will be offered by Challenge Alaska. Forest Service staff will provide support for these trips, enhancing the educational component and assisting with transportation as needed. Participants on these trips will be introduced to the natural history of the forest, will learn outdoor recreation skills and techniques, and will be given a chance to explore potential employment opportunities with the Chugach National Forest.***



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