

Rising to the Challenge:

Fifth Annual Inclusive Sea Kayaking Adventure in Prince William Sound

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Prince William Sound is renowned as one of the finest places on earth to explore by sea kayak. Its wilderness labyrinth of densely forested islands and passages are ensconced within steep walled fiords laced with sinuous waterfalls dangling like white shoestrings over the precipitous heights. The myriad of passages, coves and islands hide secret beaches and campsites providing a wilderness experience unique to North America. Perhaps surprising to many, this rugged landscape is accessible to those with disabilities.



Nick, a trip veteran, negotiates technical terrain to reach his kayak.

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 adventurers with physical disabilities into this maritime wilderness each summer for four days of camping, kayaking, skill building and camaraderie.

As the trip began this summer, Brandon Harker and Lauren Williams, both Challenge Alaska interns, took a long look at the line of bergs marching out of the glacial lagoon. Brandon said in his distinctive Minnesota accent, "Boy, it seems like there's a pretty good current coming out of that lagoon and those bergs are really moving fast eh?" Although not familiar with coastal Alaska, years of canoeing has taught Brandon to respect the power of moving water. Challenge Alaska's certified therapeutic recreation specialists Leah Stiebing and Jeff Dick as well as Heather Hall, the Chugach National Forest's zone archaeologist, agreed. 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 and enter the lagoon right as the flooding tide started to refill it. This would allow us to enter with the current at flow rate that would be manageable and safe.

Our immediate challenge was to get Skyler, who was recently paralyzed, down to the shore and secured in the customized middle hatch of our big triple kayak which is brought along especially for this purpose. Skyler has limited mobility below the neck but with some adaptive augmentation of the middle cockpit using a combination of Therm-a-rest® loungers, closed cell foam pads, duct tape, zip ties, wire and rope, all of which are essential to any true "Alaskans" gear kit, we managed to create a comfortable, supportive base from which he could paddle. After an inspirational group effort, we were able to transport the entire triple kayak with Skyler aboard over 50 yards of slippery, cantaloupe-sized rocks and into the water. After Skyler was comfortably settled in the kayak, we turned our attention to assisting our other participants which included Stephanie, a single leg amputee, Nick a paraplegic, Ally who has cerebral palsy, and Charlie who is blind. As it turned out, little assistance was needed. During the course of getting Skyler settled, Stephanie, Nick and Charlie, all trip veterans, along with Ally, had managed to make it down to the kayaks over the difficult terrain on their own. Andrew and Dan from the military's Wounded Warrior Program were a great help, as was Sam, Skyler's loyal best friend and personal care attendant and Kate Walker, our district ranger new to Alaska from Montana.



Paddlers pull their kayaks together for a quick break.



Author Dave Sanders

The group cast off heading for the lagoon entrance. Traveling in a tight group, we rounded the point and hung just outside the straits entrance in an eddy. We entered the narrow, river-like channel and immediately felt the surging power of moving water at our sterns. Icebergs joined us 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 current faded and the lagoon opened up before us, presenting a maze of icebergs ranging in size from something you could put in a drink to something that would easily crush a motor home. Seals surfaced on all sides of our group, inspecting us with their dark, bulging eyes sometimes slapping the water with their hind flippers in alarm as they dove beneath the surface. 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.

We paddled steadily, pulling against the gathering force of wind issuing from the glacier's icy lungs. The wind seemed to indicate to us that the glacier did not intend to bestow upon us a view without a price. Finally, we made it to a point where its icy creases, broken ridges, gaping holes and twisted formations indicated a visage distorted by extreme pressure; the result of a timeless battle between the forces of ice, rock and sea. Time tends to distort when viewing some-



The Challenge team works together to get Skyler and his kayak down to the water.

thing as ancient and massive as a glacier, so who knows how long we actually sat there in our kayaks staring at it. Our ticket to getting out of the lagoon was to catch the outgoing tide. If we missed our window to leave, we would be stuck inside the lagoon for another six hours, so we reluctantly turned and headed back toward camp.

Around the campfire that night there was an aura of accomplishment and contentment among the group. Eyes glistened and wind-kissed faces crinkled in laughter as the adventures of the day were retold in the warm glow of a wilderness campfire. Over the last four days we had become a tribe, of sorts. 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. Wilderness can provide the inspiration to bring people together to achieve a common goal. It can help to increase confidence and self reliance, it can humble and inspire, and it offers people the opportunity to seek personal growth in its wild expanse. The Challenge Alaska sea kayak adventure accomplishes all of this and more. It is understood by the Challenge participants that the nature of wild places is such that all people can't expect to access all places. This trip however demonstrates that where the opportunity presents itself and where the desire is strong enough these special places can be visited by people with disabilities. We are truly fortunate to have such an accessible Wilderness opportunity here on the Chugach National Forest.



Team work gets the job done.