

# Sucia Island: Mishap off Matia

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On the weekend of August 25-27, Kathy and Les Rounds, Greg Merrill and I had a great trip to Sucia Island. The trip did turn out to be a bit more exciting than we anticipated. The Lake Padden potluck and skill-builder sounded like fun but we each could take Friday off and we were looking forward to a long paddle to an interesting destination. As it turned out, we had a little mishap off Matia Island during our return on Sunday that turned into a different kind of skill-builder. None of us had been to Sucia before and we decided to depart from Gooseberry Point at the southern tip of Lummi Peninsula. The shorter paddling route to Sucia is from the north shore of Orcas Island but we wanted to avoid the ferries and were eager for the challenge of the long exposed crossing that would be required by the departure from Gooseberry Point.

Our 9:30 am departure was timed to take advantage of the push we would get from the combination of the flooding current and light southwest winds. We paddled around the north end of Lummi Island and then hugged the shore to paddle south along the western shore of the island for a mile or so. We then angled out into the current heading to the southwest. This enable us to get across the shipping channel as quickly as possible and put us into a position so that the current would sweep us towards Matia and Sucia Islands rather than northward into the open Straits of Georgia. As soon as we got clear of the shipping lane, we turned north and rode the current towards Matia. It was a beautiful day and, with the push from the wind and current, we made the looping six-mile crossing from Lummi to Matia in about an hour and a half. At tiny Puffin Island, off the east end of Matia, the current piled up to create some modest waves and tide rips. We spent a bit of time frolicking in these waves and cutting back and forth across the eddylines as we were swept around the north side of Matia. We ducked into Rolfe Cove at the NW end of Matia for lunch. After lunch we rode the last of the flood the last two miles to Ewing Cove on the NE corner of Sucia. Ewing Cove is a great campsite for kayakers. It is away from most of the sailboats and powerboats and it has a great beach. We set up our camp and took a late afternoon paddle around Echo Bay.

The shoreline of Sucia and the smaller islands around it include lots of eroded sandstone formations like those between Fairhaven and Larrabee State Park. We spent Saturday circumnavigating Sucia, stopping frequently to explore alternative camping spots around the island. After checking each of them out, our consensus was that Ewing Cove offers the best combination of seclusion, views and protection from the weather. Fossil Bay was packed with boats and it includes two substantial docks. It has the feel of a busy state park on the mainland. There is usually water available here but the well recently went dry as it frequently does late in the summer. Water is not available anywhere else on the island. Fortunately, we brought plenty with us. We could easily have spent several more days exploring Sucia and nearby Patos Island.

We planned on an early departure Sunday morning to take advantage of the ebbing current and to get us back to Gooseberry Point before a strong flooding current started up Hale Passage early in the afternoon. We beat the 10:00 rule and managed to get off the beach just after 8:00. We launched at very near the maximum ebb current of just over two knots. Although the westerly winds were very light, we knew that the strong current could generate rough water and strong tide rips. We discussed the importance of sticking close together and we reviewed a few rescue techniques we might use if one of us got into trouble. We planned a brief stop at Rolfe Cove on Matia and we knew that the current might sweep us past the entrance to the cove if we didn't line up our approach carefully. As we approached the west end of Matia, the waves got very large very fast. The confused mass of two to three foot waves, combined

with the strong current made for very challenging conditions. The current was sweeping us past the entrance to Rolfe Cove. Les and I were slightly out in front and we realized we would not make Rolfe Cove but we managed to duck into the next cove just to the south. We were out of the strong current but the waves were still quite large. As soon as I got out of the current, I turned to check on Kathy and Greg. I saw Kathy about 20 yards away making her way towards us but Greg was nowhere in sight. A moment later, I heard a whistle, and a moment after that, I caught a brief glimpse of Greg and his overturned boat as they crested a wave about 50 yards away. Greg had done a wet exit and pulled himself up onto his overturned boat. Les, Kathy and I turned and sprinted toward Greg. Kathy got there first and was already setting up for a T-rescue when I arrived. I pulled up alongside Kathy to stabilize her boat and help hoist the bow of Greg's boat across our boats. Greg pushed down on the stern to help and we quickly emptied the water from his boat and stabilized it as he pulled himself up onto his stern deck and back into the cockpit. By the time he was back in his boat, the current had swept us around the south end of the island into calm water. Greg had been in the water for about 4 or 5 minutes. He was cold, but OK. We paddled to a beach at the east end of the island and Greg changed into dry cloths. After he warmed up, we made our way back to Gooseberry Point with no further excitement.

Our mishap began when Greg was knocked over by an unexpected wave that hit him broadside. He was only about 10 yards behind Kathy when he was knocked over. Greg practices his rolls quite a bit and he was able to roll back up successfully. Greg had never practiced rolling a loaded boat but he pulled off the first roll with no trouble. Unfortunately, he was up for only 5 seconds or so before he was knocked over a second time. Greg acknowledges that his mistake here was pausing to consider his next course of action as opposed to sculling for support. He tried another roll but missed it. He then decided to wet exit and wait for help rather than exhaust himself trying more rolls. He had a whistle attached to the outside of his PFD. This meant he could signal us quickly without having to dig through a pocket. In the spot where he went over, the waves were big enough that with his boat overturned and him in the water, we could see him only when he was on the crest of a wave. The whistle got our attention and got us looking in the right direction even before he came into view. Greg did not have a wetsuit or drysuit on. He was wearing polypro but this provided no thermal protection in the water. As he waited for us to get to him, he pulled his upper body out of the water on top of his overturned boat. When Kathy got to him, he got back in the water and was able to help position the boat to empty water from the cockpit. He then had no trouble hoisting himself back up onto his boat with us stabilizing it. We did have a little trouble getting his boat emptied, even with Greg, Kathy and myself working together. Greg had a loaded deck bag on his boat and this made it difficult to slide his overturned boat up onto the deck of our boat. We had to turn his boat up on one gunwale so we could slide it up onto our boats far enough to empty the cockpit. With Kathy and I working together, we were able to do it but with only one of us, it would have taken much more time. Earlier in the spring, Greg had wondered if this deck bag might interfere with a T-rescue. Because of this concern, he had practiced T-rescues with this deck bag in place at the Thetis symposium and had had no problems. At that time, he was practicing with an empty boat. On this day, with his boat loaded, the deck bag was a problem. Based on this experience, I am inclined to feel that deck bags are a bad idea and that all deck gear should be kept to an absolute minimum.

Our trip to Sucia ended up being just a bit more exciting than we planned, but it could have ended badly. All in all, I feel we were well prepared for the trip and we did a number of things right. We also made some very bad decisions that could have had disastrous consequences. Each of us has been paddling for two or three years and we had each experienced conditions like these on a number of occasions. Each of us benefited from attending the kayak symposium at Thetis this year and we have practiced rescues quite a bit in the pool and in open water. We had never practiced rescues under conditions that were as rough as those off Matia and none of us had ever done a "real" rescue before. The four of us have paddled together many times and we have even practiced rescues together. We knew we were launching into conditions that would be challenging but we had reviewed rescue techniques the night before around the fire and we had discussed the importance of keeping close together when we launched.

Les, Kathy and myself had wetsuits on but Greg had elected not to put his on when we left the beach in the morning. It was shaping up to be a nice day and he didn't want to overheat. I have been guilty of making this same decision on other occasions. On this day, Les, Kathy and I chose to put our wetsuits on and we should have encouraged Greg to put his on as well. If we had encouraged him to put his wetsuit on, I know he would have happily done so. Greg was the one to be knocked over but the same thing could have easily happened to any of us. If two or three, or all four of us had ended up in the water, it would have taken far longer to get everyone back into their boats and Greg's lack of a wetsuit could have been far more serious than it was. When we landed on Matia after the rescue, Greg put on dry cloths, including his drysuit, for the paddle back to Gooseberry Point. Les and I also put on paddle jackets in addition to the wetsuits and polypro we were wearing. Kathy had already been wearing a wetsuit and paddle jacket.

The flood that we rode on Friday from Lummi to Matia was just under one knot. The waves and tide rips generated by this current were modest and we had fun playing in these conditions. When we launched on Sunday, we should have realized that the forces generated by a current of nearly 2.5 knots are much, much more than twice those of a one-knot current. When the unstoppable force of this current hit the immovable object that is Matia Island, the water boiled up to create some very dangerous conditions. We should have anticipated this but the mild conditions we encountered on the other end of the island on Friday made us complacent. As we approached Matia on Sunday, we should have recognized the conditions for what they were and we should have skirted around the island to the north or south rather than try to fight through this patch of rough water to make it into Rolfe Cove. As we approached the island, Les and I were slightly out in front and he expressed some doubts about making it into Rolfe Cove. I felt we could make it and I encouraged him to charge ahead. We should have reevaluated the situation as a group and if anyone had reservations, we should have turned away.

In spite of our mishap, we had a great weekend and we look forward to getting out again soon. Each of us has learned a great deal through our interactions with WAKE members and we hope that others will avoid the mistakes that we made on our recent trip. Dressing for immersion, practicing rescue techniques, recognizing the threats posed by strong currents and listening carefully to the concerns of others in your paddling group are essential for a safe and enjoyable kayak trip. We will certainly pay more careful attention to each of these issues the next time we go out. Finally, Sucia Island is a great destination for kayakers but it is not a destination that is appropriate for beginners.