

## CROSSING NAHWITTI BAR

*Navigating one of B.C.'s most treacherous passages*

*by June Cameron*

Some years ago, Diane Fast and I were stuck in Bull Harbour at the north end of Vancouver Island waiting for a north-westerly gale to subside so we could cross Nahwitti Bar and continue our planned circumnavigation of Vancouver Island. Bored with sitting on my little C&C sailboat, we rowed over for an evening visit to a commercial fisherman anchored nearby. In the course of the conversation I muttered something about how the preferred crossing time for the Nahwitti Bar was getting later each day. We had hoped to be able to cross the bar in the early morning at slack tide. This would get us to Cape Scott before the afternoon north-westerlies got into full swing. "Lady," he asked, "why would you even want to cross the bar?" Why, indeed? The huge breakers we had seen there a few days earlier had us wondering the same thing. "Why cross it when you can go around the end?" he added.

Soon we were sitting on his back deck with a beer in one hand and Chart #3598 spread out on the hatch between us. Sure enough, along the Vancouver Island shore we could see a clear passage at depths averaging 4 fathoms (7-8 metres). The fisherman explained how the swells and currents across the bar are diminished by the shallows of the Tatnall Reefs, making the route even more attractive. This whole area is one huge sandpile, sculpted by years of currents and storms. Since the reef is well charted and does not consist of hidden rocks--just sand and massive kelp beds—our sounder would give us plenty of guidance through the passageway.

We started out next morning in gentle winds and deliberately took the inshore route. In retrospect, we could have crossed the bar because the weather had calmed a bit and the breakers were minimal, but we wanted to try the fisherman's suggestion. Of course, by the time we reached Cape Scott the winds were in a fighting mood but it was then slack water so there was no added turbulence to slow us down.

A few years later I decided to write about the Nahwitti Bar bypass route for *Pacific Yachting* so I traveled north alone. I talked to both fishermen and coast guard personnel. At Port Hardy, I heard horror stories of bar crossings that left me round-eyed. Jack, of the big troller, *Possibility*, said a big swell dropped him so hard that he hit bottom with a jar that knocked his batteries loose. The skipper of the fishboat *Near East* said at one point he couldn't even see the top of his brother's mast as the two boats plunged through the breakers.

During a flood tide, currents sweep around the top end of Vancouver Island and down the straits and inlets for about six hours. A portion of that water is squeezed between Hope Island and the Vancouver Island shore. During a large tide, currents can reach five or six knots. Depth is also a significant factor. Over a very short distance, the depth over Nahwitti Bar drops from 7 fathoms to 48 fathoms on the Goletas Channel side. When

you add strong summer north-westerlies that run from mid-morning to suppertime, the breakers can get huge.

When the tide is running out---that is, to the west--opposing a vigorous wind, the bar becomes impassable. The same phenomenon occurs when an in-coming current faces a strong southeast wind.

I talked to Steve Martinella on Quadra Island who regularly runs his fifty-foot longline troller *Triple M* to the Charlottes. He said that he always checks the current tables. If the wind and current are both going in the same direction, he goes over the bar. If not, he simply heads along the east side of Hope Island down past Scarlett Point Light but he is not messing around cruising for pleasure, he is in a hurry. He said that in a big swell he would be very reluctant to go near the Vancouver Island shore. Who would? But all of the other fisherfolk I interviewed who operate smaller boats than Steve said they always used the inshore route if they needed to by-pass the bar.

So here's what I you can do. As a coastguard man once suggested, head out of Bull Harbour and pause near Jones Point where you can inspect the bar with your binoculars. If it appears calm, go for it. If you are in doubt, get a bearing on the Vancouver Island shore at 196° magnetic and cut right across the passage until your sounder indicates 5 or 6 fathoms of water. I use CHS chart #3275, which shows the preferred route in larger detail than #3598. If the depth drops to less than 3 fathoms change course offshore until you find deeper water. If you can navigate along the shore of Spanish Banks you can do this.

This route is only one mile longer than risking the bar, and the current here is minimal. If you're heading to Cape Scott try to time your passage to miss the afternoon westerlies off the cape. Keep in mind, though, if you are crossing from Bull Harbour when the current is running you will be pushed east or west. So take a transit on your initial sighting, choosing a landmark on the Vancouver Island shore and a distant mountain peak directly behind it. Then crab your way across the passage keeping these landmarks lined up so that you stay on your planned course. Or watch your electronics--but I prefer to navigate heads-up.

If you're then heading to Cape Scott, once you have reached Sutil Point you can either keep on going, head back to Bull Harbour or you can search the bottom for a clean patch in which to drop the hook in the shelter of the point. Fishermen typically hide out here to wait for better weather. Of course, they have stabilizers to calm the swell. This is where the *Morekelp* anchored when Edith Iglauer went ashore and walked across the isthmus to inspect some petroglyphs on the outer beach.

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