

Tide Change

At low tide the mudflats stretched westward for miles from our view atop the boulders at Beluga Point along the Seward Highway a few miles south of Anchorage. Intrigued by the name, we'd driven past Beluga Point several times over the last week but now we had time to investigate before catching our red-eye flight back to South Carolina. Named for the white whales that frequent this area, we came with hopes of spotting some of these magnificent creatures roaming in pods of 20-30 individuals spouting water when they surface. When we arrived in mid-afternoon, the tide was going out. Currents roiled westward in narrow braided channels as water ebbed toward Cook Inlet.

"You here for the bore tide?" asked a man in a red shirt from Wyoming as John and I settled into an inviting spot with our binoculars.

"Maybe," I said. "What is the bore tide?" I asked, hoping he could explain the meaning of this strange term.

"They say that under certain conditions when the tide comes in, it arrives as a wall of water six to ten feet high, big enough that surfers can ride it. We don't know for sure but we heard the bore tide will pass by Beluga Point sometime between five and six o'clock today."

"Wow! That could be quite an event! Thanks for the heads up." I checked my watch. It was about 4:30.

John read about the bore tide from his iPhone. According to one source, the bore tide is generated by unique conditions involving lunar cycles and the configuration of the waterways surrounded by mountains on all sides that connect this arm of Cook's Inlet to the Pacific Ocean. The article went on to say that unsuspecting people had been swept away by the bore tide here in Turnagain Arm where the difference between the low tide mark and high tide reaches 38 feet. Times for bore tides were listed for several days the previous week and for later in July but not for today. We pondered this mystery from the safety of our sunny windblown perch far above the high tide mark as indicated by the life-forms clinging to the rocky surfaces below.

People meandered about on the mudflats with cameras. One dark-haired girl strolled to a large rock emerging a foot or so from the mudflat. She struck poses

and took pictures with her cell phone, oblivious to the turn of the tide. In the few minutes she lingered in selfie-absorption, the rising tide encircled her stone studio. We watched as she shed her sandals and tossed her cell phone to someone before wading to safety.

A half dozen gregarious teenagers descended to the mudflat. Several boys vigorously jiggled their feet and legs at the water's edge, intentionally burying themselves to mid-calf level. Were they aware of the magnitude of the eminent tide change? John and I watched with growing concern as the tide quickly rose until at last their friends extracted them from their muddy shackles and they scampered away, laughing, shoving and tussling the way teenagers often do.

One of the big boulders rose about six feet above the mudflat. If the bore tide comes, that boulder would be covered instantly. Instead it took a few seconds shy of ten minutes for it to be completely submerged. Glancing to the west, vast expanses of mudflat were already completely inundated. Currents now swirled eastward where the braided channels had trickled westward. A piece of driftwood surged past at a pace faster than the most powerful swimmer could muster. It circled briefly in an eddy before disappearing in a swirl of waves.

We never saw a wall of water that could have been the bore tide, but we did witness the irrepressible force of nature as the water rose at an alarming pace. No human intervention could stop or even slow it. It reminded me of the events that occurred exactly six months ago at 5:47 pm on December 18th when Tia was irrevocably swept away from us to another shore by forces of nature growing in her brain that that neurosurgeons and neurologists were powerless to oppose.

To what extent were her physicians in those last days like me and John from our high vantage at Beluga Point, aware that a brain cancer was surging and there would be no escape?

I had often wondered where I'd be on the six month anniversary of her transition. How privileged I am to have been at this special place at this special hour when a marvelous natural cycle commemorated the passing of my dearly beloved.

GR Davis Jr
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