

5/26/2017: Ocean Avenue Salem to Tinkers Island. 10:30am-3:40pm. Bob L in Pintail, alone. LT 6:03am, -2.0ft. HT 12:19pm, 11ft. Tidal range, 13ft. near springs. Day after a storm, rain, visibility about a nautical mile, 15-20kts N and NW winds, 3-4 foot waves, larger primary swell off M'head Neck. 60F air, 45F water. The synoptic charts for the day are shown below. They show the low pressure system moving across the region and then off-shore. This was the source of both the storm, and subsequent wind and swell. This trip was to test run my new acquisition, an old Valley Pintail. I was looking for a plastic rock/surf boat; and this fiberglass kayak appeared on Craigslist for a reasonable price (I only barely violated my rule of not paying more than \$1K for a boat). I'm too tall for the pegs and just placed a foam pad against the bulkhead. The fit is pretty good, and I had no issues during an hours long paddle. However, because of the storm and conditions, I loaded it for winter-time paddling so I think it was over-weighted. This was another test, but it confounded the goals of testing for rock gardening and surfing.

I launched at 10:30am from Ocean Ave Salem, and noticed that the boat was weather cocking in the quartering north winds. There was also significant 2-3 foot wind driven chop in certain areas of Salem Harbor – particularly between M'head tip and Salem. The solution was a little more rapid cadence and combining the forward stroke with stern draws to counter the weather cocking upwind direction. I didn't bother putting the skeg down. With all this added effort, the arrival to Naugus Head at 10:55pm was only slightly slower than the typical run there. In order to test the maneuverability of the Pintail, I did some full 360° circles in the wind. It felt easier to turn the Pintail than the Explorer, especially downwind turns. The dominant wave type on M'head tip was wind driven chop from the Beverly coast. There was not much power in these waves, and yet there was some challenge in taking the usual Fluent Point passage. I went through a few times in turbulent water, but not much of a push. I then continued to Peachs Point arriving around 11:30am. Here there was some swell under the chop and a more challenging situation. However, the water was approaching high springs so all the passages were wide. On the downside, there was not much protection from the outer rocks in the garden. An occasional wave would top the outer rock and cause green water to break violently into the basin. It was strong enough to push a boat up on to the back ledges, so I was constantly timing swells in crossing through the passages. I did well on multiple passages, but did not sense anything special about the Pintail in the rock garden. I continued to the eastern ledges of Brown's Island and then the usual passage at Gerry Island. Here I had some trouble moving over the ledge, got caught in the drain, and then hit by the next swell. It ended OK as I edged into the ledge and the wave turned the Pintail outward around the rock. It was textbook, but a little nerve wracking nonetheless.

I made the decision to head for M'head Neck and cross the harbor, arriving to the lighthouse around 12:15pm. The swells were definitely much more coherent, less chop, and also of higher amplitude and with more water (more powerful). At one of my usual passages in this location directly across from M'head Rock, I hesitated longer than usual to study the waves. I never liked this passage because of the overall narrowness and proximity to shore ledge and stand-alone rocks. Anyway, I saw that the outer rock was providing a safe zone, even though you could not see the incoming on the other side. I decided to proceed. The problem was that the push through the entryway was stronger than anticipated, so that I managed to get surfed out of the safe zone. Looking outward at that point, I saw a large swell coming in and breaking. There was not sufficient time to retreat back behind the rock, so I tried to turn into the wave but did not have the time to complete the turn and build up some momentum. The Pintail was immediately swept

up in a foam pile, and I started bongo sliding to the back ledge. The boat would have been damaged and I might have had to wet exit on the ledge. To avoid that circumstance I tucked forward and capsized into the foam pile. It worked. There was a period of turbulence under the boat but it quickly subsided, and I immediately rolled up. At the same time, I executed a strong sweep turn outward and encountered the incoming swell with forward momentum. I was lucky as this second swell was smaller than the previous one. So there it was - a nasty combat roll on my maiden voyage with the Pintail - unbelievable. Furthermore, I had ripped my dry suit neck gasket on a paddle last week and, with the aid of a friend, just fixed it with duct tape. Actually, it seems to work quite well, and is more comfortable than the original gasket! However, a slight amount of water did penetrate the suit in the roll. I'm used to a leaky dry suit and plan to replace the gasket this week, but it did give pause after the fact. I decided to be more careful in the rock gardens during the remainder of the trip.

I proceeded down the M'head Neck coast. At the tip of the east coast across from Tinkers Island, the swells were enormous and broad – much more than at the northern end of the Neck. It was essentially high tide, which meant that there was a full thirteen feet of water over a springs base of -2ft at Tom Moore Rock. The Rock had breaking swell. Unfortunately my chart does not give a drying height for Tom Moore Rock, but I remember during multiple low tide trips there that the shelf was a few feet above sea level. Assuming three feet above MLLW, that suggests that the Rock had 8 feet of water over it, so the breaking swells were $8/1.3 = 6$ feet. They definitely looked that big, and frighteningly vertical along the shallows from Tom Moore to the shore, and also in the areas surrounding Tinkers Island. I proceeded through the Tom Moore shallows and these vertical waves to the lower rock garden (across from Tinkers). It is a favorite of mine but my initial reaction was that the waves were just too large to work in the garden. I sat just on the outside watching large swells overtopping the rocks in the high water and then slamming against the back ledges. It was quite spectacular. I noticed that one of my favorite passages was not having a direct hit by the largest part of the swell; and in any case the endpoint was deep water (no ledge backdrop). I waited for a medium sized swell to hit, and surfed through that location. I spent ten minutes or so, just bouncing around in the chaotic basin of this garden. I was careful to stay only where the backdrop was deep water because, when the largest swells came in, the entire basin was awash with surging green water. At some locations the water would crash onto the backdrop rock face with tremendous power. A boat caught in that would likely be broken. As it was, in the areas of only deep water backdrop, the “drop” was fun. I turned the Pintail around and let it get pushed out by the surge. There was only one occasion in which I lost control and had to brace.

I was tempted to continue to Swampscott, stow my boat and walk back to Salem. However, the long paddle to Off Rock with continuing bands of rain and high winds, and with a dark sky, was a deterrent from crossing the bay south of M'head Neck – even with following winds. There could also be a long walk back in the rain. I then considered paddling to Devereux and portaging across, which may have made sense. However, being alone, I would have had to empty the boat and carry it on my shoulder across the causeway – a hassle. Also, I was not sure Devereux could be landed in these conditions. I decided to just check out Tinkers and return up the coast. I arrived at Tinkers around 1:00pm. The swells were very vertical in the shallows north of the island. I recall this area being unpassable in previous trips, one winter paddle in particular, but this was not the case today. Nevertheless, my initial reaction was that the waves were too big for

rock gardening on the eastern ledges. I paddled down just outside the break zone of fearsome swells as they crashed into those ledges. There just was no obvious way to penetrate safely to areas that may be protected, although I was tempted to try the eastern cove (and probably would have with another paddler present). I was careful not to get distracted analyzing the shore, and thereby miss incomings! I rounded the southern edge of the island and considered landing on the beach. It was already around 1:30pm, and I was concerned about low water on the Tom Moore ledge on my return. Before heading north, I did a Tinkers passage on the northern edge. It was a little dicey, but the outer rock was providing a safe zone and I had a clear view of incoming swell from that zone (unlike previously in M'head Neck). I just sat there and let the large swells crash around the rock; and then quickly rounded it and moved out on a smaller set.

In heading back, I immediately noticed a large “whaleback” of the east coast of M'head Neck that was visible from Tinkers. Starting well off-shore, the “spout” just did not seem to stop! It burst forward, died a little, and then restarted for another long run. It looked enormous, although I know that these things often appear larger across distances on the water (refractive ducting from marine water vapor?). It was the Tom Moore Rock and shoals with now less water over them. I decided to paddle directly from Tinkers to the green can GC”1A”, which I knew to be safely eastward of the shoals (it is, after all, what keeps boat traffic off Tom Moore). I progressed to the can and turned westward towards Castle Rock. An examination of the chart below shows that this avoided the shoals entirely. I had a moment of regret that I did not try to surf the “whaleback” – or at least moving in for a close look. It was surely doable, but what stayed in my mind was the seemingly unending track of the thing – could it go all the way to the M'head Neck ledges? My earlier spill was sufficient drama for the day, so it is for my next visit. Approaching Castle Rock, I picked up significant lee from the NW winds, and headed up the coast to the tip of M'head Neck. It was already approaching 2:00pm, so I decided to forgo the rock gardens here. I visited the site of my earlier accident, and noted that there was now less water and more trouble in the passage. I crossed the M'head Harbor channel from GC”1MH” to RN”2MH” against still strong NW winds and, just before reaching the red nun, encountered a motor-driven sailboat leaving the harbor. I was not sure what the captain of the yacht was proving, essentially taking a course to hit my kayak right at the RN in a completely empty channel; but I managed to reach the buoy despite the wind and chop as he passed behind me.

After a brief break on Browns Island a little after 2:00pm, I returned to Peachs Point. It was delightful. The swells had lessened considerably and water level had dropped. The usual rock passage was both doable, and exciting, and I could enter the back areas of the garden to experience a lot of turbulence. I did multiple passages, and then went to the rock face crevasse that we often use to ride reflected waves. Again, there was just enough power in the swell to allow me to position the Pintail for a ride up after the drain and then an explosive push back from the reflection. I also tried it starting sideways to the rock and facing outward – getting interesting rides from the reflected waves. There was uniquely none of the boat and body breaking forces for such a strong swell effect against the rock face. I eventually continued around Peachs to Naugus Head at 3:00pm where I did an on-side and off-side roll. The Pintail is an easy roller, perhaps even more so than the Explorer. The air and water seemed pleasantly warm. The harbor was calm and beautiful as I entered with following winds; and I very much enjoyed the final leg of the paddle. I arrived to Ocean Ave at 3:40pm. Total distance of about 10 nautical miles.





