

## Following Beatrice through Paradise

*A summer cruise with Gary Hirsch and Chip Cunningham, July 12 to 18, 2015*

Gary is probably going to be taken aback, at least initially, being depicted as Beatrice. I'm no Dante either. But it is not an exaggeration to compare our seven-day cruise with a pilgrimage through Paradise. It is the realization of the dream that started me sailing in the first place. For Gary it was another special chapter in his charmed sailing life. Every morning when I opened *Solje's* boom tent and stood up, the first thing Gary would say from *Blue Rose* was, "Another day in Paradise!" That phrase can be a terrible cliché, except when there is simply nothing more appropriate to say.



*Blue Rose and Solje*

I am of two minds about naming the location of our cruise. Part of me wants to keep it secret by telling you that we explored the little-known Maumee Archipelago upriver from Toledo. And part of me realizes that if the true place hasn't been overrun with vacationers yet, it's probably fairly safe: we sailed out of the Blind River Municipal Marina into the southeast end of the North Channel in Lake Huron. I sailed *Solje* W1321, the gracefully aging woodie I had the serendipity to buy from Gary in 2011 just after he and Al Schonborn raced her 300 miles in the *Tip of the Mitt* around northern lower Michigan. Gary sailed *Blue Rose*, his Sea Pearl 21, a sleek 21' long, narrow, leeboard cat-ketch. Notwithstanding his being Treasurer of the USWA and an honest admirer of the Wayfarer, being able to get a good sleep aboard despite a cranky back takes priority. The two boats were surprisingly well matched for cruising together. Downwind the Sea Pearl pulled away wing-on-wing, but otherwise we sailed side-by-side. Not to put too fine a point on it, however, Gary could drop his anchor and be in bed in his mosquito-tight tent in five minutes. Maybe less. To boot, the Sea Pearl has unstayed masts. The sails can be let go to

avoid getting pinned on a run. Like a Laser, the Sea Pearl reefs or furls by rolling the sail onto the mast. Unlike a Laser, the goosenecks are on rings that allow the masts to be spun without having to remove the booms. Quick and easy.

Eight the first morning I discovered that Gary gets up about five. From then on we were under weigh by seven or eight. Gary would choose a spot for the night toward the end of afternoon to avoid a hurried search later in the evening. We would raft for a while and enjoy a “Happy Hour” beer and a single-malt bump. We saw very few other boats. Maybe only a couple actually under sail. He said the further up the North Channel, the fewer the boats, which is why he chose to sail out of Blind River. That, and the fact that they only charged us \$9 (CAN!) to park for the entire week. Gary asked the young woman tending the marina, “Is there a launching fee?” Somewhat puzzled, she replied, “Well, you’re going to do all the work, aren’t you?”

We got off our boats three times to walk on the islands and once to say hi at the North Channel Yacht Club: an hour and a half, total, the whole week. “I’ve never had a cruise like this—where I got to go everywhere I wanted to go,” Gary said.

I had imagined that sailing in such rocky conditions would call for constant attention to the chart. But, it’s the water you want to pay attention to: unusual surface patterns, color changes. North Channel water is very clear. I could usually see 12 feet deep. Maybe more. One moment you can be sailing along in deep dark water, and suddenly a rock as big as a house can rise up and pass close under. But neither of us hit anything. I’m not taking any credit. I was at hull speed and found myself suddenly in a minefield of rocks. I used up a lot of good luck there. Gary said he had been trying to wave me off. Pay a little more attention, Chip.

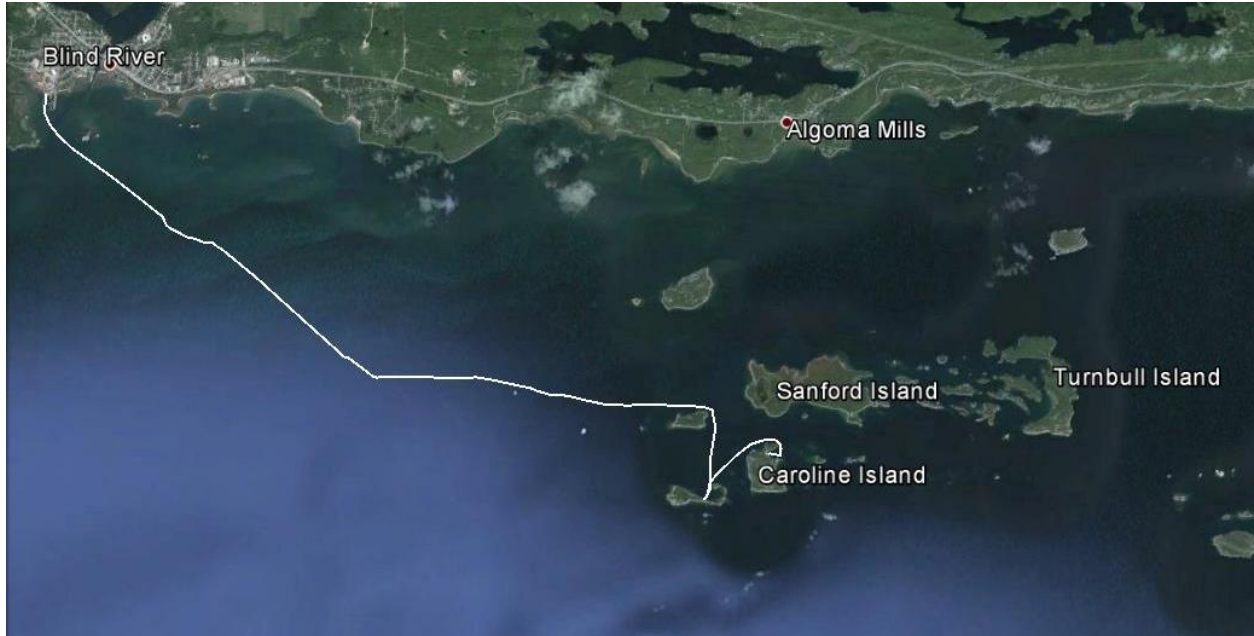
But the beauty of the North Channel is jaw-dropping, and it’s not always easy to pay attention to anything else. Sky, my wife, spent her childhood summers on the Lake of Bays at the southern edge of the shield in Ontario. She especially loves the rocks. Now I know why. “The Earth is showing its bones,” she says. I imagined I could feel differences in gravity. The geology of the islands changes from great piles of rocks in the northwest to huge smooth monolithic loaves in the southeast.

Navigation was not so much a matter of chart reading either, but of outward awareness. I don’t discount the importance of charts—and we had good visibility the whole time—but once I began to get a feel for the relationship between the scale of the chart and the actual islands and expanses of water, I found it was much more advantageous to just look at what we were sailing through. Of course, I was following Gary, but *he* was navigating from memory. Even so, water levels are up 2.25 feet over chart datum in Huron this year and most of the sand beaches Gary remembered were gone, under water. I didn’t have any real sense of where we were until the fourth day.

Several times I marveled to Gary, “I am learning *so much* about sailing!” Finally he said, “You sail all the time, and you sail with Nick. How can you be learning so much now?” Eventually I realized that this was the first extended sailing I had done in big water. I told him that usually a long tack for me in a race or the lakes I sail at home is five minutes. Here I was sometimes on the same point of sail for an hour or more. That was giving me time to understand the results of a lot of tuning adjustments. I shouted my big new insight, “I sail pinched all the time!” Gary answered, “Almost every sailor I know does.”

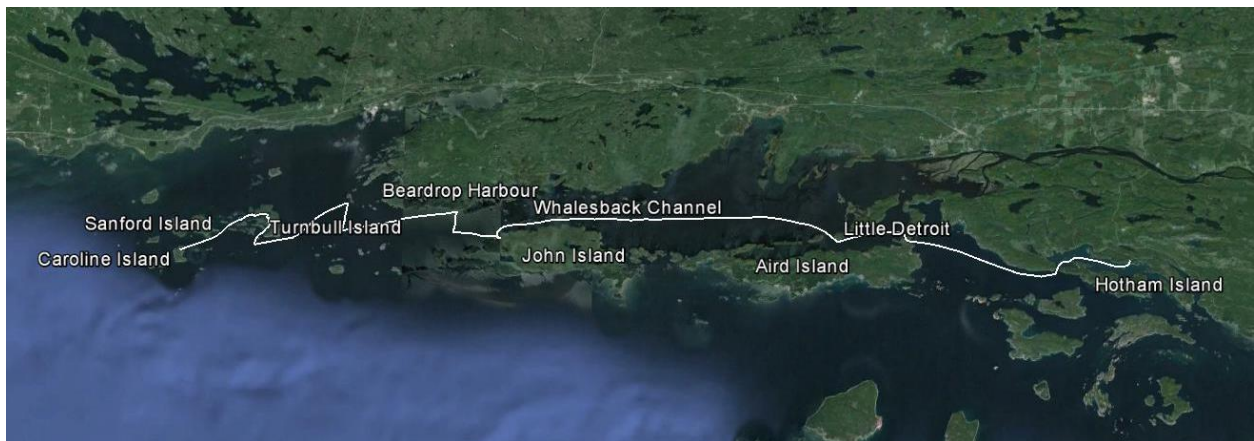
More than once I was moved to exclaim, “They charge for Disneyland—and this place is for free!?” It was a joy how respectful the people who come here must be: I saw almost no trash anywhere.

Our cruise was a large figure-eight. Extended weather reports predicted light winds which proved true only for the first and last hours of our cruise. Otherwise we had plenty of wind. Plenty. I'd say never less than 12 knots sometimes close to twice that, west to southeast the whole time. Sunday we sailed from Blind River east into the South Passage, under Sanford Island and overnighted on the east side of Caroline Island. *Blue Rose* sits peacefully at anchor. Gary puts out a small bit of mizzen as a steadying sail, and that's it: she sits. *Solje* on the other hand dances as she swings back and forth through a wide arc. She lets me know we have wind even before I'm awake.



*Sunday, 10 miles*

The first night I pulled the tiller but left the rudder shipped. The cotter pin that pins the tiller into the socket on the rudder head is on a small piece of line. By morning, a night of the rudder swinging back and forth must have somehow cut the string and the cotter pin was gone. Hanging over the stern I was struck for the first time by the clarity of the water. As I lamented the loss of the pin *Solje* continued to swing back and forth. At the end of one swing I noticed something shiny on the sand bottom. I dove about eight feet to get it: it was the cotter pin. How's that for luck!



*Monday, 32 miles*

Monday began with a beat down the west side of Turnbull and then evolved into a long sail east into Whalesback Channel, through the strait of Little Detroit where Gary had to give me a tow with his



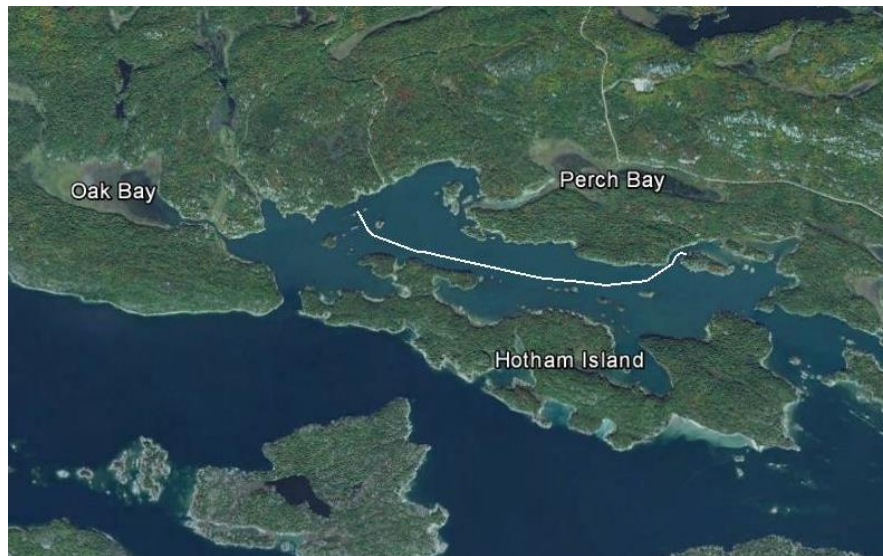
outboard against its wind-driven current. Then we followed McBean Channel and turned up behind Hotham Island. We spent the night anchored in a small channel off to the northeast. It had been a long dicey close reach with streaks of foam and nasty gusts in confused seas all the way down Whalesback Channel. That evening we talked about the only shortcoming of the Sea Pearl: Gary does not know of one being righted from a capsize, even with crew. “The best you can hope for is to be blown to shore.” If the masts haven’t dropped out or been bent by then, the boat rarely escapes some other kind of damage. Gary had been occasionally taking water over the low side all afternoon. *Solje* was well-behaved with a genoa, one reef in the main, and a wary eye to windward.



*Our intrepid USWA Treasurer*

This might be an interesting place to mention that Gary cannot swim. He is not afraid of the water—obviously. You should hear some of his sailing stories. But swimming is not something that his body does. The Marines tried to teach him and they don’t give up easily. “It’s all in your head,” they said, “Go up on that high dive and jump off!” “OK,” Gary said, climbed up and jumped off without fear. He went straight to the bottom and waited for them to realize they needed to pull him out. Numerous Red Cross swimming programs haven’t changed the situation. “When I start swimming, it’s just a steady churn to the bottom,” Gary says. He won’t tell you any of this stuff unless you ask him.

Tuesday we decided to spend anchored between Oak Bay and Perch Bay north of Hotham Island while the wind blew at least 20 knots punctuated by even sharper gusts than the day before. It went on all day and into the night.



*Tuesday, 2 miles*



*Wednesday, 19 miles*

Wednesday we began by poking into the coves on the south side of Hotham and then headed south, skirting west of Fox Island, into the Benjamin Islands. We nosed into the spectacular inlets on the south end of South Benjamin and had one of our three island excursions up a huge smooth granite egg covered with lichen and moss, trees and blueberries. Then continuing on west between Eagle Island and Frechette Island we pulled into a cove on a small island facing the northwest end of Eagle. It was remarkable to relax in calm water and watch a wild sea charge past the opening to our anchorage.





*The view from the top of South Benjamin*

Thursday morning built from a beat into what we both called an “exhilarating” beam reach west along the south side of Aird Island into Moiles Harbour at the east end of John Island. Back out of Moiles we sailed reefed along the south side of John Island, through John Harbour at its west end into Whalesback Channel and across to the west end of Beardrop Harbor. We sailed east through Beardrop past six or so anchored boats, the most we had seen so far, and spent the night alone in good wind next to a small island in the large cove just west of Beardrop.



*Thursday, 19 miles*



*Friday, 18 miles*

Friday morning we worked our way through the reeds in a narrow channel around the north of that small island and sailed west back out of Beardrop. We could not quite agree on a more intense word than the previous day's "exhilarating" to describe the reach we had out the west end of Whalesback Channel up into Serpent Harbour. And none of the legs of our cruise quite matched the ride we had that afternoon back out of Serpent Harbour into the Turnbull Island group. Gary's GPS had him doing over 10 knots. Who knew a Sea Pearl could plane? *Solje* was flying almost parallel along the waves. We roared into the lee of a small island west of Turnbull and dropped anchor. Someone from a yacht holed up in a protected spot nearby jumped into his inflatable dinghy and zipped over to us. "Are you guys OK?" he shouted. Gary and I exchanged a look: we couldn't have been better. We held our glasses of whisky high in a lusty toast to the wind. We thought, "You should try it, sometime."



*"Just a splash" of water in our single-malts*



By Saturday we were pretty worn out. So was the wind. We sailed a drifting broad reach west. Somewhere well past Sanford Island Gary started his motor, threw me a line and we idled back into Blind River.



*Saturday, 10 miles*

The only bad part was the night I anchored close to shore out of the wind and the mosquitoes moved in with me. I love Hans' boom tent, but it's not bug proof. And now I realize a lot of the mosquitoes had boarded before I put the tent up. They were under the floor. They said, "Hey! Look down here! It's dark and moist and there's food up above!" I did not sleep a wink all night. I had a small mosquito net headpiece that kept them off my face for a few minutes (only if I was sitting up) until they found another way in. My hands were burning. A couple of times I really thought I was going to lose it. Being anchored in a channel I couldn't quite picture *how* I would lose it, but it was certainly going to involve a lot of screaming and I didn't want to bother Gary. So I just sat and waited for morning. About three AM I remembered the fifth of scotch in the tub next to me and had a couple of heavy pulls right through the mosquito netting. That got me to sunrise at five when I tore down the tent, raised the sails and headed for open water and a breeze. (Nobody moves at night in the North Channel, not even people on the verge of raving crazy.) Even so it took an hour to drive away the cloud of mosquitoes. There were drifts of dead mosquitoes on *Solje's* stringers. The liner of my sleeping bag looked like someone had been slaughtered in it.

Fortunately that morning was the day of big wind and gusts that we decided to wait out. I slept on the foredeck all day and into the evening. Back in Paradise—just like that. The air had been blown crystal clear. Sometime late during the night I opened the tent flap and looked at the stars. There was no moon. There were so many stars I didn't recognize the sky. The Milky Way really was a white river. *Solje* was slowly swinging, turning the stars back and forth. I started to get overwhelmed. I thought, "Man, this is too intense. I can't do this," and closed the flap.



