LIFESTYLE

PENINSULA

INSIDE:

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The Leader

VOL. 6 | ISSUE NO. 2 | SPRING 2025

ABOUT THE COVER
An artificial intelligence-assisted rendition of Nathan Barnett, Port Townsend's premier fencing instructor.

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LIFESTYLE IS PUBLISHED BY:
The Port Townsend & Jefferson County Leader
226 Adams Street
Port Townsend, WA 98368
360-385-2900
ptleader.com

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TAILSPIN TOMMY'S

THE SPIRIT OF FLIGHT IN PORT TOWNSEND

BY ALEX FRICK

Day after day, Scott Erickson roams through the old hangar at Jefferson County International Airport like it's the family home.

The walls are decorated with decades-old tools and faded photos of mechanics and pilots. The scent of oil and aged sawdust hangs in the air. The shelves are disheveled, stuffed with a near millennium of aviation history.

Local historians say the old hangar was first built in San Diego at Rockwell Field before it was disassembled and shipped to Sand Point on Lake Washington in 1922. The hangar remained at Sand Point for 10 years before it was disassembled once again and shipped to a newly built Army emergency airfield in Port Townsend.

After WWII, the airfield (along with the hangar) was declared surplus by the military and in 1947 was turned over to the city of Port Townsend. Today, the hangar is not only still standing, it is the home of Tailspin Tommy's, an active aircraft maintenance shop owned by Erickson.

In 2011, Erickson and his wife, Nataliya, purchased the business from Thomas Wacker, AKA "Tailspin Tommy." Aside from a few rental planes that Wacker sold with his company, Erickson is intentional about keeping the business aligned with Wacker's vision, blending old and new. Through it all, the hangar remains a constant for aviation's past and future.

AN EARLY PHOTO CAPTURES THE ORIGINAL TOMMY TAILSPIN OUTSIDE THE HANGAR BETWEEN A FEW MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY. *COURTESY PHOTOS*

Erickson's path to owning the business has been anything but direct. He earned his Airframe and Powerplant (A&P) certification from a vocational-technical school and began working in airplane maintenance for an agriculture pilot. He was then put in contact with an Alaskan company that needed mechanics and pilots.

During the summer months, he worked in Alaska, and in the winter months, he painted planes at Paine Field in Everett. He did this for nearly seven years. Later, he transitioned into a position with Goodrich Aerospace, working on jets. Still, the pull toward small aircraft never left Erickson.

SCOTT ERICKSON, LEFT, AND TOM WACKER – TWO GENERATIONS OF TAILSPIN TOMMY'S – DIVE INTO THE HEART OF AN ENGINE, BRINGING LIFE BACK INTO IT.

In 27 years, he has seen the business evolve, growing with the ebbs and flows of the aviation industry.

"It's a very economy-driven business because it's not cheap to own an airplane." Aviation, in general, isn't going away, he said. "It'll always be around, people always want to fly."

Today, Tailspin Tommy's offers major and minor repairs, annual inspections, minor avionics repairs and installs, and aircraft insurance repairs, including salvage and recovery.

Tailspin Tommy's also operates as a flight school with certified instructors. For those with a pilot's license, they also offer plane rental services.

No one has had a closer relationship with the hangar than Summer Martell, who works as a designated pilot examiner on the property. Martell's story in the sky took off at an early age, thanks to her father and his biplane. When she was still a teenager, Martell first met Howard Larum, an airplane mechanic who was operating in the hangar that Erickson owns today. He became one of the first mechanics to work on her father's antique biplane, the same plane where she first learned to fly.

"He was in his 70s, and he was a wonderful man. He had a labyrinth shop in the hangar here that was just packed, floor to ceiling, with trails and tools and old parts, and he was just really ingenious," said Martell.

"He was an old-school mechanic and had really sparkly blue eyes, and he was the sweetest man," she said.

Wacker later came in and founded Tailspin Tommy's in 1981. Wacker and Larum meticulously cared for her father's biplane until his death in 1985. She continues to fly the plane to this day.

Martell said that the hangar has always been a source of community and aviation culture.

"THERE IS A NATURAL BEAUTY ABOUT AN AIRCRAFT. LIGHT WILL CHANGE THE WAY THE PAINT GLOWS OR REFLECTS. IT'S A FUNCTIONAL WORK OF ART." – SUMMER MARTELL

THE INTRICATE INNER WORKINGS OF AN EXPOSED ENGINE ARE ROUTINE IN SCOTT ERICKSON'S LIFE, BUT HE REMAINS COMPLETELY AT HOME IN THE HANGAR.

THE HANGAR HAS GONE THROUGH MANY CHANGES OVER THE YEARS. ERICKSON SAID THAT WHEN HAROLD LARUM WAS STILL IN CHARGE, THE HANGAR WAS COMPLETELY OPEN. "IT WAS JUST LIKE A BARN, LIKE A HAY BARN."

"Aviation in and of itself is a community, and it doesn't matter where you go in the world. It's a world unique unto itself, and I call people in the aviation business my sky family —sky brothers and sisters," she said.

When Martell was first married, her reception was held at the hangar, filled with 300 guests, some of whom she knew and some not. She taught her own mother to fly there and admittedly fraternizing with a customer who became her "husband-to-be." Since the mid-'90s, Martell has hosted a Christmas party for the aviation community, a tradition she said Erickson has fully embraced.

"Scott Erickson is now the new generation of my airplane mechanics, and I've been really blessed," Martell said. "The airplane, myself and my dad have been really blessed over the decades to have great mechanics here in this building, taking really good care of my dad's antique airplane, and later my antique airplane. Scott is the latest incarnation of such."

For Erickson, Martell and others who have found a home in this hangar, Tailspin Tommy's will always be more than a business. It is a legacy. For the love of the skies, it is a living testament to flight.

Alex Frick is a freelance writer based in Port Townsend.

A VINTAGE AIRCRAFT OVERLOOKS THE HISTORIC HANGAR, A SYMBOL OF AVIATION LEGACY IN PORT TOWNSEND.

PHYSICAL CHESS

FENCING AND THE ART OF STEEL AND STRATEGY

A GROUP OF STUDENTS FORM A CIRCLE WITH THEIR SWORDS TO BEGIN PRACTICE FENCING. THIS BEGINS A TRADITIONAL PRACTICE OF MEETING.

BY HINAA NOOR

On a misty morning in Port Townsend, the rhythmic clash of steel rings out as a group of students gathers under the guidance of Nathan Barnett. Unlike modern Olympic fencing, Barnett's class delves into the world of historical European martial arts (HEMA), reviving the combat techniques of centuries past.

"I teach my students how to fight with a basket-hilted broadsword or cutlass," Barnett explains. "We study this as a martial art. We don't do choreographed 'stage combat,' nor do we do sport fencing. We seek to apply rational systems to the chaos of violent combat. It's wicked cool."

Barnett has been involved in martial arts for decades, beginning with judo, tae kwon do and karate before dedicating himself to historical fencing in the early 2000s. He started teaching in Seattle before founding his own fencing school, Embassy Arms, in Port Townsend in 2011. "Teaching is in my blood," he said. "Both my parents were teachers. I love sharing knowledge, and I love the tactical and physical challenge of fencing, which is often referred to as 'physical chess.'"

Students in his class learn the techniques of George Silver, an English swordsman from the late 16th century, whose writings provide a structured system for real-world combat. This historical approach sets Barnett's instruction apart from modern fencing. "I had been teaching historical fencing in Seattle since the early aughts," he said. "Soon after I first moved to Port Townsend in 2011, friends who helped us move into the Old Consulate Inn, our B&B, asked if I would start teaching here."

One of Barnett's students, Kimberly Snow, shares how she was drawn to this unique form of fencing. "I did some research in Port Townsend looking for anyone who was teaching fencing. It was then that I saw Nathan Barnett's Embassy Arms website and contacted him about classes," she said. "I was drawn to his class because it was unlike anything I had ever done, and that was exciting. His vast knowledge of historical European martial arts and his national and international reputation as one of the best sword instructors were also draws for me."

Snow had some prior experience with fencing, but Barnett's approach was something completely different. "I took fencing in high school when I lived in Germany, and then again in college. But my limited previous experience with fencing before joining Embassy Arms was with the rapier," she explains. "When I joined Nathan's class, I was excited to find out that I was going to be taking a historical European martial arts fencing class, where we learned and practiced accurate 'battle-ready' techniques with the cutlass and backsword."

Unlike many traditional martial arts schools, Barnett's classes don't follow a strict ranking system. "Like most martial arts — and most of life — students arrive with their strengths and weaknesses," he said. "From there, it's all about learning how to fight with a sword. I've trained professional MMA and cage fighters and some very sassy grandmothers. We all arrive with what we bring and learn to think, move, and fight with those traits."

Snow echoes this sentiment. "There's no ranking in our class. There are beginner students, and there are advanced students. But we all work together to help each other learn," she said. "The most important things that I've learned as a fencer I've learned mostly from getting hit. Getting hit is how you learn not to get hit again."

INSTRUCTOR NATHAN BARNETT MAKES A DEMONSTRATION WITH ONE OF THE SWORDS AT HIS CLASS.

A COMBAT SPORT STEEPED IN HISTORY

Historical fencing is part of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA), a practice that revives centuries-old combat techniques. Unlike Olympic-style fencing, historical fencing uses techniques documented in historical texts from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance.

According to the U.S. Fencing Association, fencing is one of the safest combat sports, with rigorous training and protective gear ensuring minimal injuries. While sport fencing focuses on speed and points, historical fencing prioritizes technique, strategy, and combat effectiveness.

Nathan Barnett's classes emphasize George Silver's system, a 16th-century English fighting style designed for real-world self-defense. His students train with basket-hilted broadswords and cutlasses, learning the same techniques used by warriors of the past. His Embassy Arms school in Port Townsend attracts students who want to experience the art, discipline and strategy of historical fencing firsthand.

"Fencing is about personal growth and empowerment," said student Kimberly Snow. "It's one-on-one, like boxing. And of course, you're using weapons, which makes it stand out from other kinds of sports."

STUDENT NAHJA CHIMENTI STANDS WITH A SWORD AND PROTECTIVE GEAR FOR THE CLASSES AT EMBASSY ARMS.

Barnett's classes emphasize control, safety and technique. "Students wear fencing masks and rigid arm protection, as well as padded fencing jackets and sometimes knee protection," he said. "Students spend months learning technique and control before they are allowed to 'spar' or 'free play.' The essential safety precautions are mutual respect, control and training."

For Snow, historical fencing is more than just a physical challenge — it's a way to develop discipline, awareness and patience. "Distance, timing, balance, control, footwork, awareness of space, strategy — these are all things I've learned from fencing," she said. "The control part is one of the most important aspects for me, learning to control my fight-or-flight mode, to calm and center myself."

Barnett sees fencing as a lifelong pursuit. "I've found that sixteen is about the youngest I can effectively teach, but from there, I don't think there are any limitations," he said. "I've had students in their seventies and students with the full spectrum of experience and physical abilities. Fencing is an art form that lends itself to diverse styles and capabilities."

As swords clash in the training hall, students continue honing their craft, bringing an ancient tradition into the modern world. For Barnett and his students, historical fencing is more than just a sport — it's a connection to the past, a test of skill and a way of thinking that extends beyond the blade.

Hinaa Noor is a freelance writer based in Lawnside, N.J.

BASKET-HILTED BROADSWORDS AND CUTLASS SWORDS LAY LINED UP FOR THE FENCING CLASSES AT EMBASSY ARMS. THESE IN PARTICULAR EMERGED IN EUROPE, ESPECIALLY IN SCOTLAND AND ENGLAND IN THE LATE 16TH CENTURY.

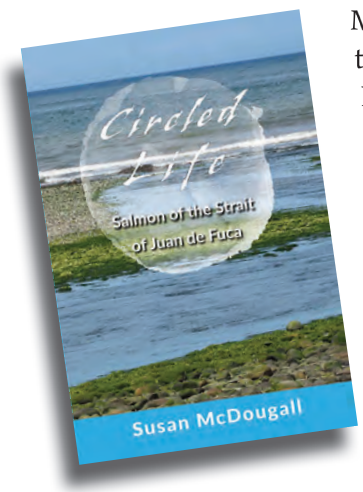
SEQUIM AUTHOR, ARTIST DOCUMENTS SALMON OF JUAN DE FUCA

FOR THE LOVE OF SALMON

BY KIRK BOXLEITNER

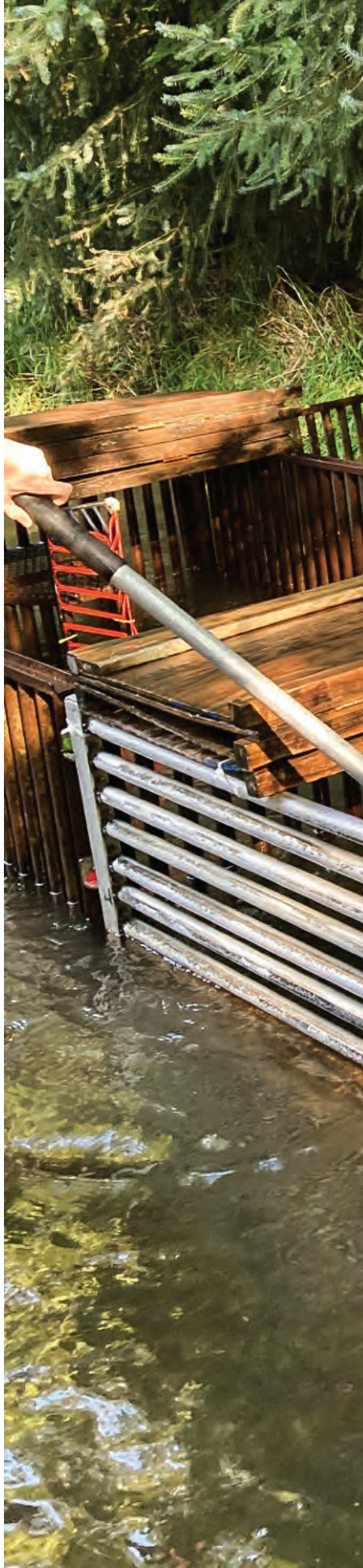
Sequim author Susan McDougall continues to devote her artistic talent and her skill for research to telling the tales of the fish species native to this area. Her ongoing labors already yielded the publication of "Circled Life: Salmon of the Strait of Juan de Fuca" last year.

McDougall's latest book features her written entries and her accompanying pastel paintings of seven species of salmon that live and travel along the Strait of Juan de Fuca on Washington's Olympic Peninsula, including the Chinook, Chum, Coho, Cutthroat, Pink, Sockeye and Steelhead.



McDougall had previously written and taken photographs for 2014's "Trees Live Here: The Arboretums of America," 2007's "The Trees of Mount Rainier" and 2005's "The Wildflowers of Mount Adams, Washington," and had collaborated with David Bick on 2007's "The Flora of Mount Adams, Washington" and 2000's "Flora of Mount Rainier National Park."

McDougall worked as a software engineer for Boeing, but she'd always pursued writing, illustration and photography on her own time, long before moving to the Western side of the Puget Sound from the Seattle area eight years ago.



SUSAN MCDOUGALL
HOLDS A SALMON.

Moving to the Olympic Peninsula only furthered McDougall's fascination with nature, especially as she learned of local efforts to conserve and restore salmon populations, such as occurred after a storm blew out a critical culvert over Chimacum Creek in the mid-1980s, just as summer-run Coho salmon were returning.

McDougall began her bid to capture as many of the local fish species in her art as possible nearly three years ago, while researching and writing accompanying essays about them. Once she realized how long this task would take, she decided to break it into smaller chunks.

McDougall admitted that "Circled Life" focuses on seven relatively well-known species of salmon, but she also wants prospective readers to get the value of her diligent research, which covers everything from the current issues that each species faces in its survival, as well as how Indigenous peoples have historically used those fish.

"This is not a field guide," said McDougall, who's consulted multiple peer-reviewed scientific papers online, and accumulated a veritable library of her own on local fish species. "I always consult the most recent papers, because research can change what's known very quickly."

A particular favorite of McDougall's has become Dr. Milton Love, a research biologist at the Marine Science Institute of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

CUTTHROAT TROUT

COHO SALMON

PINK SALMON

CHUM SALMON

STEELHEAD TROUT

CHINOOK SALMON

"He thinks he's funny," McDougall chuckled.

McDougall has also looked up articles in newspapers and the British scientific journal "Nature." She has also made personal contacts with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and its National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), as well as the North Olympic Salmon Coalition (NOSC), the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Lower Elwha Klallam and S'Klallam tribes.

"The Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe's new library has been invaluable," McDougall said. "Canada's been a bit tougher of a nut to crack, though."

As for artistic references, McDougall admitted that she utilizes a number of online photos, without ever "copying" them, while also referring to the works of world-renowned fish artist Joseph Tomelleri.

"My own drawings are technically accurate, but I could never match his level of detail," McDougall said. "I have no idea how he manages to render all those scales. Rather than trying to illustrate my fish in every phase, I usually limit myself to when they're spawning, since that's when their colors are more vivid."

McDougall said her books "obviously aren't huge sellers," but she's been surprised by some of the venues in which they've been stocked, including a few libraries and university bookstores.

SOCKEYE SALMON

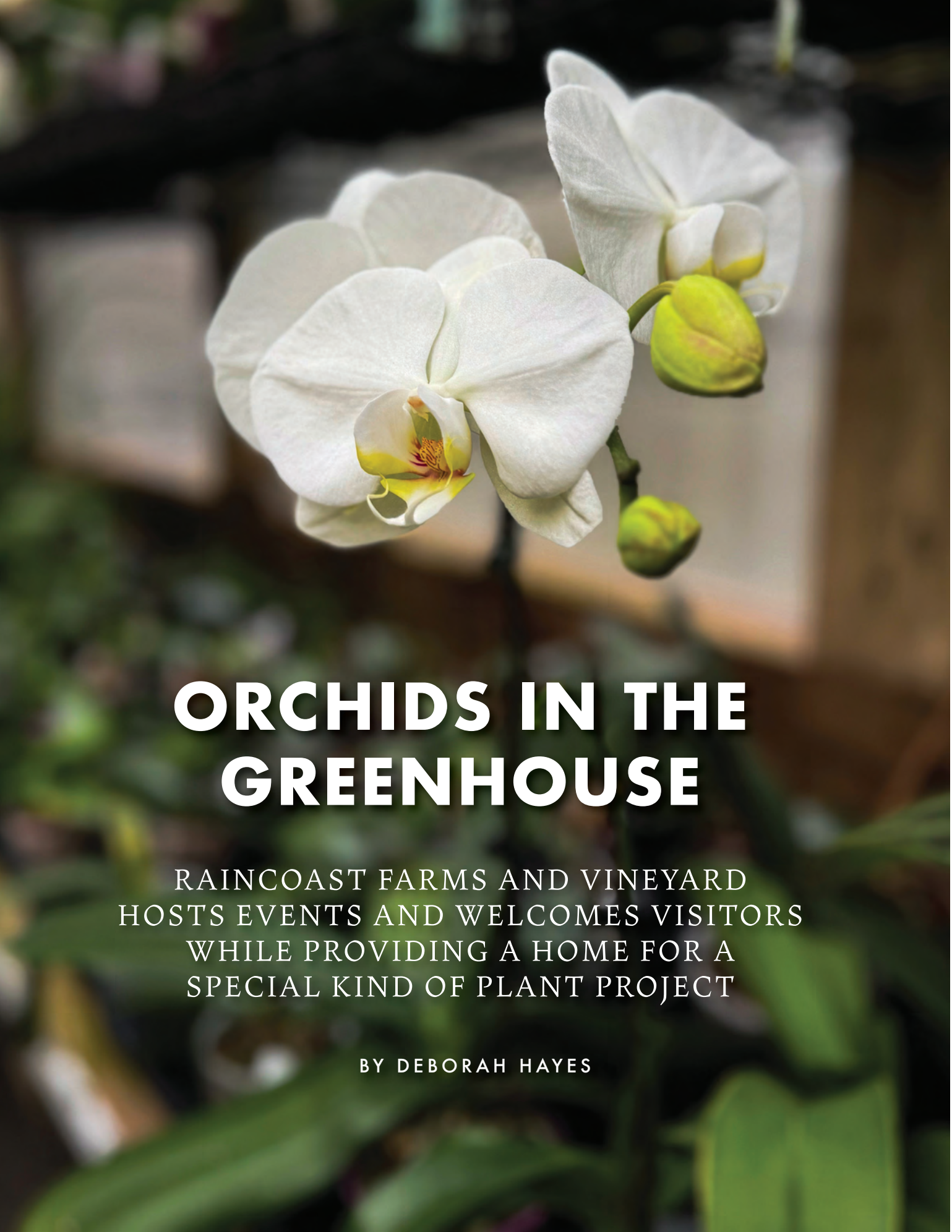
McDougall is still weighing her options as to which fish she might focus on in her next volume, changing her mind multiple times during her conversation with The Leader, but she's definitely got a soft spot for rockfish, which she sees as having experienced a number of issues similar to those of salmon.

Either way, McDougall expects she'll continue illustrating and writing about fish, just as she's participated in counts of spring smolt coho and adult spawning chum in recent years. She described that as "the experience of a lifetime," even if a bit messier than expected.

McDougall recalled one photo of herself, taken in 2022 by the manager of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's local salmon projects, in which she got absolutely drenched.

"I stepped into the trap to take the fish out of the water, which I guess I was expecting would be this simple, gentle process," McDougall said. "But it was big and heavy and thrashed all around, so it became quite chaotic, and I got immersed."

She shrugged. "Oh, well. I still can't quit working with fish."



ORCHIDS IN THE GREENHOUSE

RAINCOAST FARMS AND VINEYARD HOSTS EVENTS AND WELCOMES VISITORS WHILE PROVIDING A HOME FOR A SPECIAL KIND OF PLANT PROJECT

BY DEBORAH HAYES

Have you ever owned an orchid? Orchids are one of the most common houseplants in America. The Phalaenopsis, also known as the moth orchid, is a particularly popular type, known for its elegant appearance and long-lasting blooms. However, after the blooms inevitably drop off, it can take a year or more to blossom again, even under the best conditions.

Most people don't have the time, patience or know-how to bring these plants back to their former beauty, so they often end up in the compost pile. Instead of tossing them out, you can donate your tired and stressed orchid plants to the Orchid Recovery Project and make someone smile.

Raincoast Farms and Vineyard is co-owned by Mike Gaede and Margaret Stoermer, who purchased the property in 2016. Located on the east side of Highway 19 about 7 miles south of downtown Port Townsend, the winery uses sustainable organic practices. There you can enjoy wine tastings and stroll through the vineyard, orchard, flower garden and old-growth cedar forest, which is a wonderland of gentle giants and luscious ferns. You may also have a chance to see all the spectacular orchids in bloom.

Raincoast Farms currently maintains two greenhouses full time: a recovery greenhouse for donated Phalaenopsis and a larger greenhouse with a unique collection of species and hybrid orchids and tropical plants.

SAVING THE CEDARS

In 2006, Dick Schneider, a retired businessman and scientist from California, was looking to retire to a quieter way of life. His search led him to the Quimper Peninsula. There, he came across a heavily logged 17.5-acre tract of land for sale just off of Highway 19 and not far from Jefferson County International Airport.

"There was nothing here, except a run-down cabin in the woods built by hippies in the '70s," Schneider recalled. The main attraction of the parcel was a magnificent stand of old-growth cedar trees that he wanted to save.

Schneider bought the land and started a farm.

ANNE AND DICK SCHNEIDER POSE FOR A PHOTO IN A GREEN-HOUSE AT RAINCOAST FARMS.

AT RIGHT
A YOGA RETREAT AT RAINCOAST FARMS AND VINEYARD IN MARCH 2025.

Hard work went into planting apples, berries, grapes and more. He wanted to produce organic healthy food and help the local community have food security. "What if the bridge went out?" he speculated. So, he built a garden and donated the food he grew to the food bank. It was not a commercial enterprise but rather a hobby he enjoyed and put to good use.

His fascination was with growing tomatoes. Being a scientist, he researched for years how best to grow tomatoes in our little corner of the world. Schneider always shared what he learned about growing tomatoes with area farmers, and soon, locally grown tomatoes became readily available, thanks to his instructions.

After ten years, Jefferson County residents no longer had to depend on getting tomatoes from Mexico. His mission accomplished, he said he no longer wanted to grow tomatoes and compete with the other growers.

Schneider's interest in orchids began when his son, a doctor, handed him two nonflowering orchids given to him by a patient. He knew his father had a green thumb and asked if he could get them to bloom. Schneider said, "I didn't know anything about orchids," but he accepted the challenge and after about a year, successfully revived the orchids and got them blooming and healthy. Soon after, friends and family started bringing him their unwanted or stressed orchids to nurse back to health.

SAVING THE ORCHIDS

Schneider accumulated so many orchid (Phalaenopsis) plants he became overwhelmed. He was running out of space! He drove to Jefferson Healthcare with the intent of giving them to patients and brightening up their rooms, but the hospital nixed that idea.

They said, "No, you can't put orchids in the rooms because (1) we don't know what you're bringing in with the orchids (germs), and (2) the nurses can't take care of them," Schneider explained.

So, he came up with the idea of leaving the plants at the admission desk, and that was approved. The orchids had new homes, and Schneider could place them in the clinic reception areas as well. So, in 2013 the Orchid Recovery Project, as Schneider named it, was born.

Schneider and his wife, Anne, decided to sell Raincoast Farms in 2016. They had two conditions: first, the big old growth cedars were to be preserved, and second: they could rent two greenhouses for orchids, one for the recovery project and one for Schneider's personal collection.

The new owners, Mike Gaede and Margaret Stoermer, were excited about becoming farmers, and worked hard to bring Raincoast Farms to where it is today. They make wine and cider, and the farm also serves as a venue for weddings, parties, yoga classes, staff parties and retreats. "We grow Siegerrebe and Pinot Noir. Our most popular wine is our Sparkling Siegerrebe."

"Presently, we are encouraging artists to use our space in the barn for workshops," said Stoermer. "The artist promotes and collects money for the workshops and Raincoast charges the artist $15 per person for tastings."

Stoermer said they also love to give tours to visitors. "We love it when visitors stop by for tastings and encourage people to bring their own snacks or charcuterie."

Dick Schneider still runs the Orchid Recovery Project at Raincoast Farms. It takes in donated dying orchids, revives them, and gives them away to people in need of cheering up. He and helper Lindsay Mayo run the entire program by themselves with donated plants. They keep meticulous records of each orchid in a logbook. When an orchid is donated, it is assigned a number and has its picture taken. They jot down the date it was donated, the name and contact information of the donor, the condition it was on a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 being great, 2 being so-so and 3 being poor. They also keep track of the orchid's fate, such as whether it died or was donated. As of March 25 the logbook had 1,903 entries.

"They are a plant that gives so much back with a little TLC," Mayo added.

"All plants for the recovery program are donated from people who have plants that are not doing well, or they just don't want them after they're done blooming, etc. I take them in, and I get them healthy and then once they're blooming, Dick takes them and delivers them to the hospital," said Mayo. "There's no money involved in any of this," except what comes in donations.

"Many of the recovered orchids are donated to Jefferson Healthcare Medical Center. They don't go to any of the patients' rooms because then the nurses would be taking care of them, and they've got enough to do," continued Lindsay.

THE ORCHID RECOVERY PROJECT GREENHOUSE.

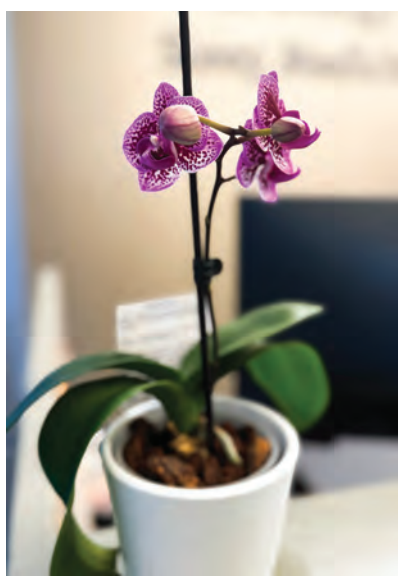
The orchids go to the clinics and the main entrance. They also go to the clinics that are outside of Jefferson Hospital, as well as to hospice and some of the care facilities in town. "Every week or so, I pull plants from there and Dick drops them off at the hospital. I had 98 plants blooming last year at this time and this year I had 80-plus."

Mayo has been involved in the orchid recovery program for more than three years and created an outreach to Salish Coast Elementary and Dove House. There they didn't get orchid plants but rather house plants were donated. The plants went into different classrooms throughout the school.

“Over the last few years, I’ve been taking plants to both places," Mayo said, estimating about 15 plants had been taken to Salish and about 15 to Dove House.

“The way we get other houseplants is someone will reach out and say I’m moving, I can’t take these plants with me, or somebody just died, so what do I do with these — that sort of thing. And we’re not talking about large house plants that would sit on the ground, but rather something that you would place on a counter in your kitchen or on an end table or something like that. We prefer orchid plants because of space.”

Schneider explained the challenge of growing orchids at 48 degrees north is making sure the plants get the right conditions to grow. It is hard to duplicate the conditions of a tropical rainforest, such as light, moisture and temperature.



ORCHIDS BLOOMING AND READY TO GO BRIGHTEN A HOSPITAL CLINIC OR HOSPICE

He also must make sure no insects get into the plants. If a bug pollinates an orchid, its blossoms drop.

However, the biggest challenge, he said, is to keep the light on the project by getting the word out. "The project just doesn’t work if there are no donated orchids." Schneider has spoken to members of garden clubs and garden lovers in the area. He has donated orchids to auctions, in addition to the hospital and hospice. He puts signs in all of the orchids at the hospital and clinics to spread the word.

He also has an extensive personal orchid collection, which are either plants he purchases or rare varieties that the University of Washington has shared with him.

He tries to grow the orchids as close as possible to how they grow in the rainforest. The bare roots are misted, and other tropical plants are kept with them for their symbiotic value. There are anthuriums, begonias, bird's nest fern and even a night blooming cereus in the greenhouse.

Wherever they go, Schneider's interest in orchids has captivated him. It's also worked out for the orchids and the people who enjoy them.

Deborah Hayes lives in Port Townsend.

FROZEN LAKE NERKA AND THE AGULOWAK RIVER FROM THE RIDGE BEHIND THE LODGE. MARGARET IS IN RED JACKET IN FOREGROUND. *PHOTO BY CHRIS CHRISTIE*

Wood River Lodge, Alaska
1980-81

The river murmuring it's way down the valley, talking to itself,
past mountaintops frosted cupcake pink with alpenglow,
so sweet I could taste it.

The sturdy cabin hunkered down on the riverbank,
logs glowing copper in the sun.

The river, always the river, flowing endlessly on.

330 MILES TO NOWHERE...

OUR WORLD WAS A CABIN, OUR UNIVERSE A VALLEY

BY MARGARET "MEG" VISGER

Just the thought of it makes me smile. I grow wistful ... for my youth, and the years that seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of me. For a healthy, strong body. For the thrill of exploration. For the happiness and contentment Chris and I felt together. I was 29 and he was 38. It was our third year together and our second winter alone in the Alaskan wilderness. We fit well together and didn't need, or want, other people. Our world was the little cabin on the river, and our universe was the valley.

That winter wasn't the most eventful of our 40 years in Alaska, but it was pivotal, because we decided to live full-time in the Alaska wilderness. Chris was a bush pilot, fishing guide, aircraft mechanic and jack-of-all trades, while I was the granddaughter of Alaskan pioneers, with adventure in my blood and a penchant for cooking.

We spent about 20 years living a wilderness life, working summers for remote fly-in Alaskan lodges, and spending wonderful, cozy winters alone in the bush. It was a great life, and that winter at Wood River Lodge was one of the happiest.

The summer of 1980, we ran a tent camp on Goodnews Lake in far western Alaska. Chris flew a De Havilland Beaver and I cooked. After the season ended in October, we stayed with my folks in Anchorage, and Chris started networking. Everyone in the fishing and flying business in southwest Alaska knew everyone else.

One day, he returned home brimming with excitement. "Guess what! I was talking to the guys at the hangar and I found us a caretaking job!" Thick brown hair escaping his cap, well-worn denim jacket topping faded jeans, Chris looked kind of like a scruffy little kid in the children's movie "Our Gang."

ABOVE
CHRIS CHRISTIE BUILDING THE LOG PORCH. MARGARET PEELED THE LOGS. *PHOTO BY MARGARET VISGER*

AT RIGHT
MARGARET WITH A RAINBOW TROUT SHE CAUGHT IN THE RIVER. TROUT AND ARCTIC CHAR WERE PLENTIFUL. *PHOTO BY CHRIS CHRISTIE*

"It's at Wood River Lodge, on the Agulowak River in southwest Alaska. It's really a neat spot and has fabulous fishing."

Hugged by low mountains, the Agulowak River connects two large, sprawling lakes, forming a jagged Z shape. It's in the Wood River-Tikchik lake system, about 330 air miles southwest of Anchorage. Of course it's off the road system and off the power grid, like everything in that area.

"It'll be our job to maintain the buildings, clean and close up the lodge for the winter, winterize the cabin we'll live in and build a kitchen," Chris continued. "We'll also build a wood-fired sauna, peel logs and build a screened log porch for the cabin."

"What about food?" I asked.

"We'll have to buy our own food, but the pay is generous," he replied. "We can also have whatever is left over at the lodge."

We spent two days madly buying supplies in Anchorage and packing. Purchasing was always a balance between what we wanted, and the weight and size that would fit into the plane. As a result, we stuck to the basics and avoided heavy and bulky items.

We flew out in a historic, amphibious WWII aircraft, a Widgeon, lovingly restored. "It looks like a fat banana with wings on top," I joked. There was a large engine mounted on each wing. Wheels retracted into the belly, and small floats, for stability, hung from the wings. It could land on its belly in water or on land with the wheels. Trundling into the water, it looked like an unwieldy duck.

NOVEMBER 7, 1980

The pilot loaded our gear into the five-passenger plane at Lake Hood airstrip in Anchorage. There were four of us, plus our 80-pound dog and half our gear. "You guys ready to go?" The pilot was a well-known bush pilot from an old Alaska family, brusque, but a great guy. My folks were there to see us off. Dad hugged me goodbye. "Gosh, I wish I were going with you. Have fun. Be careful."

It was snowing when we left Anchorage, but clear by Lake Iliamna. The flight through Lake Clark Pass in the Alaska Range was stunning. Steep, snow-covered mountainsides crowded us on each side, and two glaciers shook hands in the middle.

THE CABIN ON THE AGULOWAK RIVER. *REMAINING PHOTOS BY MARGARET VISGER*

Spruce trees cloaked the lower elevations in inky green while bushes dipped their toes into Lake Clark's unearthly azure blue. "Wow, the color of the water is unreal," I said to Chris over the microphone.

"It's fed by glaciers, and the minerals turn it that color," he explained through the bulky headphones we all wore because of the noise.

We arrived about 11:30 a.m. having traveled the 330 miles in two and a half hours. Finally, I could spot the mountains jutting from the horizon. It seemed like we inched over the tundra until the lake, not yet frozen, came into view. Sunlight glinted off its surface and a peaceful river flowed out to the west. Spruce and birch forest covered the lowlands, while snow swaddled the mountains.

THE WIDGEON WITH OUR GEAR ON THE BEACH AFTER ARRIVAL AT THE LODGE.

We landed on our belly in the lake, the water splooshing around us. Once we unloaded our gear on the gravel beach, the owner showed us the lodge and cabins. "We'll bring the rest of your stuff in a week. We'd better get going because it's getting dark at 4:30 and the weather could close in." We stood on the beach, dog sitting by our side, watching the flying banana disappear into the sky.

The first thing I noticed was the silence. Quieter than a whisper, softer than a hush. Crystal-clear. Absolute.

I gazed at the dark woods and mountains surrounding us, the lake spreading beyond, and the river lapping near our feet. This is going to be our world, our entire universe for the next seven months. I thought, I am so ready for this.

Margaret "Meg" Visger is at work on a memoir about her 20 years in living in remote areas of Alaska. This is an excerpt from the book.

THE CABIN ON THE AGULOWAK RIVER.

SAILBOATS SET OFF FROM SHILSHOLE BAY MARINA IN SEATTLE FOR THE BLAKELY ROCK BENEFIT RACE ON APRIL 5. *PHOTO BY MEREDITH JORDAN*

The Olympic Peninsula seems designed for mariners, its fickle conditions helping to shape them. That's especially true for sailors who rely on the wind. This isn't the Caribbean where, in season, the trades promise a steady 15-20 knots from the same direction.

Our region features an abundance of sailors up for the challenge. They are happy to compete against others to effectively harness the wind. There's also lots of support from those happy to sit on a race boat or on shore with a beverage in hand and watch the race.

A look at some of the region's larger sailboat races over the course of a year.

BLAKELY ROCK BENEFIT RACE

APRIL 5, 2025
SLOOP TAVERN YACHT CLUB

The large fundraising race on Puget Sound benefits a different nonprofit each year. This year, it was Sound Experience, which operates Adventuress in furtherance of its mission to get more young people out on the water. Sponsored by the Sloop Tavern Yacht Club, which is more of a watering hole than a traditional YC, with skippers meetings at Shilshole Marina. The race started in 1981, and more than 100 boats were expected to be there this year.

GRAB THE WIND

COMPILED BY MALLORY KRUML AND MEREDITH JORDAN

TRI-ISLAND RACE

APRIL 26-27, MAY 10, MAY 31, 2025
SEATTLE YACHT CLUB

The Seattle Yacht Club will host its Annual Tri-Island Race Series from April through May. The series consists of three races of varying lengths: Protection Island, scheduled for April 26-27; Vashon Island, scheduled for May 10; and Blake Island, scheduled for May 31.

SWIFTSURE INTERNATIONAL YACHT RACE

MAY 23-25, 2025
ROYAL VICTORIAN YACHT CLUB

The Swiftsure starts in Washington waters and concludes in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Now in its 80th year, the race has various courses around the Strait of Juan de Fuca, both inshore and offshore. Considered a premier race, it draws "rock star" sailors worldwide.

J FEST SEATTLE 2025

JUNE 14-15
CORINTHIAN YACHT CLUB

Race Week Pacific Northwest is taking over the production of J Fest, happening June 14-15, 2025, at the Corinthian Yacht Club in Seattle. The annual regatta celebrating J/Boats offers competitive racing in the Shilshole Bay in Seattle. Daily and overall awards will be presented, along with sportsmanship and performance trophies. Social events, including parties and dinners, will be hosted on-site.

WA360

JUNE 28, 2025
NORTHWEST MARITIME

This 360-mile race loops from Port Townsend back to Port Townsend, where vessels strategize the best way through (or around) waterways. Brought to you by Northwest Maritime, the same people who deliver the mighty Race to Alaska, which returns in 2026.

RACE WEEK BELLINGHAM 2025

JULY 21-25
RACE WEEK PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Race Week is a 5-day sailboat racing event that attracts the region's most active sailboat racers. For nearly 35 years, the event was held on Whidbey Island. The event moved to Anacortes in 2000 and has made its new home in Bellingham. Boats range in size from 24 to 52 feet. Race courses will be set up by certified race officers in Bellingham Bay.

SALISH 100

JULY 24-31, 2025
NORTHWEST MARITIME

This 100-mile cruise from Olympia to Port Townsend cruises the length of Puget Sound with stops each night. That enables a sense of community and a lot of fun.

NORTHERN CENTURY REGATTA (N100 AND N50)

AUG. 30-SEPT. 1
ANACORTES YACHT CLUB

Anacortes Yacht Club hosts regional regattas that cater to competitors throughout the Puget Sound and Canadian waters:

-- The Northern Century (N100) was founded as a two-person endurance race, with additional options added over the years. The Northern Century Race now includes a "Double-handed 100" division and a "Fully-crewed 100" division.

There's also the Northern 50 (N50), created for racers with smaller boats or otherwise disinclined to run a hundred miles. It includes a "Double-handed 50" division and a "Fully Crewed 50" division.

Multi-hull and Mono hull division splits will be made depending on sufficient entry of vessels.

ROCKFISH ROCK 'N ROLL REGATTA

The Anacortes Yacht Club adds the 1st Annual Rockfish Rock 'n Roll Regatta to its repertoire this year in cooperation with title sponsor Rockfish Grill and Anacortes Brewery. Racers will be treated to live music and a waterfront beer garden on the docks following each day's races. We have reserved slips for all competitors on C-dock in Cap Sante Marina beside the party barges. Kick-off opening day with exceptional Buoy and mid-distance racing experience on the waters of the Salish Sea, and afterward, party like a Rock Star!

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