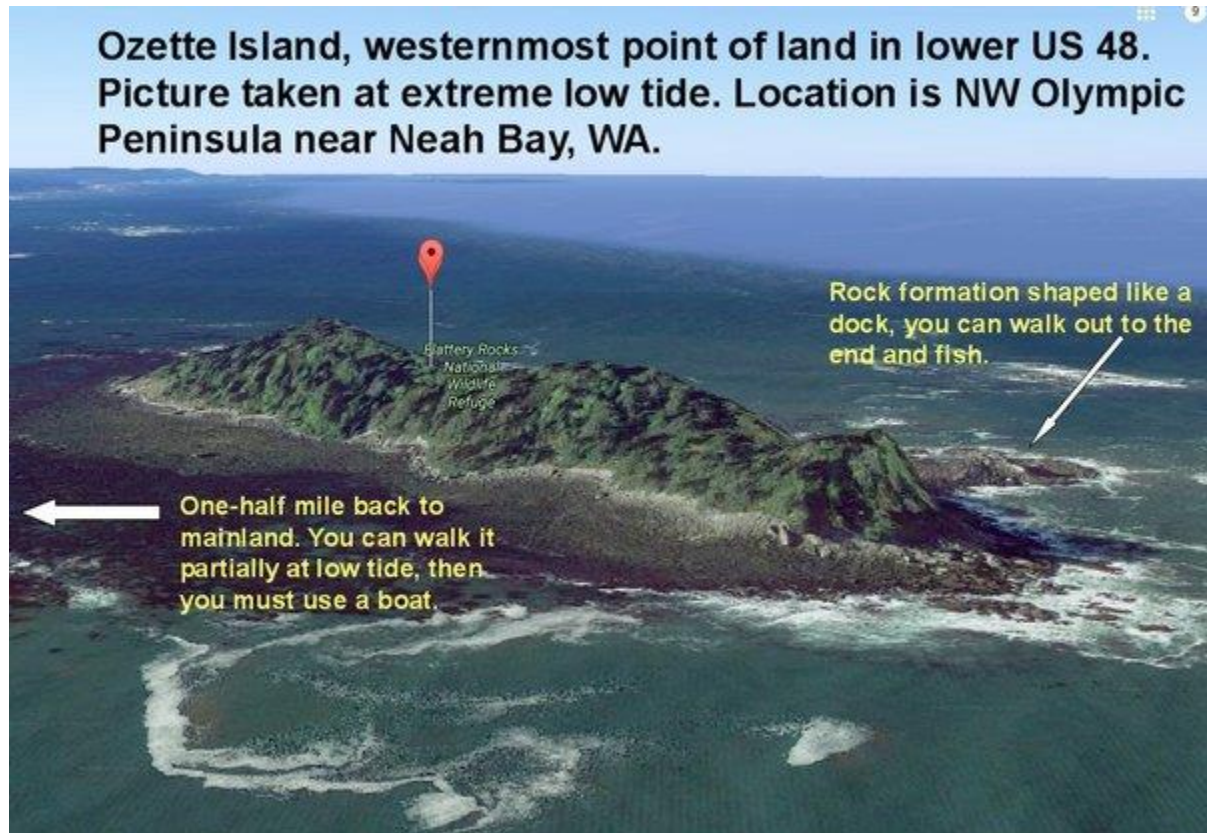


My 40 years on Ozette Island, By Robert Blevins



Frightened, cold, and you start making promises to God.

That's the bottom line, and I know this because I once spent three days in the Pacific Ocean off the northwest coast of Washington State, USA. I was trying to reach the island shown in the picture, a place I had been many times before, a place where I finally got careless and paid the price.

Sure, I had a boat. It was a canoe-shaped Sevyolor rubber raft that leaked so badly I had to blow it up every hour for those three days. It was marginally better than a life vest, and that's all.

From the original article: 'My 40 Years on Ozette Island'.

"Seattle sci-fi author Robert M. Blevins describes his special relationship with the westernmost point of land in the continental United States. The island is both magical -and dangerous."

The first time I saw Ozette Island, I was on a camping trip with my Boy Scout troop and it was 1968. We were hiking along a muddy wilderness trail between the Hoh River and Shi-Shi Beach. For anyone not familiar with the more remote parts of Washington state, Ozette Island is off the Pacific Coast near Lake Ozette. Just look for the westernmost point of land in the lower forty-eight states.

The island sits offshore about a half-mile, looking like some picture-postcard

Northwest version of Gilligan's Island. It is about a half-mile long, with a low point in the center and is heavily forested, with sandy, inviting beaches. It is also a National Wildlife Refuge island. This means you can go there, but you cannot disturb the wildlife. The Makah Indians considered it special, if not sacred. Since I was restricted to the beach, I didn't get a chance to try and make the crossing over to the island, but I promised myself I would try it later.

Fourteen years passed before I returned to the place. In the summer of 1982, I had taken in two German exchange students who expressed a willingness to try a new adventure. I convinced them to accompany me in an attempt to cross over to the island. Lacking enough money for a boat, we purchased fifty long spike nails and a hundred feet of rope. We drove to the Ozette Ranger Station and hiked the three-mile boardwalk leading to the beach at Cape Alava. We began scouring the beach for big logs and flat boards. Within a few hours, we had constructed a giant raft with a center log nearly twenty feet in length. By the time we finished it was getting late. We rolled out our sleeping bags, built a crackling fire and waited impatiently for the morning tide. At dawn, the waves rolled into the beach as the tide changed, and the raft began to float free.

The tide caught the raft and we jumped aboard. Yuli grabbed the long log that was thrust out our stern as the tiller, while Karl and I used poles to push our way into the surf. We managed to breach some heavy incoming swells and guided the raft into open water. An offshore wind caught us and we were away.

At each end of the island, the waves are high and rolling, so we aimed for the center of the island's longest beach and poled like madmen. An hour later, I jumped into shallow water, grabbed a long rope we had tied to the front and pulled us ashore.

The island was everything we had expected, and more. It was heavily wooded and we saw deer that had somehow crossed over to the island in the past and become permanent residents. They moved away at our approach, but didn't seem afraid of us. We found a perfect campsite in a sheltered cove on the south side of the island and set up our tent. For the next three days, we explored the place like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn on a Mississippi island.

We discovered a natural rock formation on the west side of the island, the side not visible from shore. It was a 'dock' made of stone, pounded for thousands of years into this unique

shape by a persistent ocean. We took pictures, beachcombed, and marveled at the beauty of Ozette.

On the fourth day, we checked our raft and discovered it was now sitting much lower in the water. Logs on the beaches in Washington State do not float across the ocean and wash up on shore, as some people believe. They are trees washed down the local rivers and then deposited on the beaches. Since they are NORTHWEST logs, they are already heavy and partially waterlogged. The raft was sinking. We broke camp and loaded up the raft. Seawater washed around our feet during the trip back to shore, but the incoming tide finally carried us back to the mainland. My two German friends swore they would never forget that trip, and I am sure they never did.

As the years passed, I made several more trips to the island. I usually went with a friend and stayed for a few days. Once, I lived on the island alone for six weeks, and then paddled back to shore and caught a ride to Clallam Bay for additional supplies. I returned and stayed for the entire summer like Tom Hanks in *Cast Away*.

After so many successful trips, I became over-confident. I felt as if Ozette was my own private retreat. When you do this on the ocean, the ocean will always give you an object-lesson in humility.

On that particular trip in 1995, I had gotten a late start and didn't arrive at the main trail-head to the beach until afternoon. I hiked down to the beach and unpacked my new raft for the crossing. This time I was using a canoe-shaped inflatable, but was foolishly packing only one oar.

The tide was very high, but I didn't want to wait until the next day to make the crossing. I inflated the boat, tossed in my backpack, and started paddling. I knew I was in trouble almost at once. A powerful outgoing tide suddenly caught my pitiful rubber boat and swept it around the island and into the open sea. I had not noticed the strong offshore winds - another mistake. I paddled furiously, but it was no use. In a few minutes, I was more than a mile offshore and headed for Japan.



A huge rogue wave suddenly came up behind me like an express train, flinging me over into the pounding waves. I was plunged twenty or thirty feet underwater. I kept a death grip on the inflatable and finally burst to the surface, choking on seawater. I watched helplessly as my backpack and my one little oar floated away, and all my hand paddling did nothing to bring me any closer to them, or the shore. The sun began to set and the last thing I saw before it got dark was a skinny line on the horizon- (the beach), and a faraway dimple on the ocean - (the island).

During the long night, the raft developed a slow leak and I was forced to blow it up every hour or so. The occasional big wave kept dumping me back into the ocean, but I actually got used to that after a while. Two more nights of this followed, and although during the day I could usually see the coast, I wasn't getting any closer to it.

I started making promises to God.

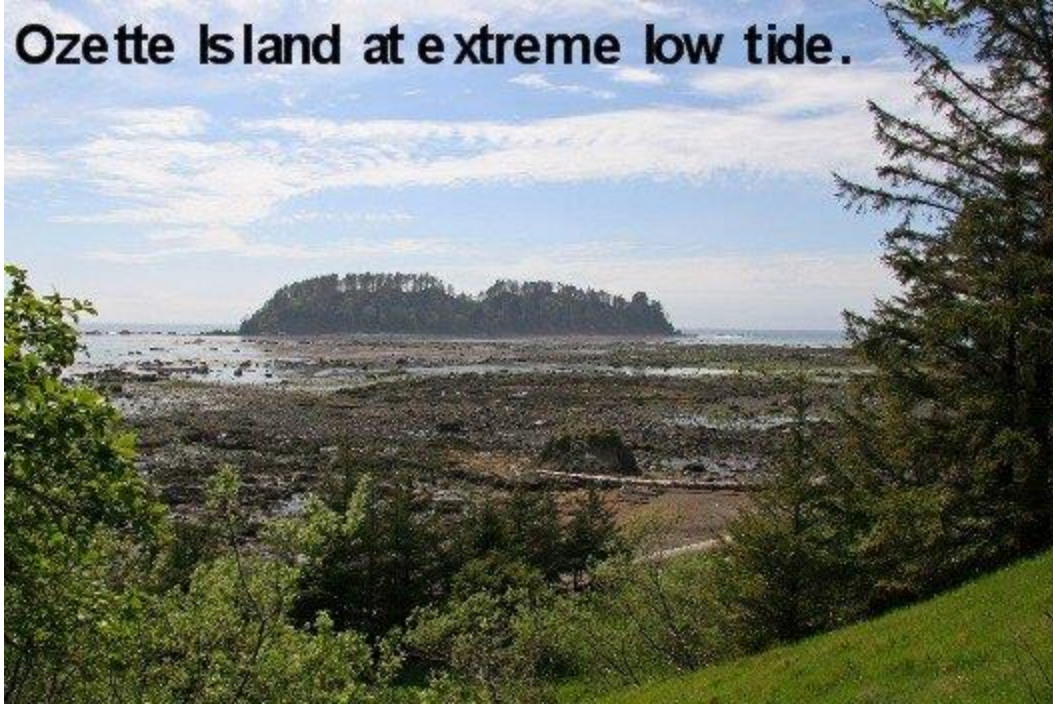
After three of the longest and most miserable nights of my life, the sun rose again and my heart sank. The coast was a skinny line on the horizon, still miles away. I scanned the ocean for fishing boats, or pleasure craft, without results. Finally, sometime in the afternoon, the tide and winds began to shift. I sat in the bow of the boat and kept paddling by hand, and by early evening, I saw I was moving closer to shore.

Nature had one more surprise for me, however. As I approached the mainland, I saw a huge flat rock, sanded smooth by the ocean, and being swallowed occasionally by pounding waves. Every few seconds, the ocean would temporarily retreat, revealing the rock, and then the ocean would swallow it violently again in geysers of white water. I was being pushed toward the rock by the strong current.



I put every bit of strength I had left into furious paddling, trying to go around the trap. It was no use. At the last moment, I spread myself in the boat in a sort of four-point position, and tried to keep my body away from the bottom. The waves picked me up and threw me onto the rock. Instead of striking the rock, some miracle sent me past it and into the water again. I popped to the surface and the rock was behind me now. I jumped from the boat and started swimming for the beach. I made the shore at the very end of my strength and collapsed in the sand. I lay there for an hour trying to recover from the ordeal. When I sat up and looked around, I realized I had washed up at Sand Point, five miles south of where I had started.

Ozette Island at extreme low tide.



A lone hiker happened by and saw my deflated boat sitting offshore, grounded now by low tide. *He actually asked me if I still wanted it!* I told him to go ahead and take the thing. I hiked back to the parking lot. I borrowed a coat hanger from the rangers to open my truck, and then waited around for a day longer while the rangers searched the beach for my backpack, since it had my keys and wallet in it. They never found the backpack, but they DID find a small Tupperware container that had been near the top of the pack. They confiscated the 22 pistol in it, and gave me back the rest - which included the wallet and keys. (I also got a lecture about having a gun in a National Park, which was not allowed back then.) Then I drove home with my tail between my legs.

It was three years before I returned to that island, but I finally did. It bothered me that I had failed so miserably, after all those successful crossings. I took a friend, and paddled over safely, enjoying a wonderful week. After that, I was satisfied that I had seen and done everything there was on Ozette. Occasionally, I do think about a message I left behind on that final trip, buried in a glass jar, and I kick around the idea of going back just one last time to retrieve the thing.

Maybe.