

Amanda Bouvette

Saint Paul Island's Southwest Point

Anchorage, Alaska to Saint Paul Island is a nearly 800-mile trip by plane. My family took a ride on a thirty-passenger Saab 340 Turbo Prop to travel the distance, flying out over the Bering Sea. For me, flying is a little scary, but it was the best way to travel when my parents and I lived in Alaska, when we went to visit family in the lower forty-eight every year. This time, however, we were going on a combination vacation and work trip to a tiny island, approximately six by eight miles in size.

We pray together before every flight and at the start of any vacation in general, asking God for a safe journey. I don't think I fear death as much as I fear not being ready to meet Him. I've struggled with my faith since I was a child, and by the time I was a teenager, when we took this trip, I was still struggling, but I had found that observing and learning about nature gave me a source of proof to help bolster my belief: I would see the complexity and wonder and exact design of the world around me, and it would help me to believe in God a little stronger.

Not that I don't enjoy nature purely for its own sake. When I was a little girl and we lived in Iowa, Dad raked up a pile of leaves for me to jump in, and when I had jumped in it, I continued to sit there, picking up leaves and examining them. I wasn't a particularly athletic child. But when I was fourteen, Dad, Mom, and I moved to Anchorage, and we really had reason to explore. Southcentral Alaska is gorgeous; we explored mountains, glaciers, trails, streams, and waterfalls, looking out for wildlife along the way. Dad flew out to sites around the state to work on weather equipment for his job, and he wanted Mom and I to see some of them as well. Eventually, he arranged things so that we would come with him on a work trip, and when he wasn't working, in the afternoons and evenings, we would explore the island.

We arrived on Saint Paul Island at the airport, which was tiny; it was even in the same building as the Eider Inn, the only hotel on the island. We did not stay there. We all stayed in the transient quarters provided by the National Weather Service, which happened to be one of four houses grouped together within walking distance of the weather office. One of Dad's coworkers met us at the airport in a truck and drove us there, and for the week, we used the truck to go out to a few places around the island.

Throughout that week we combed the beach for shells and sea glass, took pictures of the puffins on the cliffs, and visited the town of Saint Paul with its colorful houses and Russian Orthodox church and a museum and gift shop, all perched on the side of a steeply sloped hill. We also got a few things at the AC Store, a grocery and convenience store found in many remote villages in Alaska. At these stores, a gallon of milk can cost \$10, a bag of Ruffles \$9, and a box of laundry detergent \$24. Our favorite place, however, was Southwest Point.

My family ended up visiting Southwest Point three times during our trip. It wasn't only the point that we liked; the experience began on the drive down to it. To get there, we drove out on a road separated from the ocean by a steep, grassy slope that gave way to rock, or in some places, sandy beach. The first stretch of the road ran beside some small hills in which a family of playful baby foxes had made their den. They were Arctic foxes in their summer coat phase, so like the foxes we saw in town or out on the beach, they had short, dark gray coats. We took some pictures of them and drove on.

Further down the road, we came to the Northern Fur Seal rookeries, which are breeding grounds, on the rocky slopes. Near the rookery, male fur seals slept in the grass or fought each other, making gurgling and belching noises, while harems of female fur seals and their pups gathered on the rocks below, making sounds like the bleating of sheep. Mom particularly loved

the seals. We spent a while watching them from our truck, talking excitedly and taking pictures and videos. Male Northern fur seals are dark brown or gray, while females can be more of a mix of brown and yellow. Viewed from the side, the head of the fur seal curves into a dome shape from the nose back, and the bodies of the males are especially fat. As we watched, I noticed the flippers of the seals—how they could curl them up to scratch themselves, and I could see their knuckles like those of human hands—and how the ends of their flippers flopped like smooth, flat rubber. We also could see that their gait on land is somewhat awkward, but that they swim as gracefully and playfully as dolphins. This is an amazing feat, because, as Dad explained, the waves they swam in were too strong for a human to survive. As we drove on, we continued to see more seals on the shores or sometimes only several feet from the truck, and we sometimes stopped for still more pictures and videos.

As we came closer to Southwest Point, I could see rough, weather-beaten volcanic rocks covered in lichen erupt through the grass, which near Southwest Point and inland is very coarse and is mixed in with other plants and purple and yellow wildflowers. The road ended, and a path lead down to a beach made of sand and volcanic rock. To the left, we found a pocket of what looked like many tiny pieces of peridot—a yellow green semiprecious stone—imbedded in the volcanic rock and many stones that were porous like pumice, but much heavier and with larger pores. To the right, steps of dark volcanic rock spread out like pavement along the edge of the island. These rocks dropped off as cliffs into the ocean, and waves crashed against them and shot into the air like white fireworks. From one spot, you could see a cutout from the dark volcanic steps where, according to Dad, about the same amount of water as in an Olympic-sized swimming pool, 660,000 gallons, would flood in and suck back out or crash up onto the cliff sides. I took some videos of the motion of the water, but I tried not to get too close. Southwest

Point itself had fur seals, with some males sitting regally on the rocks and other seals in the water beyond, so we watched the seals and the waves, amazed at the beauty, the ability of the seals—and the danger. The ocean as seen from Southwest Point is especially volatile. The waves rose 100 feet, exposing teal flanks edged in white. I remember that I felt amazed by God’s power in creating and controlling the oceans and their enormous, rocking waves. I don’t think I had ever seen that kind of power before, at least not in person. I was in love with watching the water and animals.

My family was so happy to be on the island. We said that this was the best vacation we had ever taken, but we were there under some of the best circumstances—it was August, when the seals came to the island and there was no snow—and we knew that it wouldn’t be the same to try to move there and that it was very likely we would never get the chance to come back. We took what we could get. And in seeing this corner of nature, God’s creation, I got a lot.