

One Wild Cat

An 18-foot Marshall Sanderling catboat more than proves its mettle in the Race to Alaska.

Story and Photos by [REDACTED]





It was 3:30 in the morning and damp. With four layers and a winter hat, I was jumping up and down in the cockpit to stay warm. A light breeze across my port beam hit my exposed cheek and pressed *Wildcat* north. The current was with me, finally, and it was approaching full ebb. No movement on the horizon—all the other boats around me had anchored short of Seymour Narrows for the night.

Any decent bit of advice urged only passing through this treacherous stretch of water during daylight and near slack water. That's because the current can rip through Seymour Narrows at up to 15 knots. Think whirlpools, standing waves, and no reprieve due to a rocky coastline lining either side of the 0.4-nautical-mile-wide pass.

But now was the smaller of the ebbs, no traffic, the wind was only 7 knots, and Alaska was calling. I ignored the advice and pressed on in my 18-foot Marshall Sanderling, *Wildcat*.

An otherwise silent night gave way to a low rumble. The glow of the bow lights showed nothing more than smooth water, but the darkness amplified my imagination as the rumble grew to a deep growl. It was too much like the sound of standing atop a waterfall. A bit of regret flashed through my mind, but adrenaline quickly overpowered it. It was too late anyway. *Wildcat* was accelerating and being pulled right into the heart of the narrows.

Four knots of current, 5 knots, 6...the rudder was becoming

less effective by the second and the building turbulence set about a tremor across the entire boat. Swirling water abeam made me wonder if it was possible to get stuck in the middle of a whirlpool and just spin for minutes, maybe hours. I hadn't slept in about 20 hours. *Stay focused*.

Wildcat continued to accelerate. Speed over ground was now touching double digits. Did I mention this was an 18-foot catboat? The current hit 9 knots; I was moving more than 12 knots over the bottom. A whirlpool, several boatlengths wide, caught me. I locked the boom to center and lost any control of my heading. *Wildcat* spun in a slow but complete circle and was spit out. Just as I got her pointing north again, a second whirlpool. The moon peaked out from behind the clouds and *Wildcat* spun around again, dancing her way through Seymour Narrows in the low light, altogether completing three full 360-degree pirouettes as the northbound current whisked her along.

Just as it had built, the current waned, and I was through the first gate of the Race to Alaska (R2AK). The course traverses 750 nautical miles, or a little more than entire western coast of Canada, to Ketchikan, Alaska, in adventure race style: no engines allowed, no pre-planned support, but full creative license for any sort of wind or human-powered propulsion.

First to finish gets \$10,000 nailed to a log, second receives a set of steak knives. Everyone else who finishes joins a unique club with fewer members than the number of people who have been to outer space.

The adventure started six days earlier in Port Townsend, Washington. At 5:00 a.m., with crowds lining the waterfront, a cannon



The author at the helm of *Wildcat*, left. This custom-built sliding seat setup enabled [REDACTED] to row the 2,200-pound boat with 12-foot oars when the wind didn't cooperate, center. Drying out the gear after a wet night, right. Opening pages: A reefed down *Wildcat* bashes to weather in Johnstone Strait.

illustrated the building topography that forms corridors for the wind—the breeze naturally follows the waterway, and a beam reach becomes rare.

I caught the last whispers of wind and combined that with more rowing to drop anchor in Elk Bay, a small bite out of Vancouver Island's coast that was home to a logging camp with one small house. The current had turned and there wasn't much progress to be made, but six hours of sleep on calm water sounded beyond incredible.

Singlehanding requires that sleep is traded for miles. There's no escaping it. A sprint may be different, but this was a 710-mile stretch in an 18-foot boat: not enough sleep would have become dangerous. There is a delicate balance between eking out extra miles and maintaining good fighting form; it doesn't take long before one compromises the other.

Most of the early course was too tight to nap for even 20 minutes without bumping into rocks, wildlife, or another boat. So, anchoring became the strategy, and the best opportunity was when the wind died and the current was foul...as long as a nearby spot offered some protection and was more like 30 feet deep and not 300, but better not to get lost in these details.

I awoke to bright sun, turquoise waters, and so much more energy. My camping stove and a freeze-dried packet of huevos rancheros gave me another boost. The breeze was filling in, this time against me, and with the current changing in my direction soon, I weighed anchor. A few dozen strokes of my oars and I was into the breeze line.

What I didn't yet know is that for the next 55 miles I'd be short tacking in steep chop, and when that chop would flatten out, the current would be too strong to fight upwind. Welcome to Johnstone Strait.

Regular 49-degree spray over the bow and onto my face ensured I stayed awake. I was hand steering, working each wave to capture any advantage to weather. Shifting between a single and double reef kept *Wildcat* on her feet, driving forward.

I performed another exercise in creative anchoring, as a neutral current quickly turned adverse, tucking in between a pile of rocks



Wildcat's deck setup was optimized for quick and efficient singlehanded in all conditions; note the rowing oars stowed to starboard, above. The first catboat to enter the R2AK, the 18-foot Marshall Sanderling proved her all-around sailing chops with all that the challenging, 750-mile course threw at her, right

with a navigation marker and the shore. There was less room than scope on either side of me, but the current and wind were reliable enough to keep me off the rocks, or so I hoped as I jumped into my bunk. I also took some comfort knowing I was farther away from shore than a grizzly bear could jump. At least a hungry one would have to swim out to me through the current.

Joking aside, the threat of grizzly and black bears is real on the racecourse, but it's an unlikely encounter. Whales and logs pose far greater threats. A fellow racer had a humpback breach a few boatlengths ahead of them, and *Wildcat* has some scratches down her port side from a log that could have punctured a thinner hull.

My alarm went off. Fire up the stove. Eat a warm meal. Put on more layers. Fill water bottles. Pack my pockets with snacks and prepare a couple of RecPaks. Weigh anchor. This next tide cycle was a repeat of the first, but I was making progress to Alaska.

The mountains were now steeper, rising right out of the edges of the pass, and covered with lightly rooted conifers that released an invigorating smell that reminded me of cruising in Maine. The rugged coastline brought me there too, but that's where my familiarity ended—this was my first time sailing these waters. The taller peaks, still holding onto their snow, were a stark reminder that this was an unforgiving environment, even in June.

Back at sea level, the beauty of this stretch wasn't enough to hide that Johnstone Strait was beating me up. Hugging the shore offered no reprieve. But, I was in the mix with larger and fully crewed boats; *Wildcat* was performing beyond my expectations.

As soon as I got the chance, I took the first highway exit out of

Johnstone Strait. I was ready for a break from the chop and endless upwind sailing, and believed conditions couldn't get any worse. I was wrong.

Passing Hanson Island to port, the current pulled me out of Johnstone, across the tsunami of a wake from a passing cruise ship, and into Queen Charlotte Strait. At first the waves were slightly bigger, but the period was more comfortable. Then they changed. Maybe it was more exposure to the Pacific, it could have been stronger current, or maybe the bathymetry had a large effect. In quick order, the waves built to 6 and 7 feet and started breaking.

Each wave brought a few gallons of water into the cockpit. I was struggling to point; it took my full concentration to avoid being knocked over by the sea state. The breeze was still building, and I desperately needed another reef. For the first time in this race, I felt truly outmatched by the elements.

I'll give in now and let you know that one of my goals was to finish, and none of my other, increasingly more challenging goals would be possible if I didn't. That made the decision simple. I was not going to sail another 9 miles to the northern coast of this strait; I would turn around and seek shelter.

Jibing was out of the question, so it had to be a tack. Waiting for the right moment would be critical, but the longer that took, the farther I was from safety. Diving down for as much boat speed as I could muster, I threw the tiller over. *Wildcat* turned through the breeze but was halted by the next wave. She started sliding backwards. All I could do was turn the tiller in the other direction and ease the main. The breeze blasted me, I started to heel, and then gradually started

moving forward again. I brought the tiller back to center, completing my three-point turn, and then, wave by wave, fought my way into the lee of the closest piece of land: Malcolm Island.

It was a kelp bed with a straight rocky coast, but my anchor dug in hard inside the swell line. I dropped *Wildcat*'s sail and paused in the cockpit for a minute. The sun would be setting in an hour, I was exhausted, and dampness penetrated anything that wasn't in a dry bag or a sealed bucket. The current was with me and there was breeze, but I was stopped on the racecourse. My primary data connection was also down due to multiple sets of failed charging cables. Morale was at a low point. I needed a reset: a warm meal followed by at least six hours of sleep.

But first something more important. We were a lifeline for each other on the course. At any given point, the coast guard could be six-plus hours away. Hypothermia or worse was a real risk if something went awry. Before I lay down, I radioed the boats behind me, letting them know the conditions ahead. Met with silence, I sent a couple texts too, just in case they managed to catch a stray signal. Undoubtedly, they had their hands full too.

A new day brought a calmer ocean and lighter breeze. The sun would slowly dry out my gear, and it turns out, a bit of nose grease rubbed on the contacts got the charging cables working again. I also learned that everyone else nearby had also paused racing due to the conditions, and if I had kept going, I would have been farther downwind. Everything felt back on track, and Bella Bella, the next and final gate before Ketchikan, was within striking distance.

After another full day and evening of tacking upwind, I passed Cape Caution, fully exposed to the Pacific, without issue as light air prevailed. In other years of the race, this part of the course has been near impassable for days.

Another stroke of luck put the wind at my back as I worked inside Calvert Island. I even napped as my autopilot, Jack, handled the tiller. That wasn't to last long though—this course is not designed to favor arriving in Ketchikan. The current flipped against me and so did the wind.

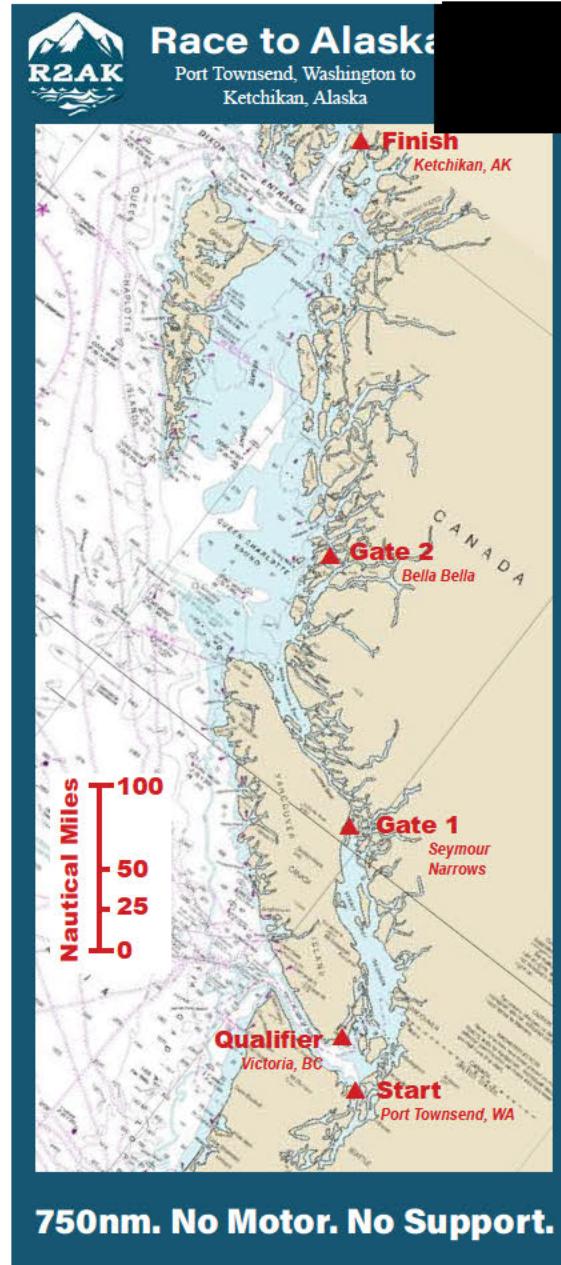
Bella Bella represented the last bit of civilization, and while I intended to stop and top up my water jugs, the real excitement was over a hamburger. Yes, my mind tends to wander down the course while singlehanded, but what else is one to do when stuck inside your own head for days on end? Perhaps, a bit of chatting on the radio...with a couple boats around me, we caught up on morale, the best sacrifices to make to the wind gods, and our culinary dreams for when we hit *Bella Bella*.

I'm not sure if it was the optimism we shared or the patience veiled under the distraction of the radio, but we all started moving again. Slowly, but that is a big step above sitting still, or even worse—drifting backwards.

Light air remained the theme as *Wildcat* used her large sail area to her advantage. I persuaded her along, as needed, with one pair of 12-foot oars and the sliding seat arrangement built custom for the race.

Seven days after the restart in Victoria, I tied up to the dock in *Bella Bella*. There was one problem though: no hamburgers! Those were in Shearwater, a handful of





miles out of the way. Dismissing my devastation, I quickly pivoted and shared a couple boxes of ice cream bars with another team on the dock—those calories would work just fine too!

Ketchikan lay somewhere around 250 miles away, depending on the chosen course. *Wildcat* and I were now free to take any path we wanted; we were through both course gates. We could leave the safety of the inside passage in hopes of more wind or accept some level of protection and remain at the mercy of the stronger currents and funneling winds. I had mapped this decision well before the start and knew with an 18-foot boat, I needed protection for as long as possible. The forecast was for moderate air on the nose for a day, followed by a big system moving in and interrupting that.

The forecast held true, and by the time I was approaching Dixon Entrance, the last and unavoidable open body of water, the wind was touching 40 knots in that region. At least it would remain at my back, just as it was now, as I was flying through Principe Channel. Perhaps a triple reef could handle the breeze, maybe I'd have to shift to bare poles, but the sea state was the issue. It was no place for *Wildcat*.

Instead of anchoring for a half day, I made a quick decision to split off to starboard down a tight winding pass between Pitt and McCauley islands. This would provide a shield from the worst of the weather for another 35 miles. The tide charts had been inaccurate, and I had been keeping my own log. The tables suggested a slightly positive current, but I was surprised when I saw 2-3 knots with me. As I turned around tight corners, so did the wind—I never needed to adjust the mainsheet. Williwaws blasted down the mountains, doubling the wind velocity without warning. I kept *Wildcat* sailing deep through each of these and was thankful to have already shortened sail.

The breeze became even more sporadic as I left the narrow pass and joined Ogden Channel. With darkness settling in, I added a second reef. The wind that funneled through Grenville Channel hit me as soon as I left the lee of Pitt Island, and I was now surfing waves and holding 8 to 9 knots in *Wildcat*. With the centerboard up, she was like a giant surfboard and totally in her element. It was beyond dark at this point. The cloudy skies obstructed any hope I had of a reference point for steering. Oc-

casionally I'd catch a glimpse of a light from shore or the long period flicker of two navigational beacons, but it was not enough, and I was thankful for the array of Raymarine instrumentation and my cheek's sensitivity to the wind.

The finish line was only 100 miles away, but through open water that was still seeing wind into the high 30s. Continuing would leave me and *Wildcat* vulnerable. I anchored for what I hoped would be a final time before making one last push. I tucked up tight to shore and rushing noise of the breeze faded. The trees provided refuge until daybreak.

Now on the tail end of the system, I weighed anchor and made course for Clarence Strait, just across Dixon Entrance. I should have left an hour earlier, as the breeze dropped faster than anticipated, but it was still enough to push *Wildcat*, with a full sail again, to within the final 6 miles of the finish line.

I believe I've mentioned that this course is brutal. Nichols Passage is no exception. As I imagined ringing the bell at the finish line, the wind died altogether. Then, the current switched earlier than predicted and built to beyond anything I could counter. I may as well have been 60 miles away from the finish—there was no fighting nature. Especially that of the Canadian and Alaskan wilderness.

I scanned the horizon quickly and took a chance on the northwest coast. I rowed *Wildcat* with all the energy I had to avoid being swept backwards for the next six hours. I crabbed sideways for the next hour and 20 minutes, covering just half a mile, but I made it into the relief provided by the Blank Islands. I was out of the current. Better yet, I found a counter current. If I kept the tip of my oar blade a couple feet off of the rocks, I could follow the coast all the way up to the final pass into Ketchikan. And I did just that.

Pushing through one last floating wall of logs, I turned onto the final 2.5-mile stretch. *Wildcat* was bucking the current again, but half a knot was manageable, especially with one more snack and excitement I couldn't hide. It was all rowing from here on out. I raised the sail in an attempt to tack my way there, but without much wind, it was more ceremonial, and I left it up as I crossed the finish line.

Passing between a day marker on a rock jetty and the pier for a cruise ship meant I had completed the Race to Alaska. The real



Creative and strategic anchoring was a key skill, since pulling over and stopping was the only way to get enough rest and also avoid foul current or too much weather, top. [REDACTED] stayed extremely busy managing the boat, navigation, and his own well-being on the 750-mile course, mapped at left.

culmination was the cheering crowd on the fishing dock as I rowed towards them to ring the finish bell. It felt great to be around people again. Hugs, high-fives, and plenty of laughs—it was an invigorating blast of enthusiasm.

As the crowd dispersed, the noise melted away, and I was left alone again. It didn't take long before the silence became deafening in that the race was over. After five months of heavy preparation, a 3,153-mile road trip, a successful qualifying leg, and 10 days, 22 hours, and 26 minutes of racing a Marshall Sanderling to Alaska, I had accomplished everything I had set out to do, including every one of my goals I had set for myself. It didn't feel real, and I wasn't quite sure where that left me.

I rowed over to the tie-up dock, where earlier finishers were drying gear and tidying up their boats, and immediately I knew exactly where finishing this race left me—in Ketchikan, Alaska, with some of the most interesting and driven people I've ever met, with more to join us soon, as we cheered them across the finish line.

The real win in this race is the community formed. Sure, I was the first singlehanded boat to finish, and I set two new course records (fastest singlehanded monohull to ever finish the race and the fastest monohull under 20 feet to do the same), but someone else will break those someday, and I look forward to cheering them on as they do.

And that community goes so much farther than just those of us who raced. I had an entire team that supported getting *Wildcat* and

me to the starting line: family, friends, and sponsors. The community grew as the race took shape, from those I met while traveling west, to catboat enthusiasts, to others I had never met but were enthralled with the race. I dare you to follow the next race in 2026 and not get addicted to the tracker or have a favorite team.

I shouldn't sell short the fact that we tackled one of the most challenging racecourses out there. I've always considered extended coastal sailing more difficult than offshore work, especially single-handed. The Race to Alaska proved that again, with the need to constantly update my strategy and dodge all the dangers associated with being close to shore. All in, only 26 boats finished. And I couldn't be prouder of *Wildcat*; not only was she the first catboat to ever attempt the R2AK, but she proved herself as one tough cat, and a pretty quick one at that.

As I hauled her for the journey home, the question of what's next echoed in my head. I didn't have an answer, but I know something else will come, because there really isn't any other path forward. The emotional highs, the adrenaline, the focus on a single purpose, even balancing sleep with performance—it's addictive. The sea calls, and I have no choice but to answer.