



## **SIGNALS FROM T·A·R·S·U·S**

April 2007

# **DISPATCH FROM DIXON'S FARM**

By Mary Wessel Walker  
10-Gong Contributing Editor

This winter I'm working at a farm in rural Wales that is quite similar to the Dixon's farm where the Swallows and Amazons go for milk and Dick and Dorothea stay during their winter holidays. The farm, Tyr Eithin (which means "House of Gorse" in Welsh), is a small, organic dairy farm which sits on a hillside in southern Wales, not far from the sea. We have a small herd of cows (ten milking cows and a large assortment of younger animals), a flock of sheep, four goats (two of whom we also milk), a flock of chickens, three cats, and a sheep dog named Polly. There are also 12 humans on the farm. Unfortunately we don't have any ducks or geese like Mrs. Dixon, nor do we have any young pirates coming to get milk. However, we do have several Ransome readers!

Like Mr. Dixon's sheep, our sheep are out to pasture and look after themselves for the most part. Just this week, however, lambing has begun and we have to check on the sheep regularly to see if any more lambs have been born and to make sure that all the sheep and baby lambs are doing ok. Yesterday I got to hold a day-old lamb for the first time. At a day old, a lamb has very long legs and doesn't look all that cute. They look cuter after a few days when their wool gets to be fluffier. The nicest thing about little lambs is the way they wag their tails while they drink. It's very sweet!

Since it's winter (though spring is definitely on its way!) we are only milking two of our cows right now. One of them is Grape, a heifer (young cow) who had her calf only three weeks ago. Black Currant, the calf, is adorable. She's very curious and friendly. She doesn't like being alone all day while Grape is out to pasture, but she does enjoy getting new straw bedding in her pen. When that happens she runs around and jumps and kicks up her heels with excitement. The milking schedule will get busier very soon with two more cows expected to have their calves any day now.



Mary with a newly planted hedgerow

A typical day at Tyr Eithin begins with feeding and watering all the animals and giving them fresh bedding. Then we milk the cows and goats and put them out to pasture. Then, after the animals have had their breakfast, we get to have ours—typically a big bowl of porridge with fruit and fresh milk. Since we're only milking two cows, it's not enough milk to sell, so we get to use it all here at the farm. Fresh, unskimmed and unpasteurized milk is so delicious that it's going to be hard to go back to drinking "ordinary" milk when I go home.

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# THERE WERE MORE KINDS

By Avi Lank  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

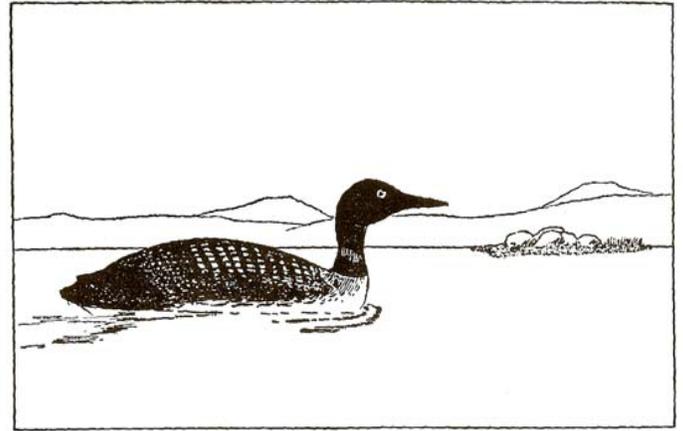
The first word in Arthur Ransome's wonderful series of children's books is the name of a flock of birds, "Swallows." And the final chapter of last book he completed is about another type of bird, the Great Northern Diver, known on this side of the Atlantic as the Common Loon. This is no accident. As Dorothea explains to Roger in the title of this article, for Ransome, as for Dick, there were many ways for the imagination to explore.

While the books center on children, birds play the next most important role in letting Ransome's creativity take wing. Five titles in the series — *Swallows and Amazons*, *Swallowdale*, *Coot Club*, *Pigeon Post* and *Great Northern?* — include the names of birds. Throw in *Peter Duck* and half of the names Ransome gave his books are avian. Stretch the list to include the fragment Hugh Brogan has called *Coots in the North*, and more than half do.

In all, more than 90 different species or types of birds are named in the books, everything from albatrosses -- which Titty imagines being killed by shipwrecked sailors in *S&A* and Nancy pretends to see while acting as a decoy with John in *GN* -- to the yellow head hawk Tom and Dick discuss in *CC*.

Ransome uses birds in many ways. The most obvious is as drivers of action. Two books, *CC* and *GN*, have plots that revolve around birds and birding. Had the *Margoletta* been left safely moored to the bank instead of set adrift by Tom to protect a pair of nesting coots, there would have been little drama in Ransome's snapshot of the waterways of the pre-war Norfolk Broads. Without the discovery of divers, the cruise of the *Sea Bear* would have been little more than a footnote in the world of the Walkers, Blacketts and Callums, not fodder for an entire book, *GN*. Unsurprisingly, *CC* and *GN* are the most bird-filled of the Ransome opus in terms of species, with more than 30 individual breeds or types mentioned in both.

Ransome also uses birds to drive action. A real owl (as opposed to the numerous imaginary ones used to send signals in several books) awakens Titty during her night alone on Wild Cat Island in *S&A*. That allows her to kindle the leading lights and subsequently capture the *Amazon*. A buzzard leads to the discovery of the cragfast sheep in *Winter Holiday*. Mr. Dixon's gratitude at the rescue inspires him to help Dick make the sailing sled that is so important to the dramatic climax of that book. Without



The elusive Great Northern Diver (AKA Common Loon)

Sappho, Sophocles and Homer, the children would have been pinned too close to civilization to have had real fun in PP. In that book, too, the dramatic climax requires avian intervention. And Polly the Parrot is very important in driving the plot of *Missee Lee*, perhaps even saving the lives of the Walkers, Blacketts and Captain Flint after the Taicoon Chang takes a fancy to the bird and its owner, Titty.

Beyond plot devices, Ransome uses birds to make more subtle points. Sometimes, it is simple personification. Other than the imaginary Black Jake, the two villains of the series are persons who would harm birds, George Owdon in *CC* and *The Big Six*, and Mr. Jemmerling, the egg collector of *GN*. The unpleasant, if finally a bit sympathetic, Great Aunt Maria is described by Dorothea as "not the sort of person to be interested in birds" in *The Picts and the Martyrs*.

And then there is the interesting case of Harry Bangate, the eelman in *BS*. Consider this passage from Chapter Three:

'What about buttlies?' said Pete.

'Shot many a score of 'em I have,' said the old man.

'Oh, I say....Not bitterns,' said Tom.

'Many a score. There was plenty of 'em then, and then they get fewer till there ain't none. Coming back, they tell me, they are now. If I was up Hickling way with my old gun....'

'But you can't shoot bitterns,' said Pete, horrified.

'And why not?' asked the old man. 'In old days

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# OF EXPLORATION THAN ONE

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we shoot a plenty and there were a plenty for all to shoot.'

'But that's why they disappeared,' said Tom.

'Don't you believe it,' said the old man. 'They go what with the reed cuttings and all they pleasure boats.....'

Tom looked at the faces of the other Coots, to see how they were taking these awful heresies.

'But they're coming back,' said Joe. 'And no one's allowed to shoot 'em. And there'll be more every year. We found two nests last spring.'

'Who buy the eggs?' asked the old man.

'Nobody,' said Joe. 'We didn't sell 'em. We didn't take 'em. But they would have been taken if we hadn't have watched.'

'Some folk are rare fools,' said the old man. 'Now if I'd had knowed where them nests was, it'd have been money my pocket and tobacco in my old pipe.'

The Coots looked at each other. It was no good arguing with old Harry, but, after all, it was one thing for an old Broadman to talk about taking bitterns' eggs and quite another for somebody like George Owdon who had plenty of pocket money already without robbing birds. The old man caught the look on Pete's face.

'Old thief. Old Harry Bangate,' he said. 'That's what you think. And I say, No. What was them birds put there for? Why, for shooting.'

For a book published in 1940, the passage shows a remarkably modern appreciation of the environment and interdependence of eco-systems. Two explanations are offered for the decline of the bitterns – hunting and what we today call wetlands degradation. Yet Ransome the folklorist and social historian will not condemn Harry for acting in accordance with the social norms of his time, or the needs of his class. No other passage in the *Swallows and Amazons* series takes such a nuanced view of the social environment of pre-war Britain.

When Ransome talks about birds as part of the landscape, he usually does so in the way of all good writers, to help the reader appreciate the setting. Often when characters are on the move, such as going to see the charcoal burners in *S&A*, birds are used to paint a picture of the hike. When the *Wild Cat* arrives at Crab Island in *PD*, birds are used to make the reader understand he or she has encountered a

place vastly different from Great Britain or the United States. Consider this elegant description of the island from Chapter 20:

Clouds of tiny birds were buzzing around these clusters of flowers, birds so small that at first Titty thought they were biggish bees. Some of them were blue, like kingfishers, and others had a sheen of purple and dark red that changed as they caught the light or slipped into shadow flitting in and out among the leaves. And then there were big birds, too, green parrots, mostly, like Polly, and noisy chatterers, that made more noise than the parrots, except when the parrots were startled and a flock of them rose together into the air above the trees, so that the explorers could not see them, but only heard the wild screaming of them high above the green feathery screen that shut out all but small patches of the sky.

Finally, Ransome uses birds metaphorically. Often, those metaphors are very simple. We hear that ice sleds swoop like swallows in *WH* and that kettles boiling sound like cuckoos in *S&A*.

On occasion, the metaphor is a lot more complex, and even sinister, as in Ransome's use of cormorants.

The fish predator appears in eight books. No other bird is in as many titles, and very often, the cormorant is used as a malevolent symbol. The robbers bury Captain Flint's treasure on Cormorant Island in *S&A*. In *ML*, the first real contact the Swallows have with the Chinese who could, in the end, kill them, comes when they see a cormorant fisherman. And in *GN*, the cormorant is used as a symbol of someone who is constantly hungry and better gotten rid of, as when Nancy says of Roger, jokingly to be sure, "Feed the young cormorant and be quit of him."

The most interesting use of the cormorant as a symbol comes in the least bird-filled book of the series, *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*.

At the very end of the volume, as the *Goblin* is making her way back to up river to the safety of Mrs. Walker and Bridget, we are told:

"A cormorant, spreading its wings like a German eagle, was perched on the buoy at the bend."  
There is no such species as a "German eagle," although

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Googling Groote Beer:

# HISTORIC WOODEN YACHT

By Debra Alderman  
Mercer Island, WA

When I first read *We Didn't Mean to Go To Sea* to my son Akiva a number of years ago, I got very excited at the part where they were guided into the port in Holland. The description of the canal boats brought back some wonderful memories for me and I went running to the photo album to find pictures of the yacht-version of the traditional canal boat which I had the opportunity to sail in my younger years.

I had the good fortune to have been a crew member of an amazing historic wooden boat in my teenage years. My friends and I, members of a co-ed Explorer Scout post, had the use and the care of the Dutch *bötter* yacht *Groote Beer* ('Great Bear'), a 65-foot flat-bottomed, lee-boarded, gaff-rigged boat, for three years. Since it had been donated to the Boy Scouts as a tax write-off by its previous owner, we were the temporary custodians of a wonderful old boat that was in need of a lot of TLC.

Being caretakers of an aging wooden boat was a lot of work! Reading GN, I identified with the senior crew members of *Sea Bear*, who spent a long day of scrubbing and bottom-painting as the younger members got into adventures ashore. Along with a lot of sanding, scraping, varnishing and polishing, we also spent the rest of our "free" time setting up tables for Bingo at the community center and parking cars at the Elks' Club to earn money to pay for varnish, sandpaper, diesel fuel, and provisions for our voyages. Back in those days, teens were expected to pay their way. But we didn't complain. We were much like the Swallows & Amazons and appreciated our good fortune to have been given the use of such a wonderful old boat—even if it was for just a few years.

But we had some great adventures sailing in Puget Sound and up along the coast of British Columbia. Because she only had about a 3 foot draft we were able to pull into some very shallow coves and anchor where other sailboats would have feared to tread. I recall some great times exploring uninhabited islands.

After her three years of loving but under-funded care by a pack of teenagers and an occasional adult volunteer or two, *Groote Beer* was sold to a private owner who, we heard, was taking her up to Alaska. That was in about 1983.

That was the last I heard of that wonderful boat until about a month ago when something possessed me to "google" *Groote Beer* and to my delight, I learned that



Photo: Jack van Ommen

*Groote Beer* restored and gorgeous, has returned to Holland.

she's continued to be loved, sailed and shlepped around during the past twenty-some years.

The back story that always made the headlines was that *Groote Beer* was supposedly commissioned by famed Nazi Herman Goering during WWII when Holland was under German occupation. According to legend, the Dutch boat builders didn't want Goering to ever take possession of the boat, so they continued to put more and more decorative flourishes into it—stretching its construction from months to years and beyond the end of the war. Well, as we always told visitors when we took people on tours at wooden boat festivals, that's a very colorful story, and probably mostly legend. According to Jack van Ommen, who has researched and published the true story of *Groote Beer*, the facts of the story were not nearly as colorful.

Turns out that there *were* some vague Nazi connections. The boat was actually commissioned by a man named Theodor Temmler, a Dutch pharmaceutical company owner with ties to the Nazis. Temmler apparently never had an opportunity to come and see how his money was spent. According to van Ommen's account:

An attempt was made through Scholtz (the broker) to claim ownership, but the Dutch government had confiscated the still unfinished *bötter* as war booty. The hull was completed in 1945. Mr. W. Greeve bought her in auction in 1947 and then engaged a known interior architect for her completion. Anton Fortuyn did the beautiful interior and exterior teak carvings. She was launched in 1948. Greeve sold her in 1953 to Charles M. Donnelly of Groton, Ct. for \$75,000.

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# RESURFACES...RESURFACED!

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If you're interested in the details, you can visit Jack van Ommen's webpage and follow the links to read the story in full: <http://www.cometosea.us/GrooteBeer.htm>

Suffice it to say that *Groote Beer* came to North America and changed hands a number of times. Her delft tile, carved teak and Italian marble details are still intact, but as of the early-80s, she had certainly seen better days and had become a bit shabby. Her woes were not only cosmetic but probably structural. My first date with my high school boyfriend, another member of the Explorer's Post, was a late night foray to the *Groote Beer* to pump her bilge—which had to be done rather frequently. How's that for a romantic rendezvous?

But the best part of discovering van Ommen's article on-line, was that *Groote Beer's* long and interesting story has a very happy ending. A South African man who now lives in Holland has purchased *Groote Beer* and taken her back to Holland for a full and thorough restoration. To see some fabulous photos both above and below decks of the newly restored *Groote Beer*, visit Jack's web page:



Photo: Jan Willem

*Groote Beer* out for a sail in all her restored glory!

<http://cometosea.atforest.com/albums/G.B.Restored/>

I hope to see her again some day, but I feel so much better knowing that the vessel that played such a large part in my adolescent adventures has been so beautifully restored—probably better than she was when she was new.

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## THERE WERE MORE...

(Continued from page 3)

eagles long have been a symbol of the German empire. That makes Ransome's choice of this metaphor very interesting. Consider its context in the book: The *Goblin* is returning from a forced, and dangerous, trip to Europe for which the ship was ill-prepared. The trip happened because the ship's owner was injured. During the voyage, the *Goblin* nearly gets run down by a large, aggressive German liner. Coming to its rescue in Holland is an officer of the Royal Navy, Commander Walker, who is hurrying home for some unspecified but obviously important assignment. When the "German eagle" is encountered, both Commander Walker and the boat's recuperating owner are back on board. The metaphor is eerily predictive of Britain's plight at the start of World War II. It stands out as much in a children's book as does the Coots's encounter with Harry Bangate.

In the time frame of the series, *WD* is in the early 1930s, a tad before most Britons began to be worried about an overly aggressive Germany. But even within the time frame of the books, it is quite reasonable to believe that Commander Walker was privy to information that made him concerned about events on the Continent. Something im-

portant caused his hurried recall from the Far East, because as we later learn in *Secret Water*, he was given scant leave once he got back to Britain.

We also need to consider what was going on while Ransome was writing the book. *WD* appeared in 1937, when the threat of Hitler was becoming more apparent to many all over the world, including the erstwhile war correspondent Ransome. Brogan tells us that on Sept. 27, 1938, Ransome wrote in his diary "the stark word 'war.'" That specter surely was on his mind when he conflated a cormorant with a "German eagle" and almost had his child heroes run down by a German liner.

Ransome wrote his books to entertain and inform. Birds play a key role in achieving both goals. In two instances, however, on an eel sett late at night on the Norfolk Broads, and in the return of maturing sailors from an overseas adventure, he used birds to explore more than just the joys of childhood and British folk life.

*Avi Lank grew up reading Ransome in Rochester, N.Y. He lives in Milwaukee. Contact him at [avilank@execpc.com](mailto:avilank@execpc.com)*

# ROBBERG HOLIDAYS WITH

By James Wessel Walker  
Michigan

When I was a child I spent Christmas holidays at Plettenberg Bay on the Indian Ocean coast of the Cape Province of South Africa. One of the special features of this beautiful place is Robberg, a high, narrow, rocky peninsula stretching several miles straight out to sea. It is now a nature reserve and national monument, but it was a little-known wild place when four small boys explored it fifty years ago.

Robberg is about two miles long and nowhere more than a half mile wide. Sandstone cliffs drop several hundred feet into the water on the northern side, sheltering Plettenberg Bay. Here the water is deep, calm, and clear, with a bottom far below of clean, smooth sand. When we were older and bolder we could slip into the water with fins, face masks, and spear guns. The tricky part was getting out. We had to climb ashore at the top of a swell before the water dropped away and promptly scramble beyond the reach of the next swell. We learned to take off our fins before making the move.

The other side of the peninsula faces Queen Maude Land in Antarctica across three thousand miles of open ocean. The water on this side is shallow and rocky. Wild, white surf extends out from shore farther than any angler can cast a baited hook. We stayed well out of the reach of this water.

Robberg is cut off from the rest of Africa by a deep cleft, the Gap, that stretches right across the peninsula. From the parking lot on the mainland the trail descends steeply into the Gap and then divides. The northern branch climbs back up above the cliffs and runs along the top of the ridge with fairly easy going and fine views across Plettenberg Bay. The southern branch descends to the shore, offering an exciting scramble along the edge of the surf over and around boulders following a route that depends on the height of the tide.

About a third of the way along the southern shore is the Island, a rocky hillock a few hundred yards across and a quarter of a mile offshore, connected to Robberg itself by a wide sand dune. The Island was a wonderland. On our

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## DISPATCH FROM DIXON'S FARM

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My co-worker Martin makes butter and has taught me to make cheese and quark (German soft cheese). Martin has also been making real cheese, but it will be a few weeks before it is finished. After breakfast we go out to feed the younger animals their "cake", which is an apparently delicious food supplement that looks a bit like guinea pig food.

After that, each day is different. We're trying to finish off the winter projects before we get too busy with spring things. There's sowing seeds for the garden and green house, maintaining the hedges and fences around the farm, building a new woodshed, and much more. And of course, with so many people around, cooking dinner and washing dishes takes time as well. Some days, when there isn't too much happening, my co-worker Katharina and I find time to play recorder-piano duets together. One of my favorite times of day, however, is the early evening when I go to fetch the cows and goats from the pasture. This involves climbing up to the top of the farm where I can look out across the valley. Even on a rainy day the view is beautiful. Sometimes the lights in the villages across the valley have been lit and they look very close, though they're actually quite some distance away. It's peaceful and relaxing to look at the view, but I rarely



Sheep out to pasture at Tyr Eithin Farm in Wales.

linger long since there's another whole round of feeding and watering and milking to be done before bed!

*Ten Gong Contributing Editor Mary Wessel-Walker seems to be moving from one adventure to another. Stay tuned for her next dispatch!*

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# DRAGONS & OCTOPUSES

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first visit we found seagull nests with recently hatched nestlings in every convenient hollow. The nestlings were irresistibly cute. We cuddled them, which was a mistake. On our next visit we found those nestlings dead. They had been rejected by their parents. I suppose they smelled of human hands. We never again went near an occupied nest.

There was a dragon in the Island. We could hear it huffing and puffing through a crack in the rock. We would try to feed our handkerchiefs to the dragon by spreading them over the crack. The hanky would disappear down the hole for a few moments before being spat out into the air with an angry roar. Only occasionally was a hanky sacrifice accepted. The loss did not matter. We had no better use for handkerchiefs. Some people may have believed that our dragon was a blowhole, a fissure in the rock connected to a cave at the waterline. Air trapped in the cave by an incoming wave would be forced up through the fissure with a whoosh and then sucked back with a snuffle as the water receded.

Even more wonderful were the tidal pools. The waves have cut horizontal ledges at mean water level all around the Island. At low tide we explored pools inhabited by sea anemones, algae, crabs, fish, and even little octopuses. I was and still am reluctant to touch anything underwater that moves, but Dennis and Morris, more reckless than I, would use their bare feet as bait to find out what the suckers of a little octopus felt like.

We occasionally spent the night in a hut on Robberg that faced the Island across the sand. It belonged to the Plettenberg Bay Angling Club and was called the Fountains



Robberg Peninsula

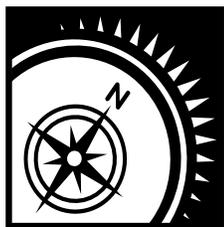
Shack because it was close to a spring. As I remember, this spring was the only reliable source of fresh water on Robberg. The PBAC had another hut, the Point Shack, at the very tip of Robberg. I learn from the internet that the Point Shack has recently been restored and that restoration is planned for the Fountains Shack. There are photos at <http://www.rscg.co.za/StatusPhotos.htm>. The Point Shack is now smarter than I remember it. The Fountains Shack is more decrepit. The photos are worth a visit not just for the shacks, but also because they show so vividly the climate and the landscape that Dennis, Morris, David, and I enjoyed when we were young. They also show how we might have looked a few decades ago if we had stayed in the land where we were born.

Fishing became our main activity on Robberg once we had thoroughly explored the peninsula. We were always sent off in the care of a ghillie, an experienced fisherman who knew the ways of the sea as well as the best spots and the right bait. Jonas, though a small man, would also do most of the carrying, food and rods on the hike in, fish and rods on the hike out. At low tide he would gather bait, scrambling barefoot down the rocks as a wave receded, catching the creature he was after, and scrambling up again with the incoming wave lapping at his heels. From Jonas we learned always to keep an eye to seaward to watch for the freak big wave. We also learned that the third wave tends to be bigger than the two before.

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## Adventurers Wanted!

Have any adventures to share with our readers?  
New insights into the AR books?  
Recommendations of great travel, reading and other adventures for us armchair travelers?



Photos, projects and other ideas are also most welcome!  
Please send them to *Signals from TARSUS*  
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*Deadline for the fall 2007 issue: Aug 15th*

# ROBBERG MEMORIES

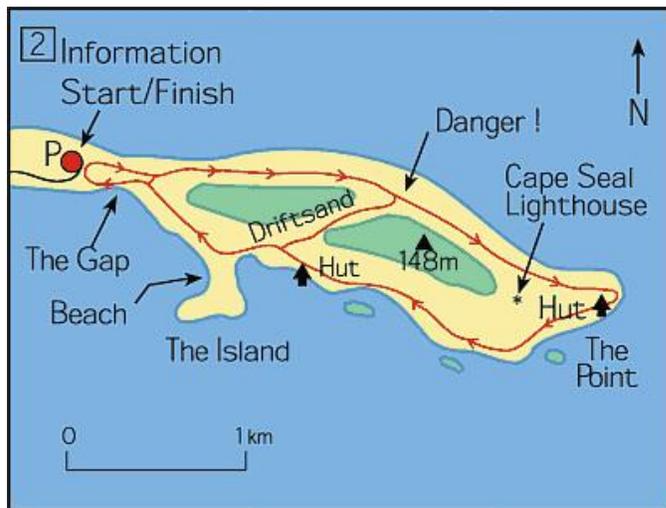
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We started fishing with heavy bamboo rods and reels that were simply large spools on an axle with a handle for winding and no brake or gearing. Of course we yearned for the fancier tackle on display at the general dealer in the village. After a few years, the profits of the Plettenberg Bay Salvage and Smelting Company (see *Signals from TARSUS*, December 2006) allowed us to buy fiberglass rods and “American” reels with gears and brakes. Whereas our old tackle had restricted us to bait fishing in the rough waters on the south side of Robberg we could now spin for yellowtails and leervis at the Point. This was much more exciting.

Bait fishing necessitated sitting and waiting for a tug on the line, winding in from time to time to make sure that the bait had not been stolen. Spinning provided continual action: cast, wind the spinner in slowly, cast again. On the sheltered side of the Point we could cast into deep water effectively two miles out to sea. Some really big fish pounced on our lures. I don't think any of us ever caught a fish weighing more than a boy, but we caught many that were larger than the Death and Glories' champion pike.

A mighty heave on a long flexible rod can cast a heavy spinner a long way out to sea. The trick is to take the thumb off the reel to let the line run free at just the right moment. Too soon and the spinner soars straight up into the air. Too late and the spinner plunges into the water at the fisherman's feet. It is just as important to get the thumb firmly back on the reel as soon as the spinner splashes down. If the reel runs free when line is no longer being drawn out, a bird's nest of fishing line explodes around the reel in the blink of an eye. Then the careless or uncoordinated fisherman must find a quiet corner in which to try to sort out the tangle and get the line neatly and tightly wound back onto the reel. I spent enough time in this way that the activity came to be known as “Jim doing his knitting”.

Out at the Point one day I had just made a bird's nest and was bending over my knitting with my back to the water when I felt an agonizing whack on my tail. Den knew that his spinner had hit something during a mighty cast. He thought it was a rock and called out “Did you see the sparks, Jim?” I straightened up slowly and put a cautious hand around behind. There was a large, three-pronged, barbed hook with one prong



Layout of the Robberg Peninsula

buried deep in my flesh. The link that fastened the hook to the spinner had broken. Den's spinner had completed the cast, but the hook had stayed with me.

There followed a debate about what to do. I favored walking, or better still being carried, to the parking lot, there to be met by an ambulance and trained medical personnel. Den, who was eager to get back to fishing, favored yanking the hook out with one great heave or, failing that, leaving it where it was for a couple of days until it was time to go home. Fortunately, Jonas knew what to do and had the skill and determination to do it. While I dug my fingers into Den's shoulders trying to inflict as much pain as I could, Jonas took pliers from the tackle box and used them to twist the hook around to thread the point and its barb back to the surface. I still remember vividly how hard he worked to do this. Bottoms are tougher than I would have imagined. Then he nipped off the point and barb with the pliers and painlessly slid the rest of the hook out of me. He splashed a little iodine on the two punctures and we all went back to fishing, or rather, the others went back to fishing while I went back to my knitting.

Did I get tetanus? No. Did I get sympathy? No. All I got was a bruise that soon faded, a patch on my shorts that lasted a little longer and, as a souvenir, a three-pronged fishing hook missing a point.

*Jim Wessel Walker, a retired Professor of Environmental Studies, is the father of Ten-Gong Contributing Editor, Mary Wessel Walker. He sails the Wildcat on lakes great and small in and around Michigan.*

# AR'S SEAMANSHIP TIPS

By Ben Zartman  
California

One of the less appreciated attributes of Arthur Ransome, it seems evident after reading various editions of *Signals* and *Mixed Moss*, is what an extraordinary seaman he was. His books contain scores of little nautical tidbits—from his description of how to draw a bucket of water from the deck of a moving boat to the sound of a dinghy towing gently astern—that give evidence to the breadth of experience and knowledge that he had. Certainly, no one who has read his books can miss that he was a well-versed sailor, but just how much of one I never understood until I went to sea myself.

AR probably bears the greatest responsibility for my having gone to sea at all, for it was while my mother read his books to me as a child that I first began to take interest in all things nautical. Of course, the first time *Peter Duck* and *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea* were read to me, I didn't know what a cockpit was; I imagined it to be a many-paned plexiglass dome like those found on some WWII bombers.

It goes without saying, then, that I let pass unappreciated the dozens of other maritime morsels that he so seamlessly wove into the fabric of his tales. But many of them lodged in my subconscious, and when I finally signed on as crew of a sailboat bound for Mexico at the age of eighteen, those odds and ends of information resurfaced during the day-to-day operation of the boat.

In the twelve years that have elapsed since that first voyage, I have continued both to sail and to read AR, and can now relate firsthand to most of the practical nautical gleanings to be had from his various books.

In *Peter Duck* they hold the stay'sl to windward to pull the Wild Cat's head off the quay; this is a tactic I have found useful more than once. Not having a handle for the halyard winches of the 27-foot sloop my wife and I cruised lately, I tensioned the halyards by swigging, just like Peter Duck.

(Continued on page 10)



The Zartman family taking delivery of a bare hull of a Cape George 31' pilot cutter purchased from the manufacturer in Washington State. They are currently working to build the rest of the boat.

# AR'S SEAMANSHIP TIPS

(Continued from page 9)

The wisdom of making sure the end of the anchor rode is made fast aboard (see *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea*) was impressed upon me one late afternoon in the estuary of a Guatemalan river, when a sudden squall forced us to heave the anchor over in a frightful depth of water, and fathom after fathom of anchor rope rushed over the side—nearly all the rode we had—before the anchor finally found bottom. Had it not been made fast inside the anchor locker, I could not have so glibly let it run out, for fear of losing the end, and the anchor, forever.

Though there are far too many of these incidents to list, there is one opinion of Mr Ransome's that I came to share so wholeheartedly it is worth mentioning.

"...nothing at all but the noise of foghorns," says Peter Duck as the *Wild Cat* sails down Channel, "and us groping our way in blind and wishing all steamships was at the bottom of the sea." Even the most staunch landsman can probably picture a steamship, charging right along like they do, running down a slow-moving sailboat (all sailboats are slow-moving in the fog, since there is generally very little wind. If they all use their fog signals properly,

there is very little chance of a collision among them), even if AR hadn't put vivid descriptions of near-collisions during fog into several of his books.

But there is more to Mr. Duck's statement than that. The noise of power-driven vessels drowns out the fainter sound of bell buoys and fog whistles, and while feeling our way toward Block Island in heavy fog after five days at sea my wife and I very nearly missed a key buoy because of one that passed inopportunistically astern, completely blanketing the sound of the crucial navigational aids.

So sound have proved all of the bits and pieces of practical seamanship I've gleaned from AR, that when shopping for a larger boat to accommodate our two young daughters, I purchased what he considered to be the seaworthy-est design—a pilot cutter style of hull; in effect a smaller version of the boat in *Great Northern*?—with short ends, stern-hung rudder and long, heavy keel. And though the gaff rig has lost much popularity of late, I will be rigging our boat with one, having my confidence bolstered by all the information to be found about them among the pages of my favorite series of books.

## MEET THE ZARTMEN FAMILY!

That we are sailors we owe, in great part, to the Swallows and the Amazons. I think my first interest in all things nautical was sparked by AR's books, an interest which lead to devouring all books nautical during my early teens, and eventually to buying a dilapidated 27' sloop and putting to sea with my wife, Danielle. Much of AR's information on small boat handling, seemingly just an aside in the books, comes in very handy when actually at sea. For instance, I would never have thought to make the end of the anchor rode fast aboard if John had not lost his in *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea*. But a little experience shows this to be very good sense. There is much sound nautical advice to be gleaned from reading the S&A books, and we read many of them while actually on the trip.

A voyage from Florida to the furthest Caribbees, then up the US East coast, finally ended when we discovered a child to be on the way (we thought the morning sickness was just queasiness as we sailed about the grey North Atlantic). So we left our boat, *Capella*, with a broker in Massachusetts and moved back home to California, there to save up for and dream of our next boat.



Ben Zartman and his ship's baby working on a sailing dinghy project

# MEET THE ZARTMAN FAMILY

(Continued from page 10)

In order not to forget the water, since we live far from the ocean, high in the Sierra Nevada mountains, I began a small business building sailing and rowing dinghies from fiberglass ([www.mariposacustomcrafts.com](http://www.mariposacustomcrafts.com)). So we can still do Ransome-ish things in the many reservoirs and lakes we live among.

After much shopping around, we discovered the perfect family cruising boat: a Cape George 31' pilot cutter, built in Port Townsend, Washington. Our ideal hull shape was influenced in great part by AR's opinion of what makes a good boat—short ends and a square transom, and a keel that gets gradually deeper by the stern. Unable to afford buying a finished one, we purchased the bare hull—no decks, bulkheads, ballast, anything—just a fiberglass shell, and are working to complete it by the time our second daughter, born in September of '06, should be old enough to put to sea. It has proved so far a great challenge, but there is reward in seeing it all slowly come together.

Last, but not least, of the Ransome-ish things we indulge in is writing. I began writing magazine articles (with pencil and paper) while cruising on *Capella*, and have lately published half-a-dozen in various sailing magazines. A serial, about the building of our pilot cutter, is due to begin this summer in *Cruising World*. A book I have written about the voyages of *Capella* is having less success being sold to a publisher, but hopes still remain high. And though I don't mention it until the very last, the project I'm most excited about is a translation I am working on, into Spanish, of *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea*. Although sixty years ago or more some of the S&A books were translated into Spanish, those have been all but lost, and I feel there is need for an updated translation into readable Spanish. Swallows and Amazons for ever!

Ben, Danielle, Antigone and Emily Zartman can be reached for comment or question at:  
4147 Vista Grande Way  
Mariposa, CA 95338 USA  
Phone (209) 742 6260  
or by email: [benz@yosemite.net](mailto:benz@yosemite.net)



The completed Swallow/Amazon inspired dinghy.

## Update 4/16/07 from Ben Zartman:

Ben sent an update dispatch on 4/15/07 to let TARS members know that he is making progress on the large boat (pictured on page 9) and they hope to complete it "sometime in '09". Ben says, "we have tentatively named the boat *Ganymede*. It is the name of one of Saturn's moons, and though not very feminine for a boat, the only other name on the table was *Dutiful Penitence*—the name of a character from my second favorite set of children's books. By the way, if you ever get *Cruising World* magazine, a column I am writing on the building of the boat is scheduled to start this June."



The Zartman's boat showing great progress as of April '07

## **TIDBITS FROM TARSUS**

### **Signals needs you!**

Thanks to the many new and veteran Signals contributors for submitting their creative, thought-provoking and entertaining articles for this issue of *Signals from TARSUS*.

### **Late summer/early fall issue deadline: August 15!**

Contact me for submission format and length guidelines. Thanks! Debra Alderman, *Signals* editor:  
dalderman@antiochsea.edu

### **Welcome new members**

The following folks have joined TARSUS since the January 07 issue:

Robert , Pamela, Elana & Arthur Goldman, Family, MN  
Beverly Hock, Adult , CA  
Pamela Marshall, Adult, NH (rejoin after absence)  
Robert Owens, Adult, NY  
Helen, Mackenzie and Harriet Reid, Family, CT  
Chris & Virginia White, Family, MD  
Trevor Winkfield, Adult, NY

### **TARSUS contact information**

Dave Thewlis is the TARS U.S. coordinator.

Please note his new address:

4390 Chaffin Lane

McKinleyville, CA 95519-8028

[dave@arthur-ransome.org](mailto:dave@arthur-ransome.org)

707-840-9391 (work phone, messages)

415-946-3454 (fax)

### **Resumes of fellow TARSUS members:**

Dave says he can supply a complete new resume file to any TARSUS member who requests, but will have to charge about \$3.50 for it in printing and mailing costs. If newish members would like to share their "resume" or short biography, with all the current members, they can also submit it to Debra for publication in SFT.

## **Amazon Publication 2007**



More than 20 years before Hugh Brogan and Christina Hardyment's seminal works, Hugh Shelley wrote the first serious appraisal of the work of Arthur Ransome and the appeal of the *Swallows and Amazons* books. In eleven short chapters such as 'The Holidays', 'Characters and Character', 'Forerunners, Fairy tales and Fantasy', 'Children and Adults' and 'Children and the Writer', Shelley became the first to analyze their amazing success, and the only commentator to interview Ransome himself and to benefit from his input.

The inclusion of Ransome's comments in his diary when he corrected the proofs, and the annotations in his personal copy will make the Amazon edition of Hugh Shelley's little-known monograph, first published by The Bodley Head in 1960, rather special.

*Arthur Ransome* by Hugh Shelley (96 pp, hardback) will be published (with the permission of the Random Century Group) for subscribers, at a suggested contribution of \$26 for overseas airmail, and will appear to coincide with the TARS AGM in May 2007.

To purchase this publication, send your check for \$26 made out to "TARS" to Dave Thewlis, the TARS U.S. Coordinator, and indicating on the memo line that it is for the 2007 Amazon Publication.

This price includes postage. Mail your check to Dave Thewlis (see address in column, left).

## **IF WE'VE 'TIPPED YOU THE BLACK SPOT' YOU'RE A MARKED MEMBER, MATEY!**

If you have not yet renewed your TARS membership, a renewal form is included with this packet and the envelope has a big black spot on it! Please renew by early May or you will be dropped from the TARS membership rolls! (*and miss out on future issues of this and other fabulous TARS publications!*)

***STIR YOUR STUMPS! RENEW TODAY!***