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# Tree frog's lovely day sail

By Chip Cunningham – Aboard Solje

W1321

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**L**et's start with the frog: an Eastern Gray Tree Frog. During summer it lives in Solje, W1321. She, the boat I mean, – the frog may be a she but I really have no idea – is a gracefully ageing woodie built by Small Craft in England in the middle '60s. The frog is a beautiful putty green terrestrial creature about an inch and a half long. It has delicate fingers with suction cup-like things at the ends. Its hind legs are brilliant yellow underneath. It is solitary. They can change color – to gray, as you might suspect. A closely related frog, the Green Tree Frog of the southern U.S., is sometimes kept as a pet. They can live to be 16 years old. Sailing is not one of their usual behaviors.

Solje lives outside year round on her trailer next to the propane tank covered with two tarps. When the top one wears out, I take it off and put a new tarp under the former bottom tarp. It is a good arrangement. The varnish looks fine. There's never a leak or condensation. I make sure to take any nest building material out of the boat for winter. I cringe every time I remember that Solje's hull was packed half full of raccoon crap when Gary Hirsch bought her. There should be some special Wayfarer Association award for him for dealing with that.

Many years back with the arrival of the warm months, I began to find a tree frog underneath the red dome cap on the propane tank when I checked the gauge to see how full it was. Then, four years ago, I began to find a suspiciously similar frog on Solje's rear deck when I pulled the tarps off to go sailing. I carefully put the frog back under the red cap, or sometimes just in the grass and leaves under the propane tank. Once I carried the frog all the way to the house and put it in a flower bed.

At first, I was amazed to find the frog back in the boat next time I went sailing. Now I expect it. When it is not immediately visible, I look for it. I am fond of it. It has a way of looking at me that I interpret as curious, friendly

even. I want to avoid the scenario where the struggling frog's suction cups finally let go as we reach highway speed on the way to a launch site, and of it flying off into the air, and landing on the pavement. The possibilities only get worse from there. So I search for the frog and I usually find it. I say a few words to it about when I plan to be back and put it by the propane tank.

This year, being the strange year it has been, my sailing schedule suffered. The garden, on the other hand, was one of the best. A half bushel of dry black beans. 12 bushels of potatoes, 98 delicata, buttercup and butternut squash, and 120 feet of carrots yet to be dug. One of the most sure-fire ways to grow most of what you eat is to eat mostly what you grow. Variety might drop, but it is tremendously satisfying.



W1321 Solje, a gracefully ageing '60s woodie, in calmer times.

I've learned to get along with them.

The day of this story, the wind was really howling. NOAA weather was predicting a steady 25 MPH gusting to 40. Scout's honor. That promise to liven things up was playing out: the water was one big cat's paw. But I am not completely crazy, so I livened things down with the working jib and one reef in the main. I put my hearing aids in a drybox.

The wind was north-northwest. The arm of the lake that leads from the launch ramp to the big part of the lake is roughly east-west and only about 300-yards across, so it was fairly protected from the full wind. Passing a channel open to the north between the north shore and a small island at its east end gave me a blast of what was actually going on. I nosed up in the lee of the island and put a second reef in

The few times I've been sailing have been at nearby Lakeville Lake in Oakland County, Mich. It's got two bridges to shoot and a couple of arms that can be mildly tricky to get in and out of. But overall, it's become pretty routine.

To get the most bang for my buck this year, I went on the windiest days. I remember when the cat's paws coming across the water at the launching ramp would make my stomach tighten. Their lessons have often been wet, but

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the main. I have sailed in wind numbers like these before and so, confidently, for what it's worth, I sailed out into the main part of the lake.

The waves were almost as high as Solje's freeboard. I'd say a foot and a half. The main lake has a fetch of a mile to the north, but I have never seen waves like these on this lake before. Solje was on a reach and we were really flying. Her acceleration in the gusts was thrilling, right up until the main went limp and the aft end of the boom fell in the water. Uncle Al's (Schonborn W3854) phantom voice shouted "Safety Position!" I let the jib go and dove to get the centerboard up. The situation calmed down enough to discover that the aft end of the second slab reefing line had pulled out of its anchor loop. So much for using a stopper knot there. Solje had shipped enough water to fill the bilge.

And there was the frog, on the floorboard next to the hand hole to the bailer. The frog gave me that look I told you about earlier. I imagined that it had come up to get away from the water. Remember, they're terrestrial frogs. I doubt it fully appreciated the rest of what we were facing. I put the frog in a small screw-top drywall bucket tied against the forward bulkhead.

"Things could get worse," I explained. "Why don't you ride in here."

I dropped the main and pulled the boom aboard. I remembered to close the bailers. The wind blew us toward a relatively protected place along the east shore. In the shallows I jumped out and, while holding Solje against the wind, tied the reefing line back on with a bowline. With the reef tack back onto the reefing hook, the main pulled up, and the slab reefing line snugged, I pushed the board down and we headed west back across the lake.

I was feeling pretty good about having remembered to open the bailers when Solje went way up on her side and took on a little more water. I let both sails go but Solje just kept slowly rolling up. Hiking out didn't do too much good because by now I was hiking perpendicular to the water.

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particular hurry to get around to the upwind side.

I sail with a wooden mast because it floats and I really don't want to turtle single handed. Imagine my surprise then as Solje just kept slowly rolling until she was turtled. Lakeville Lake is shallow with lots of old tree stumps. I began to get a bad feeling. But as I pushed down on the leeward gunwale she just kept rolling. I swear that must be the only place in the lake deep enough to do that! She came up to windward and, true to what Uncle Al says, righting to

That, and I'm below 150 pounds (see above about diet). The mast hit the water and I climbed down to make sure the sails were free. I was in no



Google Earth

Lakeville Lake, about an hour north of Detroit. North is up. The main part of the lake is a mile long. The launch ramp is at the very bottom left.

leeward is not going to work. She capsized again toward me. This time I dove under her before she turtled and got a hold of the centerboard. I didn't even have to climb up on the board to get her rolling to windward. She came up, I pulled myself aboard up over the side and, for the second time this day, scrambled to get the centerboard up.

"See what I mean?" I said to the frog.

I took a moment to appreciate the thigh and torso wetsuit I had gone back in the house to put on under the insulated bib pants I was wearing. I took another moment to marvel that the mast had not stuck in the bottom. Twice, both times on Lake Eustis, I have had a mast stick: once during a race with Nick (Seraphinoff), and once alone. Nick and I both, even with me at my racing weight of 180 pounds, could not get the boat to budge. A stuck mast needs a pull on its bow line from a powerboat—like a committee crash boat—to get out. The time I was

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singlehanded, I waited, perched on the hull for over an hour until a group of folks partying on a catamaran motored past me and gave me a tug. As I see it now, the mechanics of a capsize to leeward in depths less than the height of the mast, position the mast angled on the bottom so that the continued push of the wind on the hull drives the mast into the mud.

I bailed like crazy for a while. The frog's bucket was in place. Everything except the 50-foot floating-line throw bag seemed to still be in the boat. When the water level was only a few inches over the floorboards, I put the centerboard back down and trimmed the sails in. The bailers emptied the hull surprisingly fast.

Things were beginning to improve as we reached across the most exposed stretch of the lake right up until the mainsail burst. A swirl of white threads and one batten spun wildly away. As before, the boom fell into the water.

"See what I mean?" I said to the frog and pulled the centerboard up.

The blown mainsail was easier to take care of than the previous problems, although it was flapping around quite a bit at first. I let the halyard go and got the luff rope out of the mast. Once the boom was shipped and the main was tucked under the thwart, things quieted down. The larger problem of sailing back to the ramp was shaping up to be more time and labor intensive. We had drifted far to leeward into a south bay of the lake. Solje will point on her working jib alone but less than half as well as usual. Subtract a little more for having to steer down for enough oomph to get through the waves against that wind and it turned into a long beat home. I had to gybe around for most of the tacks.

When I did get home, I called Sky out to the boat. She knows about the frog. I told her the story in a way that let the suspense build. Together we opened the frog's bucket. The frog was very gray. Confusion? Exasperated? Seasick? We put it by the propane tank and I went about straightening up the boat.

The mainsail had torn open on the leech at a batten pocket. (Had I noticed sunlight coming through a small crease there the other day?) Solje was dried out by the next day. The main has been replaced with what I think is her original main: a Lucas from England. The logo and numbers are in an elegant somewhat vintage font. It has no reefing points. It won't need them. I called to the frog that until

we get a new reefing main, our sailing will be much more sedate. But I haven't seen it since.

Next summer, then.

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## L'esprit de l'escalier

As I said earlier, I have sailed singlehanded in wind numbers like these before. Twice now I have gone out on Lake Huron, and twice on Inner Saginaw Bay in small craft advisories with sustained winds above 23 mph, gusts above 30 and waves around 5 feet. All of those times the main was double reefed and the working jib on roller reefing. It was a handful, but I don't remember even taking much water over the rail. Once I learned the trick of tacking coming up on the crest of a wave, I was in sufficient control. It might not have been all that elegant, but I was out in it for a long time and got back OK.

So what happened with the capsize on Lakeville? One thought that feels right to me, and Uncle Al has mentioned it too, is that the wind got under the hull. I was too casual about getting Solje back down when she started to heel. I let the sails go, but that did nothing to reduce the windage of the hull. The capsize did feel kind of slow-motion. If I ever feel a capsize like that again I am bolting over onto the centerboard, which may not be all that bad an idea anyway. I have done a few dry recoveries and they are much easier. But they are dry only up to a point: you do still have to bail the boat out.

As for the turtling, I have capsized and allowed Solje to lie on her side many times. Her mast has never gone below the surface. In this case, the wind must have continued to push her hull over. It was enough to sink the mast. The wind was also why she righted to leeward so easily. I love how righting to leeward sets up a righting to windward. Forget swimming the mast around!

But why was the wind such a problem this time? Here's my current thinking. On Lake Huron and Saginaw Bay in those wind conditions the waves build to much higher than Solje's freeboard. The waves break up the laminar flow of the wind down at the level of Solje's hull. In this similar wind, the waves on Lakeville only built to a foot and a half and disrupted the laminar flow of air to a much shallower extent. The wind still had an organized flow low enough to catch the hull and roll it.

There is no end to sailing, is there.

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