Off the Grid

Coastal British Columbia Stories

Wayne J. Lutz

Powell River Books

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About this Book

The stories are true, and the characters are real.
Some details are adjusted to protect the guilty.
All of the mistakes rest solidly with the author.

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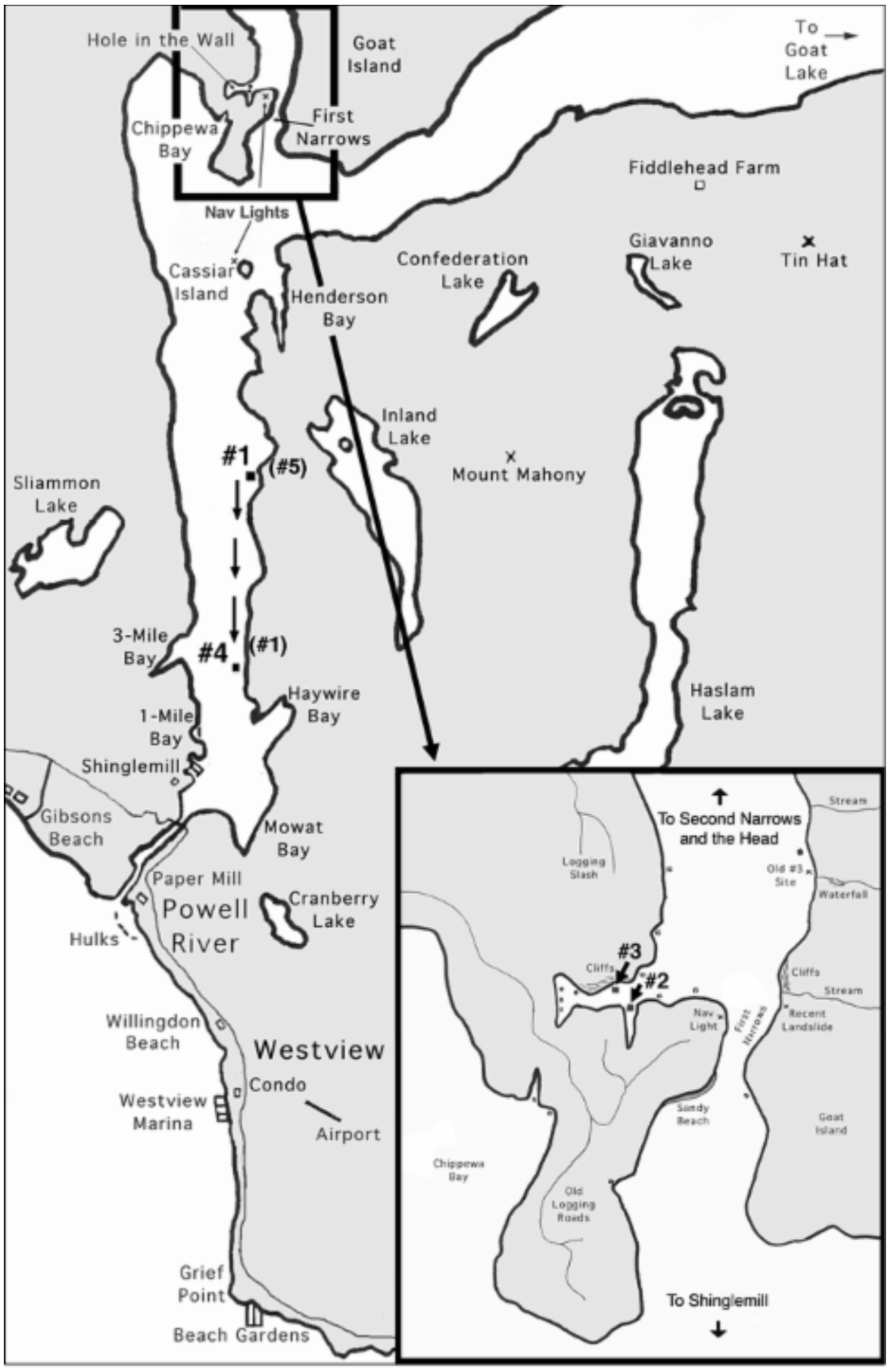
Updates in this version of Off the Grid:
Captions added to photos; text format upgraded

Books by Wayne J. Lutz
Coastal British Columbia Stories
Up the Lake
Up the Main
Up the Winter Trail
Up the Strait
Up the Airway
Farther Up the Lake
Farther Up the Main
Farther Up the Strait
Cabin Number 5
Off the Grid
Up the Inlet
Science Fiction Titles
Echo of a Distant Planet
Inbound to Earth
Anomaly at Fortune Lake
When Galaxies Collide
Across the Galactic Sea
Pacific Northwest Series
Flying the Pacific Northwest
Paddling the Pacific Northwest

Powell Lake Region



Lower Powell Lake

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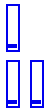

Preface

The 3 R’s

“I bet you wonder what I do up the lake.”

I sometimes find it’s best to get this question out in the open right away. Those who haven’t lived off the grid are likely to ask whether such a lifestyle would bring boredom or even cabin fever, with a bit of lunacy mixed in. Seldom does anyone ask how I manage in such a remote lifestyle, as if I might consider the question offensive. So I sometimes jump in right away. Such is the case today when I decide to explain before the question arises.

“My style of backwoods living isn’t for everyone. So you might wonder what in the world I do with all of that quiet time. Don’t you?”

“Not really,” replies Tim. “I know you’re a writer, so I bet it’s a good place to write.”

“That’s for sure,” I reply.

Living off the grid might not work for me if I didn’t have an outlet like writing. Up the lake is the perfect spot, and I usually have two or three books going simultaneously, in various stages of production.

“I love to read,” says Tim. “It sounds like a place where a guy could knock off books all day long, to his heart’s content. I can picture myself doing that.”

I’m a big reader, too, and I’m not sure anyone should tackle such a lifestyle without a passion for reading.

“Nothing like the three R’s,” I reply. “Reading, writing, and a little ‘rithmetic. Very little, actually, so maybe the third R should be ‘radio.’ I listen to a lot of satellite radio and CBC.”

“I never listen to the radio at home,” says Tim. “Only in my car. But you don’t have TV or the Internet, do you?”

“No. But that’s more by choice than necessity. Almost anywhere in the world today you can have both television and the Internet with a satellite

receiver and just a little bit of solar power. But there's something about living up the lake that makes me want to avoid satellite technology. I get plenty of TV and the Internet when I come back to town."

"I hadn't thought of that," notes Tim. "I like the idea of the 3 R's. But doing without TV and the Internet might be tough."

On the other hand, it might just be what makes off-the-grid living particularly alluring for me.

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The phrase "off the grid" can be interpreted in several ways. Before the expression became popular, a friend called me an "off-the-grid kind of guy." At the time, I didn't know specifically what "off the grid" meant, but I interpreted it as living without electrical utilities, or maybe residing beyond the normal extent of the grid lines on a map. In fact, either interpretation is accurate, and these two conditions are typically found together. Expand the phrase a bit further to include "on-your-own" for all utilities, not just electrical power, and the fit is complete.

"Off the grid" is thus associated with a lifestyle some of us select in order to experience remoteness and detachment from society. It's a concept that can be construed as the opposite of one of my favourite descriptors: "city-folk."

This is what I found in British Columbia, more specifically on Powell Lake. Float cabin life and its contrast to my previous existence as "city-folk" formed the foundation for my first book, Up the Lake, and its follow-up volume, Farther Up the Lake. In fact, all of my books in the series Coastal British Columbia Stories involve a common theme of seeking an off-the-grid existence.

Another common thread in my writing is the magic of John, the ingenuous individual who epitomizes "off the grid" in all aspects of his life except (in stark contrast) where he sleeps, a typical city-folk house in Powell River. John has built five float cabins, spends much of his time up

the lake, and knows the backcountry better than any individual I know. He exemplifies the concept of coastal BC as a place where lifestyles focus on self-reliance and a different sense of purpose.

John built my cabin, his third, which we both refer to fondly as “Number 3.” It was one of the best bargains of my life, although I didn’t realize it at the time. John was simply part of the deal. My wife, Margy, and I inherited a life-long friend who has helped us to face the wonderful challenges of off-the-grid living, and introduced us to this supernatural place where the mountains drop into the sea.

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Chapter 1

Off the Grid – A Sense of Place

"How do you handle human waste?" asks a woman in the last row.

It's a question that seems to be in the back of everyone's mind, and the most common inquiry at the end of my author's promotional slide presentations. Sometimes it's worded more tactfully, sometimes less, but everyone wants to know how you can live without a traditional bathroom.

"Probably many of you have camped in an area where there's no running water," I reply. "Imagine camping on a permanent basis. You develop solutions that are comfortable for you as an individual."

Then I go on to explain that an outhouse fits the purpose just fine for me. For others, modern composting toilets are more "like home" and environmentally friendly. Everyone has their own level of tolerance on any issue, but how you go to the bathroom seems to have profound implications for the quality of life.

If you've ever attended a gathering where an astronaut speaks about spaceflight and personally discovering a part of the universe few of us will ever experience, you'll hear the same question. If it's not asked, it's implied: space exploration is an amazing venture, but how do you go to the bathroom?

There are other common questions, too, involving how to handle the challenges of travel on the lake, the generation of electricity, and living without television and the Internet. Still, consideration for human waste gets top priority. I've always assessed this as an indicator of the challenge in communicating about life off the grid. The bathroom issue is far from the head of the list for me – in fact it's not even on the list. When you're using different checklists, it's often hard to explain.

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My reaction to the catastrophic financial events of late 2008 is an example of how my perceptions of life have changed by living off the grid. When the news of the economic collapse hits, I'm at my float cabin. I'm able to keep up

with world affairs at Hole in the Wall through radio. In fact, I'm typically more in tune with the news of society in my cabin than anywhere else, since I use the radio as my primary source of media entertainment. Without television or Internet, I rely on radio more than ever before. CBC is my primary source for Canadian and world news, while the local FM station keeps me posted on the latest topics in Powell River. The marine radio's weather reports from Environment Canada warn me when to batten down the hatches, or when to make a run for town. I've become a radio junky.

For financial news, a subject I follow enthusiastically, I tune to CNBC on the satellite radio. It broadcasts the exact same programs as CNBC-TV, but without the stock market headers at the top of the screen and the streaming tickers at the bottom. The talking heads are talking voices who often forget they're being broadcast on radio, so it sometimes takes an hour of listening to determine how the Dow Jones Industrial Average is fairing. Still, I listen with interest most every weekday morning.

It doesn't take on-screen graphics to realize the world's economy is in turmoil, and everything except the U.S. dollar is hurtling downward – including stocks, commodities, and the Canadian Loonie. Since my investments, including retirement reserves, are primarily in the U.S. stock market, this is more than a distant news story. I'm directly impacted. Under normal conditions, I would be quickly fine-tuning my portfolio. But here I am, off the grid, knowing almost as much as I would while sitting before an Internet screen, but generally lacking in concern. Of course, I'm not immune to the information, but I'm also untroubled. I don't rush to town to adjust my stock holdings. Instead, I'm paying attention, riveted to the world story, but not terribly distressed. It seems millions of miles away. I'm losing money, just like I would be in town, and that's never a pleasant situation. But I'm less impacted psychologically than I would be otherwise. The world's financial crisis is huge, but the affect on me is somehow lessened.

I look across to Goat Island draped in low stratus. A gentle rain is falling, and the cabin is drifting slowly outward with the wind. Even the wildest world news is moderated by this enduring geologic feature in front of me. The

magnitude of Goat is unaltered, the rain perseveres, and the cabin's direction of travel isn't influenced by this wild turn of financial events. The magnitude of serenity seems to outweigh the power of all human-made problems. I live within a microcosm that refuses to submit to the woes of the mortal world.

If my stock portfolio collapses to zero, I might have to figure out how to survive off the grid for the rest of my life. But I've already been thinking about that extravagance for years.

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Two kayakers paddle side-by-side past my float cabin. As I sit inside, a gentle breeze flows through the screened sliding-glass door. The man and woman ride plastic sit-on-top kayaks, similar to my Mr. Blue – vessels that indicate the paddlers have come from nearby. In fact, they are renters at a neighboring cabin – summer visitors here to enjoy a few days of sun on the lake.

I sit inside my all-season home, looking out at the kayakers. Although they're still a hundred metres away, I hear them speak. Voices travel distinctly over the quiet water.

"Look at that floating garden! How nice," says the middle-aged woman.

"Looks like they're really dug in here," replies her male companion.

"It's nice, but I'd go crazy with nothing to do for long periods of time," continues the woman.

"Me too. It'd be fun, but just for a while."

I can't help but laugh (softly though, so I'm not heard over the tranquil water). If only they knew. But true understanding can only be achieved by experiencing it. That's how it happened to me.

* * * * *

When friends see photos of my floating home, they're often shocked by the cabin's small size. How can anyone live in a house so tiny, half the square footage of a small apartment? Yet I live here in complete harmony, never feeling confined by the walls. That's because I occupy a much larger space, the entire scope of Hole in the Wall, a majestic bay on Powell Lake.

I feel increasingly in tune with the environment. My surroundings are awe-inspiring, and I thrive on this expanse. Cabin fever is of no concern. After a week of sustained winter rain, there's a natural yearning for sunlight, but it has nothing to do with the confinement of my living quarters. My wife, Margy, and I read, write, and work on personal projects, while managing daily chores in our quiet bay. An occasional trip to town is a special adventure, along with the thrill of a boat ride. Boredom isn't on the agenda.

Even when it rains all day, I'm often outside more than on a sunny day in town. There are electrical power panels to manage, a tin boat to bail out, firewood to split, maintenance on the cabin and a variety of small boats, as well as constant checks on the clouds, waterfalls, and the water level in the lake. These may be ordinary tasks, but they're far from mundane. The constantly changing vista from a passing storm makes stepping outside a personal treat. Getting a little wet is hardly a challenge. I have plenty of dry clothes and the warmth of a wood stove. Without television or the Internet, I've an abundance of time to spare, and little of it is wasted.

The lack of visitors during the off-season (which is every season except summer) makes my surroundings a serene and intimate environment. Not only do Margy and I live in this tranquil bay, we feel we possess it, and it mutually dominates us. In fact, during those many days when we're the only humans in the Hole, it's ours alone. We're fully immersed in our sense of place.

Crew boats carrying loggers cruise up the lake just before dawn, passing through First Narrows, a kilometre to the east. Sometimes the gentle roll from a workboat's backwash against the cabin foundation awakens me. My home rocks up and down, though barely noticeable. It's an enchanting reminder of where I live, and enough to propel me contentedly back to sleep.

Late in the afternoon, those same crew boats travel back down through the narrows, hurrying home. They're a pleasant reminder that this is a working lake. Only a handful of people choose to live here year-round, and I'm one of those privileged few.

* * * * *

At our cabin on Powell Lake, the slightest change in weather is immediately evident. At Hole in the Wall, Margy and I are in tune with every adjustment in the environment. When the rain starts, it's instantly visible in the water off the front deck, and our metal roof acts as a noisy rain detector. When a breeze begins, clothesline flags flutter, and the cabin swings slowly on the cables tethering us to shore. As the wind picks up speed, the big blades of the wind generator provide a sudden whoosh to announce the power of the atmosphere, carrying a swift surge of amperes into the cabin's electrical system.

During winter rains, I step out on the front deck to watch waterfalls that form an ever-changing landscape on Goat Island. In the middle of the night, during breaks in a storm, I often awaken to the sound of the tumbling water, necessitating a climb down from the loft and out onto the front deck to assess the volume of flow. In the darkness, the waterfalls plunge noisily down the granite face of Goat, unseen but not unheard.

Landslides are common on the steep slopes of Goat Island. I've witnessed two of them from the cabin; one during the day when the explosion of falling trees shifted my attention fast enough to see boulders and evergreens tumble into the lake. Another major landslide, this time during the night, awoke me to the thundering sound of nature reshaping the island's steep angle of repose. The next morning, huge scars on the slope directly across from the cabin bore visible evidence. The jumble of toppled tree trunks on the shoreline confirmed the magnitude of the clamorous force.

* * * * *

When I leave my home to go down the lake to town, I almost immediately lose track of the weather and my natural surroundings. On those occasions, when I stay in town for several days, I seldom venture outside. The natural environment is only inches away, but there's no urgency to expose myself to it. When it's time to go to the grocery store, I step into an elevator and take it down three floors to the covered parking garage. Then I drive my truck to the store, where I step outside for the first time, and am briefly exposed to the elements.

In contrast, at Hole in the Wall, I live immersed within my surroundings. Even when I'm inside the cabin, I feel I'm part of the natural environment and every change in its atmosphere. I live here in harmony with nature, and intimately influenced by its forces.

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"You could use that board to build a bench," says John. "Just put some legs under it, and it's a perfect seat. Put it up on the cliff, and just sit there and look down on things, checking everything out."

My friend, John, is forever checking things out, at as slow a pace as possible. He's the reason I've been able to live here. Without him, I might still be in Los Angeles.

At first, I lived part-time in Hole in the Wall, while teaching college in California. During those initial years, I required a knowledgeable and trustworthy "agent" to help me maintain my cabin, boats, and assorted vehicles. These days, now a permanent resident of Hole in the Wall, I need John to assist with all sorts of challenges faced by a city-folk person living in an off-the-grid world. In other words, I couldn't have begun my dream, nor could I have continued it for very long, without his help.

Besides his ever-so-important friendship and support, John also provides continuous inspiration. When it comes to mechanical tasks, he's innovative. He can look at a floating log and imagine a completed cabin. Even more important, he's transferred some of his innate ability to me, where no such talent existed before. I've even learned to take on challenges and build things myself.

"Notice how flat the waves have worn that piece of driftwood," says John, as we look down at the wooden slab that's drifted against my breakwater.

To me, flotsam is potential wood for my stove. To John, it can be magically transformed into a castle.

"Too thick to cut into firewood," I reply. "Maybe you could build a bench for me."

"You could do it yourself. Give it a try."

So I do. And it's easier than I think.

I haul the hunk of wood out of the water, letting it air out for a few days. The slab is so waterlogged and heavy I need to let it dry and lighten up before dragging it up the stairs to the cliff.

There's an abundance of smaller chunks of floating wood I can use for the legs of the bench. The vertical wall of granite on the cliff-side ledge above the outhouse serves as the natural backrest for the bench. Its warmth radiates through my spine when I lean back on a sunny day. It's the perfect place to sit and read, or just contemplate the beauty of the place below that I now call home.

Bench on the cliff

From up there, on my bench, I look down on Hole in the Wall, checking things out. I gaze out at John's Cabin Number 2, quiet and empty in its

picturesque little bay. Back towards the sheer walls of the Hole, a narrow gap where no cabins are visible, the scene is a sublime dead end.

Peering out towards First Narrows, Jess' cabin is empty today, but Max and Monica are on their deck, watching their son, ride around in tight circles in a tin boat. Dominick is 8-years-old now, and out for one of his first solo adventures in the small craft. In recent weeks, Max has been practicing with him, letting Dominick drive while Max instructs and observes. Finally it's time to let him go boating on his own.

It seems only yesterday that Dominick was a little child, fishing from the deck under his parents' supervision (Farther Up the Lake, Chapter 9), but now he's big enough to handle a boat by himself. But he isn't allowed to leave sight of the cabin or use full-throttle. That's why the bow is raised abnormally high as he plows water, around and round in circles, until he finally returns to the cabin. He'll be back in the boat again within an hour, never tiring of his new prowess as the driver of a real marine vessel.

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"Time for a field trip," I say to a couple visiting my cabin. "Let's climb the stairs, and I'll show you one of the greatest viewpoints around."

Up the steep steps we go, past the outhouse, along the path towards the majestic overlook. We stop at the bench.

"Have a seat, and lean back to feel the cliff's warmth on your back."

"Wow, what a view!" says the man, leaning back to enjoy the spot.

"I built it myself."

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Chapter 2

Tin Boat

A tin boat is one of my most important tools. As a float cabin owner, tools are essential for day-to-day operations. This includes saws of all types (chainsaw, circular saw, jigsaw), and a gas-driven generator to make them all work. But my most important power tool is my trusty aluminum boat.

It hasn't always been trusty, nor is it only a tool. Sometimes, there's a blurred line between using a boat for fun and attending to essential tasks.

I didn't always own a small kick-around boat. Instead, my 18-foot Campion was used for many of the tasks normally assigned to a tin boat, including fishing (fun) and towing or pushing logs (work that's fun). Since the Campion is a bow rider, it can handle many tasks on the lake. But once I purchased my aluminum boat, it became my vehicle of choice around the cabin. The Campion takes me to and from my cabin, but once I'm home, the tin boat takes over.

In truth, I didn't buy this boat. John took care of that for me. He knows boats a lot better than I do, so I've learned to stay out of the way and let him arrange such purchases. In the process, I acquire a small trailer that I don't need. My tin boat never leaves Powell Lake, except for dry-dock storage at the cabin when I'm away for extended periods or for occasional maintenance on the deck. So the unneeded trailer turns into a quad trailer that John eventually sells for a well-deserved profit.

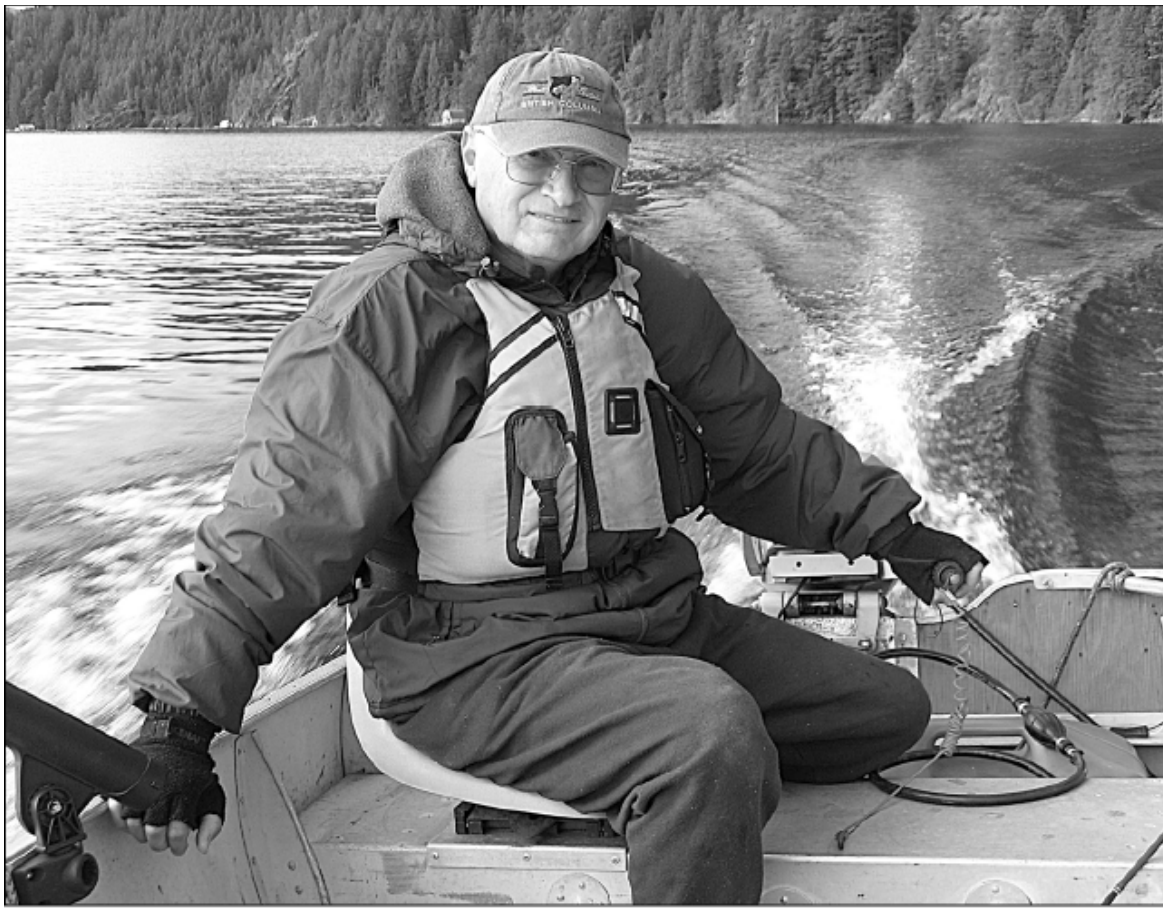
My first task is to register the 14-footer, although there probably aren't a lot of properly licenced tin boats on Powell Lake. John provides the required sales receipt, but no pleasure craft registration from the previous owner. I compile the bill of sale with the boat's licence number, hull serial number, an official licence application, and even the outboard motor identifying data. It's an impressive package that includes a signed note from me verifying that the previous owner of this 14-foot Lone Star lost the original licence, and a reminder that Canada Customs should have a copy on file matching the hull numbers and the name and address of the seller.

After several weeks, Campbell River Customs sends it all back, with a check-box form that indicates I will need to supply a notarized declaration of lost licence, photo identification, and another application for pleasure craft registration. It makes me wonder if the government piles incoming boat applications in a dusty corner, never entering the details into a database.

I consider how I might accomplish this unexpected onslaught of paperwork, and decide it fits clearly into the category of “Catch 22,” an impossible task. John had already repainted the boat (wonder red), and even purchased adhesive decals of the original K-numbers for my use. So I simply install them. Sometimes there’s only so much you can do.

The 15-horse two-stroke Evinrude is the weak link in the mechanical chain. It runs when it wants to, which is about all that can be said for it. When departing the cabin, I make sure I stay close enough to row back. Even with John’s magic, the motor gets worse and worse, wearing out my arm during starting, and stopping at will. Small water leaks, of which there were none at first, begin to increase, a common affliction for aging riveted hulls.

Regardless of these limitations, I love this boat, bombing around in it every chance I get. But I make sure I don’t troll too long, since the motor has a tendency to quit unexpectedly at low speeds, and refuses to restart when it recognizes I’ve strayed too far from home.



Author in the tin boat

After a lot of time (John's) and money (mine), it becomes evident the motor should be replaced. John is able to keep the old Evinrude running, but just barely and never for long. I'm torn between finding another boat and engine (which might be more efficient) and simply getting a new motor. The decision isn't very difficult when we (John) begin looking for used tin boats with good engines. There simply aren't any available at a reasonable price. Finally, I decide I want a new engine, and send John out to buy what he feels is best for the boat. He returns with a 15-horse Honda four-stroke, brand new and exciting for both of us!

New Honda 15 HP 4-stroke

The Lone Star seems to handle the heavier motor fine, getting on-plane quickly and far outpacing the old two-stroke. But on the first test run, John

points out a twist in the transom during acceleration. I probably wouldn't have noticed it until it collapsed, but it's certainly evident once he points it out.

"Now that's scary," says John.

"Why now?" I ask. "Do you think I just didn't see it with the old motor?"

"Doubt it. It's a heavier motor, for one thing, so that puts extra stress on the transom. And the acceleration is what really does it. Old transom, you know."

Yes, it is old. The previous owner had tried beefing up the stern with an extra metal plate, and that might have been enough for the lighter outboard, especially since it's old age resulted in low compression and puny thrust. But the spiffy new Honda is too much for the transom.

"Could just break off," says John.

"That wouldn't be good."

No, it wouldn't. But John has a solution. We measure the transom precisely, and John simply builds a new one. Well, it wasn't a complete transom, but it might as well have been. Using a quarter-inch aluminum sheet, he cuts a complete profile of the transom that we bolt over the stern. So we now have the old wooden transom coupled with a heavy aluminum overlay.

When we conduct our first test run, the flexing is gone.

"No way the back of this boat is ever going to fall off," says John.

"Good. I like it that way."

But then the leaks begin in earnest. As if on cue (boats do have instincts, you know), the installation of the new engine is accompanied by an increasingly leaky hull. Much bigger leaks than before, as the old rivets work their way loose. Maybe we should have swapped out the old boat and motor for a new set, after all.

"Not much to do about it, once it gets started," says John.

"Can I replace the leaking rivets, or maybe buck them again?"

"Could, but when it starts, it will only get worse. If some rivets start leaking, the others will follow close behind. Do you have any idea how many rivets there are in a hull like this?"

A lot.

But there are work-around solutions. I love this new motor, and the boat has nice lines and most of the extras I desire in a tin boat (waterproof locker, strong seats, navigation lights, rod holders), so it's worth considering alternatives.

"You could put in a floor," says John. "Just wood boards, with a brace down the middle. It'll keep your feet out of the water."

"So you let it leak, and just keep your feet out of it?"

"Sure. And it's flat, so you can stand and fish."

Now that's a plus.

"And a bilge pump would help," says John.

These are all good ideas, so I take him up on these "solutions." I build a rough floor, and John installs a bilge pump with both a manual and a float-activated automatic switch to fight the level of the rising water. I already have a small battery for the nav lights, so the pump can use it for power. And the new engine has a generator equipped with a battery charging harness, a nice luxury over the old motor. I can charge the battery when I'm running, and operate the lights and bilge pump at will. Sometimes work-around solutions do the trick.

Until the leaks get even worse.

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I hear Margy downstairs, boiling water in a kettle, which is probably the gentle noise that woke me. She's preparing another hot water bottle. I'm grateful and simultaneously feeling overly pampered. I just want to get well, and quickly.

I slowly extract myself from bed, swinging my feet carefully to the floor, and go downstairs to phone John.

"Just called to tell you I'm still in a whiny mood," I say when he answers. "But I wish I could help you move that wood today."

"No problem. How's the back."

"Better, I think. I should be able to help you in a couple of days, if you can wait that long."

"The wood will still be there when you're ready. Too hot to work for very long today, anyway. Maybe you should do some stretching exercises."

“Sounds painful,” I reply. “Think I’ll just go back to bed instead.”

John and I have been working on his new cabin, progressing nicely to the point where we need to remove the remaining piles of wood from the deck so installation of the cabin floor can begin. But a few days ago, I pulled something in my back, and I’ve been dragging my body around ever since. On the other hand, I’m always pleased to get a day off.

Days off are how you define them. For me, I enjoy assisting John with his cabin. Over the years, he’s done so much for me, and it’s nice to be able to repay him a little. But John’s work days are long days. They may not begin until 10 o’clock, but the prolonged summer daylight allows him to work until it’s almost too late for supper. Way too demanding for a lazy guy like me.

John may say he won’t work very long today, but I’m sure he will. With a short swim break and at least two lunches, he’ll work on-and-off until almost sunset. And sunset comes late this time of year. When I work with John in the summer, I tend to show up late (noon) and leave early (6 pm). I’m good at coming up with excuses.

By early afternoon, my back is noticeably improved, and I’m feeling restless. During the winter, it’s only natural to be confined to the cabin for days on end, as relentless storms cycle through the area. But during the summer, staying housebound feels more like self-imposed cabin fever. I’m ready to get out.

I launch the tin boat with a “Be careful!” from Margy. My plan is to cruise down through First Narrows and take a look at the North Sea. If it’s smooth enough, I’ll cross over to Cassiar Island, then along the shore to John’s new cabin, Number 5, surprising him with a can of pop. He appreciates the little things, and it will be good therapy for me. Unless it’s rough, of course.

Usually during summer afternoons, an up-lake wind develops from the south, enough to set whitecaps in motion throughout the lake. Except here of course – in Hole in the Wall it usually remains smooth, and impossible to tell what’s going on down the lake.

As soon as I enter First Narrows, I can see the conditions – whitecaps in the North Sea. But it’s hard to tell how rough it is from this far away, so I’ll go a

little farther. Since I'm headed into the wind, the waves will have more impact, but they're better off the bow than at an angle. Unless the south wind increases.

Bam! Bam! The tin boat takes the whack with a lot of noise, and I have to slow down. The only way to handle substantial seas in a boat like this is to creep along. Otherwise, you can do damage by smacking rivets right out of the metal. There's already enough leaking water, as evidenced by the buildup in the stern. At this slower speed, the bow rises high as I plow water. I reach down and turn on the bilge pump, and a steady stream pours out the hose at the top of the transom.

Just past Cassiar Island, where the lake should be more protected, it gets rougher. Water splashes around the bow as I pound through the waves, and splatters all over my face and chest. I can barely see out of my splattered eyeglasses now, but the spray is warm, nearly hot, and it feels good. I wipe off my glasses with the sleeve of my shirt, and press on.

The waves are taxing my backbone, too. The whacks on the hull are strong enough that I can feel it vibrate through my spine. So I sit up straight to protect my already tender back, and weave as best I can to avoid the biggest swells.

It's a fine line, going slow enough to minimize the impact of the waves, but fast enough to get to my destination as quick as possible. Like running in the rain – should you go slower to minimize the drops, or go faster to get there sooner? One thing for sure, going too fast will take a bigger toll on both the bones of my back and the rivets in the hull.

As I near Redhead Bay, the waves settle down, and I'm able to increase my speed a little. It may not last, so I intend to take advantage of this brief reprieve by pushing up the throttle.

Suddenly, a rogue wave appears right in front of me. I can either pull off the throttle until I cross it, or blast on through. The decision is made in an instant, and it's the wrong one.

Bam! Then another whack from a wave behind it. Bam!

Water sprays everywhere, covering my shirt and face. Then, there's a weird feeling of "What's happening!?" The waves settle down, but water still pours onto my shirt. And it doesn't stop.

A pencil-sized stream is squirting right at my stomach from the floor by my feet. I've popped a rivet, and it's in a critical location.

I take my right foot and push it down over the spot, just outboard of the wooden floor. The water stops squirting out immediately. When I slip my foot aside to see whether the gushing has stopped, (Surprise!) it's still leaking. But as long as I keep my shoe over the missing rivet, all is well. The waves are nearly gone now, so I throttle up and cruise the rest of the way to Cabin Number 5 at nearly full speed.

I think about my recent discussion with John regarding the increasing frequency of leaks in this boat. He recommended I find some wooden golf tees to carry along with me in case a rivet pops loose: "Anything would stop the leak," he says. "But a golf tee is the perfect fit. Just push it in the hole, and your leak is stopped."

I haven't forgotten John's advice, but neither have I searched for golf tees in any of the stores I frequent.

Entering John's breakwater boom, I need to push his gate log open. It's floating in a position that completely blocks the opening, and I must maneuver while holding my foot over the rivet hole. It really isn't difficult, but not being able to move my foot feels awkward, especially crammed awkwardly against the planks of the wooden floor on one side, and I keep looking down to make sure I'm covering the leak. I fumble for a while, forward-reverse-forward, pushing against the entry log. Out of the corner of my eye, I see John on the deck, watching my antics. Finally, the gate moves inward and opens. I start to slip through, but misjudge my position enough to slide up onto the log with a solid thud – stuck!

The good thing about a tin boat is that you're seldom really stuck. I shift into reverse, rev up the engine, and slide off the log, with a grinding sound from the hull that I'm sure catches John's attention. When I glance towards the deck, he's shaking his head.

When I pull up against the dock, John grabs my bow rope and ties it quickly. I shut off the engine, but keep my foot planted firmly over the leak.

"The upper lake is a mess," I say. "But I've got a good excuse for coming."

“I bet,” replies John.

“I had to come down here to give you a can of pop, and to see if you have a golf tee.”

“Oh, no! What happened?”

Rather than answer, I demonstrate by taking my foot off the rivet hole. Now stopped at the dock, the water doesn’t squirt out with a metre-long stream, but it does gush upward like a small water fountain.

John reaches down below the overhanging deck, immediately finds a small twig, and reaches into the boat to give it a try. It’s too big, so he strips off a layer of bark, and tries again. This time it’s a perfect fit. To my amazement, the gushing water not only stops, I no longer see the slightest indication of a leak.

“So that’s all it takes,” I say. “Who needs rivets?”

“Tell me that after you’ve hit a few waves on the way home.”

In fact, that splinter of wood holds all the way home, and the rivet hole is still watertight a month after John’s quick fix. But other leaks are popping up, and the bilge pump is needed more and more. Something will have to be done, and soon.

That afternoon, at John’s new cabin, I help him move some of the wood from his deck. My back is doing fine now, even after the thrashing from the waves. John is right again – stretching exercise seems to help. We take two swim breaks. But I make an excuse about needing to get home in time for dinner, so I leave early – at six o’clock.

* * * * *

John keeps a lookout for used aluminum boats. A few come up for sale, but generally they include an engine and a hefty price. Or they’re just standard riveted boats, and we’ve decided we want to avoid these. Instead, we’re focused on welded aluminum boats, but they’re hard to find. Besides, my 15-horse Honda won’t be able to adequately push a welded boat of moderate size. Welded boats are virtually leak-proof, but they’re also heavy and mighty expensive.

We consider a Jon boat that’s available in Campbell River, and I like the layout. The Internet photos show a funky design that’s flat on both the front and

bottom. John says it will be unstable in waves. The owner says he uses it in the ocean all the time. Eventually we pass up the deal, and start over. Meanwhile, I ponder a way to solve the leaks on my old boat.

The work-arounds (wooden floor and bilge pump) have helped a lot, but the leaks are now beyond control. I still have a passion for this boat, if only the leaks could be fixed.

“There’s nothing you can do, unless you replace all of the rivets,” says John. “Even then, you’ll just face more leaks after a while. There’s really no good solution except welded aluminum.”

“I found something on the Internet,” I reply. “A repair kit with good reviews.”

“A kit? What kind of kit?”

“It a plastic stick you heat up with a propane torch,” I explain. “Actually, you don’t heat the stick. Instead, you’re supposed to heat the hull near the rivet. Kinda’ like solder. It melts and supposedly takes care of almost any leak.”

“Sounds suspicious,” says John.

It does sound suspicious, but the on-line reviews are overwhelmingly good. One guy used left-over sticks from the kit to fix a horse watering trough. Very suspicious.

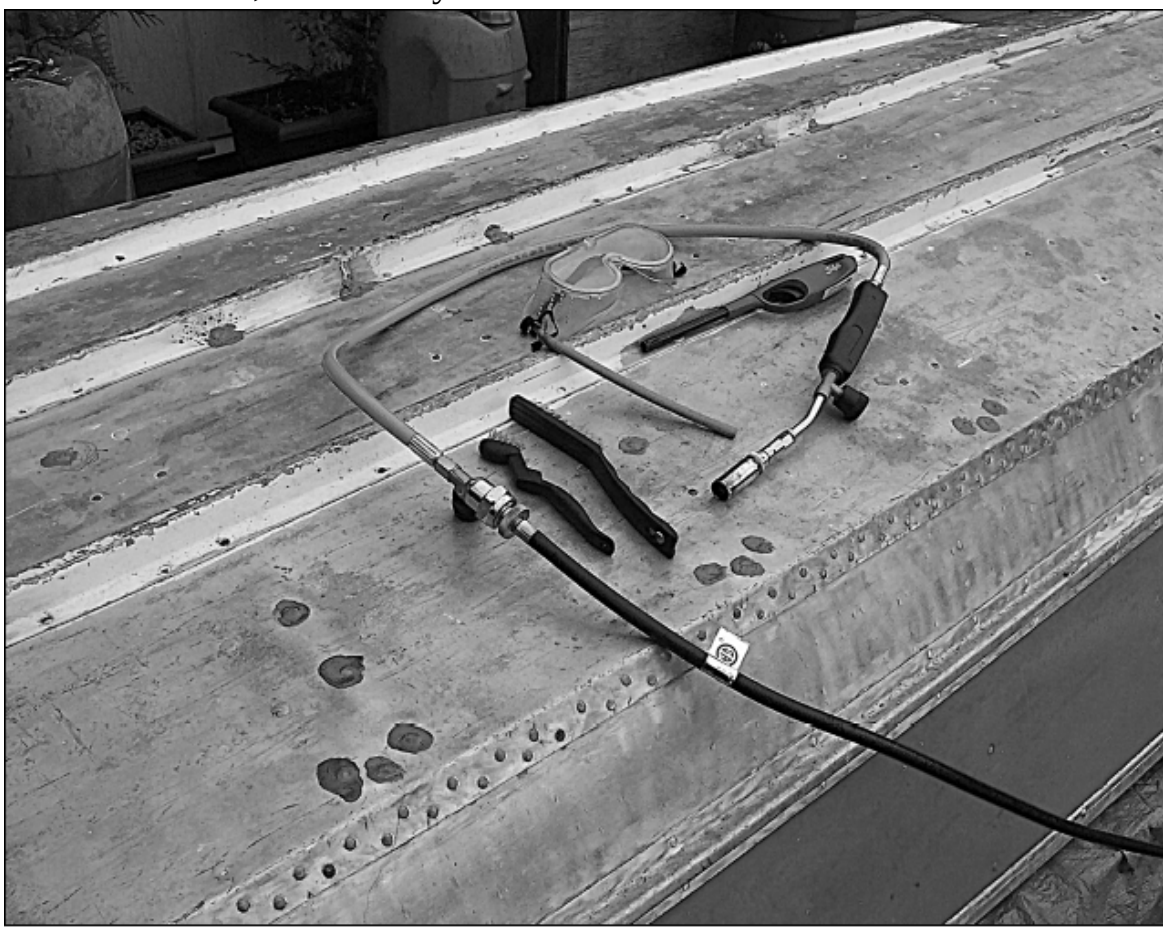
Of course, the kit is available only in the States. And I don’t even own a propane torch. But I’m scheduled for a trip to Bellingham, where I can buy the kit (and a propane torch while I’m at it).

I purchase the kit and torch, and consider the repairs a winter project. When the time comes to begin, Margy assists in removing the engine. Then we pull the boat onto the deck, where we fill it with water and check where it seeps out. In many cases, we can identify only general areas where leaks occur. In these cases, we mark all of the rivets in the area for kit repair.

We tip the boat upside down, and I use my rotary tool to carefully sand around every rivet we’ve identified as potential leaks. Then I clean around the marked rivets, as specified in the instruction sheet.

The process goes slowly at first, but then I begin to get the hang of it. The “soldering” is so simple that I expand the area of coverage to include all of the

rivets in critical areas, even if they’re not marked.



Tin boat repair kit

It’s a major project, but that’s what winter is for. Much of my time is waiting for the rain to stop so I can go to work.

When I’m done, Margy and I turn the boat upright, and I use the kit material on the inside of the boat, too. The splotches are an ugly yellow-green, but the floorboards cover the inside repairs. The outside patches are mostly underwater, with the colourful smears out of sight.

I wait for a (rare) rainless week to let the boat completely dry so I can properly test for leaks. Then Margy and I slide the boat into the water and watch with anticipation. There are no leaks! (Yet.)

For the next test, we reinstall the outboard motor, which pushes the stern much deeper into the water. Still no leaks!

It’s hard to predict whether our repairs will last for an extended period of time. When this tin boat is pulled up onto shore or onto the deck, the bottom of the hull (and it’s rivets) will get a lot of abuse.

But several months later, the boat still operates without leaks. Next winter, if necessary, we can deal with another repair kit, if it’s needed.

Repaired tin boat

So now I’m in tin boat heaven, bombing around here and there nearly every day. And I go comfortably beyond my “row distance limit” of months ago. Now that the boat is operating so well, I make additional enhancements. I add a water ballast tank for lateral balance, using a 10-gallon plastic barrel. When I ride solo, I use the tank. With a passenger aboard, the ballast is removed.

I even install a fishfinder. Sure, the little fish symbols seldom provide accurate indications of where to troll and cast. But it’s a wonderful luxury for fishing expeditions, even if only the depth readings are precise. And the scrolling image of the bottom of the lake gives me endless hours of entertainment.

There’s simply nothing like a properly equipped tin boat. But carry a few extra golf tees, just in case.

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Chapter 3

Fishin' Luck

For a full decade, I've heard the stories and seen the pictures. Powell Lake is a renowned place for trout fishing. I don't doubt the validity of those tales, but the situation has changed. Unless, of course, I'm simply not fishing the right way.

I don't profess to be a great fisherman, but I have some experience, especially in my younger years. Bringing my knowledge of bass fishing to a trout lake probably isn't the wisest approach, but fishing is fishing. I may be overly confident of the power of a red-and-white daredevil, but I've also tried the traditional lures touted by the locals. As an alternative, I've used a fly rod. Over the years, I've caught many small trout, but I usually return to my cabin completely skunked, while fish jump all around me.

My barbless hooks are no excuse. If you don't get a bite, you can't blame the hook. I've become convinced that the fish stories of times past will never be repeated again.

Yet, now and then, another new story surfaces right in my own backyard. Rob and Jess have caught lots of big ones in recent years, and Julie won a major fishing derby with a nice trout near Beartooth Creek. Meanwhile, my trips to the Head of Powell Lake with John provide some hope, based on a few medium-sized trout in ideal stream outlets under perfect spring conditions. Still, these successes fall far below the standard that used-to-be.

My fishing attitude is well short of intense, so that factor must be taken into account. But I continue to fish without "luck," trolling in my tin boat with two buckets tossed overboard to slow the Honda 15-horse to an appropriate speed. I try different depths, losing enough lures on the bottom to assure I'm not stopping short of appropriate sacrifice. I cast up against prospective-looking cliffs, occasionally forfeiting a red-and-white to a lure-eating branch. And I drift-troll with Mr. Blue, my sit-on-top kayak, fishing shallow while paddling and then coasting even slower (with the lure sinking deeper) to vary the tempo.

It's all for fun, since I don't have high expectations. But I cover a lot of ground, and catch almost nothing. Fortunately, fishing is a great excuse for a

slow-speed trip through First Narrows, an obvious there-must-be-trout-here spot, during the early evening.

Then comes the spring of 2010.

This isn't the normal transition to summer. The winter is exceptionally mild, with almost no snow and less than the normal amount of rain. Spring seems to come early, and I'm sunbathing on the deck in May. Then the weather slips back into the single digits on the Celsius scale. It doesn't warm up as expected, and by mid-June, temperatures still hover in the mid-teens. Everything seems at least two weeks late – the sun, the building of birds nests, the mosquitoes. But, oh, the fishing…

While Margy is in the States, I try my first serious evening of fishing in the new season. This will also be a chance to use my cell phone from the headlands off Chippewa Bay, a known location where my wimpy phone can reach the cell tower on Telus Mountain (a local name) near the Shinglemill. Chippewa always produces a few bars on my phone, and serves as a pleasant environment to make a call, bobbing in the tin boat in the evening shadows of the ridge called the Bunsters.

I rig my pole with a spinning lure that possesses thin, tan feathers and a red hook. It looks like any other local bait, but John has shared this "secret" lure with me by describing it in detail, then telling me where to find it.

"I saw it back in the fishing aisle at Canadian Tire, kinda' high up, near the rest of the feathered spinners."

"You think it's better than the 'bang tails' I use?" I ask.

"Never heard of them. Is that what you call those red and white worthless spoons?"

"Those are daredevils. A 'bang tail' is what I saw engraved on one of the spinners everyone fishes with on the lake. I don't think it matters much what you use. None of them catch fish, as far as I can tell."

"Oh, there are lots of big trout. You just need to know how to catch them."

And John knows how. But he takes fishing even less serious than I do, though he has lots of advice for me. When he was younger, he fished a lot in

both the chuck and our local lakes. But now he considers the whole “business” of fishing to be a government plot.

“You used to be able to fish without a licence, and there weren’t any C.O.’s lurking around to check your limit.”

Probably true, but I’m not sure John is old enough to speak from experience.

The new “secret” bang tail is six dollars, well above the amount I normally pay for lures that I may lose on a snag. But if John says it’s something special, it’s worth a try. And it is a beauty – including a small fish-like body, intricately designed with a blend of silver and red, and heavy enough to cast a long ways. I also purchase the same model in yellow, which, to me, looks even more perfect for trout.

So now I bob off the headlands of Chippewa, in deep water a half-kilometre from the cliffs. With my phone call to Margy complete, I crank up the Honda and point the bow towards the shore, planning to turn along the cliffs back towards First Narrows. I toss out the buckets, then my line with the new lure. Since I’m dragging the spinner without extra weight, it travels shallow, almost on the surface. Outboard motor tiller in one hand, fishing pole in the other, I slowly troll towards the shore, not expecting anything until I reach shallower water.

Bam! In several hundred feet of water, a lot deeper than I normally fish, my new secret lure hooks a big trout. The fish comes completely out of the water, performing a graceful arc towards the sky, still far behind the boat. The fish goes airborne again, then heads deep, whirling the drag on my reel. When I finally get the fish into the boat, I’m looking at the biggest trout (about 2 pounds) that I’ve seen in this lake. What a thrill!

Powell Lake rainbow trout at the gunnel

The 18-inch rainbow is hooked deep in the throat, but my needle-nose pliers make a quick extraction. I admire the squirming fish for just a moment, and then release him back to his home. The trout immediately darts down into the deep.

If I don't catch another fish this year, I'll be happy with this one. But that isn't the end of my luck today.

I head back out into the deeper waters, retracing my path with no more strikes. Then I curve around the headland back towards the shallow area I call Sandy Beach, although now the spring water level is too high to reveal any sand. Right around the corner, I catch another trout. This cutthroat is as big as anything I've caught in Powell Lake (until 15 minutes ago), a fine looking fish.

After releasing the trout, I continue along the shore, trolling towards Sandy Beach. A land cabin with an attractive bay appears off my left side, and I should

be able to ease in close. No one is home (no boats), so I plan to angle in near a boom log that marks the outside edge of a natural swimming pool directly in front of the cabin.

It seems the perfect spot for a trout, but I pass the boom log with no bites. Then, just past this spot, with my line trailing just outside the swimming pool, another fish hits and goes immediately airborne. Flying fish are everywhere this evening!

This trout, also a cutthroat, is as big as the first rainbow I caught off the headlands. Three fish in a single night is a record for me, and two are bigger than any previous catch!

I glance up towards First Narrows, where sunset is working its way up steep-sloped Goat Island. I notice white flowers marking a small grove of dogwood trees. There's an old wives' tale: "When the dogwoods are in bloom, the trout are biting." The dogwoods are late this year, and now there are trout.

I maneuver the boat around and travel back to the area near the natural swimming pool, turn off the motor, and try some casts. The first few throws result in several strikes, and I lose a few, then bring two trout quickly aboard. They are smaller than the others, but still nice-sized, about 10 inches long. I stand in the rear of the boat, casting a few more times. By now darkness is approaching, and finally the biting stops. I start up the outboard, retrieve my trolling buckets, turn on the navigation lights, and head for home.

* * * * *

"Let's try fishing near the land cabin," I tell Margy.

It's the first night she's been back at the cabin from the States. Like me, Margy loves an evening of fishing. Also like me, it's more for the pleasure of a peaceful boat ride than for catching fish. After all, she's caught far fewer trout in this lake than me. And I haven't caught many.

The dogwoods are still in bloom, and sunset is ready to climb towering Goat Island. I point the tin boat southbound through First Narrows and around the corner at Sandy Beach. Right away we know our plans are compromised.

"There's a boat at the cabin," says Margy.

Sure enough, someone is home. So that will prevent us from stopping in front of the natural swimming pool and casting, since it just wouldn't feel right. But we can troll past fairly close – as near to the cabin as we feel comfortable.

We continue southbound on-plane past the cabin, and then head towards the Chippewa headland, where I slow down and turn the boat around. I give Margy the pole with the secret brown lure, and rig another pole with the yellow look-alike purchased at Canadian Tire.

I toss out the pails, and we begin to troll. Within just a few minutes, in fairly shallow water, Margy catches a good-sized rainbow trout, nearly equal to the fish I caught the first night. It's almost a two-pounder, and Margy is thrilled. It's the biggest fresh water fish she's ever caught. (The next year she catches "Grandpa," a five-pounder, on a typical no-luck evening, just before we give up for the night. It's the biggest trout we've ever seen on the lake.)

We release the rainbow and continue down the shore towards the cabin, angling in as close as seems comfortable with people nearby. I pull through the area where I caught so many trout a few nights before, but all is quiet. We navigate down the shore towards Sandy Beach, and pretty soon Margy has another 14-inch trout. As I extract the hook for her and release the fish, she beams with delight.

That's the end of the catch for the evening, but we head home with a sense of satisfaction, and renewed faith in the fish stories we've heard for so many years. I'm pleased that Margy has out-fished me (two for the brown lure, zero for the yellow). On back-to-back attempts, the fishing has been superb. If we never catch another fish in this lake, we'll be satisfied.

On the way back to the cabin, we pass through First Narrows, nav lights now turned on for the encroaching darkness. On the far shore, Goat Island's dogwoods form white patches in the fading twilight.

* * * * *

A few days later, on Sunday morning, I phone John to tell him about the fish, and how well his secret lure has performed. We also discuss one of our many boat repair projects.

"Can't figure out why it won't start, but I will," he says.

I have no doubt.

“So what’s up today?” I ask.

I’d invite him to our cabin, Number 3, but I don’t have any specific ideas of what to do. I’m recovering from recent eye surgery, not enough to limit things like fishing, but I need to be careful. Hiking or similar physical activity wouldn’t be wise.

“I was on a big trail-building project at Murphy Lake yesterday,” he replies. “So I might take the day off. Bro is pretty tired. Maybe we’ll go up to Number 1.”

Which means “Number 5” to me. The original Number 1 site is getting a new cabin, and the building process is consuming all of John’s free moments. The old Number 1 cabin has been sold and moved to site Number 4. So I call the new cabin “Number 5.” Then, of course, there’s Number 2, which is John’s cabin across the bay from me. It sounds complicated, but that’s how we visualize things. On the way up the lake, we first pass Number 4 (where cabin Number 1 now sits). Then we motor past the new cabin (Number 5, previously Number 1), and finally into Hole in the Wall, where John’s Number 2 and my Number 3 sit across from each other. Like I said, it only sounds complicated.

John has ridden his quad hard the previous day, and it’s typical he’ll need a day off. More specifically, Bro, his trusty dog, will need time to recover. The black Labrador retriever is now approaching 15 years old, and his rear legs are nearly crippled. Still, Bro runs around like a madman whenever he can, and particularly when he meets people he knows.

For a moment, as I talk to John, I think about a fishing trip to the Head. We could do it today, and it just happens to be Father’s Day, so John could fish without a licence. (“The damn government shouldn’t require fishing licences!”) But there’s a gas problem, since the Campion would be the obvious choice for such a trip. When coming up the lake last time, I bypassed the fuel dock and have barely enough to get back to the Shinglemill. So my thoughts of a fishing trip appear and quickly pass without mentioning it on the phone.

We hang up, and I return to a morning project on my laptop computer. But in a few minutes, the solution occurs to me.

“John’s looking for something to do,” I say to Margy. “He’d probably be interested in a trip to the Head, but the Campion is almost out of gas. I could ask him to bring some from town.”

Just then, the phone rings.

“Guess who?” I exclaim.

We don’t get a lot of phone calls in the Hole, and it’s pretty obvious who this is.

“Hello, man. How about a trip to the Head?” I say before John can even identify himself. “You’ll need to bring some gas.”

“Sure,” says John. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“It’s Father’s Day, you know.”

“So. Who’s a father?” says John. “Not me. Not you.”

“No matter. You can fish without a licence today.”

“Are you sure?”

John doesn’t pay any attention to ministry projects, including the BC encourage-to-fish program. But certainly he’s heard about the free fishing weekend.

“Sure, I’m sure. No licence needed. It would be more fun at the Head if you could fish.”

“The government shouldn’t require fishing licences. Whose lakes are these, anyway?”

I won’t win this argument, so it’s time to move on.

“Okay, so let’s go. But the Campion is nearly out of gas. I’ve got one 5-gallon can here. Can you bring another? Five more gallons should give us plenty of reserve.”

“Sure. We can fish the waterfalls. There’s lots of trout at the creek outlets this time of year.”

“Careful,” I say. “Margy is on a fishing streak. She’ll beat all of us.”

You can’t do anything with John without entering a contest. And he always wins, no matter the nature of the event.

“I’m pretty hard to beat. I’ll catch the biggest fish” he replies. “What time do you want to go?”

“As soon as you can get ready. We’ll be here whenever you arrive, because this is where we live.”

John probably likes my response for at least three reasons. First, he hates schedules. Second, he loves boat trips. And third, he enjoys hearing about how much Margy and I love our home on the lake, since he personally built it.

“I’ll be there in about an hour.”

* * * * *

“Here comes John!” I yell to Margy.

When John arrives in the Hole, it’s always a big event for us. Never do we undertake an adventure with John that’s less than memorable. We’ve been to the Head many times with him, but each trip has been unique and exciting. We all love the Head, and spring is one of the best times to visit this beautiful area. There should be plenty of waterfalls today, and maybe a few fish.

When John’s Hourston reaches the dock at Number 3, Bro bounds out before the boat is fully stopped. He sees me, and runs around like a madman, darting to and fro before finally settling down. The Lab knows this cabin well, and he immediately starts exploring, including the bridge to shore and out onto the ledges of the cliff.

I show John my new fishfinder for the tin boat that I’ve just finished installing. I’m proud to have wired it up myself, mounted the receiver and transducer, and even installed an in-line fuse. As far as I’m concerned, this project went almost flawlessly. Of course, it took me a full day, whereas John could have installed the depth sounder in about an hour. Still, I’ve come a long way in my mechanical abilities at the cabin. Living off the grid goes a long way towards promoting a personal mechanical inclination.

“Looks good,” he says.

“But?” I add.

“No, it’s fine. But you might consider running those wires through that metal mount below the rod holder.”

I glance at the rod holder, and John’s suggested route for the wiring is obvious. It would be a much cleaner installation, keeping the cables out of the way.

“Oh, I’ll change that. Thanks.”

“And another suggestion – you could raise that board a few inches. Would give it a better grip for the clamps.”

I’ve mounted the transducer on a short board that’s clamped to the transom. It provides a good mount, secure but not permanent, so I can remove it when I pull the boat up onto the dock.

“Right again. I’ll do it.”

And, of course, I’ll make both changes. When John sees I’ve taken his suggestions to heart, he’ll be pleased. I learned long ago that I can’t keep up with him when it comes to construction ideas. And I appreciate his help. I’m getting better, but he’s continually the best. Both of us recognize it, and we both live comfortably with my limitations.

* * * * *

As we motor out of Hole in the Wall, we’re all in our traditional seats. John drives, which we all prefer, Margy sits up front next to him, and I take the rear seat. Bro heads below the walk-through windshield and plops down as far forward as he can go, his head draped over the bow – tongue out and ready to ride.

“Try these,” I say, handing John one of the new headsets I’ve recently installed in the Campion.

The red aviation headsets are connected to an intercom that allows Margy and I to talk comfortably on trips up and down the lake. It’s a noisy engine, and the headsets make traveling a lot more enjoyable. But John already has his traditional earplugs in, and he isn’t a big fan of my technological improvements.

“Okay, I’ll try, but I don’t need a headset.”

Margy puts on her earphones, and makes a test in the mike: “Hello.”

“That’s enough,” says John, removing the headset before even coming up on-plane. “Don’t need them.”

It was a mighty quick test of the new system. And it failed. I gather the headsets and intercom box together for storage in a their backpack for the rest of the day.

We cruise north on the Goat Island side of the lake, but after only a few minutes we stop at the third cabin. John's brother is the proud new owner of this float cabin, and he's lounging out front, taking a break from painting. A cabin owner's work is never done.

John shuts off the engine outside Rob's breakwater, while we drift slowly north in the light wind.

"When are you going to start painting?" kids John.

"Yeah, right!" yells Rob. "It looks good, don't you think?"

"Oh, I didn't think you'd started yet," chides John.

"Where are you going?" asks Rob.

"Up to the head. Should be good fishing in the creeks where they wash into the lake."

Rob is a big fisherman, both salt and fresh water. And he loves to travel on the lake. Give him an excuse, and he'll be in his boat.

"I was thinking of going up there," says Rob.

I can see Rob's mind crankin'. I wouldn't doubt we'll see him at the Head later on.

* * * * *

We blast farther up the lake in nearly perfect conditions – a typical south wind on an almost-summer day, with small waves and a smooth ride. Although it's a Sunday in June, we meet only two other boats. One is fishing near Beartooth Creek, and another is cruising southbound a bit farther ahead. Summer is arriving on the calendar, but the cool weather has kept recreational boats to a minimum.

John slows several times to check out creeks that cascade into the lake on the west side, but none meet his fishing standards, so we continue north. Waterfalls plummet down from the mountains on both sides, as we continue towards the Head. We won't stop now until we come to one of our all-time favourite fishing spots. We almost always catch something there, but it's usually only one fish. The first line in the water almost always gets the reward, and then the spot goes quiet.

“No fair casting until we come to a complete stop,” says John. “We’ll all throw our lines at the same time.”

The rules of competition are already being drawn. But it probably doesn’t matter – John always wins.

“Okay, but remember, Margy is on a hot streak,” I say.

“I consider that a challenge,” replies John.

As we slow to idle, we creep past a big bird’s nest on the top of a tall stump jutting out of the lake near a waterfall that’s cascading in front of us. As we pass by, an osprey takes flight, gives out its territorial cry, and lands on an adjacent stump.

Osprey in nest

“They don’t like us in their fishing area,” I say.

“No wonder they’ve made their nest near this waterfall,” says Margy. “All the fish they can eat.”

John brings us in close to the waterfall, and turns off the engine. We’re in perfect position to fish the whitewater exit point of the creek where natural fish food is dumped into the lake. The push of the falls will drive us farther from shore, but we start in a perfect position.

“I’m coming up front,” says John, lunging toward the bow. “Get ready.”

I’m already perched on the front of the bow, Bro reluctantly adjusting his position to one of the side cushions. I’ve rigged my yellow secret lure look-alike, with my reel bail already open and ready to cast. In the back of the boat, Margy is getting her brown lure ready to go. John steps briskly past the walk-through windshield and into the bow, his own brown secret lure at the ready.

“Go!” yells John.

Our lures all hit the water nearly simultaneously. From the front of the boat, I can’t see past the canvas top well enough to watch Margy cast, but I see her pole jutting out the side of the boat, with her lure appropriately placed in the whitewater. Only a few seconds passes before she catches the first fish, and it’s a nice one.

Margy’s reels the trout in, and I crowd past John and Bro to help her remove the hook. By the time I get to the stern, she has already extracted the lure, and holds up the rainbow trout while I snap her photo.

Margy and her rainbow trout

"I told you she's deadly," I yell back to John. "Are there extra points for the first fish?"

"It only counts in a tie," says John.

We release the fish, but then we argue about whether we should have kept it. Like us, John is normally a catch-and-release guy, but today he's declared we're going to have a fish fry at the Head. Margy's fish was big enough to keep, and who knows whether we'll catch any more today. But it's certainly a good start.

By now, I'm convinced we've spooked the spot. So I don't expect to see any more action here. However, John catches a smaller fish almost immediately, and then I catch a big one – a big lure-eating tree, that is.

“Oh, no!” laments John, as he maneuvers the boat back towards the tree so I can try to retrieve my lure.

“Maybe I can grab onto a branch and hold us in the whitewater,” I offer.

And I do manage to latch onto the tree and hold us in position, while I simultaneously try to unhook my lure. John comes over to help.

“I was trying to catch a land trout,” I suggest.

“You sure caught one,” says John. “Watch your pole!”

But in the next instant, my foot, awkwardly positioned on the gunnel, comes down on the pole, and it snaps in half. I retrieve the yellow lure, but my pole is done for the day. Fortunately, I’ve brought along several more.

Once the crisis is over and we’ve drifted away from the waterfall, I ask Margy to pass me another fishing pole located behind her.

“Give me the one with the yellow spoon,” I say.

She hands me a short pole with a yellow lure that’s basically a red-and-white daredevil without the normal colours. This speckled spoon has caught small trout before, so I decide to give it a try.

“Won’t catch anything on that,” says John matter-of-factly.

“We’ll see,” I reply.

Before we leave the waterfall, John hooks another fish, a two-pounder. It’s a beautiful rainbow, and he takes several minutes to reel it in. I help pull the fish from the water and unhook it. We decide to let it go, although it’s enough to provide lunch for all four of us (Bro always gets the raw fish head). Maybe there will be more fish. As far as we’re concerned, this one is too big and beautiful to eat.

We move on to another creek farther north, and our luck continues. Margy catches another rainbow, and I reel in a small trout on the yellow spoon.

“See I told you – daredevils work,” I kid.

“When they’re biting, they’ll hit anything,” replies John.

Actually, that’s also my theory. Which makes the magic of the secret brown lure seem vastly overblown. On the other hand, by the end of the day, Margy and John are tied four-to-four, with three fish and one branch on my ledger. That’s eight fish on the brown lure (which is all that Margy and John use

today) and three on my speckled daredevil. Margy catches the first fish (extra points in a tie), but John lands the biggest (the most points). We're too thrilled with our "luck" to argue much about the near-tie. By the time we get to the Head, we've set aside two trout that will make a hearty lunch.

* * * * *

At the Head, we pull around the empty booming area marked by the pen's floating log boundaries. No logs to be towed south are sitting here today. This famous area, once the site of a major logging camp, is now completely shut down, though the dock is still in good shape.

We tie up the boat, and Bro leaps out and heads to shore in front of us. By the time we get to the ramp area where we plan to cook our fish, Bro is already splashing around, chasing imaginary frogs.

John builds a fire on the gravel ramp, using some kindling and small chunks of firewood we've brought from our cabin. He's the chef today, so we watch as he cleans the two fish we kept, and gives the heads to Bro. While John is looking the other way, Bro decides the fish bodies are more tempting than the heads. When John sees what's happening, he yanks one of the fish away from Bro before he can do much damage.

John uses a hinged hot dog grill he's packed in his bag. It works perfectly for our fish, providing a tasty lunch. But after we're finished, John dips into his lunch bag for another sandwich-and-a-half. He's never been known to travel light when it comes to food.

"Let's hike up to the bridge," says John.

"I shouldn't work up a sweat," I reply. "Not good for my eye. You and Margy go, and I'll wait here."

Working up a sweat after eye surgery isn't one of my concerns. Instead, I really just want to be alone for a while, enjoying this beautiful spot.

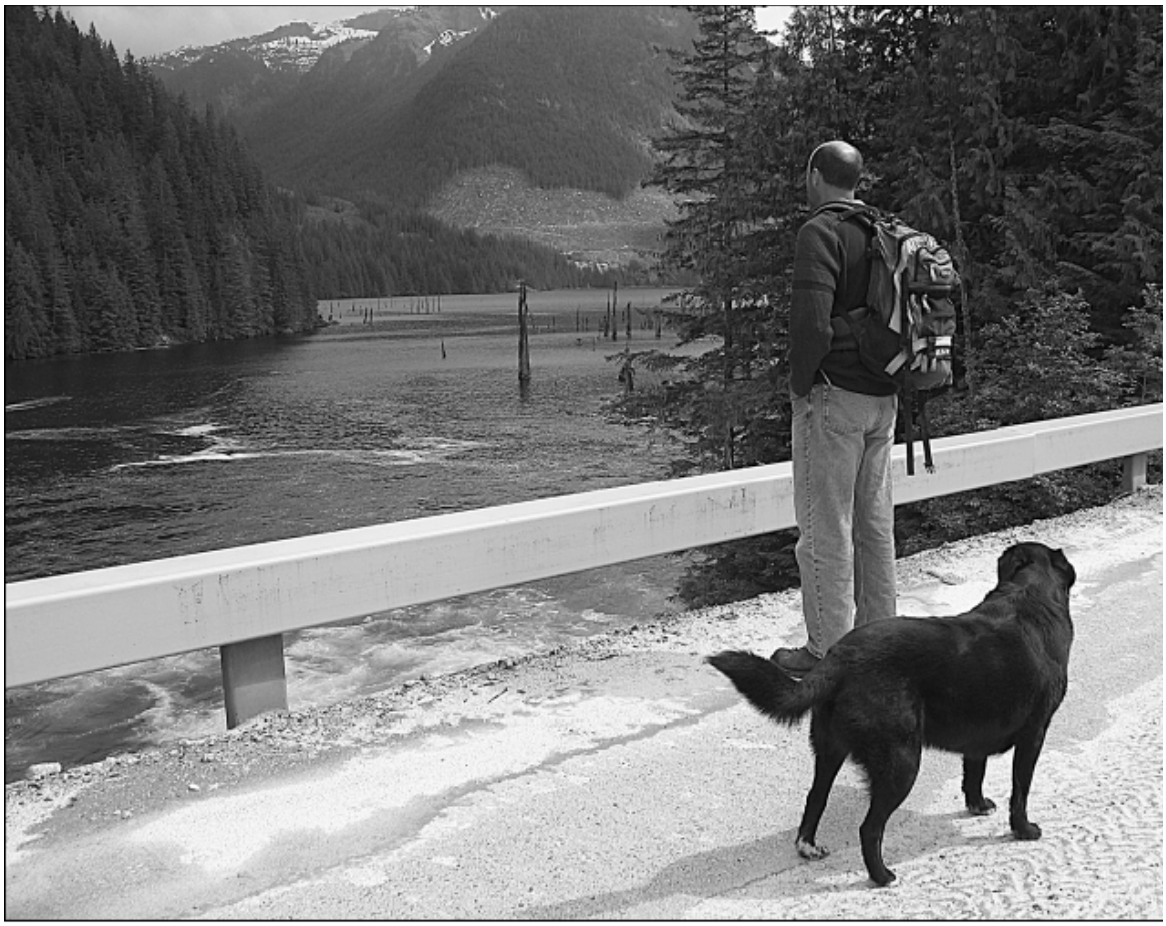
After Margy, John, and Bro have left, I stoke the still-smoldering fire to burn off the fish skin that remains on the grill. Then I douse the flames, and kick back to relax. The Head is one of the most scenic spots on the lake any time of year. Today it's particularly quiet and peaceful.

A pickup truck sits nearby, overlooking the tranquil scene. This vehicle is a remnant reminder of the deactivated logging operation.

I build an angled seat against the rocks with an old two-by-ten that I find nearby. Using my jacket for a pillow, I angle my body into a comfortable near-lying position. In a few minutes I'm almost asleep. Then I hear the sound of a motor.

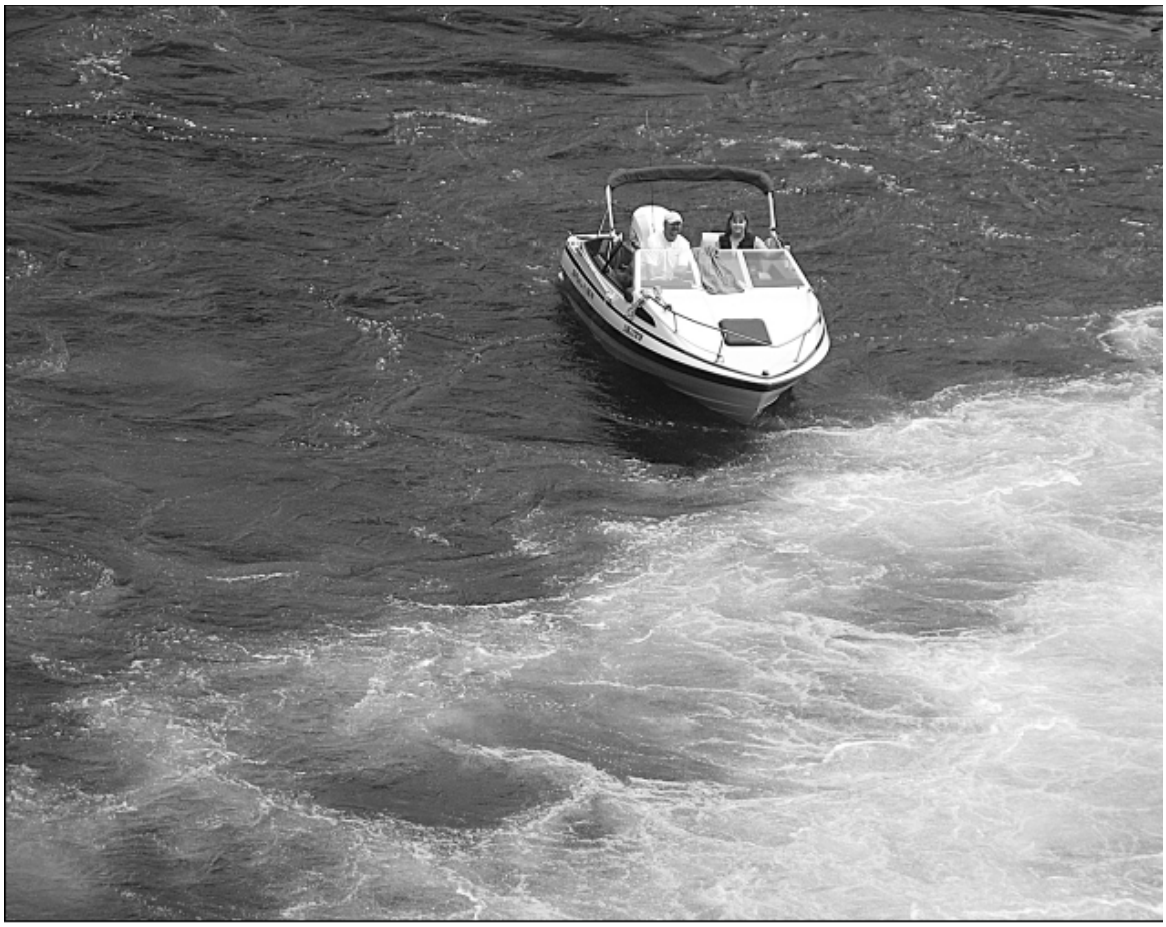
Even before I see the boat, I know it's Rob. In the next instant, the blue craft comes around the corner, slows to a near crawl, and treks out into the snag-filled narrows that lead to the waterfalls at the true Head of Powell Lake. I wave, but Rob doesn't honk his horn, so I know he doesn't notice me on the shore.

Meanwhile, John, Margy, and Bro are exploring near the bridge, where the Daniels River swirls over thick granite as it tumbles into Powell Lake. They hike there along the main access road, passing a spot where two quads are parked, ready to continue someday soon on an on-going government survey of the surrounding terrain.



Bridge over inlet to Powell Lake

John will undoubtedly hear Rob's boat and position himself to surprise his brother. They are always playing a game of one-upmanship. Maybe John will be able to greet Rob from the bridge. (Later, Margy reports that's exactly what happened, Rob pulling right up into the rapids so John and Rob could wave to each, while Margy snapped a photo.)



Rob in the rapids at the inlet to Powell Lake

A half hour later, Rob returns to the logging dock. I walk down to meet him, Karen, and her daughter. Their two small dogs are with them, and they are barking up a storm in high-pitched yips. It's best that Bro has gone hiking.

"Saw John at the bridge," says Rob. "We pulled right up into the beginning of the rapids."

"See any fish?" I ask.

"Caught a small one. That's all."

When I tell Rob about our great fishing luck today, I don't think he believes me. After all, he's a big-time fisherman, and we all know about the amateur status of Wayne and Margy. But not this year.

In just a few minutes, John, Margy, and Bro are back at the dock. Rob tells us that waves are now building just south of the Head, all the way down to

Second Narrows. It's a normal afternoon up-lake wind this time of year, but we hope to get back to Hole in the Wall before conditions deteriorate further.

Then Rob roars away in his typical throttle-to-the-wall mode. John leads us out of the Head slowly, stopping to check out the old dock at Jim Brown Creek, and then down along the east shore where we try fishing at the outlets of several streams. After hearing my fishing report, Rob is likely working hard to catch a big trout.

The excellent looking fishing spots on this side of the lake produce almost no bites and no additional fish. We work our poles hard at several spots near ideal pools just below waterfalls. Our luck has ended today, but we're totally satisfied.

The waves are increasing in size, now battering the Campion during cruise. In the back seat, I bounce around and feel my spine punched into the seat. You could get a sore back after a short time in waves like these. After passing Second Narrows, John angles the boat towards Olsen's Landing, where we'll stop and wait for an improvement in the conditions.

When we pull into Olsen's, waves are breaking over the dock. I hop out first and get us tied up before the boat gets out of control against the railing.

"Hand me two bumpers," I say to Margy. (Yes, I know they're called "fenders," but "bumpers" make more sense, especially today.)

The boat rocks almost out of control. While I'm installing the rear bumper, a fishing pole flops over the side of the boat. The tip of the pole hits me at a weird angle, and the lure swings towards my head. I duck, and the hook embeds itself in the hood of my jacket. Margy reaches out to remove it.

"It's really stuck," she says.

John comes to her aid, and together they work on my hood, while I kneel beside the Campion – them inside the boat, me outside.

"Man, all three hooks are stuck," says John. "When you get hooked, you really do it big-time."

"Do I win the contest?"

Finally, they extract the lure, put away the pole, and we're on our way to shore. John loves to explore logging staging areas, and there's a lot to examine

here today. Pickup trucks and excavating equipment line both sides of the parking area, all the way up to the beginning of the main. We hike around, looking over all of the big vehicles. Then we try fishing off the dock, waiting at least an hour for the whitecaps to calm down. They don't.

When we finally depart the dock in the Campion, John slowly accelerates, testing the waves. It will be a long, slow trip home in these conditions.

Just as we round the point that separates Olsen's Landing from the adjacent creek (Olsen's Creek), we see Rob's boat floating in the protected water of the outlet.

"Where'd he come from?" I ask.

Probably Rob arrived while we were on shore exploring the logging equipment.

"He's been waiting for us," says John. "I bet he'll follow in our wake until things calm down."

Sure enough, when we pull in front of Rob, he slips behind the Campion, riding the calmer conditions behind our boat. We accelerate up onto plane, and Rob follows behind us, taking advantage of the relative calm in the centerline of our backwash.

Today, in the northern stretches of giant Powell Lake, we've seen only three other boats, and one of them is John's brother. Now we ride with Rob, only twenty metres apart, headed back to our comfortable floating cabins. It's a small world and a big one at the same time.

"No fair!" I yell to John over the roar of our engine. "Rob has the bigger boat. He should be leading, and we should be riding in his wake."

"You're right. It isn't fair," replies John. "But Rob's no dummy."

He's right, and I'm right. But I don't mind one bit.

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Chapter 4

Canoe Route, Kayak Style

The Powell River Canoe Route is famous among those who love paddling. Beginning at Lois Lake, just off Highway 101, you can paddle through a long chain of lakes, all the way north to Goat Lake. From there, you travel through Goat River into Powell Lake and then the final demanding stretch to the Shinglemill. It's a route tackled by hardy canoe enthusiasts, and the most difficult part (other than the lengthy trip down Powell Lake) involves the land rather than water. To connect to the lakes in sequence, you need to hike a series of portages, some more demanding than others. Since you're packing your camping gear as well as your canoe, this is reserved for those in the best physical shape.

It seems impossible for me to try this route. Although my physical shape is fair, my canoe is a kayak. Worse, it's a huge sea kayak.

Mr. Kayak (as opposed to Mr. Blue, my cabin sit-on-top model) is a stable ocean craft, able to easily handle two people (plus a dog or small child in a middle seat) and quite a bit of baggage. It's length and weight makes it a non-candidate for the Powell River Canoe Route. Still, there is a way to enjoy this chain of lakes in Mr. Kayak. You only need to drive to the lakes, one at a time, thus avoiding the portages. It's part of my long-range plan.

* * * * *

The first lake in the chain that Margy and I tackle is Lois. We launch on a sunny July morning from a dirt turnout off Goat Main at the south end of the lake. The 10-kilometre trip to the far end would normally be near our limit, but today we start in calm conditions and proceed in following seas for the last portion of the trip. The typical up-lake afternoon wind aids our progress, with a few whitecaps emphasizing the gradually increasing breeze. These two-foot wind waves are well within our comfort zone. But it wouldn't be fun paddling in the opposite direction under these conditions, so an early morning return after our overnight campout will be wise.

Halfway up Lois Lake, we encounter our first traffic, a small cabin moving south, towed by a yellow tug. There aren't a lot of float cabins on this lake,

mostly at the south end, but we've caught one in transition.

"Moving day," says Margy, as the freshly painted cabin, no bigger than a large shed, moves past.

Moving day on Lois Lake

"Must be a logger's day off," I reply. "Why not borrow the tug from the boss, and call it a busman's holiday."

"Or maybe it's simply the boss," quips Margy

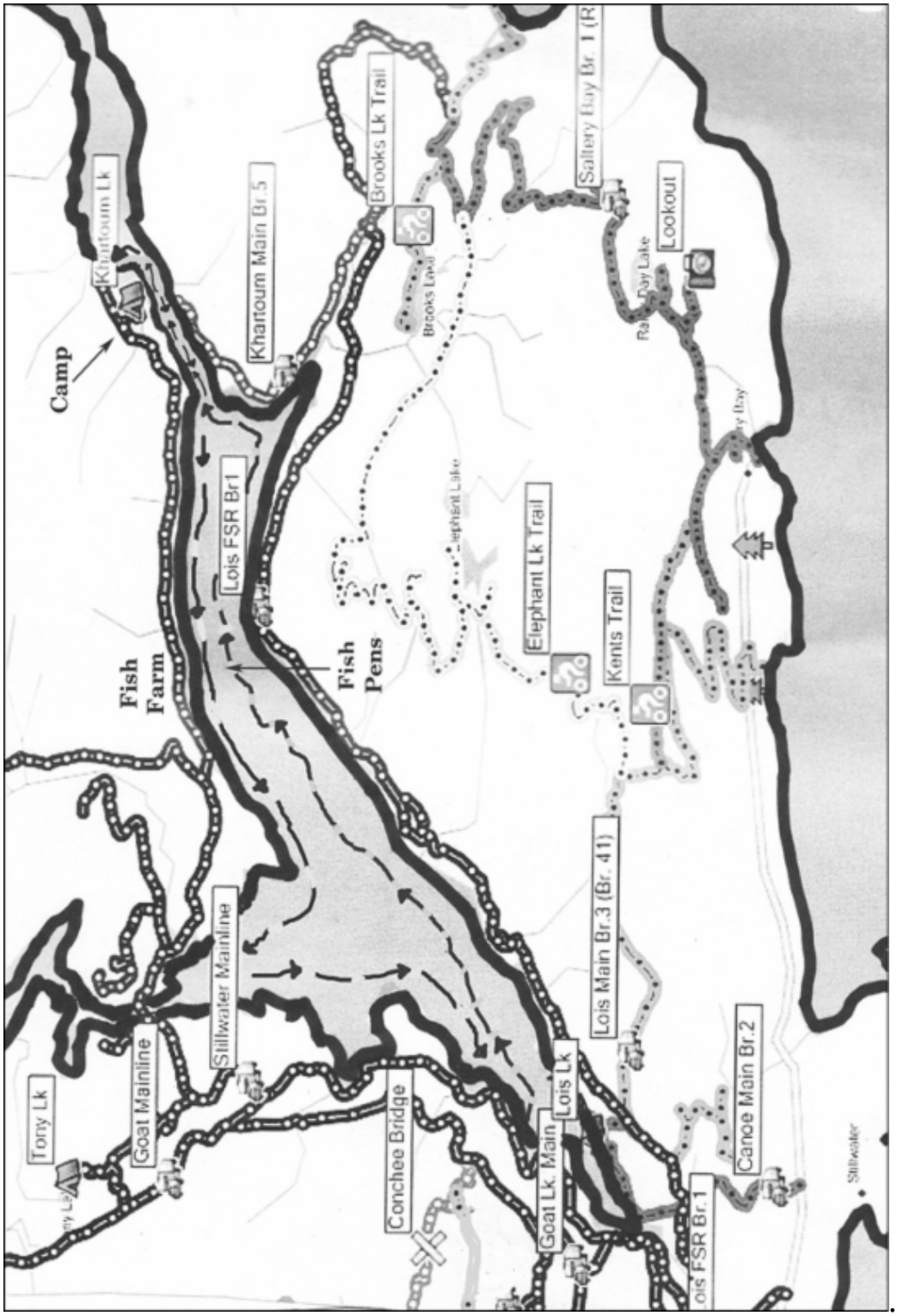
Once the cabin has passed, we ease our kayak along the edge of the salmon farm near mid-lake. Clang - clang go the big metal cages and their chains in the waves. Paddling from the back seat, where I have access to the rudder pedals, I steer to the left to come close enough to inspect the large frames, but we see no fish inside. At the time of this trip, the whole concept of fish farms is relatively new to BC, and the current controversy involves the escape of caged Atlantic salmon into the Pacific, along with the effects of antibiotics in our local waters. This debate will grow in future years. We're now passing one of the first local

fish farming experiments, and it will receive increased scrutiny in the years ahead.

In front of us, the peaks of the Knuckleheads thrust upward, with glacier-capped crests in the distance. I toss out my trout lure and set the pole in the kayak's rod holder. Trolling towards the north end of the lake, I don't get a single bite, but it's an enjoyable way to fish as we paddle at a perfect trout-catching speed of 2 to 3 knots.

Paddling Lois Lake

When we reach the head of Lois Lake, we pause, floating idle for a few minutes, looking for the river that pours out of Khartoum Lake to the northeast. Our map lacks detail, but the river should be obvious. It isn't



I head towards a cabin that might be perched near the outlet. Sure enough, the cabin leads us to the river. We wind through the placid small connection between Lois and Khartoum, finally breaking out of the meandering stream into

open water. I feel like a pioneer traveling a never-explored region, until we meet a fellow in a canoe headed directly towards us. It's a bit of a surprise, since we haven't seen anyone else during our journey today except the moving-day tug.

This athletic-looking lad is a sight right out of a comic book. He wears a tan safari hat, earflaps extended, paddling a bright red canoe. It seems a strange hat to be wearing here, not sporty looking like my traditional baseball-style red Canada hat.

"Must be on a safari," I joke to Margy.

She too laughs at the sight, although it's merely an experienced canoeist protecting himself from the July sun. (The next day, with inflamed ears and neck, I realize the error of my ways. Now you'll see me with a similar safari cap, especially on the water where reflected sunlight is particularly troublesome. Live and learn – and watch out where you direct your laughs.)

We pitch our tent at the campground on the south shore of beautiful Khartoum Lake, near the tumbling creek pouring down from Walt Lake. It's a peaceful night and tempting to sleep-in the next morning, so we do. But later we regret it (in addition to my bad case of sunburned ears). Our late and leisurely start from the campgrounds means we'll arrive on Lois Lake just in time for the inflow winds.

For the entire length of Lois, we face difficult paddling conditions. We try to stay close to shore, where the wind waves seem smaller, but that puts us against the beach where the fish farm has cables extending out into the lake. We end up steering closer to shore, temporarily abandoning our kayak and walking it over the cables in the shallow water. It's a physical struggle on the edge of our endurance. By the time we pass the farm and are back aboard the kayak, we're exhausted.

When we reach the more-protected bay that extends towards Horseshoe River, we're definitely ready for a rest. We slip out of the wind and into calm water. Snags poke up from the bottom of this shallow spot, but we easily navigate through the stump jungle.

Stump jungle, Lois Lake

I use the rudder pedals to aim us towards the outlet of Freda Creek and up to a bridge, where I cast my lure in what looks like ideal conditions. I catch nothing, but at least I get one brief bite to entice me.

Then we explore the area where paddlers pull their canoes out of the water for the portage to Horseshoe Lake. Here the fishing looks ideal, but it's tough to cast in the tight confines of the winding creek. I quickly lose my feathered spinning lure in the rocky, shallow flow.

As we paddle back towards the lower portion of Lois Lake, we pass a huge osprey nest in the snags, while listening to an eerie sound.

"Do you hear that?" says Margy.

"Sounds like a waterfall on the lower portion of the lake. I don't remember hearing it on our trip yesterday."

It sounds like a river pouring into the lake, rushing over a substantial waterfall. But as we get closer, where the calm arm opens back into the windy main section, we recognize the sound as something else.

“It’s waves crashing on the shore!” exclaims Margy, with concern in her voice.

Waves that make this kind of noise are of substantial size. The trip back to our car will be a battle against the elements.

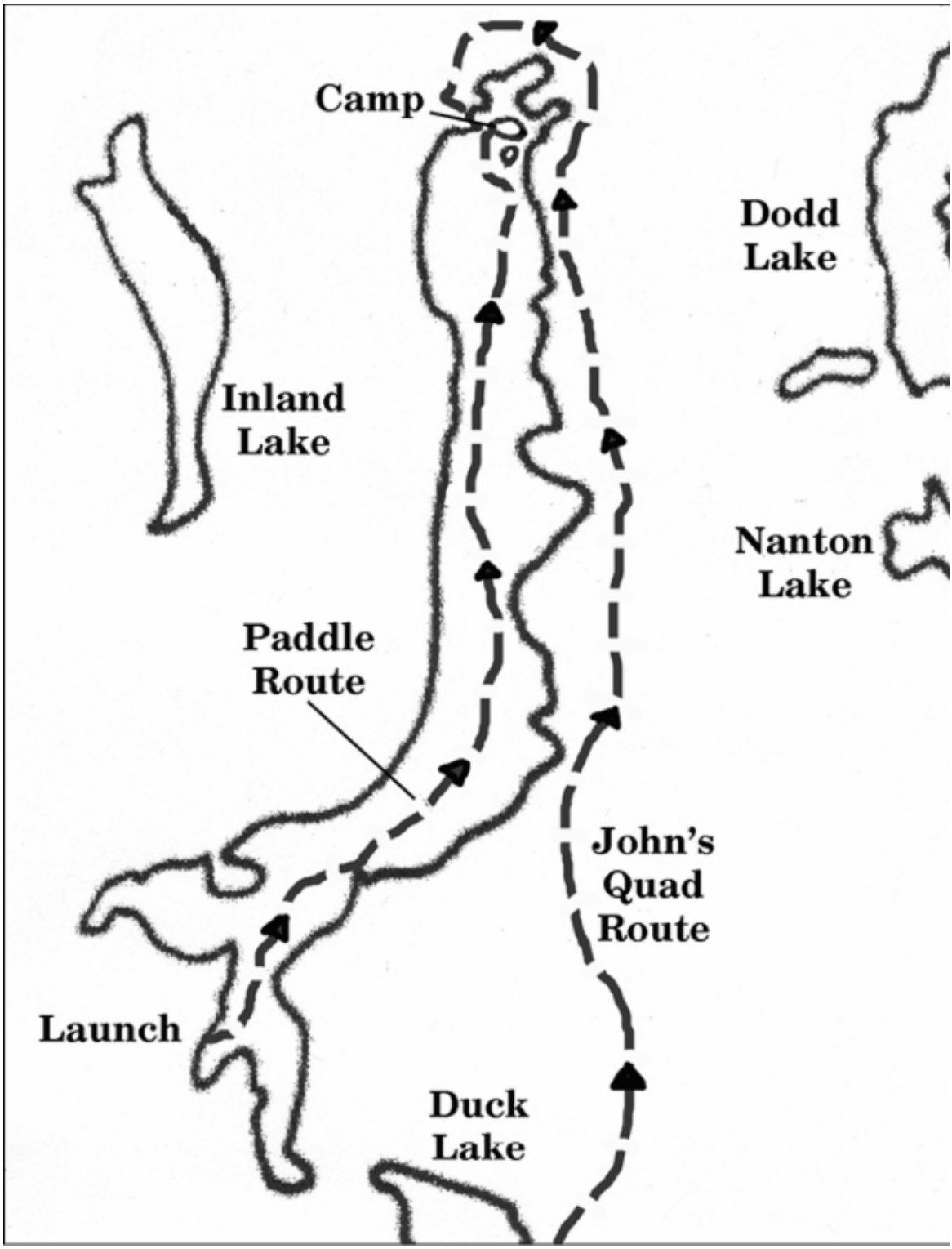
We watch the shore pass by at an agonizingly slow speed. Sometimes, it seems like we are actually going backwards. When we think we see the promontory that marks our parking spot, we relish thoughts of this now-tortuous trip being over. But the point isn’t the one where our car is parked. Nor is the next.

It’s a slow trudge back, and all of our paddling muscles reflect the pain, but finally we arrive at our launching spot. We pull the big kayak out of the water, wiser about the virtues of getting up early and wearing proper hats.

* * * * *

On another kayak camping trip, Margy and I paddle Haslam Lake. This isn’t part of the Canoe Route, but it’s another great inland lake with lots of open space to explore. We paddle up-lake in early afternoon from our launch spot at the south end. The wind is, not surprisingly, at our backs, and we’ll be sure to return in the morning before the winds develop again.

It’s an all-day paddling adventure for us, ending at a secluded camping spot on a small island at the head of the lake. As soon as our tent is set up, we take a short swim to the main shore, where we sit on a bluff waiting for an event we’ve planned with John.



Right on schedule, John arrives on his quad, having ridden along Haslam Main in the late afternoon after the road is clear of logging trucks. For the next hour, the four of us (Bro, too!) swim in the warm, shallow water between shore

and island, wading in and out, and lounging on the bluff in the warm sun. We manage to spend a lot of time watching Bro run madly along the shore, searching for frogs.

After John leaves, Margy and I go for another swim to get back to our small island, and pausing in the muddy bottom near our campsite, comforting our feet in the warm, soft ooze.

But the ooze holds other things I don't expect (but should). After climbing out of the water, I sit on a boulder in the sun. Glancing down at my foot, I see a dark leaf lodged near my ankle. But it isn't a leaf. These warm, muddy waters are no place to linger, and I suddenly realize I'm looking at my first leech, up close and personal.

I yell out in fright (overreaction, of course), grab the leech, and tear it away. Margy comes running, thinking it's a major injury (which, to me, it is).

My too-swift action results in a bloody wound that could have been avoided by lighting a match and enticing the leech to let go of my foot. It would have been more humane for both the humble parasite and me. But, at the time, I'm horrified by the unexpected sight, and react too quickly.

But I survive the encounter with the leech just fine, and learn another good lesson: Don't linger in warm, muddy water, even though it's the established drinking water supply for the town of Powell River.

Campsite on Lois Lake

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On the Canoe Route, Nanton Lake and Horseshoe Lake are joined by a narrow waterway. They can be paddled without need of a portage, one lake at a time in a two-for-one package.

One May weekend, Margy and I discover Nanton Lake for the first time during an ATV Club group ride and campout. North of Tin Hat Junction, soon after the turn off on Goat Main that leads to Lewis Lake and Tin Hat Mountain (the real Tin Hat Junction, in my opinion), the logging road passes a clearly marked sign that points to Nanton Lake. I've driven right by this turnoff many times on my quad, not noticing the short road that leads right to the shore. It's one of those obvious intersections that makes you wonder how you could miss it.

During the May ATV Club stay at Nanton, I fish from shore, finding lots of small trout. The campsites are picturesque and relatively unoccupied on this

sunny spring afternoon. Margy and I resolve to return in the near future with Mr. Kayak.

But this will necessitate navigating logging roads in our Ford Tempo with the kayak on top. For most vehicles, these dirt roads are not much of a challenge, but the Tempo is low-slung and city-like in its capabilities. The car's needing-replacement shocks flex like they're filled with jelly, even on the smoothest of roads. But we're determined to make the trip – someday soon.

* * * * *

Someday soon takes a full year to arrive. Once again it's time for the annual ATV Club get-together at Nanton. We aren't particularly looking forward to the group ride, since it's typically over dusty logging roads. The companionship is great, but group rides go slow, so we're looking for an excuse to go to the event (and the great barbecue!) without participating in the ride. So we jump at the chance to kayak on Nanton, camp overnight on Horseshoe Lake, and join in the club's barbecue after the ride the next day. We can join our friends and fulfill our dream of kayaking these lakes at the same time – an additional two-for-one. It seems like the perfect plan, except for one thing – we must leave our float cabin to do it, something we find even more difficult as the summer approaches. We love our off-the-grid home so much that it seems impossible to leave without regrets, even for only a few days.

As the weekend approaches, the weather is looking good. May hasn't provided much sunshine to date, but the next few days look perfect. Cool, but not cold, and lots of sun. We're determined not to cancel our plans for Nanton, although that means we'll miss a sunny period on the lake. Mario is arranging the weekend schedule, and he's worked hard to make it enjoyable for all. I've already sent him an email explaining our plans for kayaking while the club is out riding, and how we'll be joining them for the barbecue. When I drag my feet about leaving the cabin, it helps to feel a little commitment to promises made.

* * * * *

Margy and I turn off Highway 101 onto Goat Main, Mr. Kayak on top of the Ford Tempo. We wind north towards Nanton Lake on a Friday afternoon, before the logging operation is finished for the day. But we proceed carefully,

pulling off onto the narrow shoulder twice when logging trucks barrel down the main. Except for the swath of dust they toss our way, the truck drivers seem content with our joint use of the road, waving as they pass.

As we approach the turnoff to Tin Hat, we come upon a major logging operation right along the side of the road. A truck piled high with logs is parked on our side of the main, engine running and far enough off the road to give us room to pass. Only 50 metres farther, two large cranes are working on a mound of logs on the other side of the road. Their big tires are on the main, with what looks like just enough room to slip by, were it not for the wide oscillations of the big logs swinging around like matchsticks.

I pull off onto the shoulder, in a position where I can see around the big truck and wait (hope) for the cranes to eventually stop their work. Just as I'm about to get out of the car and walk forward to talk the crane operators, one of them sees me and hops down from his high cab and heads towards the Tempo at a brisk pace. At first, I'm concerned we're in trouble for coming up this road. Yes, the signs did warn of logging activity ahead, but usually everyone is good about sharing the backcountry.

By the time the fellow in the flourescent vest is halfway to the car, I can see my worries are unfounded. He's smiling and motioning to me to drive forward. Then he swings around and yells to his buddy in the other crane, who lowers his log and leaves the crane's neck fast to the ground. I pull around the logging truck and stop to talk to the man in the bright vest.

"I'd like to go to Nanton Lake," I say through my open window. "If that's okay with you."

"Sure," he replies. "Could be another truck coming down the main before you get there, so watch for him."

I nod with a smile, and start pulling past the cranes. Behind me I hear the vested man yell some final thoughts: "Now you be careful!"

It sounds like he means it, and not in a derogatory way. Encounters between loggers and recreational users sometimes don't go this well, but I'm convinced it's usually the ATV drivers who set a bad tone. There's a big difference in attitude between asking permission and demanding access. Most

of us understand that these roads can be easily shared for both logging and recreation. A little courtesy goes a long way.

There are no logging trucks in the short stretch of main between here and the turnoff to Nanton Lake. We creep down the rutted access road, bouncing up and down on the Tempo's mushy shocks, and park at the best kayak launching spot on the lake. Although several of the campsites are occupied (probably by Mario and his friends), no one is anywhere in sight. I suspect that Mario is out riding, scoping out tomorrow's route.

Mr. Kayak and Ford Tempo at Nanton Lake

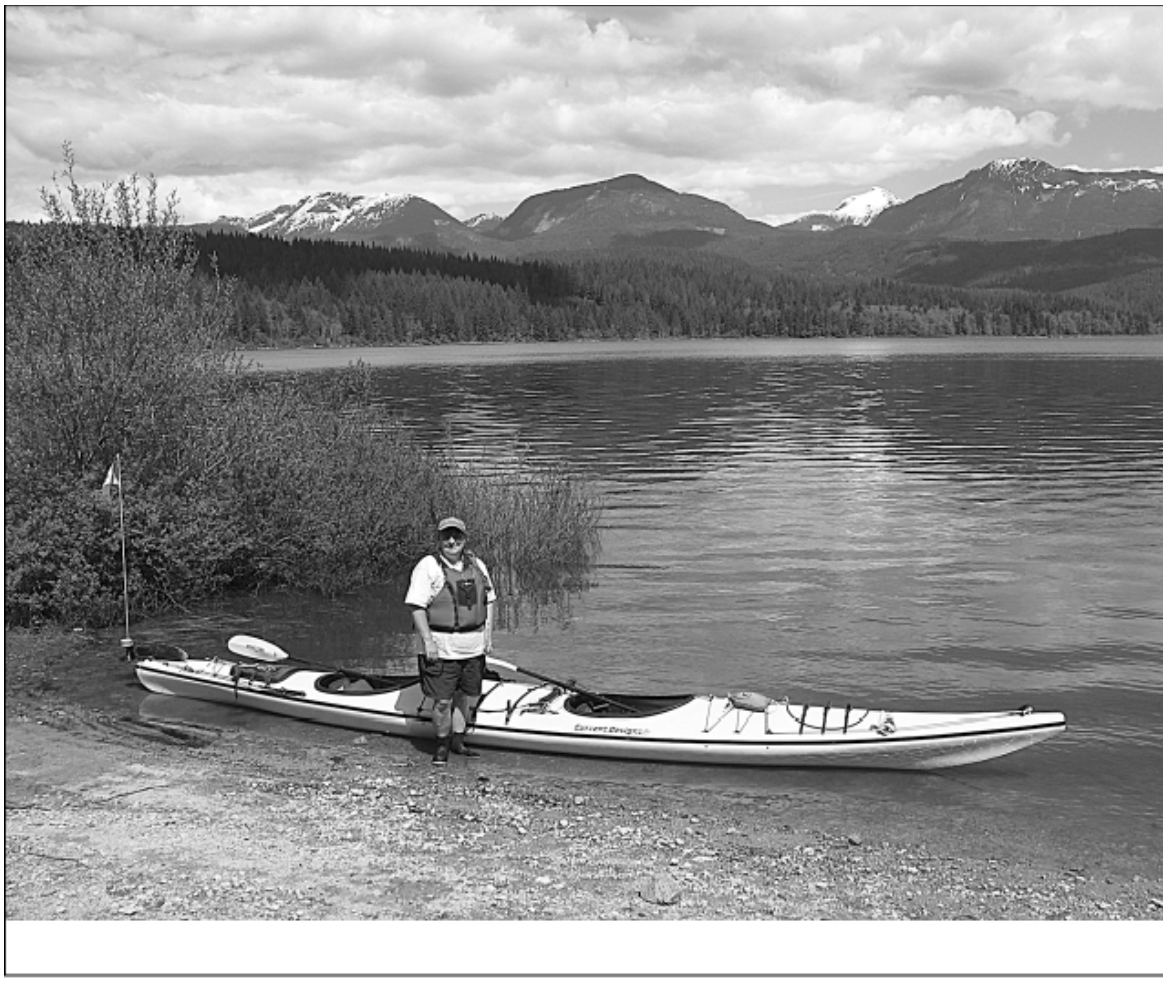
We off-load the kayak from the top of the Tempo, positioning it between the car and the gravel beach. We gather our gear from the trunk, and load it in the three watertight compartments. By the time we're ready to carry the kayak the few metres to the water, it's so heavy we can barely lift it.

“Good thing we’re not carrying this thing any farther,” I say. “Imagine trying to get through the Canoe Route portages with this monster.”

“It’s amazing it will even float,” says Margy.

I’ve been thinking the same thing. With so much weight in the compartments, you’d think this vessel would ride really low in the water. But the big sea kayak seems to take anything we give it. And in our adventures during the past few years, we’ve given it lots of challenges. It may not be the sleekest-looking watercraft afloat, but it sure is a workhorse.

Once Mr. Kayak is in the water, Margy attends to the final preparation of our two cockpits – water bottles, sun tan lotion, camera (hers), inflatable back support (mine), paddles, and all the comforts of home on the go. Meanwhile, I move the car a few metres forward, parked up against the bushes. When Mario returns from his ride, he’ll know this is our car (with our Powell River Books signs on the rear windows), and will know we’re out kayaking. It’s nice to have a float plan on file with someone as rescue insurance.



Margy and *Mr. Kayak* ready for launch, Nanton Lake

We push off from the beach, paddling slowly along the west shore and then parallel to the north shore, heading towards the junction between Nanton and Horseshoe Lake. The wind is light from the east, and we're comfortable in the cool afternoon sunshine.

Margy and I take turns fishing in the shallow water, while the other paddles, often needing to reverse course to a hidden snag that's caught our lure. But with a kayak, you can position yourself right over the submerged obstacle, and often see the lure below. We tug carefully to remove the hook. We encounter a lot of snags, but we lose not a single lure.

As we paddle into the narrows, the sky is peppered with cumulus clouds, and the horizon is littered with logs. In fact, it appears to be a complete

blockage of the connecting channel, hundreds (maybe thousands) blown back towards us by the light wind. The closer we get, the more obvious it becomes that our path is barred by row after row of logs wedged against each other and the shore. There's no clear path through this logjam. Surely this can't be normal.

We maneuver up to the logs in an area where they seem to be slightly less densely packed. We push against them with our paddles, trying to maneuver the logs out of our way. It's futile.

We try pushing with the bow of the kayak, both of us paddling as hard as we can. But nothing budges.

"Must be blown in from Horseshoe Lake," says Margy. "Maybe rather than trying to push them back, we should try pulling them out of the way."

And so we do just that. Log by log, we pull rather than push, and some of the logs break free. We send them on their way into Nanton Lake, working at things a log at a time. Sometimes we run into wood that won't move, lodged against the shore or on an underwater obstacle. In other cases, huge logs, looking too heavy to dislodge, float backwards with a gentle push of our paddles. One by one, the way is cleared, until finally we see an end in sight.

"It must feel like this in the Arctic," I say. "You read about boats trying to find leads in the ice. An area looks clear, and then it's a dead end and you have to turn around and go all the way back again."

"Mr, Kayak, the icebreaker," says Margy.

"Maybe this occurs regularly, with the logs blown in from Horseshoe and then back out again nearly every day," I reply. "If so, these logs are just sitting here waiting for a slight change in the wind. We might be the 'last straw' they need to get untangled. When we come back, they may be gone."

Logjam between Nanton and Horseshoe Lake

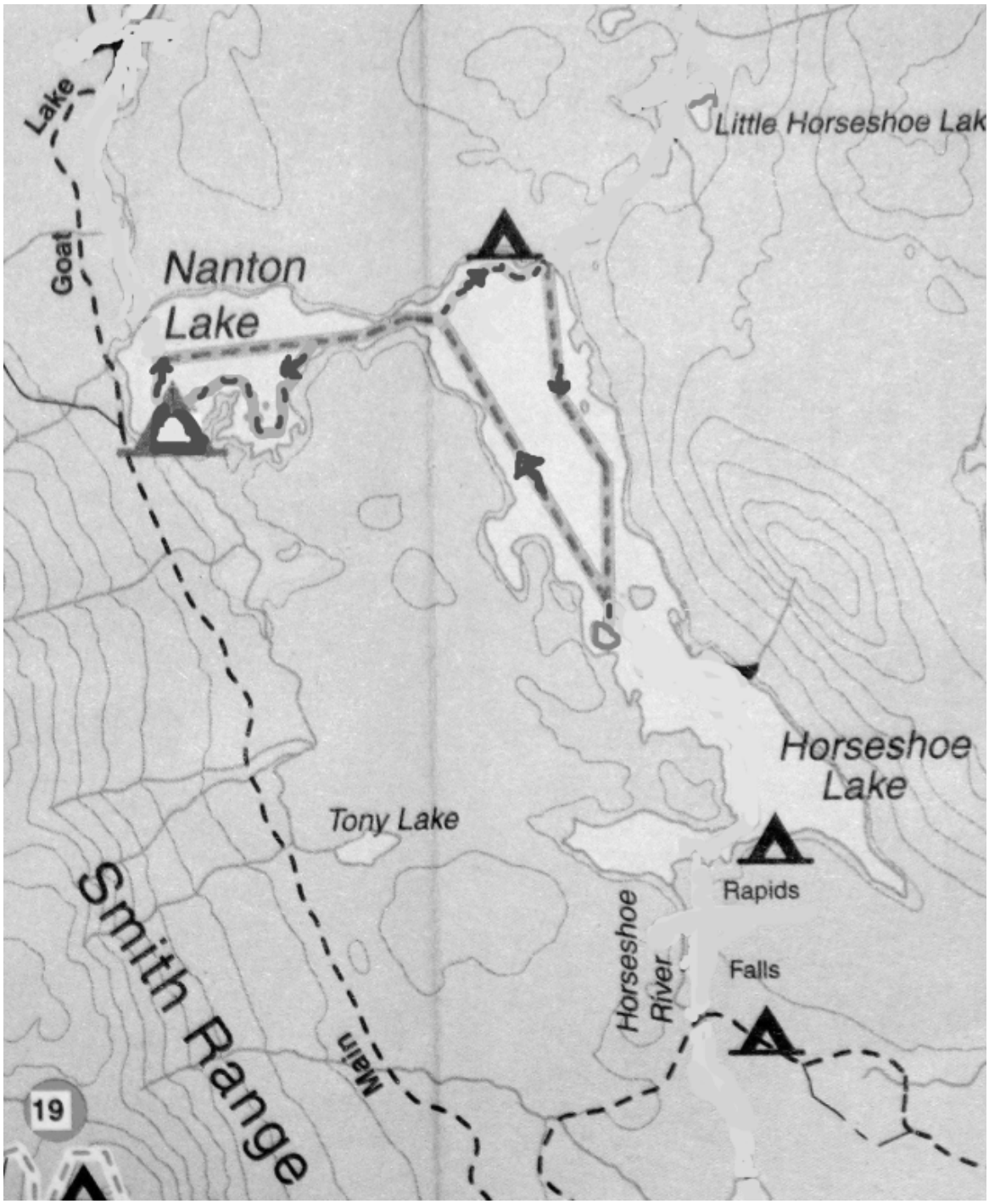
Finally, we're in Horseshoe Lake. I glance back over my shoulder and notice that the way back is closed off again. I decide to not think about struggling to get back through the logjam tomorrow. Maybe the wind will blow the channel open while we're camped. Or maybe not.

As we enter Horseshoe Lake, we pass an old boat, partially sunk with its bow protruding upward. Possibly it's the fate of those who try to pass through logjams. More likely, it's a boat blown helplessly, like these logs, from a distant part of the lake.

We paddle along the north shore of Horseshoe Lake, where big logs cover the shoreline in every direction. We begin our quest for a place to camp. John has given us some ideas, one of which is the established campsite at the portage to Little Horseshoe.

“But you really want a place on the east shore, where there’s plenty of sunlight right up until sunset,” he recommends.

The Little Horseshoe campsite sits back in the trees, already in the shade this afternoon, looking like a mosquito haven. Besides, it’s still early, and we have paddling energy remaining. So we pass it by, knowing we can camp anywhere there’s a small patch of flat ground. We don’t need a picnic table or any facilities, so we expect to find lots of candidates.



It's an easy paddle down the lake along the east shore, but there are no obvious campsites. I note a few spots on bluffs where we could pitch our tent, but water access is a bit challenging, sometimes due to cliffs and often due to logjams against the shore. It would be nice to find a spot where it's easy to

unload the kayak, with a short bag-drag to where we'll pitch our tent. How about an island?

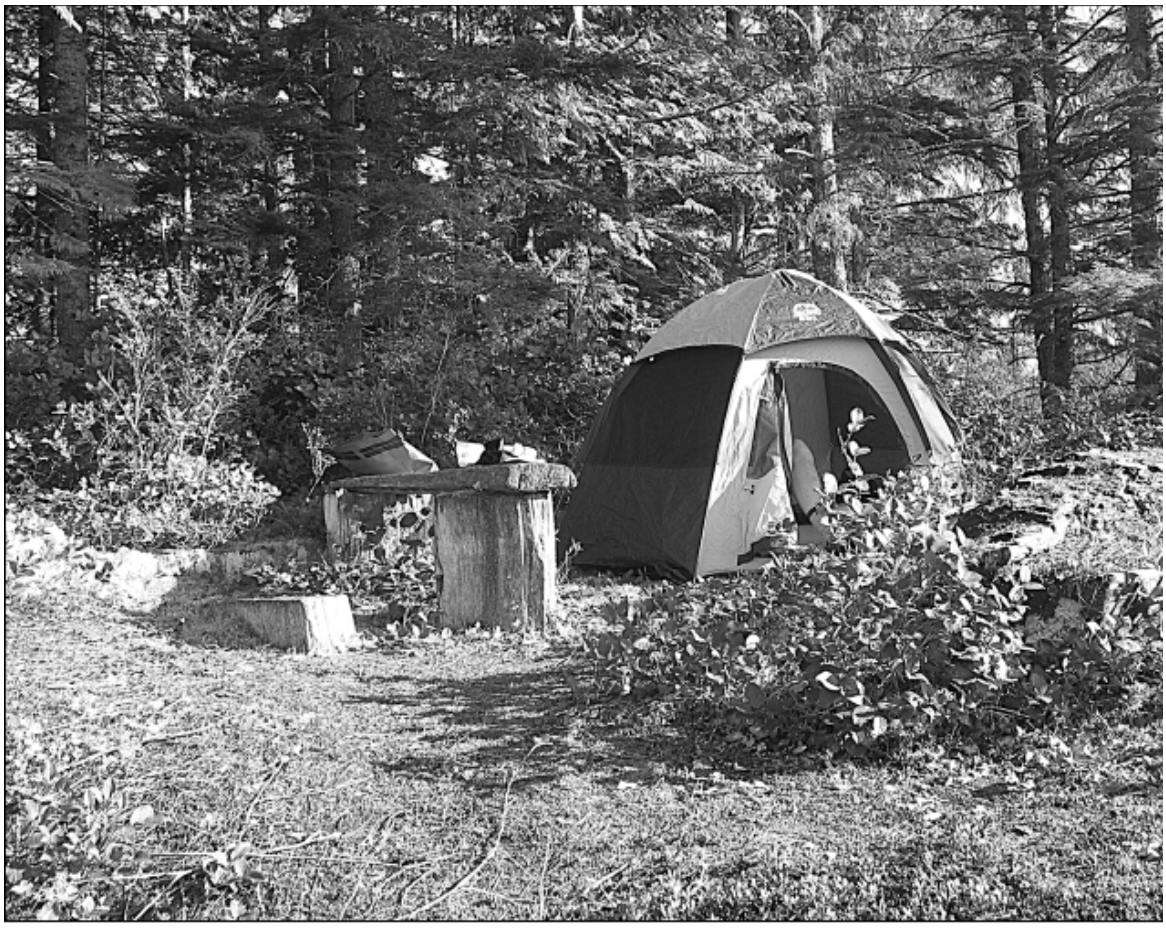
I'm amazed at the overall dimensions of Horseshoe Lake. It's huge. We pass close to a prospective island. This takes us across the center of the lake towards the west shore. When we reach the island, every bit of ground is covered with wood. Today, floating logs clog the narrows, are jammed against all the shores, and cover the islands. This is obviously logging country.

We decide to continue farther south, knowing we can always return to one of the bluffs on the east shore. Our excursion places us close to the lake's west shore where several big bays look like fishing paradise, so I push the rudder pedals and aim for a prospective-looking spot. When we get there, I try a few casts. Margy paddles along the edge of one of the bays, while I lend some rudder. Meanwhile, I find no fish.

Back in the main lake, we head towards another island that looks like a likely camping spot. It sits in a position where it will catch the setting sun right down to the horizon. In fact, what first looked like an island could be the end of a long peninsula.

Paddling a little farther south, the island-peninsula becomes even more attractive. It possesses a wide-open slope that isn't covered with wood. And there's a ledge along the shore where we can dock the kayak and conveniently off-load our gear. As we pull towards the best looking landing area, I notice a wooden structure in the clearing, a bench someone has built. Very inviting after five hours of paddling.

This spot has been developed (in a makeshift sense) precisely for our style of camping. The clearing has an almost-flat spot to pitch our tent, along with a bench and fire ring. Both Margy and I are pleasantly worn out by the paddling, but we manage to stay up until the sun drops below the horizon. Then we crawl into the tent and are quickly asleep. An exhausting day of kayaking can catch up with you almost immediately when you finally relax. It's a good feeling.



Nanton Lake campsite

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In the morning, we sleep until the sun breaks through the trees behind us, filling our tent with splashes of sunlight. We eat a snack-breakfast of crackers, peanut butter, and apples. When traveling by kayak on one-night trips, we usually avoid packing a lot of food and cooking gear. A simple snack for breakfast will be fine when you know you have a big barbecue to look forward to in the afternoon.

Looking to the north from our campsite, I notice a large mass of logs floating in the middle of the upper portion of the lake.

“Look at those logs,” I say. “Maybe we really were the ‘last straw’ for that logjam yesterday. Those logs may have drifted south from the narrows.”

“Or maybe they’re headed back to the same place,” replies Margy.

After packing up our equipment, we're back on the water quickly, with plans to stop and fish along the way. We're both a little apprehensive about what we'll find at the narrows leading back into Nanton Lake. Could these logs we see far ahead really be the start of another logjam? Should we rush (beat the logs) or slow down (wait for improvement)?

As we paddle north, we fish several back bays along the western shore, and I catch a small trout. Then we take turns trolling – one of us paddling while the other manages the fishing pole. Margy catches a nice 12-inch trout, but then we decide to keep the line in, since the looming mass of logs is getting close. It must be the original logjam, now spread into Horseshoe Lake by the morning breeze. There are just as many logs as we encountered yesterday, but now they're spread out a bit more manageably. We zigzag around them, sometimes having to retrace our way out of dead ends. Then we're clear of the mass, and the channel ahead is wide open. We paddle through the gaping expanse of water that's hard to imagine completely blocked as it was yesterday. Suddenly, we're in Nanton Lake.

We've planned one more stop on our return to the beach where our car is parked. The ATV Club has built a new campsite on the southeast corner of the lake that can be reached by quad, and it should be easy to identify since they've spent considerable time building a dock. When we come around a small promontory, there it sits. It's a good place to take a break before the final paddle back to the beach.

The Club has built a skookum bench, just perfect for relaxing and looking out over the serene waters. Margy goes for the bench, and I go for a laid-back rest on a flat slope in the sun.

We've paddled a lot in the past 24 hours, and we deserve a rest. Our sleep last night was great, but we were so tired when we went to bed it passed almost without notice. Now we can slowdown and enjoy the lake, relaxing in this wonderful spot. We're way ahead of schedule, and the barbecue is still about four hours away. Since we were worried about the possibility of another logjam, we left early this morning to assure we made it through in time for the picnic. Now we've got time to spare.

After resting for a while, I try some fishing off the end of the dock. Someone has added a cute touch – a homemade springboard for brave divers to use on a summer day that's a lot warmer than this one. The dock looks like a great spot for trout, but I have no luck. As usual, it doesn't matter whether I catch anything, as long as I have the opportunity to relax with a fishing pole and a line in the water.

Fishing at Nanton dock

After leaving the campsite, we paddle through another wide bay that looks perfect for trout. We don't catch anything, and now we're like a horse getting a scent of home. The beach where we're parked is right around the corner, and we make a final dash for it.

By 2 o'clock, we're back where we started, with our kayak loaded onto the car, and our camping gear stowed in the trunk. As we collect the remaining stray equipment, a father and his teenage son come down to the shore to talk to

us. They've been camping here for almost a week, fishing in Nanton Lake each day, and catching quite a few two-pounders.

"What about Horseshoe Lake?" I ask. "Did you catch anything there?"

"Oh, no," replies the dad. "The logjam has kept us out the entire time."

I guess we really were the "last straw."

After the man and his son leave, we sit in the Ford Tempo, windows rolled down, swatting at a few mosquitoes. It's still about an hour before the ATV Club will return from their ride, and the barbecue will be at least another hour after that. We're far from starved, so that raises some questions. I express one of them out loud.

"Why are we waiting?"

The answer should be straightforward. We're waiting because we want to join in the picnic. After all, we came all of this way to explore Nanton and Horseshoe Lake by kayak, and then enjoy the comradeship of the ATV Club. And, of course, there's the food, too.

"We're waiting for the barbecue," replies Margy.

"But we could be headed up the lake," I suggest.

"True," says Margy. "Do you want to go?"

"Are you okay with that?" I ask.

"Sure. You know that going up the lake is one of my favourite things."

"I'll email Mario. It'll be the wimpiest excuse he's ever received for missing a barbecue. But he knows how much we love our cabin."

So I start the engine and maneuver the car with its big kayak on top out the access road. From there, I point the Tempo back down Goat Main. It's been a great trip, barbecue or no barbecue.

* * * * *

Mr. Kayak has spent a lot of time on Powell Lake. But in recent years, he remains in town, stored at the airport, awaiting his next adventure on the ocean or another inland lake. At our float cabin, I occasionally used him for brief excursions around Hole in the Wall and a bit of drift-trolling for trout. But the big kayak doesn't operate efficiently as a single-person vessel. Then again, I

have plenty of other boats at the cabin, including the tin boat that's ideal for "bombing around."

One day, in the cardiologist's office in Bellingham, Washington, I'm faced with a hard-to-answer question. The nurse is pleased with my progress in my personal war against cholesterol. The numbers are under control, but she isn't totally satisfied.

"It's the LDL you need to watch," she says. "The 'L' is for lousy cholesterol, whereas your HDL is of little concern."

"And my LDL is the lowest I've seen it in years," I say.

"But you still need to take care of your heart in other ways," she says. "What do you do for daily exercise?"

The operative word here is "daily," and I know that's where I'm lacking.

"Well, I hike a lot. Not every day, of course. I live in a cabin that floats on a lake in Canada, so it's hard to do real cardiovascular exercise that's not boring."

Clinging to excuses, just like always.

"Can't you go for daily walks?" she asks.

"Not really. There aren't any sidewalks or roads, and not even any acceptable walking trails. Hey, I could row for exercise."

It's a sudden revelation. Rowing would be perfect exercise for me. The tin boat has oars as well as an engine, so why not use it for daily exercise.

"Rowing is good," she says. "That'll get your target heart rate up where it should be."

I resolve to change my ways. I'll row nearly every day. Besides, when I return for my follow-up visit in six months, she'll ask me about it. No excuses.

* * * * *

When I get back to Powell Lake, I tackle my new exercise regime immediately. But the tin boat rows slowly, and it's best to row facing towards the stern. There's something about seeing where you've been that's less than appealing. And I'm used to paddling at the somewhat faster pace of Mr. Kayak.

Then an idea hits me. Why not buy a small kayak. Not a big ocean vessel like Mr. Kayak, but a small, lightweight model that will paddle efficiently. I'll

be able to exercise and fish in the same outing. It will be enjoyable exercise, something to look forward to. And a small kayak will take little dock space. In fact, I can easily pull it aboard the float when I leave the cabin for any period of time. Thus is born the concept that eventually leads to Mr. Blue.

While I'm hunting for a used kayak, I concentrate on the kind of vessel I'm used to, a traditional sit-inside model like Mr. Kayak. But soon after beginning my hunt, I come across a sit-on-top model I now call Mr. Blue because of its faded blue plastic surface. Blue is a good colour for the cabin – it matches the fifty-five gallon blue barrels used for cabin flotation and the numerous blue barrels serving as vegetable pots. Blue is beautiful.

Mr. Blue turns up in a surprising location – on the back deck of John's Cabin Number 1. I've seen it sitting there for months, but I've never paid it much attention until now. Missing its drain plug on top of the bow, it has slowly filled with rainwater.

"Found it in Jervis Inlet when Doug and I were there in the Bayliner," says John. "Nobody around, just floating there, looking lost and banging against the rocks. No paddles or seats. So we hauled it aboard and brought it home with us."

It makes you wonder why a deserted kayak was floating free in Jervis Inlet, not the most forgiving waterway. Probably it had drifted harmlessly away, but surely John and Doug pondered the fate of a vanished kayaker who might have been aboard. Then again, the missing seat likely indicates a derelict vessel.

When I try to turn the kayak over on John's deck to inspect it further, I'm barely able to lift it.

"Must be waterlogged," says Margy, watching me struggle. "Full of water."

I can hear it sloshing around inside, and I assume the faded kayak is less than seaworthy. Lots of things hang around John's cabin for no apparent reason.

"I think it's okay," says John. "When we found the kayak, Doug paddled around on it, using a stick for a paddle."

(Picture it. Doug, a likeable immigrant from New Zealand, with shoulder-length curly blond hair, sitting on top of a faded blue kayak poised near a cliff in

Jervis Inlet. T-shirt and shorts, no shoes. He propels forward in a burst of thrust, paddling with a big stick he found along the shore: “Looks good to me!” he yells up to John, hovering nearby in the Bayliner.)

“If I can borrow it for a few days, I’ll test it out at Hole in the Wall,” I say. “I’ve never used a sit-on-top before, but maybe it’s just what I need. If it works, I’ll buy it from you.”

“Suppose it’s not for sale?” says John.

“Is it?”

“Sure.”

* * * * *

After a brief test at Hole in the Wall, and even before I’ve purchased a seat for the kayak, I’m hooked. It’s a great way to exercise, and it paddles fast. Around the cabin, it’ll come in handy, including regular trips to the floating garden to pick a few onions.

“So we need to settle on a price,” I say to John over the telephone. “What do you want for it?”

“The Internet says it costs nine hundred dollars new,” says John.

“So what’s a fair price?”

“I have a price in mind, but why don’t you make an offer.”

“Okay,” I say. “How about four hundred and fifty.”

“I don’t know,” says John. “It’s in perfect condition, except for the missing drain plug and no seat. No paddles either.”

“So how much do you want for it.”

“Three-fifty,” says John.

“That’s not the way it works! You’re supposed to say ‘five hundred,’ and then I say ‘Sold.’ You’re not much of a salesman.”

“It’s not much of a kayak.”

But it’s a great kayak, perfect for the task of cardiovascular exercise and a multitude of daily jobs around the cabin. Mr. Blue is a fine addition to the boat family at Cabin Number 3.

Mr. Blue at Hole in the Wall

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Chapter 5

Cabin Cat

The Campion is packed nearly full. Margy's mom and StickTail (her cat from Farther Up the Lake, Chapter 12) have joined us for the trip up the lake. StickTail isn't the most relaxed traveler. He hates boats.

Mom holds StickTail on her lap while I drive. Margy is crammed into the back seat, with no foot space. The rear of the boat is crowded with groceries, crochet supplies, a litter box, and enough travel bags to allow a 92-year-old lady to be comfortable for a week's visit to a float cabin. In fact, we could easily stay a month.

I've installed some cat fences to prevent StickTail from wandering off the float. He's a bit of a scaredy-cat, so I don't expect problems. On his previous visits, Sticktail didn't seem tempted to cross the bridge to shore, where I laid a barrier of chicken wire across the entrance just in case. But now the cabin floats closer to shore because of the low water level. The jump from the float still seems formidable for a cat, and I've never met a cat that likes to swim. Especially a scaredy-cat.

After offloading the boat at the cabin, a lengthy process today, StickTail settles in quickly. Previously, it took him nearly a week before he chanced the climb to our cabin's loft. Today, he zips up the stairs to the bedroom almost immediately, the master of his floating domain. When he returns from the loft a few minutes later, StickTail is ready to eat, a sign that he's already comfortable in his new home. He eats up a storm.

Outside, the weather is remarkable for the first week in March. Sun beams down on the deck, and afternoon temperatures soar to 9 degrees C. We might even make it to double digits. The forecast indicates this respite between showers will end tonight, so I'm tempted to allow StickTail to go outside right away. He seems properly settled in, has never charged towards shore before, and it should be safe to let him roam as he desires. He won't go far.

StickTail slinks out the open sliding glass door in the keep-low-and-slow pose of a scaredy-cat. He sniffs (carefully) at the planter box, and then steps towards the edge of the deck. He warily stretches his neck to the left and right in

wide, slow sweeps, sizing up his surroundings. Then, unexpectedly, he bolts for shore!

The black long-haired cat jumps onto the lower deck, hops onto the gangplank to the transition float, and prances rapidly across the boards. My first shock at seeing him headed towards shore is over. He's settled down to a slow pace now, eyeballing the chicken-wire fence with determination. I watch him scan slowly to his left. He catches sight of a log bobbing between the cabin and the rocky shoreline. In an instant, he runs towards the edge of the transition float, hops onto the log, and scampers across this floating bridge to the rocky beach beyond.

I stand on the deck, gaping at a cat that's now well out of reach. To get to him, I'll need to cross the gangplank, climb the wooden bridge to shore, and climb back down the craggy lower cliff. StickTail, on the other hand, has a lot of open space in front of him that leads to a steep ravine that angles up the rock wall. John and I've tried to scale this cliff before, never successfully. Then again, neither of us is a cat.

"StickTail, come back here!" I yell.

Yelling directives at a cat is always futile. They hear you, but usually react by doing exactly the opposite of what you demand. Today is no exception. When I call to him, StickTail raises his tail straight up, and starts sauntering towards the narrow ravine.

Cat on a cliff

By now, Margy and her mom have heard my frantic call to the cat, and are out of the cabin and on the deck. Together, we yell worthless instructions to StickTail. Obviously focused on his goal, he ignores us. His ambition is the winding crack-like ravine that leads up a 20-metre granite wall.

If I run after him, he'll do exactly what any chased cat does in a situation like this – charge even faster away from me. So I remain on the float, thinking through a strategy that will allow me to coax the cat back to the cabin. The best approach would be to somehow get on the other side of him, scaring him back. But that's impossible.

“He won’t go past the ledge,” I say, confident that the rock barrier will stop a scaredy-cat who has seldom experienced the outdoors.

“I can’t watch!” yells Margy’s mom.

She’s truly frightened. Never before has she seen her beloved cat so far from home. And he’s headed up and out of Hole in the Wall, to terrain where beastly critters (wildcats!) roam. Rather than watch this terrifying scene any longer, Mom goes back inside the cabin and refuses to watch.

“I think he’ll try to climb up that ravine,” says Margy.

“He can’t get past the ledge,” I say confidently. “It’s pure rock with nothing for him to grab onto.”

As if in defiance of my prediction, StickTail pauses for just a moment at the base of the 3-metre ledge, peers upwards, and claws his way up what looks like pure granite. There are a few cracks in the rock face where moss and a few plants grow, but StickTail looks like he’s climbing a sheer granite face. It seems unimaginable that there’s anything on the vertical wall for a cat to cling to.

From here, the going will be rough, but it’s now apparent this determined cat could make it all the way up the face of the cliff. From there, it’s wide-open going into the forest.

I rush to a pile of small chunks of firewood at the edge of the deck. If I can throw a piece of wood above the path of the climbing cat, it should scare him back down. I grab a hefty chunk of wood and hurl it as far and as high as I can, aiming at a spot well above cat. It falls far short, hitting the cliff well below my target, then bounces harmlessly into the water. StickTail pauses for a moment, glances down at the splash below him, and keeps on climbing.

I find a lighter piece of wood that might travel farther. But my throwing arm has never been very strong. This hunk of wood clunks into the cliff a few metres below the cat. This time he doesn’t even stop in recognition of my effort.

I run to Gemini, the classic restored boat that’s docked behind our cabin. Hopping aboard, I unzip one of the heavy plastic bags that hold rocks used as ballast for the boat (no engine, you know). The first rock I come to is pretty big, but I try hurling it anyway. It whacks into the cliff, well below the climbing cat.

StickTail is clambering constantly higher, soon out of reach of any rock. I dig deeper into the plastic bag, searching for a small stone, something I can hurl a longer distance. There it is – the perfect rock! It's small and round, and I may be able to reach high enough on the cliff. Wasting no time, I aim in the general vicinity above the cat and throw the stone with all my might.

My aim and distance are perfect this time. The rock pings off the cliff only a few metres above StickTail. It hits right below a small bush that grows out of the wall. The granite is brittle here, and I watch fragments of rock drop down directly towards the cat. He leaps downward in a flash! In contrast to his slow but determined climb up the wall, StickTail comes down like a jet. He seems to fly down the cliff, barely pausing to regain his footing along the ledge. Then he rushes back along the rocks at the edge of the water, hops onto the floating log, leaps back onto the float, and is back inside the cabin within just a few seconds.

I'll need to rethink my kitty fences.

Over time, StickTail gets used to his limited range of travel imposed by the new barriers I build. In return for the restrictions in his range of travel, he settles contentedly into a vacation home in one of his favourite places – a cabin floating on a lake in British Columbia, with rock walls for a cat to eyeball every day, wondering what lies above.

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Chapter 6

Fritz

When our floating garden begins to gain attention, one of my friends mentions it's probably the second largest garden on the lake. Fritz is well known for his garden. It's only natural I would poke my boat into his bay one winter day to check it out.

Far in the back of the cove is a scattering of floats, one of which holds a plot of now weed-like growth. It floats in such a cluttered area of mismatched floats that I can't get close enough to inspect further, especially with its resident watching my Campion from the shore. To find anyone in this bay in the winter means it's probably Fritz, but I don't feel comfortable stopping to investigate.

I ask others about Fritz, and learn he's a legendary figure of the lake. No one I speak to knows the details, but he certainly sounds like a modern-day Billy Goat Smith, the controversial character who resided at the head of Powell Lake decades ago. Those who know Fritz, speak of his self-sufficiency. His floating home is close enough to town to be accessible by trail, and his bicycle serves as his normal mode of transportation. Fritz and bicycles are intimately linked.

* * * * *

I dock at the Shinglemill after a trip down the lake on an unusually hot summer day. A few minutes later, a small sailboat with a red and white sail arrives on the beach adjacent to the marina. The boat catches my attention because sailboats are almost unheard-of on this lake. This small craft is recreational-size. No sailor would tackle serious travel on Powell Lake in such a small craft.

Margy and I focus on offloading our Campion and getting everything secured in the truck. As usual, this trip to town is accompanied by a mass of stuff, including clothes for the washing machine in town, a propane tank, and several bags of trash.

On Highway 101, across the bridge and heading for town, we begin the short climb up the grade from the river. As Margy maneuvers her truck towards the crest of the hill, a lone hiker and his small brown dog trudge briskly upward

on the opposite side of the road. The man is pulling a two-wheel cart behind him. His thick beard and fast pace make me realize in an instant this must be Fritz.

“Is that Fritz?” asks Margy before I can muster the words.

Like me, she’s never met Fritz, but this person fits the profile. It immediately dawns on me that the hardy white-bearded hiker and the sailboat are linked. Fritz has come to town, but not by bike this time.

By the time I answer Margy, she’s already preparing to turn off Highway 101 towards Cranberry.

“Must be him,” I reply.

I think about what I’ve heard about Fritz, ponder today’s heat, and realize he’s probably walking all the way to town. And it can’t be a leisurely hike pulling that cart.

“Let’s go back,” I say.

Margy immediately nods in agreement and looks for a place to turn around.

When we return to Fritz, he has barely topped the hill. Margy drives slowly onto the road’s wide shoulder and pulls up next to him, so she can talk through her driver’s side window.

“Can we give you a ride?” she asks.

“No, I’m just fine,” he says with a smile. “I’m just gong to City Motors.”

“Hop aboard anyway,” I yell across from my side of the truck. “Your dog can join us in the cab, and you can put your cart in the back.”

“No, no, we’re okay,” replies Fritz. “I’m just picking up my chainsaw and dropping off this bearing from my bike.”

There are no introductions. I don’t ask whether he is Fritz, nor do we introduce ourselves to him. But Fritz immediately goes into a detailed explanation of his latest confrontation with the mechanical world.

“I took my chainsaw downtown last trip,” he explains. “They didn’t seem to know how to fix it, so I picked it up and took it to City Motors. And look at this – this bicycle wheel bearing is shot.”

He leans into Margy's window and reaches across the seat to show me the bearing, a component that means little to me.

"You see how it's grooved?" he asks.

"Uh-huh," I nod, acting like I know what he's talking about.

"I've got this invention," he explains. "You see…"

For the next few minutes I listen to Fritz's explanation of his latest invention, or at least I try to listen. He obviously knows what he's talking about, but it goes completely over my head. After a while, I'm not sure he's even talking about a bicycle. As far as I can tell, his invention might be for a nuclear reactor.

Finally, he wraps up with: "Of course, they don't think I know what I'm doing."

I wonder who "they" are. But Fritz has me convinced he knows more about whatever he has invented than "they" do.

We finally bid goodbye, and Fritz disappears behind us as we drive back towards the bridge. But as we are looking for a place to do a U-turn (again), Margy notices that Fritz has left the bicycle bearing propped up against her windshield wiper, a victim of his lengthy explanation.

At a turnaround spot, she pulls off the road, and I hop out to rescue the bearing.

"Hotfoot it to City Motors," I say. "Maybe we can get there before Fritz, so he doesn't worry where he's lost this thing."

But Fritz is fast. By the time we pull into the gas station, Fritz is already coming out of the office with his chainsaw. Margy pulls up next to him, this time on my side of the truck, and I hand him the bearing.

"Couldn't fix the saw," says Fritz, as I hand him the part.

He accepts the bearing obliviously, like he left it on our windshield on purpose.

"But maybe they can find the equivalent of one of these," he says, waving the bearing.

"How about a ride back to the dock after you see about the bearing?" I ask.

"No, Shorty and me are just fine," says Fritz with a smile.

It’s sweltering hot, and it’s over a kilometre back to his boat. But I’m convinced Fritz and Shorty are, like he says, just fine. Yet, as we pull away in the truck, I’m still reluctant to leave them on their own.

* * * * *

Almost a year passes before I see Fritz again, but when I meet him this time, it’s in an unlikely place.

“Look!” I exclaim to Margy, as I sit on our cabin couch, looking out towards First Narrows on a mild spring morning, the wind whipping every which way under clearing skies.

“What is it?” asks Margy, refusing to budge from her book on the other side of the room, out of sight of First Narrows.

“Look!” I say again.

I wait for Margy to find a spot to gaze through the front door. It’s a sight better seen than explained.

“It’s Fritz!” replies Margy.

There can be no doubt that this is the same small sailboat with a billowing red and white sail. There’s no other boat like it on this lake. And Fritz is headed right for Hole in the Wall, sail fully unfurled, making rapid closure with our cabin.

Fritz and Shorty are out for a journey. But they don’t know us or where our cabin is located, so I assume they’re just exploring today, taking advantage of the nice breeze for sailing. They’ve pushed their nose into the Hole in the Wall, and I’m quickly out on the deck, waving them in towards our dock.

Just to be sure, I check through my binoculars. Sure enough, it’s a thickly-bearded man in green hooded raingear, with his trusty dog riding on the bow.

“Hi, Fritz!” I yell.

Fritz smiles and waves back, as if he knows who I am, while Shorty stands prominently on the prow of the boat, ears perked up and clearly excited.

Fritz arrives at Number 3 in his sailboat

Fritz adeptly maneuvers the 12-foot sailboat behind our Campion and up against the dock. He pulls himself out of the cockpit, legs still dangling in the boat, while he begins to talk in short bursts.

“Saw your sail,” he says, motioning towards the cliff. “Had to stop to see about it.”

“Oh, our big tarp,” I reply. “It’s a water collection contraption for a rain barrel.”

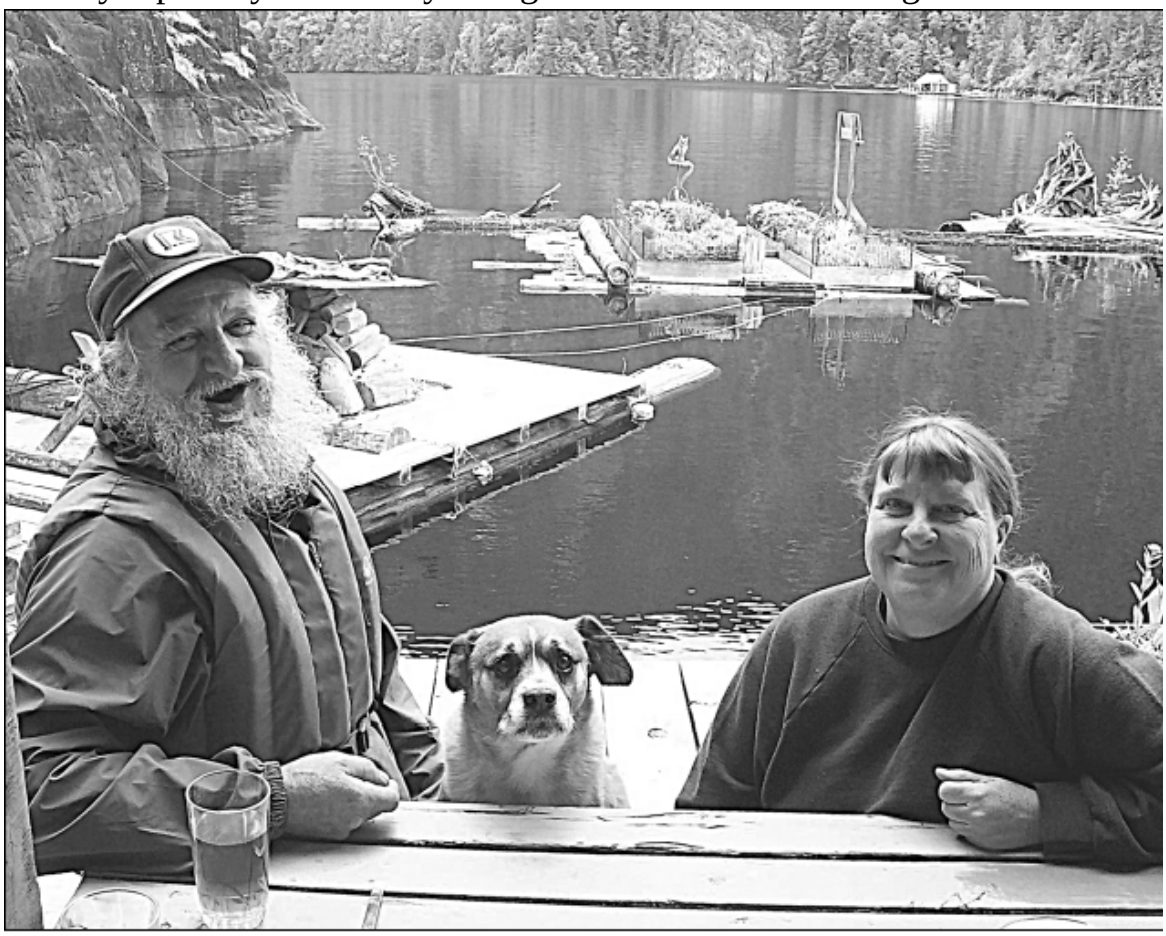
“Good idea,” says Fritz.

Fritz loves innovation, especially when it taps into nature.

Margy and I sit down next to him on the dock, and for the next few minutes, Fritz rambles on about how great the weather is on the lake today.

“Pushed me all the way here in only a few hours,” he says. “Free ride.”

I invite Fritz to the front deck for a snack at the picnic table, and I'm immediately repaid by more storytelling than I've heard in a long time.



Fritz, Shorty, and Margy at Number 3

Without prompting, Fritz spurts out details of his memorable trip across Canada by bicycle several years ago. The bike was a $160 WalMart special, redesigned by Fritz to tow a two-wheeled trailer. He and Shorty started their 10-month journey in the spring, heading first to Vancouver, across to Victoria, and then up Vancouver Island to Port Hardy, where they planned to catch the ferry north to Prince Rupert. From there, their planned trek would be eastward across the country. However, at Port Hardy, Fritz changed his mind, prompted by an unacceptable requirement by BC Ferries to lodge Shorty below-deck.

Fritz then pedaled all the way back to Victoria, took the ferry to Vancouver, and began their journey again, this time through the lower regions

of Canada. During the trip across Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, Shorty refused to ride in his carrier-cart seat, constantly jumping down to run beside the bike. So for thousands of kilometres, man and dog performed a bicycle ride-walk across the country.

After nearly freezing to death in Ontario during December, Fritz and Shorty started home, but not before experiencing a series of adventures.

The eastern portion of their journey was tormented by incidents related to staying alive in a harsh winter environment. Once, while away from their campsite, snowmobile riders wrecked their bike and trailer. So they hitchhiked for seven days, finally making it back to Powell River.

Fritz proudly shares with me his invention of “clobber-globber” at the University of Regina. While camping inside the concession stand at the football stadium (until evicted), he learned that Canadian mosquitoes can be immediately terminated by a spray mixture of Mr. Clean and water. It’s one of his many unique inventions.

Pseudo-environmentalists lurk everywhere, but Fritz has a true love of nature and lives by its codes. His self-sufficiency and need for personal freedom combine nicely with his respect for the environment and his off-the-grid pride. He makes do with what he has, and he loves every minute of it.

He moved into his floating home on Powell Lake after a long period of exploration by bicycle and raft. Fritz designed an elaborate raft that he christened Water Moccasin. This raft (he refers to it as a “barge”) grew from an air mattress and hinged boards, allowing him to haul it on a trailer behind his bike. On this raft (barge!), he tackled the waters of the Strait of Georgia, including some areas I consider chancy in my 24-foot Bayliner.

In 1986, after this adventurous period of exploration, he ended up at Powell Lake. From the Water Moccasin, he designed his first float cabin, which grew into a basic floating structure he dubbed Dragonfly.

Fritz exemplifies all that’s unique and wonderful about coastal British Columbia. He arrived from Holland with his family in 1954 and grew up refusing to conform to the structure of society. In his early years, there were plenty of close calls, as he flirted with motorcycles (not a bad thing) and a

Canadian motorcycle gang (sometimes a bad thing). After that, he renounced standard social structure to strike out on his own, savoring his independence and bare-roots lifestyle.

To Fritz, the greatest invention of all time is the bicycle. And like his Dutch predecessors, it has kept him forever young. In recent years, a float cabin on Powell Lake, a series of loving dogs (most recently Shorty), and a highly inquisitive mind have assured that he remains an infamous, smiling man of the lake.

* * * * *

One day at the Shinglemill, with winter creeping slowly in, I talk to Ernie about the normal lake topics that consume our attention when we meet – recent storms, unusual boats we've seen, new cabins under construction or renovation, you name it. Then he reveals a distressing fact, seeming to wait until we've gone through the normal pleasantries.

Ernie has assisted Fritz in a variety of ways that demonstrates a generosity beyond normal human standards. To put it simply, if it were not for Ernie, Fritz wouldn't have been able to stay living on the lake. Sincere caring like that is hard to find.

The news Ernie has for me is disconcerting – Fritz is in hospital. Ernie explains Fritz admitted himself to the local hospital when he experienced pain so intense that immediate action was required.

"Knowing Fritz, it must have been mighty bad for him to admit himself," I note.

"To say the least," says Ernie. "I'm on my way over there now."

"Tell him Wayne and Margy say hello."

"He'll like that," says Ernie.

I really don't know Fritz very well, but this is disturbing in a variety of ways. Later that day, when blasting up the lake in the Campion, I pass Fritz's bay. Glancing to my left into the back of the cove, there's no smoke coming from his floating trailer. The lake seems uncomfortably devoid of humanity, and a lonely feeling overcomes me. How can someone so important to this lake not be here today? Fritz is always here, and I try to follow in his footsteps in many

ways. As far as I know, Margy and I are the only other permanent residents of the lake, and now a person with many of our own values is suddenly missing. I seldom think about Fritz being on this lake, but now he seems disturbingly missing.

Margy suggests we go to the hospital to visit Fritz, and I immediately agree. Hospitals are a place I avoid whenever possible, but this visit seems important. But first we need to determine if he's still there. When we return to town two days later, Margy makes the phone call.

"A friend of ours was admitted a few days ago," Margy tells the receptionist over the phone. "And we're trying to determine if he's still there."

"What's the name?" asks the receptionist.

"Well…," Margy hesitates. "Actually I only know his first name. It's Fritz."

"Oh…," replies the receptionist with a strange intonation in her voice. "Sure, Fritz. He was released yesterday."

When Margy hangs up, she explains the reaction of the receptionist to her inquiry.

"She didn't even hesitate when I told her I only knew his first name."

"Good. I'm glad he's out of hospital," I reply. "I bet he gave them quite a time."

"Well, they certainly remembered him."

"I bet they did."

The next day, traveling up the lake, smoke pours from the small smokestack in the back of Fritz's cove. I smile to myself, glad that Fritz is back. I'm certain the spirit of the lake feels a sense of relieve, too.

* * * * *

On a sunny November afternoon, Margy and I deviate from our normal route up the lake to visit Fritz and Shorty. Smoke streams from the chimney of a small trailer that rides on a floating log foundation. A series of interconnected wooden structures spread outward from Fritz's small trailer, including the tiny dock where Fritz now stands to help us tie up.

"How'd you do with that last storm," I ask, as Fritz ties the bow.

The recent storm was one of the worst for November. Two other nearby cabins broke loose from their shoreline connections. Fritz's bay is precariously aligned for a nearly direct assault from stormy southeast winds.

"Did okay," he says with his typical satisfied grin. "Lost that wall, but I found the plywood floatin' nearby, so I got it back. Haven't fixed it yet."

He points to a torn-away outer panel on the shed that sits next to his trailer. It's easy to visualize a vicious wind roaring through this bay.

"Quite a storm," he says. "But nothin' you can do about it. So you might as well just sit back and enjoy watching the wind whippin' through here."

At Fritz's home in Three-Mile Bay

After sitting on his deck for a few minutes, Fritz invites Margy and me into his trailer, and we sit at the kitchen table on comfortable cloth-upholstered bench seats, still talking about the weather. I'm impressed with the neatness and

lack of clutter – all cozy and tidy. At the other end of the trailer, Shorty hops up onto the bed to relax and listen in on our conversation.

"You can see the difference in the weather," says Fritz. "Global warming is affecting everything these days."

He's right, and I notice it more in Canada than in the States. Winters, even in my brief time here, have become more vicious in recent years. And last year was the wettest summer I've witnessed. It may not all be "warming," but it's obviously part of the change.

Fritz has grave concerns regarding climate change, and he's studied the topic thoughtfully. Like me, he listens to CBC Radio in the middle of the night. It certainly helps round out a person's worldview.

"Gasoline is the cause of it all," states Fritz. "It's been nothing but trouble since the very beginning. What we need are more bikes. But who listens?"

It's hard to disagree, and I feel guilty as I listen to Fritz recite the damage gasoline engines are doing to the environment. Unlike a lot of supporters who proclaim that our carbon footprint has grown out of control, Fritz takes personal action. He avoids gasoline ("It's poison!") and puts his bike aboard his small sailboat for trips to town. Meanwhile, my gas-guzzling Campion sits at his dock today, and I'm already dreading the embarrassment of the moment when I need to start up my overpowered engine and cast off for Hole in the Wall.

"What's nice about this place is all the birds and so many animals to watch all the time," says Fritz.

I'm glad he's changed the topic.

Fritz has a trusting relationship with all of the wildlife around him, particularly the birds. He pays attention to what he sees, studying things like a scientist, and I'm convinced the critters he encounters know that Fritz is on their side. To talk environmentalism is one thing – to actually practice it is rare. But in this bay, Fritz does just that.

When it's finally time to leave, I beat Margy to the punch, and quickly unhook the dock lines and push off in the Campion. I yell goodbye and wait a few minutes to start the engine. We drift away from the dock, while I pretend to organize things in the boat. When I see Fritz walking back to his trailer, I turn

the ignition key, and try to sneak away quietly in my gasoline-gulping floating monument to internal combustion.

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Chapter 7

A Different Sense of Place

The pace of Powell River, as a town, contrasts sharply with my off-the-grid lifestyle on the lake. Still, it contrasts even more with the pace of things in a bigger municipality, especially any metropolis in the States.

My “home again” feeling doesn’t kick in early enough to prevent a sense of surprise when someone yells “Hello!” in Vancouver’s South Terminal, where Pacific Coastal’s turboprops depart for their upcoast destinations. Margy and I aren’t used to seeing people we know in public places, based on our long history as city-folk. Even in the small cross-border city of Bellingham, where I spend considerable time, I seldom see anyone I know in the local stores or at a public gathering. And that’s to say nothing of my years in Los Angeles, a city I loved (and still do). But the South links to Powell River, so a greeting shouldn’t be unexpected, but it always is. Sitting in the waiting area near the airline counter is like eating in our local Tim Horton’s.

Similarly, ferry terminals along the Sunshine Coast (Horseshoe Bay, Langdale, Earl’s Cove, and Saltery Bay) are extensions of our local highway system. Horseshoe Bay, which seems more like Vancouver than Powell River, is within striking distance of home. Even the Vancouver Island terminal at Little River, which seems so distant from home (in terms of concept versus kilometres), is a place where you’ll see friends from Powell River. A car lineup at a ferry terminal is an extension of the paved roadway to my home. The water in between is inconsequential.

The biggest surprise of all occurs when I first arrive back home, landing at Powell River Airport or pulling into the town limits on Highway 101 in a car. There will be someone I know waiting for me at the supermarket (“Hello!), but it never fails to surprise me.

* * * * *

John is my hero and my friend. But his friendship for me isn’t without reservation. His loyalty is flawless, but his self-image is also important. It’s not a matter of ego – it’s an issue of what his buddies might think when they see him in situations he doesn’t consider appropriate by his standards.

I sometimes forget his standards, as I do one day by inviting him to share a meal at the Beach Hut. I've been impressed by the quality of their fish and chips, an item I know John enjoys when his mom, Helen, cooks cod. He is hesitant, but we've had a busy day, and I know how much John enjoys food. On our trip towards home from the Shinglemill, he utters several simple reminders of "No," but I try one more time as he drives his truck down the final grade towards Willingdon Beach.

"Come on, John. You must be at least as hungry as I am. Let's stop."

"Okay," he gives in.

Less than a minute later, we pull over at the Beach Hut, and John parks in the last space past the small building. There are several empty parking spots between the small building and us. I don't ask why.

We order our fish and chips, and take our orange pops to one of the cement picnic tables lining the roadway near the take-out or eat-here food shack. John seems uncomfortable.

A few minutes later, a passing truck honks at us, and John gives a reluctant wave.

"Doug saw us," says John. "He'll give it to me good the next time I see him."

"Why?"

"Who stops at the Beach Hut?" he replies. "Only tourists."

It doesn't take a lot of imagination. Locals do eat here regularly, but we're sitting in a place frequented by tourists, and John is far from comfortable. The problem isn't the fish and chips.

"Mom's cod is a lot better," he announces, as we quickly pounce on the fish and make a quick exit.

* * * * *

Trucks are everywhere in this town. Even Margy is now a proud truck owner, but her vehicle has taken a turn for the worse. Suddenly, her truck fails to start (intermittently), and then dies in the middle of an intersection (also intermittently). Of course, this is the most difficult problem in any vehicle. A

discrepancy that comes and goes is more challenging to troubleshoot than an outright failure.

At the airport hangar, I pull Margy's truck out of the rain under the tin roof, where we can work on it without getting wet. John pops the hood and looks around, finding nothing obviously amiss. He's borrowed Rick's computer test box to plug into a debugging receptacle under the dash. It shows the problem quicker than a human mechanic – in fact, instantaneously. The LCD screen indicates a failure in the cutoff switch that's wired to the car's primary electronic module. John follows the wiring to the suspected component.

"We can probably replace it, if we can find one at the parts store," he says. "But its something GMC wants you to take to the truck dealer, where it's gonna' cost an arm and a leg."

John laments that new trucks are almost impossible to work on, with too many electronic modules, usually impossible to troubleshoot. (But not today!)

Modern vehicles have no lubrication fittings, since the old-fashioned grease nipples have been removed. Today's trucks use sealed units that never require lubrication. To John, this is an enormous step backwards in mechanical progress. When he finally had to replace his old truck with a newer 1998 Ford F150, the first modification he made was to the lubrication system. In his carport, he jacked the F150 up and crawled underneath to spend the day drilling holes in the sealed units to install grease fittings. So now he can lube his truck like you should.

After putting up with the newer F150 and all its supposed improvements over the older models, John encountered an even worse electronic module failure than we face today on Margy's truck. His malfunction involved an expensive black box he eventually found for sale on the Internet. When it arrived in the mail, it didn't fix the problem. A bit of investigation revealed that his original ignition key, like all keys for this model truck manufactured since 1998, must be programmed to the electronic module. This, of course, requires an expensive new key with a built-in chip, and the matchup can be accomplished only at a Ford dealer. He's currently in the market to sell his 1998 truck and move down to an older model.

Today's plan regarding Margy's truck is to remove the old switch, and take it down the hill to the car parts store to see if they can match it. To get at it, John has to crawl underneath the front of the truck, battling a small black box that's almost impossible to unfasten.

While John is underneath the engine and I'm providing tools and verbal encouragement, two local pilots come over to the hangar to see what's going on. There's seldom a repair action around here that doesn't generate attention. I brief them on what John is trying to accomplish.

While we (John) struggle with the hard-to-reach switch, Bob and Roger engage in a discussion with each other. While they debate the latest rumours regarding the possible closing of the local paper mill, John finally detaches the ornery component. We excuse ourselves, leaving the two pilots still talking about the paper mill, standing next to our abandoned vehicle under the rain-protected roof. As is often the case in this town, any event is an excuse for engaging in discussion.

After visiting the auto parts store in John's truck, we drive to his house with the new component. There we consult with Rick about our attempted repairs, and pickup some additional tools that may be needed for the job. Then it's to the A&W drive-thru for some chicken and fries, delayed a bit by the lunch-hour lineup: "Pull forward, and I'll bring it out as soon as it's ready."

Finally, we make it back to the airport to finish the job. It's still raining, steadier now with big drops, and the wind is picking up. We pull back into the open-ended hangar with John's truck, our chicken, more tools, and the new black box. Bob and Roger are still jabbering away next to Margy's truck, huddled under the noisy rain-pummeled metal roof, not having missed a beat since we've been gone. Basic discussion between friends around here can go on for hours, while work progresses around them.

After all of our efforts, the purchased part doesn't solve the problem, so it's off to the GMC dealer – very reluctantly, as far as John is concerned. Then again, they do fix the problem (a loose ground on the suspected black box) in a matter of minutes.

It's tough to battle modern technology.

* * * * *

“Can we stop at the credit union on our way home?” I ask John one day as we’re returning from the marina in his truck. “I’ve got to put some money in the bank before I go to jail.”

“If it’s that important,” he replies.

Rather than park in the marked stalls at the front of the credit union, he drops me off at the front door.

“I’ll be parked out back,” he states.

I pause at the bank’s entrance, watching John as he pulls away and then turns around the building towards the rear. I wonder: Is there more shade in back of the credit union? Or maybe he just doesn’t want his buddies to see him parked at a bank.

* * * * *

When you live off the grid, getting there is half the fun. Connecting the small town of Powell River (now officially designated a “city,” which I refuse to accept) with my float cabin on Powell Lake is a transition that’s always exciting. Even when it’s merely a basic boat ride from the Shinglemill to Hole in the Wall, the trip is a joy. Normally, that short voyage is more than routine, especially when you live the complicated simple life. The ride north usually involves a boatload of supplies ranging from bags of groceries to a boatload of propane tanks to sacks of manure for the garden. It can be a significant challenge when larger items are involved. Anything that won’t fit into a boat (or is too heavy) requires an alternate means of getting it to the cabin. In my case, rafts and barges serve that specialized purpose.

John and I have moved many unique items to our cabins on rafts, ranging from heavy float cables to quads. We’ve also towed bundles of lumber, strapped together into floating stacks. But during renovation of my kitchen, a heavy refrigerator and a bulky stove need to go up the lake, and a raft seems too precarious for such expensive appliances. My solution is to hire Jess to move the items, using his self-propelled barge, but John is insistent that we can do it ourselves.

“We’ll just need to take the rail off the Bayliner, and load the fridge and stove in the back,” says John. “Might take two trips.”

I’m resistant. One trip by Jess would be an easier solution. Of course, that’s not doing it ourselves.

“The fridge alone weighs over two hundred pounds,” I retort. “Jess moves things like this all the time with his front-loading barge, and we can talk him into taking all of the packing material back to town.”

Getting rid of shipping materials is always an extra challenge when moving things up the lake. If you pack it in, you have to pack it back out. Styrofoam is my particular nemesis – there’s no home for styrofoam.

“We can do it ourselves,” John reemphasizes. “Let me talk to Ernie. Maybe we can borrow his barge.”

* * * * *

Ernie has equipment for everything. He has a barge designed to haul quads, and it should work well for kitchen appliances. But I’ve only heard about it, and I’m not sure of its design. But when John phones me the next day, he says Ernie has agreed to loan his barge. In fact, he’ll even bring it down from his cabin, and position it at the Shinglemill for us.

“He doesn’t even want payment,” says John. “But he did say you could mention his name in your next rewrite of Up the Lake.”

In my book’s chapter involving Ernie, I call him “Mr. Yellow,” since I didn’t know his name, and he was driving a yellow quad when we met on Tin Hat Mountain. Mentioning his name in a future edition of the book is an admittedly small price to pay for free use of his barge. Which makes me suspicious. If it’s too good to seem true, maybe it’s not (neither good nor true).

“Okay,” I give in. “But I hate to tie up his barge. Who knows when the refrigerator will arrive?”

Margy has been in charge of the purchase of the appliances. The stove she selects is in stock, but the refrigerator has to be ordered. The salesman says it should be here by Friday. When you live on a virtual “island” – Powell River is two ferry rides from Vancouver – an item coming from “the city” can take a long time. So I’ve little faith in anything proceeded by “should be here by…”

Ernie lives up to his promise. On Thursday night, John says the barge is already at the Shinglemill, waiting for the task. But Friday dawns with an early morning phone call from John.

“I just called the store,” he says. “The fridge won’t be here until Monday. It would have made it, but the truck broke down in Vancouver.”

“You really believe that?” I ask.

“Sure. Trucks break down all the time.”

That’s not what I mean.

* * * * *

On Friday night, looking for a place for dinner, Margy and I drive out to the Shinglemill. Of course, it isn’t the pub’s good food that’s the only attraction tonight. I want to see the barge.

We park by the marina’s north gate, where I expect to find the vessel tied up. Margy and I walk the dock, all the way out to the end, looking for an old scow, but it’s not there. Then we head to the pub.

As we pass the transient parking dock, there’s a single vessel parked there – a very unusual looking boat, or is it a barge? Whatever it is, it’s definitely unique, and obviously homemade.

“I guess there’s no doubt,” says Margy. “Looks like the barge.”

“I suppose so. But it looks kind of scary.”

We walk out on the dock, and look the barge over closely. It’s an old boat, sawed off on top, with a self-bailing floor, and an open aluminum upper frame that could support a tarp cover. Two wooden planks are hinged to the stern, designed to drop down for loading. Very unique.

While eating dinner in the pub, we sit at a table overlooking the marina. While we’re there, several locals walk out onto the transient dock to inspect the unusual vessel. One guy hops aboard and gives it a closer look.

“You know, in all my years working with John, I’ve never been embarrassed by any of the equipment he’s used,” I say to Margy. “Until now, that is.”

She laughs, and so do I. In reality, John has selected the perfect vessel for the task.

* * * * *

On Monday morning, John phones to report the refrigerator has finally arrived. He heads to the store with his pickup truck to load the refrigerator and stove. Meanwhile, I drive to the Shinglemill to move my Campion over to the transient dock. While there, I untie the barge and hand-line it around to the launch ramp. I back it in stern-first, so the hinged ramps can be lowered close to the shore.

Ernie arrives first, which is completely unexpected. Apparently, he's offering both barge and loading assistance for this project. This is the first time I've met him since my "Mr. Yellow" encounter up in the mountains, and I'm immediately impressed. He's a logger, a Powell Lake expert, an avid quad rider, and all-around good guy. He's here today just to help load, and that's the way Ernie is.

"Did John tell you how much this is going to cost you?" he asks.

"Well, sort of," I reply, now concerned this may cost more than expected.

"Don't forget – in your next rewrite of Up the Lake, you can mention my name," he says.

"That's easy," I reply. "But that book won't be republished for quite a while. Maybe I can include you in one of my future books." (And here it is!)

While Ernie brings me up to date on a recent trip he took all over British Columbia (riding his quad in remote locations along the way), Rob shows up in his taxicab. Right behind him is Jimmy in his truck, also stopping by to see what's going on. When something is happening at the marina, you never know who will appear. And it's hard to determine how they find out about it in the first place.

John pulls up in his truck, turns around, and backs far enough into the water so we can lower the barge's ramp right onto his extended tailgate. In just a few minutes, Ernie and John move the refrigerator aboard, while Jimmy, Rob, Bro, and I supervise. The stove follows on the dolly, rolling aboard even easier. We're promptly loaded, connected to the Campion by a tow rope, and ready to go.

Loading at the Shinglemill

Out on the lake, the barge tows nicely. Unlike a raft, its streamlined bow allows John to push the Campion’s throttle up to 1800 rpm, and the barge tracks straight. Once in while, when crossing the wake from passing boats, the refrigerator tips enough to get me nervous, but never enough to be a real problem.

Towing north on the lower lake

It takes nearly an hour-and-a-half to navigate to Hole in the Wall at this slow speed, but the lake is calm today, perfect conditions for towing. Inside the breakwater at Number 3, John allows the boat to drift close enough to the cabin so I can hop out onto the deck, and then pull the barge up against the float foundation. We lower the ramp, and unload the appliances right onto the upper deck. Mighty slick!

John has prepared the cabin's propane connections in advance, so setup of the fridge is quick. Then we move the new stove inside. It'll be installed in the same location as the old one, so its connection is even simpler. Within just a few hours, we're fully operational.

Now we roll the old appliances onto the awaiting barge, to tow them to their new destination, John's Cabin Number 5. Bro and I supervise while John does the hardest work.

Which is the way it always is.

Bro supervises loading of the old refrigerator

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Chapter 8

Talkin’ to Myself

From the very beginning, life at the cabin is accompanied by a sense that everything around me is alive. Even inanimate objects take on a life of their own, at least in my eyes.

As time progresses, this fairy tale atmosphere prevails. In fact, it becomes more intense over the years.

“Hey, Mr. Ferry!” I yell out to the breakwater. “You’ve wrapped yourself around that cone again.”

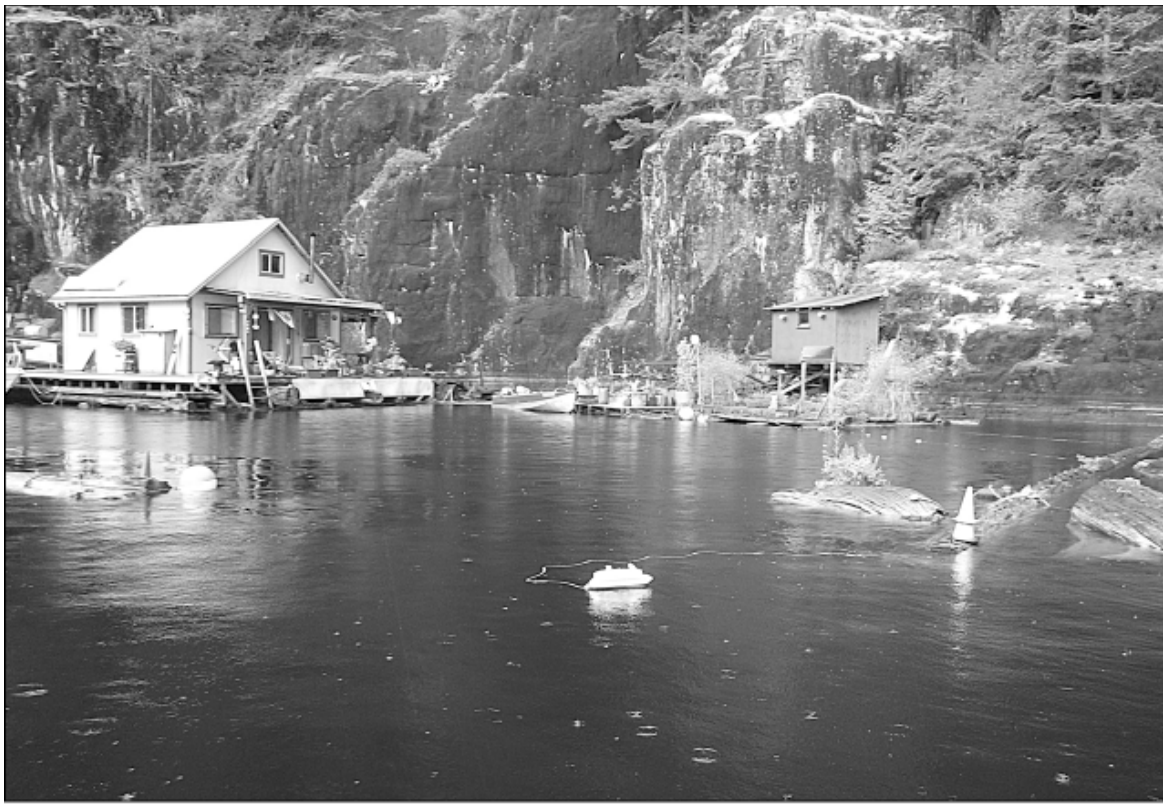
The toy inflatable blue-and-white ferry has guarded my breakwater entrance for years, replacing Buoy-Boy, another inflatable toy, after he was damaged beyond repair during a series of winter storms. Buoy-Boy and Mr. Ferry have diligently maintained a blocking position to keep boats away from the narrow entrance. And in quieter times, they’ve floated 5 metres out from the breakwater, enjoying the sunshine.

Mr. Ferry’s lengthy service is partially explained by a rotation system. Almost immediately after one ferry breaks loose during a storm, a replacement is put in service. Then the search begins. Over many years, only one has disappeared permanently. Usually, I find them floating in a calm area within the Hole, playing a game with me – hide-and-seek. In one instance, Mr. Ferry disappears for a full week before Jess motors over in his skookum welded-aluminum landing barge, with his wife standing in the bow, cradling Mr. Ferry

“I thought you’d want your boat back!” she announces proudly.

“You bet! Thanks!”

And did I ever mean it.



Mr. Ferry guards the entrance to Number 3

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Mr. Whale is a flimsy inflatable recommended for ages 5 through 10. The box he came in showed a small child riding on his back, but the thin plastic doesn't seem capable of holding such weight. Still, Mr. Whale floats nobly in the natural swimming pool between the cabin and shore. The least amount of wind swings him on his tether, and he's the perfect companion to talk to.

"Mr. Whale, you look lonely today," I say one cool summer day.

The whale turns on his rope leash, and he looks right at me with his huge dark blue eyes. Whenever he swings this way in a breeze, his sad eyes seek my attention, and I'm quick to respond.

"I'd come in swimming with you, but it's too cold. You whales can take it, but I can't."

This summer, Mr. Whale has faithfully awaited me in the water, but it has been constantly cold. The swimming pool has been so cool that I've only jumped in to accompany him a few times.

Is it a mark of being isolated that causes me to talk to these inanimate friends? I don't feel lonely, but I certainly am more often alone than the average guy. After a few days of no other human contact, I tend to talk to Mr. Whale and Mr. Ferry more often, but it all seems so normal. Then again, insanity is in the eyes of the beholder.

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Those I talk to range from Buttless Bird (a large garden wind ornament that points backwards from the proper wind direction ever since I salvaged his rear feathers after a ravaging storm) to a plethora of toy ducks that have inhabited the cabin float for many years. These are the standard yellow plastic ducks that graces the bathtubs of children worldwide. My ducks are not only numerous – they come in a variety of sizes.

One recent purchase consists of a family of six ducks – two large, two medium, and two small. Of course, it is immediately evident (to me) that these are a family of mom and dad (medium), accompanied by an uncle and aunt (large), plus two small kids. The large ducks could have been grandma and grandpa, but they seem more like uncle and aunt to me.

Soon after arrival, the two large ducks go to work outside, one guarding the corner of the float near the swimming pool and the other on the transition float. I place them on the wooden deck of their respective floats, positioned so that they can see each other out the corner of their eyes, which immediately seems to console them. With thin ropes connecting them to their floats, they move around a lot during storms (sometimes jumping into the water). Thus, I routinely shift them back into position so they can see each other.

"Good work, duckies," I often say. "You're doing your job."

"Thank you!" they simultaneously reply (I think).

Meanwhile, the rest of the family (mom, dad, and two kids) sit on a window shelf, facing inside so they can see the action in the cabin.

"Your aunt and uncle are doing well," I report. "They're guarding our float."

But the kids have upcoming duties. An unusually shaped branch becomes an ornamental standing "tree" on the floating garden. Originally nailed into

position by John, who often positions things in our absence to surprise us, the tree becomes the mounting place for a variety of duckies and other plastic animals that hang like Christmas ornaments.

I explain to mom and dad that one of their kids is going outside to enjoy the view. I clarify the details regarding their son's new duty (it seems like a male's job), and reiterate that this is a position of honour that their duckling will enjoy. Periodically, I update mom and dad regarding the status of their son, making sure they know he's having a grand time in the fresh air. His parents beam proudly.

Nearly a year after the first child's disappearance from the shelf, I explain to mom and dad that their daughter is being called to duty. Until now, I've refrained from taking away their last child. But now she's needed to replace a small plastic whale (there's a trend here) that has been riding in the front of our Campion bowrider. The baby whale served dutifully for years, riding on the outside of the passenger windshield, where it carried out its assignment as a window-stop for the hinged center windshield. When the glass panel swings open, the whale prevents the pane from smashing against the windshield wiper. But one day, after an extended trip to the States, I return to find the small whale missing. Not likely kidnapped, but probably swept away in a storm.

"I know how hard it is to let go of your kids," I explain to mom and dad. "But they eventually need to leave home. Out on their own is something for you to be proud of."

Still, I reluctantly remove the small duck from the window shelf. For the next few weeks, I make it a point to explain to mom and dad (now alone on their shelf) that both of their kids are doing fine. They should be proud of them, and their children are thrilled with such important jobs.

About three weeks after removing the last small duck from the shelf, I commit the crowning act of talking to myself. The gesture is without a hint of personal embarrassment. In fact, it makes me feel particularly good.

"Hey, duckies, we're going for a field trip," I say to mom and dad one sunny summer morning. "Let's go see your kids."

I pick up the two ducks, one in each hand, and walk out onto the deck.

“See how nice it is outside. Your kids are having fun out here while you and I are enjoying ourselves inside.”

“Look, over there,” I add. “There’s your aunt and uncle on guard for us.”

When I sneak a peak at the two large duckies, they seem to beam with pride.

“Now come over here and check this out,” I continue, while turning directly towards the ornamental tree on the garden float. “There’s your little boy, with other bigger duckies on those branches, doing his job.”

The small duck swings on its cord, looking dignified, content, and a bit grown up.

Finally, I turn towards the Campion, docked on the south side of the cabin. I walk over, holding mom and dad straight out so they can see.

“That’s your daughter there on the front windshield of the boat, doing her job. You should be proud of her. Look how pleased she is to see you.”

In fact, we’re all pleased.

I walk mom and dad back into the cabin, and put them back on their shelf.

“There, now you can get back to relaxing and enjoying life. It sure is nice to be retired, isn’t it?”

Yes, it is. And it’s also a bit unusual under these remote circumstances. But talking to myself isn’t a bit insane. Of that I am sure.

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Chapter 9

The Point

One of my favourite hiking routes begins at the back of Hole in the Wall. My tin boat can be pulled ashore near a narrow trail that leads up to the main logging road. From there, it's an easy (but long) hike to the logging dock at Chippewa Bay. Along the way, you pass a trail that leads down to the shoreline. It's one of the warmest swimming spots on the lake.

One day, John and Bro join Margy and me on this route. We turn off the main, and start down the rough path to the shore. It's normally not much of a beach, particularly at high water. Today, with the lake's water level unusually low, there's a wide sandy swath.

When John and I (Bro, too!) slide our rumps down the last small bluff leading to the beach, Margy has fallen far behind. That always disturbs John, since he hates to leave her alone on a trail.

"Where'd she go?" he asks.

"Probably just exploring on her own and takin' pictures," I reply.

"Maybe we should wait for her," he says.

Leave no man (or woman) behind!

"She'll be fine," I say.

When Margy doesn't appear while we comb along the shore, I try to convince John she enjoys exploring on her own. He finally agrees to hike with me to a place he calls "The Point," while keeping a glance over his shoulder for Margy.

The Point is a promontory normally under water. Today it pokes up and out into Chippewa Bay, a peninsula composed of small rocks and huge stumps. This area was logged heavily in decades gone by, even before the dam was built in the early 1900s.

"There might've been a cabin here before it was flooded by the dam," says John. "I've found lots of old bottles, plates, and metal here. But I haven't found anyone who knows anything about it. Might have been a logging camp."

"The water sure is low," I say.

"All of the gates are open," replies John.

The paper mill adjusts the dam gates at the south end of the lake to feed their electrical needs. Now, in the midst of winter, the gates have been wide open for a full month, pumping water through the generators at a time when the lake level is normally a lot higher. What will it be like when summer arrives and the lake drops even lower and there's less rain and snowmelt?

Stumps near shore now protrude high out of the water. Some of them are totally out of the water, stranded on the beach – like many-legged creatures pausing momentarily before moving on. In high-water months, they are mostly submerged. Birdhouses are perched on the tallest snags, placed here by loggers – caring people in an industry often unjustly criticized for pillaging the environment. I envision a nature-loving burly logger reaching up from his crew boat, when the water was deeper than now, nailing a wooden birdhouse in place.

Beach stumps in Chippewa Bay

“Margy could use this mulch in her garden, “ says John. “There she is now!”

Margy has dropped down to the beach at the trail outlet. She’s now walking in the opposite direction from us, exploring along the shore.

John is right. The fine mix of decayed leaves and tiny sticks would be a nice enhancement to garden soil. It lies in thick piles along the delta of the creek pouring into Chippewa Bay. Maybe Margy and I will return in our tin boat another day to retrieve some of this mulch. But it will only be here until the water starts rising again.

At the Point, we hike along the wide beach, and poke around the rocks. We find the remains of an old metal stove and rusted chunks of old saw blades. Margy would love this place, inspecting the remains of an old campsite or cabin that’s seldom out of the water. But for now, John and I are here alone. Then, after a few more minutes exploring these old treasures, we head back towards the trail – to meet Margy and head back to Hole in the Wall.

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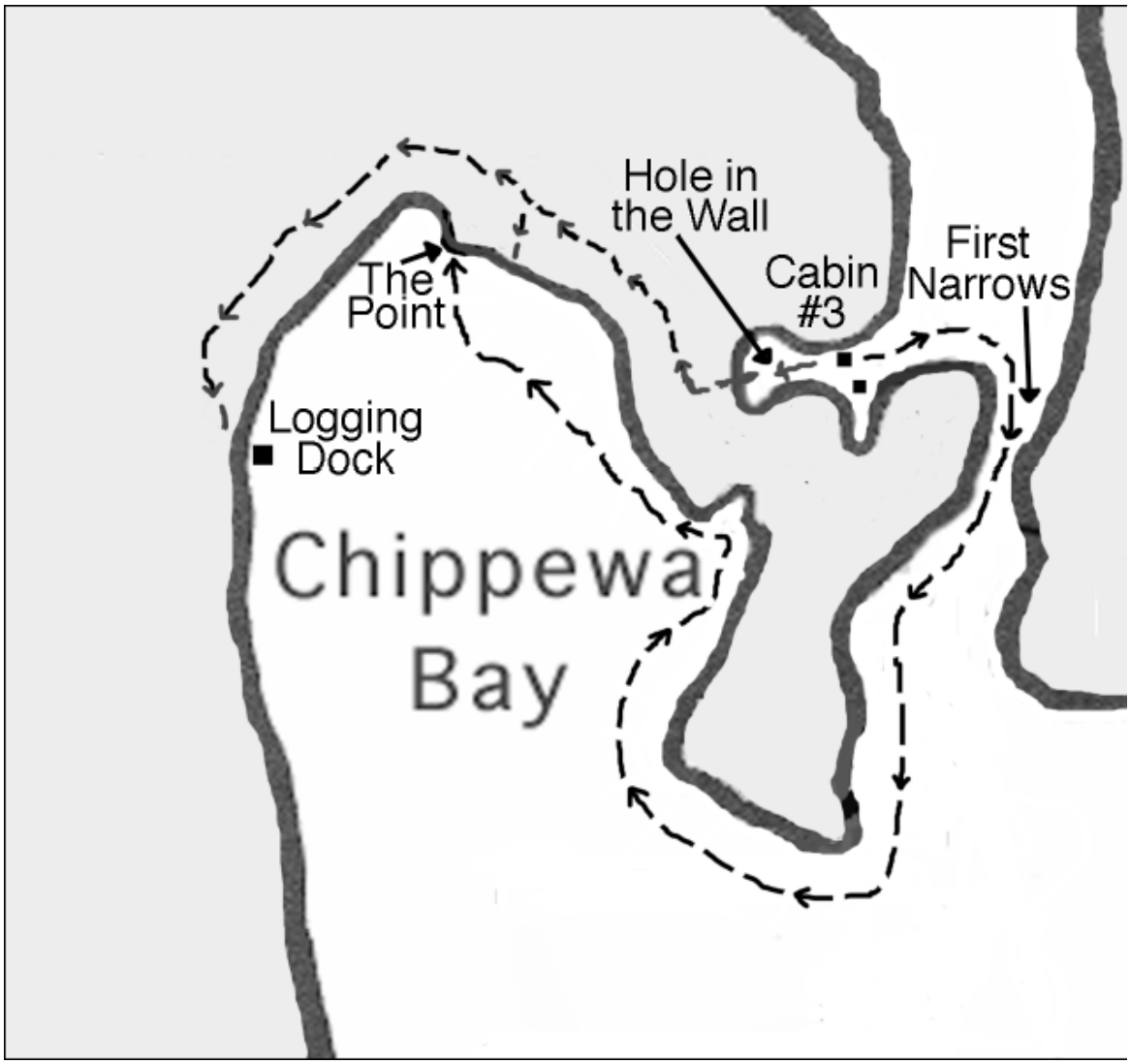
The following week, on a showery day, a few sunny breaks entice us. Margy suggests it would be a good day to return to Chippewa Bay to get some of the natural mulch John and I found during our exploration near the Point. It will be ideal for her floating garden.

“Besides,” says Margy, “I’d like to explore the Point, like you and John did.”

There’s a tinge of jealousy in her voice.

Our tin boat is ideal for such a trip. Its rugged construction – “You can’t hurt a tin boat,” says John – is ideal for pulling up on a rocky beach. And this March day is actually quite warm – a nice afternoon for cruising the lake in an open boat.



As we cruise towards the Point, the water in Chippewa Bay, known for its roughness, is only rippled. We glide along the east shoreline, where several float cabins are located. We zoom in close to the breakwater where Toot is docked at her new cabin. This boat has plied a lot of salt water on adventures with her owners, moving to Powell Lake a few years ago to continue her travels as an overnight getaway vessel on the lake.

When traveling up and down the lake, I'd often see Toot tied up to a logging dock or anchored in a scenic spot, even though shallow-water anchorages are tough to find on this lake. At the Shinglemill, a wooden sign on Toot advertised: Wanted – Float Cabin. And now Toot's dream has come true. The boat (and it's owners) finally found a home at a small floating cabin in Chippewa Bay.

After passing the last cabin lining the eastern shore, I aim our tin boat at the wide sandy beach that marks the head of the bay. In a few more minutes, we are approaching the Point.

It's necessary to slow down well before reaching our destination, since the bay is a mix of snags protruding above the waterline and submerged stumps waiting to catch an unwary prop. We glide towards the small sandy delta of the creek, which lies next to the Point.

Bam! – the Evinrude's skeg hits a submerged stump. But it's a sturdy motor with a slowly rotating prop, so there's probably no damage. Nevertheless, I punch the kill switch before any further problems develop, and use an oar to push us stump-to-stump the rest of the way to shore.

We pull our boat up onto the gently sloping delta, right next to the nearly endless supply of rich garden mulch. We plan to load the decayed leaves and sticks after we explore the Point. In fact, it doesn't take long for me to realize Margy's enthusiasm for this trip was prompted more by the chance to explore this old site than to retrieve compost for her garden.

"Have you seen enough yet?" I ask after we've found a few old metal pieces and some broken pottery.

"Not really," answers Margy. "If it's okay with you, I'll just keep looking for a while."

"No problem," I say. "In the meantime, I'll start loading some of the mulch."

While I scoop up the layers of decayed leaves and tiny sticks with my hands and load them into large buckets and garbage bags, Margy continues to explore the Point. It's obvious she's reluctant to leave. Already she's found numerous broken plates with oriental markings, metal wall hooks, the top of a broken brown whiskey jug with a round handle, and an undamaged (and probably not so old) green bottle with Made in Canada engraved into the glass bottom.

On the beach in Chippewa Bay

Finally, after I've loaded the buckets and garbage bags into the tin boat, Margy returns from her scrutinizing investigation. Ever since I told her about the artifacts John and I saw here, she's been waiting for her chance to explore.

"This is an amazing place," observes Margy. "I suppose it's been underwater almost continuously since the paper mill built the dam in the early 1900s. Lots of old oriental stuff here, probably Chinese or Japanese."

"Could be from a logging camp," I say.

"Or maybe a private cabin," replies Margy. "It would've been a scenic spot for a home."

"That's a hundred years ago," I note. "The Point has probably been out of the water only briefly a few times since then. The lake hasn't been this low very often since the dam was built."

The Point, Chippewa Bay

We find a broad, low stump that makes a comfortable seat for two. We've brought some cookies and a can of pop to share. It's a beautiful spot for a snack, and a picturesque afternoon to reflect on the rich history of Powell Lake. We sit looking south over the water, towards the dam far out of sight. A low sun is drifting towards the Bunster Range in the west, as we ponder thoughts of what it would have been like to live on this lake a hundred years ago.

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Chapter 10

The Bottom of Powell Lake

In 2006, I retrieved a deep-water sample from Powell Lake, using a Kemmerer bottle. Up the Strait (Chapters 12 and 15) documented the initial drop to a depth of 1100 feet. This was the fitting conclusion to a project that developed over a period of nearly a full year. I expected that first deep-water drop to be my final probing of the depths of this lake, but now I hope I was wrong.

After the first view of a sample of the retrieved water in my microscope, I conclude that the Kemmerer bottle was highly contaminated during the drop. Otherwise, it's difficult to explain why the microscopic view reveals so many organic-looking particles. In fact, under the microscope, the deep-water sample looked little different from routine surface samples. But viewed without magnification, the water from 1100 feet down is completely unlike any other sample. Its deep yellow colour and putrid smell immediately set it apart from any other water. Chemically, according to scientific samples taken by the University of British Columbia in 1961 and 1971, the depths of Powell Lake remain far afield from surface water – with heavy concentrations of salt, methane, hydrogen sulfide, and absolutely no oxygen.

Kemmerer water sample bottle

Avoiding contamination during a Kemmerer bottle drop is difficult, since even complete sterilization of the bottle won't prevent exposure to surface-layer water during the drop. Zooming down through 1000 feet of water, the bottle's valves are wide open, introducing contamination all the way to the bottom. Unless I utilize a completely different sampling apparatus (maybe a ridiculously-expensive Niscan bottle), I'll have to live with exposure to surface water. But what happens next surprises me more than the microscopic contamination.

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Returning to the cabin after that initial deep drop, I immediately transfer some of the water to a small plastic container. I place it on the windowsill to marvel at my accomplishment. Within 24 hours, the water loses most of its rotten eggs smell. Since the capped container is plastic, I conclude that the

putrid gases have escaped through the sides, although it seems awfully fast. Then, after another 12 hours, I notice a black particulate accumulating at the bottom. Questions come at me like wildfire!

Could the plastic be chemically reacting with the water? Since this is the water's first contact with the modern-era atmosphere, could this reaction be caused by exposure to oxygen or some other gas? Or could the exposure of the water to sunlight be responsible for the chemical effect. After all, there should be no light at a depth of 1100 feet. Questions, questions. And no real answers.

I transfer some of the original water, still sitting outside a larger sealed plastic milk container, into another jar, a glass one with a metal cap this time. Within a few hours, this sample also begins to develop black particulates at the bottom. But I'm still not convinced that plastic can be ruled out as the culprit. The original sample sits on the picnic table in the milk jug. In the next deep-water sample (there must be another), I should use all-glass containers to rule out the effects of plastic. And I'll need better scientific controls over everything. An oceanographer aboard my boat during the next deep-drop would be nice, of course. That's when I think of Frank.

* * * * *

Frank is a retired airline pilot and a friend for over 20 years. In his other life, he's a community college oceanography lab instructor. My Kemmerer bottle is on-loan from his college, and Frank will likely kill me if I lose it in the depths of Powell Lake.

To help me answer the many questions associated with the initial drop, I send Frank two sample bottles by postal mail. He's anxious to make the water analysis a learning experience for his lab students. I'm eager to convince him into traveling 1000 miles to assist me with the next deep drop in Powell Lake. I sign my mailed request for analysis accordingly: "Wayne J. Lutz, Chief Scientist, DRIBBLE, a NASA-Funded Project."

Don't I wish? DRIBBLE stands for "Deep Recovery in a Bottle Below Lake Elevation." Every scientific project needs a good acronym, and so I made one up. So far, there's been little science and a lot of wonder. Whatever is going

on chemically is quite unique. Frank's scientific colleagues in California may provide some insight.

* * * * *

"You know what I think?" says Frank. "I think we have some really weird stuff here."

So weird, in fact, that the chemical analysis turns out to be a complete bust. As a professor emeritus of the California community college system, you'll never hear me say anything contrary to the established quality of such institutions. On the other hand, these are not scientific giants of the educational community. Maybe the bottle was dropped in the teachers' coffee room, shattered and never properly analyzed. Or maybe the laboratory analysis equipment blew a fuse. In any case, I receive no further feedback on the subject. I just hope the unsealed vial didn't make it into the coffee.

There will be another Kemmerer bottle drop, but so far I haven't convinced Frank to join me as the resident oceanographer. Until then, the original samples of water are distributed around town in small jars, sitting on mantles and window shelves as topics of discussion. Someday, no doubt with plenty of self-imposed hype, another drop will be conducted. I hope Frank will be aboard my boat with me, bobbing above the deep underwater floor of Powell Lake. Until then, my imagination will have to serve as the most magnificent scientific tool of all.

Water sample from bottom of Powell Lake

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Chapter 11

The Complicated Simple Life

During the second week in January, I step out of the Campion onto the float for the first time in six weeks. Business and holidays in the States have consumed more time than expected, but I haven't missed much in terms of good weather. The rain has been relentless in coastal British Columbia for the past month.

As soon as I'm aboard the float, I check the plastic-tube rain gauge. It's my first indication of the exact amount of rain since departing in late November, but the tube is filled to the very top with water. The gauge overflows at 12 inches, another very wet December. During previous absences, I've seen the gauge nearly full, but never overflowing like today.

Margy and I have our self-assigned duties. She heads inside the cabin to get a fire going in the wood stove, while I remain outside, turning on the electricity and propane and inspecting the float. Then we combine our efforts to unload the Campion and put the groceries away.

When the cabin is finally reconfigured as our home for the next few weeks, I go outside again to inspect our boats. Three boats have remained at the cabin for the past six weeks. The tin boat is in dry-dock, chained to the deck. Its drain plug and fuel tank have been removed, and I find everything secure.

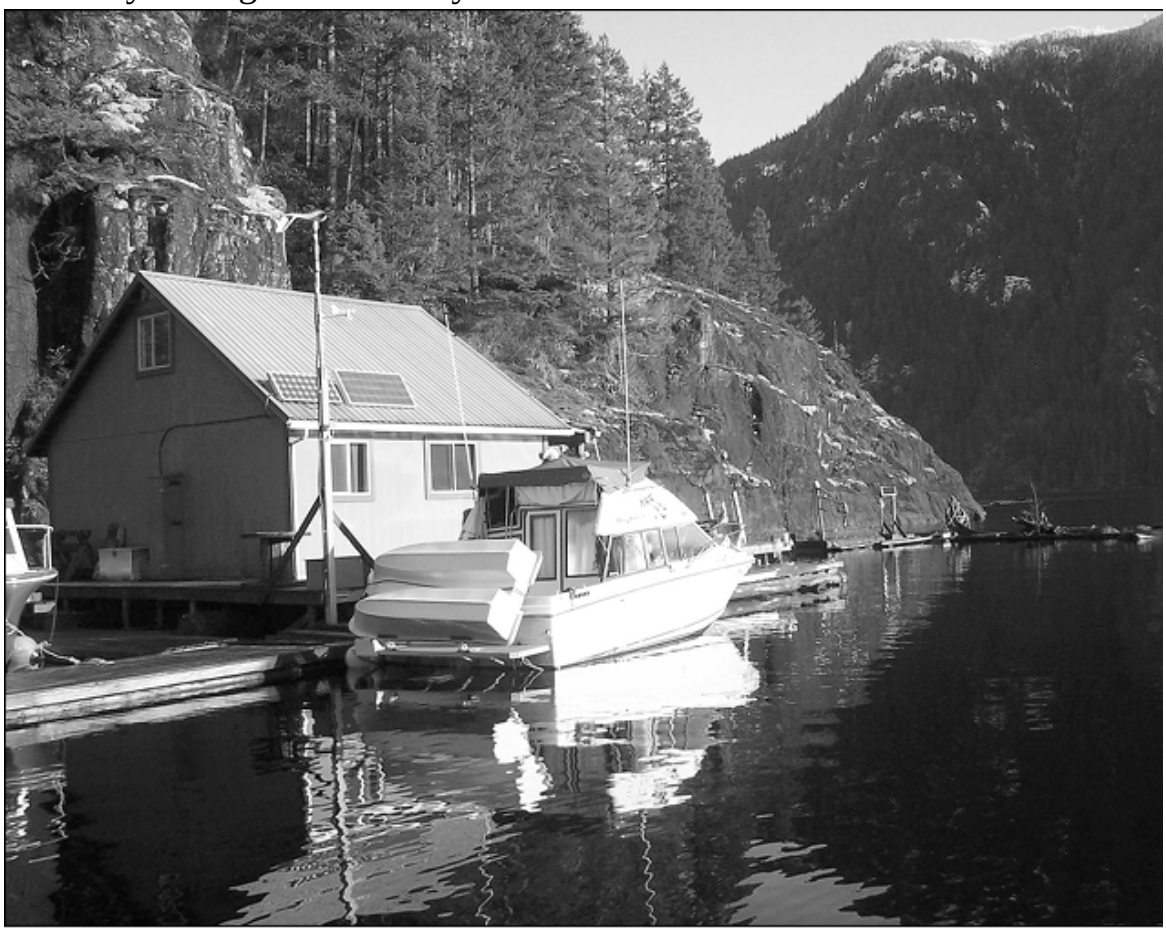
Gemini, my writer's retreat, is also in good shape. The boat's electrical power panel indicates 12.5 volts, nicely recharged by the boat's solar panel during its prolonged exposure to the muted sun of winter's short days.

The Bayliner is last on my inspection tour, docked at the cabin as a respite from its summer saltwater berth in Westview Harbour. I wage a constant battle to keep the Bayliner's enclosed cabin dry, so I'm concerned with what I'll find inside. Even though I'm not expecting a flawlessly dry interior, I'm shocked by what greets me. When I step onto the aft deck and unlock the door and swing it open, a pool of standing water covers the entire length of the floor.

Muddy water, seemingly mixed with oil, hides the carpet all the way to the floor's front end near the captain's chair. The boat is still safely afloat, but this is a significant amount of unexpected water.

While standing on the entry step at the door, just above the water-covered carpet, I turn around and pull open the hatch to the engine compartment. The engine is nearly half-submerged. The rear deck's overflow ports are designed to prevent rain from flowing into the engine compartment, but these drains can be plugged or simply maxed out by heavy rain. It seems evident that water from recent downpours filled the bilge and then somehow made its way forward into the cabin.

A partially submerged engine and a carpet covered by oily water are not the nicest way to be greeted when you come home.



Bayliner at Cabin Number 3

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The first step is to bail out the engine's bilge. Until now, the Bayliner has operated successfully without an automatic bilge pump, an obvious oversight

that will need to be corrected soon. But the immediate priority is to get rid of the water now nearly filling the engine compartment. However, I'm concerned about turning on the electric pump from the instrument panel inside the soaked cabin. I switch on the batteries (still above the engine compartment water level) and slog my way forward to the captain's chair. I raise both of my feet above the wet floor, dangling them in mid-air while I turn on the bilge pump. The comforting whine of the pump kicks in, and I hear water pouring out of the bilge.

The pump runs for nearly ten minutes, bringing the engine compartment water level down to nearly nothing. Simultaneously, most of the oily water covering the carpet drains away. By the time the bilge pump begins pumping air, standing water covers only the rear portion of the cabin floor. The water flowed out of the cabin the same way it got in, through the bilge, although a lot of it still remains. I then use a hand pump, followed by sponges, to bail out the rest.

Now it's time to see if the engine will start. The lower portion of the motor has been submerged, probably for several weeks, and that includes the starter and alternator. If I can get the engine running, and then the diesel heater, I should be able to dry out the cabin fairly quickly. Maybe no permanent damage has been done. As my favourite comedic nautical character, Captain Ron (from the movie of the same name), would say: "Hey, it's a boat. You've got to expect a little water."

The engine cranks normally and starts fairly promptly, considering the period of submerged inactivity. The idling motor sounds normal, and the engine instruments show standard indications. In just a few minutes, the diesel heater is running, and the interior of the Bayliner begins to receive a reprieve from its soaking.

As the motor gradually warms up, I monitor the engine instruments closely. While the diesel heater pumps hot air into the boat's cabin, I focus on cleaning up the engine area first. I kneel on the edge of the rear deck, where it meets the open engine compartment. I reach down next to the engine and work

my sponge around the side troughs, slopping up oily water that has overflowed into the crevices at the sides of the compartment.

With the engine purring along at idle, I squat on the rear deck, continuing to work around the engine, careful to stay away from the hot parts of the motor and the spinning fan belt. That is, I exercise care with my hands, but not with my feet.

The slippery rear deck is a hazard to be respected, particularly with the engine compartment open. I stand up briefly to reposition myself, preparing to push my sponge further into to some of the remote recesses. In one miscalculated moment, I slip on the oily, wet surface, and my foot slides down into the forward area of the engine, right into the only spot with any moving parts. The small rotating fan that cools the alternator makes immediate contact with my ankle. I pull my foot back quickly, but it's too late.

There's no sudden pain. I pull up my pant leg and inspect the damage. I'm wearing low-cut shoes, and my white sock is shredded at the ankle. Although I see bloody flesh and a gash right next to my knobby ankle, my foot doesn't hurt any more than whacking it against an overhanging step. But there's blood and an open wound, so I know it could be a serious injury.

I step back into the Bayliner's cabin, find some bottled water, and pour it over my ankle. There's still no pain. Although my torn sock oozes a small stain of red, the bleeding isn't profuse. I pull the ripped portion of the sock away from my ankle and take a closer look. There's one large gash that's barely bleeding, along with several smaller cuts that don't look serious.

I shut down the diesel heater, then the engine, and walk back along the lower deck that serves as our boat dock. When I step up to the upper level and walk along it to the cabin, I feel nothing unusual in the steadiness of my stride, which is a good sign.

Since I'm able to walk normally, I enter the cabin as nonchalantly as possible. I'll need Margy's help attending to this injury, but I know she has a low threshold when it comes to incidents like this. Her reaction in such cases is similar to the response of many of us who'd prefer not to see blood, including me.

In fact, at this moment, I can't help but remember an incident on the Kern River in California when I pulled on my fishing pole to yank a stuck red-and-white daredevil out of a log. The rebounding lure flew directly towards me, lodging its barbed hook in my calf. Since the hook wasn't imbedded very deep, I thought it could be pulled out with the help of a pocketknife and a small slit in my skin adjacent to the hook. But the hook was awkwardly imbedded in the rear of my leg, where I couldn't get at it. I handed the knife to Margy, and she immediately fainted.

There I sat on the bank of the river, with a fishhook in my leg and my wife passed out next to me. She woke up a few minutes later, saw me sitting there working on my leg with the knife, and passed out again. When she woke up the second time, I decided to give up on any streamside minor surgery. We spent the rest of the evening driving to the hospital on the far corner of Lake Isabella, where a young doctor laughed his way through the minor surgery: "You sure caught a big one," he joked, as he stitched up the small wound.

So today, with a gouged ankle, I enter the cabin and walk steadfastly to the sink. Margy squints at me, with that look of hers which confirms she knows something is amiss.

"Now, this isn't a big deal, but prepare yourself," I say. "I cut my foot, but there's almost no bleeding, and it doesn't hurt at all."

"Let me look at it," she says.

"Ah, okay. But first let me clean it up a bit."

"I'm not that squeamish," she replies. "Oh, forget about that fish hook thing at the Kern River. I promise not to faint."

That gives me a good laugh, but I still insist on cleaning the wound before she sees it. The bleeding is minor, but the gash is deep. There's little doubt this will be slow to heal.

"We can get back to town before dark," says Margy, as she looks at the oozing wound without any hint of fainting. "To me, it looks like it may require stitches – it's a pretty big cut. Are you sure it doesn't hurt?"

"It hurts a little now, but I feel good about staying here tonight. We can go back to town tomorrow, if it doesn't begin to heal properly."

My direction is now set. And it turns out to be an injury that heals fine, although very slowly over the course of several weeks. Moderate pain sets in that night, and it becomes difficult to place any weight on my ankle. For the next few days, I hobble around my floating home on Powell Lake, the victim of a first-day-back accident.

Within a few hours of arriving at my float cabin, I become nearly incapacitated. Yet, even with this injury, relentless rain, and little that most people would call the comforts of home, I enjoy my hobbled off-the-grid cabin life. I'm happier at Hole in the Wall than anywhere else in the world under almost any conceivable circumstances. In the back of my mind, I realize this will interrupt my ability to help John with construction of his new cabin float, just when he needs me to get started with the pony walls. Other than that, all is relatively well.

After a full week of nursing my foot and exercising it carefully, progress is evident. A number of cabin projects have to be set aside, including some that are getting critical but will just have to wait. The firewood supply is running low, but we'll make it through without splitting any more wood.

When the weather finally turns sunny, I'll need to return to the States. It's tough to leave Hole in the Wall just when the weather is finally starting to cooperate, but our airplane, a single-engine Piper Arrow, needs to return to Bellingham this month for scheduled maintenance. When the weather breaks, our plan is for Margy to drive her mom's car, which also needs to go back to the States, while I fly the Arrow.

Flying will necessitate strong ankles to control the rudders, but I'm healing rapidly. Just getting to the airport will require considerable travel on my weak foot – back down the lake to the Shinglemill, then to the condo, and finally to Powell River Airport. And there will be similar demands on my ankle once I arrive at Bellingham Airport.

Putting weight on my foot isn't my biggest limitation. Instead, my primary concern is wearing a shoe over the wound. And it's hard to travel around here this time of year with anything less than boots.

When the sky finally clears, we don’t lose any time. Margy scurries around the float, doing all of her normal chores involving closing up the cabin, along with many of mine. Meanwhile, I hobble around, trying to help, but I only get in the way.

We depart the cabin in a typical mood of despair. It’s always this way when we must leave our favourite spot in this world. It’s a melancholy boat ride down the lake to the Shinglemill, and then a quiet truck ride to the condo, where I pull my foot out of my boot. I’m immediately disappointed. The healing scab has broken open, and my careful attention to the injury for the past week has taken an obvious step backward.

The next morning at the condo, we get up early. Margy loads the car for her drive to the ferry terminal at Saltery Bay, and is on the road shortly after 8 o’clock. Meanwhile, I check the aviation weather reports. Powell River’s sky is crystal clear, but outflow winds are forecast throughout the South Coast. The cold front has moved through, but a dry arctic front is following behind it. Both the surface winds and the flow aloft are expected to get worse as the day progresses. Additionally, Bellingham isn’t expected to clear until later in the evening. It’s a fine day for driving back to the States, but a terrible day for flying.

With a clear day before me in Powell River, I could head back up the lake, arriving at the cabin early enough to get some time in the winter sun. It’s too tempting to pass up. So I pack up what I need for another night at the cabin, carefully pull on my boots, put on my heavy jacket, and head for the door just as my cell phone rings.

“You won’t want to fly today,” says Margy.

“Windy, I bet,” I reply.

“You bet it is. I just pulled into Saltery Bay, and the wind is really whipping down Jervis Inlet. Big whitecaps everywhere.”

“Well, I’ve already made up my mind anyway,” I say. “Guess where I’m going?”

“Back up the lake?”

“Why not? It’s gonna’ be a sunny day here. Should be beautiful on the lake.”

“Might be windy there, too, but it does sound great. I’m jealous!”

“Sorry, but I’ve just got to take advantage of a sunny day. Maybe I’ll stop at John’s house first, and see if he’s going up the lake today.”

“Don’t bother,” says Margy. “I passed by his driveway on my way out of town. John was already loading his quad into his truck. He’s gone by now.”

I glance at my watch. It’s not yet 9 o’clock, and John isn’t an early riser. When he loads his quad this early, he’s serious about riding. Around here, you don’t waste a sunny day in January.

“I’ll see you in Bellingham tomorrow,” I say.

“Take care of that ankle,” says Margy.

She’s right – traveling up (and then back down) the lake should be tackled with care. While I stand at the condo door talking to Margy on the phone, my foot is talking to me. My boots are on, and my ankle already hurts.

* * * * *

I hobble to the truck, drive to the Shinglemill, and limp my way to the Campion. I motor up the lake under bright blue skies that contrast remarkably against the dark water and new snow on the mountains. There’s no wind here yet, so I weave along the normally choppy west shore. This allows me to stay out of the cold morning shadows that still engulf the east side of the lake. When the sun shines in January, it’s worth taking advantage of every minute of it in every cranny.

Winter on Powell Lake

I pull into Hole in the Wall shortly after 10 o’clock, just as the sun is streaming onto the cabin for the first time this morning. January days here are short. It’s still early enough to scrape out another three hours of sunshine on the cabin’s deck before the low riding sun dips behind the tall trees to the south at about 1 o’clock. Then, for an additional two hours, muted sunshine will peek through breaks in the forest. There’s no time to delay – this is sunbathing weather!

Winter at Number 3

Before I even unload the boat, I drag the plastic lounge chair out of the cabin, positioning it on the deck so it faces the sun. I plop down on the chair and stretch out. My heavy jacket is zipped to the top of its collar, thick gloves still cover my hands, and my boots are laced to their tops. There's no hope of the temperature rising above 3 degrees C today. But it feels glorious in this chair, and I absorb every bit of the sun's January treat. Unloading the boat can wait until "sunset" at about 1 o'clock. In the meantime, I thrive in the crisp sunshine, kicked back and enjoying my winter sunbath.

It's so stupendous in this lounge chair, on this cabin deck in the middle of winter – I actually fall asleep for a few minutes. But when the sun slides behind a cloud, the sudden chill wakes me up. I take a short break from my sun-cloud bathing to grab a book from the cabin. Back on the deck, I spend the rest of the short daylight hours alternately reading and cat napping.

When the sun slips behind the trees, the temperature drops immediately. Now I unload the boat, start a fire in the wood stove, and begin to prepare the cabin for another night on the lake.

This extra time at Hole in the Wall has been an unexpected bonus. To make it work, I weathered a demanding two days up and down the lake, in another demonstration of the complicated simple life.

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The next morning, my ankle hurts worse than normal from the extra activity. I carefully maneuver back into my boots, secure the cabin once again, and head back to town.

In the condo, I file my flight plan and notify border-crossing officials regarding my pending arrival in the States. I drive to the airport and hobble-push the Arrow out of the hangar. More abuse for a sore foot.

After starting the airplane's engine and running the initial checklists, I pull forward slowly, testing my control of the rudder pedals. Once in the air, the rudder is of little importance (except, of course on government check rides). In fact, it's quite safe to keep your feet flat on the floor during most of the flight. But on the ground, the rudder pedals are critical, controlling both nose wheel steering and brakes. But my initial taxi check feels comfortable, so it should be an easy flight.

It's been ten days since my accident in the Bayliner, and the last 48 hours have been the most brutal part of my recovery. I'm headed back to the States, and I feel like I'm letting John down. He's geared up to install the pony walls on his new cabin, and I've contributed nothing to that construction project so far. I wonder how long it will be before I'll be back, and how soon my foot will be healed sufficiently to assist John.

Foremost in my thoughts is how much I already miss my home on the lake. Everything is simply better on Powell Lake, even a week full of foot agony in the rain. It's a place where life is good, no matter what the circumstances.

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Chapter 12

A Few More Blue Barrels

Plastic barrels pumped full of air are the most common fix for waterlogged floats. A good float cabin is built on a skookum structure of cedar logs, usually with added barrel floatation. Logs tend to ride lower in the water each year, until more barrels are necessary. These 55-gallon plastic barrels are purchased as recycled drums or found floating aimlessly around the lake, “popped loose” after a bad storm. They come in limited colours: black, white, and blue (the most common flavour).

As summer approaches its obvious end, I remind John that we need to complete a delayed project involving barrels at my cabin. More precisely, our firewood float needs to be buoyed up before Margy and I begin filling it with wood for the winter. We must get busy cutting and splitting logs that have drifted in, as well as piles of construction scraps we’ve accumulated during the warm months. The lake’s water temperature will begin to drop soon, and installing barrels under a float requires getting at least your hands and arms wet. Professional divers are often used for major projects, but we plan to do this minor one ourselves.

Besides the waterlogged firewood float, Margy’s garden is also riding low on one end. Barrels can be topped off with air, but there’s little doubt that additional drums will be needed. We anticipate that seven barrels will meet our current needs. Fortunately, John has multiple storage locations for his coveted blue barrels. He can never pass up a floating or grounded stray during trips up and down the lake. Particularly during winter storms, plastic 55-gallon drums pop up (literally) all over the lake, normally far from the cabin that rocked excessively. If a barrel is unclaimed after traveling a long way from home, it’s considered fair game. John is quick to take advantage.

“How’s the weather there this morning,” asks John over the phone.

“Pretty windy. I’d call it gusty here,” I reply. “Not too bad, but it looks a bit vicious out in the Narrows. Whitecaps out of the north.”

Summer was firmly in control yesterday, with clear skies and a high near 30 degrees C. During the night, the wind came up, and a few raindrops fell, but

now the weather seems to be improving. On this lake you often find the strongest winds during the clearing that follows a cold front. Today included.

"Pretty windy in town, too," says John. "But we need to get those barrels installed before the water temperature starts to drop."

"There's still plenty of time for that," I say. "But it would be nice to get it done. Are you going up to Number 5 today."

"Probably. So I might just stay there today, or come up to your place if it looks okay farther up the lake."

"I'll be here, so come up if the weather cooperates. If not, we'll do it some other day."

John is one of the few people who actually understand that I live on this lake. I don't just visit my cabin – it's my home. Most people just don't get it. No matter how hard I try to explain that I'm an all-season resident, people still seem to think I go there for a vacation. John knows I'll be around when he's ready to do the barrels, which makes me feel comfortable. He knows where to find me.

Although the weather looks quite challenging for boats, Margy and I expect John to come the rest of the way up the lake from Number 5, his new cabin. Then again, if he doesn't, we plan to move on to other projects, including Margy's gardening and my latest tin boat modification (in a series of "many").

Just when the wind takes a turn for the worse, meaning even bigger whitecaps in the Narrows and notable gusts, we see John's Hourston coming around the corner, turning into the Hole. Inside the boat is a solid mass of blue, with barely enough room for John at the helm.

"Where's Bro?" I yell to John as he maneuvers towards our dock.

"Down between the barrels someplace," he replies.

Sure enough, as soon as the boat kisses the dock, Bro's head pops up between two blue barrels, pushing his way towards the stern. He likes to be first-out when arriving at any dock.

Bro scrambles out, and then John begins to hand me four empty barrels. I stack them on the deck behind me, giving us extra room so John can unload his air compressor.

The compressor is an ancient single-cylinder gas engine with a belt-driven piston that supplies pressurized air through a homemade valve. The entire mechanism, mounted on a heavy wooden platform with rubber treads, takes up a lot of space. John found the discarded cylinder among abandoned equipment at Rupert's Farm in Theodosia Valley. In his shop at home, he designed this full-functioning compressor that, along with his self-designed extension wands, serves as a barrel inflation device. But it can be fickle. Once John gets it started, it usually runs flawlessly. However, getting it running can test his patience.

"I haven't used the compressor in a while," says John. "So it might refuse to start without a bit of overhaul."

John is used to overhauling things before they will work properly. In this case, a few pulls on the flywheel rope reveals that this will be one of those times.

John's air compressor for inflating barrels

"No spark," says John. "I'll probably need to take it apart, but first we'd better fill it up with oil."

The first oil spigot is for the single-cylinder motor, and it needs only a little oil. But the compressor mechanism takes a seemingly endless flow of replacement oil.

"How much does this thing hold?" I ask. "Must be almost empty."

"Oh, it's always this way. Eats oil all the time. Do you have a spark plug wrench?"

This sounds like the beginning of a typical "do-you-have" routine. John, as a master mechanic, owns every tool he could possibly need, but he hasn't brought any tools with him today. Instead he'll rely on my meager supply of

substandard tools, asking for them one implement at a time. I walk back to the cabin to get a spark plug wrench, the first of several trips to get needed items.

John begins with the motor's spark plug, finding the electrodes packed with carbon. After cleaning the plug and reinstalling it, he decides to remove the impeller flywheel to gain access to the points.

"Got a socket wrench?" he asks.

"Sure," I say, walking back to the cabin.

While I'm locating my socket set, I grab my tool bag to take back with me. I know there'll be other tools needed, so I may as well take the bag now.

"Where's Bro?" I ask when I return to the compressor overhaul site.

"Probably in the boat," he says. "Too much wind. He freaks out when it's windy."

A big tough dog, afraid of a little breeze. Just to be sure, I walk over to John's boat and look inside. Bro is huddled way up in the bow, past the instrument panel, as far out of the wind noise as possible.

Back at the compressor, John is removing the impeller. He shows me a tiny metal pin that he manufactured at home to hold the flywheel in place.

Repairing the compressor

“Don’t want to lose that,” he notes, setting the pin aside on the deck. “The flywheel rides pretty loose,” he says, showing me how the big component slops back and forth with a major wobble. “Doesn’t seem to make much difference though.”

Once he gains access to the points, I can see another trip back to the cabin coming up.

“You’ll probably want some sandpaper to clean the points,” I say.

“Right. A fine grit would be good.”

So back I go to the cabin again. I swear John does this on purpose. He enjoys jumping into a project and taking things one step at a time. Find a tool, take another step, then go looking for another tool. When I’m working with

him, he seems to get particular pleasure out of having someone assist him with this self-imposed inefficiency.

While I'm in the cabin, I grab a can of 7-Up for each of us. This project is going to take a while.

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John's overhaul of the compressor, as usual, results in a piece of equipment that starts and runs fine for the rest of the day. In this case, the electrical contact between the spark plug and its connector wire is corroded, and that discovery finally sets things straight. But the other components we check and clean need attention, too, so it's not wasted time.

Now we're ready to submerge the first blue barrel under the end of the firewood float, with one cap sealed and the other open. It's a slow process, since the single open hole must simultaneously receive the incoming water and the outgoing air.

Installing a barrel

Once filled with water, we orient the semi-buoyant barrel under and between the logs that need to be raised. Using all four of our hands, we slide it into place against one of the thick steel cables that bind the float together. Yet John routinely does this kind of work alone. Then he carefully rotates the barrel so the open cap is in the full-down position, ready to be filled with air.

Positioning the barrel

Now we begin our carefully choreographed sequence. John inserts the extension wand into the lower hole, while I pull on the flywheel rope and start the motor. Then he nods to me, and I open the air valve.

Inflating the barrel

After a few minutes, bubbles appear from the barrel's hole, my cue to turn off the engine. To do this, I use a stick to push the connector wire off the spark plug to break the circuit. As much attention as John has paid to making this compressor a marvel of old technology, he refuses to install a stop-switch.

The first new barrel under the firewood float makes a noticeable difference. The logs on this end are now well out of the water. We continue our flotation improvements by adding three more blue barrels. This winter, the firewood float will hold a heavy supply of wood well above the water line.

Now we move our attention to the garden float. I have one barrel (found floating in the Hole several months ago), but we'll need two more for the job. So we use John's boat to go to Cabin Number 2, directly across from us, where he rummages through two piles of barrels. He finds two with caps that seem

tightly sealed. Even a small crack in a cap will result in rejection, and cracks often aren't found until the barrel is installed and pressurized.

Back at Cabin Number 3, we begin work on the garden float. This is a tougher project, since it's a smaller float, and there are already several barrels underneath, with not a lot of spare room. We finally find places between logs that John feels are acceptable for additional barrels. Margy stands by to assist us if we need her to go swimming, but it looks like we'll be able to complete all of today's installations without anyone in the water.

Another barrel for the garden float

Our work progresses quickly. When the third and last barrel is ready to go, John and I work together to slowly submerge it. He positions the open cap just below the waterline to flood the blue plastic drum. This is the barrel I've contributed, found floating near our cabin. Although almost exactly like the other barrels we've installed today, this one is unique – it's white. Technically,

it’s exactly the same as a blue barrel except for colour. Then again, if you’re superstitious, you could say white barrels aren’t quite the same since they aren’t blue.

When the barrel is finally full of water, John starts to slide it under the garden float.

“Oh-oh!” he says, stopping with the barrel only partially under the logs. “There’s a leak.”

Bubbles near the closed cap reveal the deficiency, and the only course of action is to drain the barrel and seal the leak. But to do so requires the hardest physical labour of the day. We must lift the barrel partway out of the water, and then rotate it slowly as it drains. Finally, with most of the water removed, we’re able to hoist the barrel onto the float and let the last few gallons drain away.

“It’s a tiny crack in the cap,” says John, showing me the small scratch that indicates the source of the leak.

We can fix the cap with sealant, and go through the whole process again. And we will. But it’s funny that this happens when it comes time to submerge the very last barrel, just as we’re ready to claim victory over today’s project. Then again, there’s really little surprise when you deal with a white barrel. Not that anyone is superstitious around here, of course.

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Chapter 13

Wood Rats of the World, Unite

At the float cabin, I feel in touch with nature. I'm a part of my surrounding environment. It is increasingly difficult to kill the fish I catch. If trout were a necessary part of my daily diet, I'd probably feel otherwise, but that's not the case. I can shop at the grocery store in town, just like everyone else. I extend the concept of catch-and-release to mice and wood rats (pack rats) living beneath my cabin's cedar float or visiting from shore during the night.

They aren't called "pack rats" for nothing. Wood rats that inhabit the shore near Cabin Number 3 are busy critters during the autumn, when they build up their reserve supplies for winter. Our garden and flowerpots are routinely raided. Margy and I turn our heads as much as possible, providing these critters with a generous source of winter stores. Of course, we really have no alternative, since they would attack with or without our cooperation (and always when we aren't looking).

In September, in preparation for the cold months ahead, a wood rat takes up residence in the tool shed, piling up a stack of small sticks, leaves, and berries. If I can catch this critter in a live trap, I'll be able relocate him to Goat Island, where he should have enough time to build up his winter stockpile again before the cold season arrives.

Catching a wood rat requires patience. Mice can prematurely spring the trap as they creep in to steal the peanut butter used as bait. Eventually, one stormy night, I outwit the bushy-tailed fellow. Although the next morning brings a steady downpour, I decide to take this critter directly to his new home on Goat Island. Being caged must be distressing for any creature, and I can easily bundle up for protection from the elements during the brief trip.

Wood rat in live cage

Because of the rain, I rush to prepare my kayak, Mr. Blue. Hastily, I stack two cages on the exposed bow of the vessel. One contains the wood rat; the other, a mouse caught in a smaller live trap. In my haste to get the task underway, I step off the dock onto the sit-on-top kayak, intending to quickly drop into the seat. It's a launching technique I've used before without difficulty, but this morning I misjudge my step. I teeter on verge of recovery, and then lose my balance. As the kayak flips, I splash into the water. When I come to the surface, my attention turns to my two caged passengers.

As the kayak floats upside down next to me, I catch a glimpse of flickering metal as the two cages head down into 50 feet of water. I reach for the dock's railing to pull myself out, just as a soaked mouse drags himself along the deck, headed for the nearby woodpile. I've never seen a mouse move so slowly, but

he’s obviously a fortunate survivor. As I grasp the rail, he passes within inches of my hand, stops long enough to look me straight in the eye, and tosses me a disgusted stare. His cage, when overturned, popped its wire latch, allowing him to escape an otherwise watery grave.

The wood rat isn’t so fortunate. The bigger trap has an external latch that couldn’t fall open. Only a human hand could unhook that secure door. As I pull myself out of the water, my chest now resting on the dock, the wood rat is undoubtedly gasping his last panicky breath in the cold, deep water.

I twist into a sitting position, my feet dangling over the edge and into the water. I’m soaked but safe. The small mouse is in the woodpile, out of harm’s way, upset but able to continue a normal life. The wood rat, on the other hand, has met a terrible death, drowned by the very human attempting to provide him with a new life.

The rest of the morning is an agonizing experience. I chastise myself repeatedly for my lack of care for creatures that are part of my home. If I had been more diligent, the wood rat would be romping happily on Goat Island.

I used a fishing pole and a stout hook to drag the lake bottom near the spot where the cages fell into the water. I snag a few false hopes, only to pull waterlogged branches to the surface. After several hours of failure, I finally give up. Had I recovered the wood rat, he would have received a respectful burial on the granite cliff overlooking my cabin.

As darkness falls, I climb to the top of that cliff and look down on the watery place I call home. Mr. Blue bobs gently in the placid water. Somewhere below rests the still-caged animal, now gone from the living world.

Around me, I feel the presence of the wood rat. His memory is an intricate and important part of this beautiful place. I try to live in harmony and with respect for all creatures. The wood rat will always remain here, contributing in his own small way to my sense of place.

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Wood rat family stories usually have a happier ending. My message to the wood rats of the world is to unionize and unite to conquer the planet.

It always amazes me how they continually move their treasured vegetation from place to place. A pile of parsley appears here today, and is gone tomorrow.

One autumn, Ms. Wood Rat leaves presents of scat on my favourite deck chair. When I check in the morning, I find clear evidence she was contently sitting on the chair the night before, surveying her domain between runs to and from the floating garden. The nearby shed is perfectly positioned for storage of her harvest.

In late October, Margy cleans out the shed in preparation for winter. She finds considerable evidence of Ms. Wood Rat's efforts so far. Margy removes piles of small sticks, moss, and garden clipping from the back of the shed, and then turns the area back over to me for the storage of equipment for the winter.

I move the swimming pool toys into their traditional winter position in the shed. This year, I add the mast for my small Laser sailboat. It fits in the small building only by laying the mast from the corner of the floor to the opposite roof rafter. I build a wooden support so the metal poles aren't stressed by their own weight during storage at this angle. Then I rearrange the cans of paint, spare barbecue parts, and some excess insulation material that John won't let me throw away. With the shed looking crowded but properly organized, I close the door and lock it.

The next day, I check to see if Ms. Wood Rat has already moved back in. Sure enough, when I open the door, a carefully-rounded pile of parsley has been placed at the entrance. If it's purpose is to call attention to the fact that you can't outwit a wood rat, this critter has clearly demonstrated her case.

But Margy and I have agreed that Ms. Wood Rat needs her stores for the winter, so I leave the parsley untouched. It's too late in the season to battle her any longer. If she moves in again, we'll let her stay. All her little wood rats are depending upon her.

After a few days in town, we return to the cabin. As usual, one of my first actions is a quick walk-around to see if everything is secure. All is well, although a substantial storm moved through the previous night. Centered on the doormat is a single pansy leaf from one of our flowerpots. I interpret it the way I want to: "Thanks for not messing with my parsley pile."

Later that day, I check the shed again. When I swing the door open, the pile of parsley is gone. I search between the swimming pool toys and under the sailboat mast, finding no evidence of any vegetation. Apparently, this was merely a temporary location for Ms. Wood Rat's treasures.

Another check of the shed the following morning reveals no further evidence of hoarding. I return to the cabin and check my deck chair. Sure enough, Ms. Wood Rat was sitting there last night. When I walk around the other side of the cabin, I find evidence of her harvesting stash. A pile of geraniums sits next to a flowerpot Margy has constructed from an old barbecue. The next day, the geraniums are gone, and even the pansy at my doorstep (that I thoughtfully left in position) is missing. Ms. Wood Rat has been busy again.

As much as I try to make sense of her attentive hoarding and the movement of her valuables, I never seem to come close to understanding the method of her madness. But there definitely is method, and I reward it by cooperating as best I can. For most critters, the best thing you can do is simply stay out of their way. And let them sit in your favourite chair.

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After another trip to town, I return home to a rude welcome. As soon as I step out of the boat and up onto the raised deck, I see it – an attack on the flowerpots. Such an assault isn't unusual, but the extent of the damage is unique. The pansies and new cedar saplings have been completely removed from the pots and meticulously laid nearby. Whatever critter caused this wasn't after the pansies. Instead, it was digging in the dirt, probably looking for grubs.

This doesn't fit the modus operandi of a wood rat. What could it be?

Later that day, after cleaning up the pots and adding a protective mesh over the plants, I sight a river otter swimming past, just outside the breakwater. Although not unheard of in Hole in the Wall, otter observations are fairly rare. The lanky critter swims a few metres, and then dives out of sight. The otter swims and dives every few seconds, all the way to the far edge of the Hole near John's Number 2 cabin. Otters are fish-eaters, not known for grub hunting.

Just to keep the intrigue going, the next day brings an even less-common event. As I sit on the sofa in my cabin, looking out at my coveted wide-angle

multimedia view of First Narrows, I suddenly notice a mature bald eagle sitting on the breakwater. How long has he been there?

The eagle seems relaxed, just taking a rest from his airborne search for food. Usually I see bald eagles in flight or perched in the tops of trees. Their enormous wingspan holds them airborne on currents of air, followed by flapping of those big wings, a process that consumes large amounts of energy. Of course, that energy must be resupplied by a big daily diet, though not from grubs in a flowerpot. Yet it's a strange coincidence – rare otter and eagle sightings immediately after an unusual assault on our flowerpots. More likely it's geese or ducks, both of which could easily climb aboard the float in my absence. Or a raccoon or…

While I'm considering the possibilities, I take a picture of the eagle, contentedly perched on the log boom right next to Mr. Ferry (who looks tiny by comparison). After a few minutes, the eagle takes flight, pumping its 6-foot span of wings, quickly going airborne, headed towards Cabin Number 2. Then he's up and over the trees in John's back bay, into the soaring currents above. The mystery of the flowerpot attack will never be solved. But it's a reminder that the possibilities, in a place like this, are endless.

Bald eagle at Cabin Number 3

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Chapter 14

Never Enough Power

Any off-the-grid home, by definition, needs alternative electrical power. In my case, a variety of sources have been developed. None of them are perfect, and none works under all conditions.

Solar, which is at the top of my preferred list under most conditions, isn't a cure-all. Winter days are short, a time when the sun's orbit tracks low behind the trees to the south.

Getting electrical power from the sun during the summer is so simple that you'll find me recharging my laptop (an extravagance) from the solar system and turning on lights I really don't need. In contrast, regardless of the number of solar panel available, winter is an entirely different story. During that season, I turn to the wind, a thermoelectric contraption driven by the wood stove, and (as seldom as possible) a gas-powered generator. When it's available, the sun is preferred. But living off the grid, you take what you can get.

When John sets up our initial electrical system, he selects what seems to be an adequate solar panel and 6-volt batteries that are the equivalent to those used in golf carts. With two batteries in series, the 12-volt system with an inverter provides all the electrical subsystems we need, but never enough power. Soon we add another rooftop panel and additional batteries.

When the boat called the Gemini comes up the lake as my writer's retreat, it has its own large solar panel on top and additional batteries. Although I don't need a lot of power for the boat, it's nice to have an alternate source of electricity for the cabin. This design has proven particularly valuable, not only because of the extra amperage, but because I can easily isolate one battery system from the other. Running batteries down too low is less of a threat when another system is standing by. John installs a boat battery switch to make the changeover easy.

Gemini in winter

A separate small solar panel and a 12-volt deep cycle battery provide electricity for the garden float's watering hose. It draws lake water up through a bilge pump to a spray nozzle. It may seem like overkill to have running water on a floating garden, but dipping a watering can into the lake to irrigate the vegetable beds gets old real quick.

Strings of solar Christmas lights both inside the cabin and on the porch provide a touch of colour during the night in all seasons. Each string has its own small solar panel and rechargeable battery. Similarly, solar-powered pond lights and walkway lights use the sun's rays independently, as do the transmitters for my weather station (thermometers, anemometer, electronic rain gauge). The sun does lots of work at Cabin Number 3.

But there's never enough power, especially during the winter. Thus, I turn to the wind. At Canadian Tire, John, Margy, and I pick out a 400-watt wind generator to charge the cabin batteries whenever the wind blows, day or night, summer or winter. Unfortunately, in Hole in the Wall, the wind seldom exceeds the steady velocity needed for such a device. We get strong winds during storms, but it comes at us mostly in gusts, which is nearly useless. Still, it's an alternative to reliance on the winter's low-arcing sun. (For details on this wind generator, see Up the Winter Trail, Chapter 7.)

Wind generator at Cabin Number 3

Of course, there's always the gas-driven generator. The trusty old Coleman will charge up the cabin batteries quickly, and give us a day to recharge electrical gadgets in the middle of winter. While the house batteries come back up to speed, Margy and I plug in Game Boys, camera battery packs, e-reader tablets, and laptop computers. But the generator interrupts the quiet of the Hole,

and burning gas makes it seem like we're giving up some of our off-the-grid goals. Yet sometimes it's necessary.

Margy pursues another unique form of power generation, discovering a small company operating out of West Virginia that's developing equipment to harness the heat energy expended by wood stoves. Thermoelectric systems have operated successfully for decades in large industrial settings, where heat is routinely turned into electricity. But to do it on an independent residential scale is a lot less common.

TEG Power (basically a fellow named Ron operating out of his garage) is on the cutting-edge of this technology, and we decide to give it a try. To achieve any amount of energy production from our wood stove seems ideal – we create lots of heat nearly 24-7 during the winter months, and that's exactly when our electricity deficit is most critical.

Ron sends us the system components, which includes three 15-watt stove panels, a charge controller, and the necessary wiring. The cooling subsystem is a critical element, which includes a water pump, radiator, reservoir, and associated tubing. I don't expect to obtain the theoretical output (45-watts), since I've had considerable experience with the limitations of alternative energy. Solar and wind power provide half (or less) of the advertised values, due to less-than-perfect environmental conditions ranging from improper sun angle to internal energy loss. Still, if I can get half the purported output, I'll have enough electricity to run the thermoelectric system's water pump and still provide a slow charge to my batteries. Two amps flowing to the battery bank during the middle of the night in winter is a big improvement over the nightly drawdown from my solar system.

The thermoelectric process captures the change of temperature across the generator modules from the hot surface of the wood stove to the water-cooled outside edge of the panels. With an oven thermometer to indicate when the panels should be working (120 - 218 degrees C), I begin my initial tests. My multimeter samples the voltage and amperage at the output generator, charge controller, and a small battery set by the stove. Nothing operates as expected.

Ron responds to every inquiry I make, providing recommendations to extract more power from the system. I picture him in his garage, holding the phone against his ear on a hunched shoulder. By now, Margy's purchase has cost Ron a bundle. On the other hand, he has a determined Canadian test lab operating for free.

The recirculating water-cooled system (pump, radiator, and reservoir) doesn't meet the specifications we need to tap the full potential of the modules. But there's a natural source of cold water only a metre below the stove – the cold winter water of Powell Lake. I revise the module hookup to incorporate an open cooling system that pumps cold water up to the stove, circulates it through the outside face of the modules, and then dumps it back into the lake. With the stove running full blast, the outside of each module is icy cold, maximizing the thermoelectric process.

With a new (lower amperage) pump, I'm able to increase the efficiency of the system even further. Although I never get more than half the advertised output (peaking at 20 watts), it's usually enough to run the pump and provide a one-amp charge to the cabin batteries. My goal has been barely met, but it's a positive outcome both in terms of minimal battery charging (talk about a slow charge) and a lot of valuable learning about electricity along the way.

Thermoelectric modules on side of wood stove

Improvements to the cabin's electrical power situation are never-ending. There are battery banks to monitor and maintain, and subsystems to measure with multimeters. When we install a compost toilet, a dedicated solar panel (and battery) is needed to run the exhaust fan that promotes moisture evaporation. This also provides us with an opportunity to increase the output of the wood stove thermoelectric generator by transfering its water pump to another battery system. Although a single 15-watt solar panel would take care of the compost exhaust fan, I elect to install a three-panel array that provides 60 watts to take care of both the fan and thermoelectric water pump. Now the stove generator can focus all of its output on the job of charging the cabin's main battery bank.

No matter how much you have, there's never enough power.

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Chapter 15

Sawhorse in a Tin Boat

My lifestyle is based on a floating world. Not only does my home float, so does everything around me. Extra weight on the float foundation is of concern, since waterlogged cedar logs reduce the life of the structure. If bulk can be reduced substantially, it's worth taking action, as is the case regarding firewood.

A wood stove requires a substantial seasonal stack of firewood, but it doesn't need to be stockpiled on the cabin's float. Most of it can be stored in my floating woodshed, and then moved to the cabin in quantities needed for a few days of burning. When the wood is wet, that's particularly wise – not only is it heavier; it needs to be dried. The open-sided shed is a better place for drying than in the confines of the cabin.

Normally, the lake supplies my needs when it comes to firewood. Much of my supply comes to me on light winds and gentle currents. Often, on tranquil mornings when floating wood tends to gather in Hole in the Wall, I can stand on my deck and snatch what I need with a pike pole.

During two recent winters, our firewood reserves came from old cabin decks that were replaced with new cedar boards. I'm quick to accept such a donation. Cut up the old wood, and tow it home on the raft. A typical cabin deck sliced and diced will last a full winter.

There's always lots of log cutting and splitting awaiting attention. Most of the wood that drifts to me is too large for the wood stove, so out comes the chainsaw. Bigger logs are left floating in the water, tethered to the cabin's various docks and auxiliary floats, thus freeing the main foundation of unnecessary weight. Haul them in when ready, chainsaw them into stove-length segments, and split when needed. Margy and I call this "wood work," but not kind conducted in your urban garage with lathes and elaborate equipment. It's merely preparing wood for burning in the stove. That could mean cutting, splitting, stowing, or merely gathering and moving the end product closer to the living room. Such repositioning is an important part of life when you live in a floating cabin. Weight is everything. So is a long-range view of your annual wood stockpile.

Floating woodshed

When our stash of wood begins to dwindle, we can use our tin boat for a resupply mission. Of course, the days when you could obtain your firewood from the living forest are long gone. So gathering wood strewn on the shore is an acceptable alternative. This lake undergoes a constant churning from the storms that move through, and there are dramatic shifts in lake-level caused by the paper mill's adjustment of the dam gates to the south. It's not unusual for the lake to rise or fall four metres over the course of the year, sometimes fluctuating half that amount in a month. All this action deposits wood acceptable for burning on the shores everywhere.

"Let's go over to Sandy Beach later today," I say to Margy one May morning. "We'll take the tin boat and some plastic tubs. Heck, we may as well take the chainsaw and a sawhorse, too, and do all the cutting right there."

“Why not?” she replies. “There’s lots of wood there now. The lake’s starting to come down. And if we cut it at the beach, that will save a lot of work when we get home.”

In fact, the level is dropping quickly this week, probably because the dam’s gates are wide open. Snowmelt is bringing plenty of water into the lake, so the mill is tapping off quite a bit of electrical power.

That afternoon finds Margy and me on the beach just south of First Narrows, dragging dead logs to the sawhorse. We’re interested only in the smaller logs, since we’d prefer to avoid the extra effort of splitting. Besides, we can’t legally tackle the larger logs without a salvage licence.

Cutting wood on Sandy Beach

We work for several hours, moving wood to the sawhorse, cutting with the chainsaw, and then collecting the wood in the plastic barrels. We gather enough

to fill four tubs, loading the larger chunks directly into the tin boat. By the time we're out of energy, we've collected enough wood to fill the tin boat as full as we feel comfortable.

Homeward bound, riding low in the water, we pass our neighbor's cabin, where several boats are gathered. That's unusual for this early in the year. The occupants are bear hunters who've rented the cabin, spending most of their day in remote locations on the lake where hunting guides have pre-positioned quads and jeeps. We've watched them come and go for the past several days, Texans looking for bears under the supervision of local guides.

Headed home from Sandy Beach

By the time we park the tin boat, it has begun to rain, so we leave the wood in the boat and go inside the cabin. When the rain stops, I'll tackle the off-loading process, but there's no hurry. This job will wait for me.

A few hours later, I stack the new wood in the floating shed. This added supply will provide plenty of firewood for what remains of spring and those few days in summer when a morning fire takes the edge off.

Towards evening, when I walk around the back deck of the cabin, I realize something is out of place. Meanwhile, Margy is planting vegetables in her floating garden, so I stroll to the front deck to explain my discovery.

“Hey, we left some important wood at the beach,” I call to her.

“What’s that?” she yells back. “I checked pretty thoroughly before we left, and I didn’t see any remaining pieces.”

“I looked things over pretty good, too, but we still left some important wood.”

Margy gives me an inquisitive stare, knowing I’m waiting for her to figure out this mystery. She shrugs her shoulders: “What are you talking about?”

“A big piece of wood we left on the beach,” I reply.

Still nothing from Margy except a scrunch of her mouth, indicating she can’t figure it out.

“The sawhorse.”

“Oh, my goodness,” says Margy with a laugh. How did we manage to forget that?”

“Do you want to go back with me?” I ask, knowing Margy is in the middle of a major garden project. On the other hand, neither of us can ever pass up a chance for a ride in our tin boat.

“Sure. Just let me finish this patch of onions.”

* * * * *

Back at Sandy Beach, we’re only onshore a few minutes. I haul the sawhorse back to the tin boat, where Margy snaps my picture: a man in his tin boat, with a sawhorse.

We push off from the beach, almost immediately in water deep enough to start the outboard motor. I pull the starter cord, but the engine doesn’t fire. This reliable engine is fairly new, and usually starts on the first pull when the motor is warm. But today it takes five pulls to get it running. Even then, it idles rough for a few seconds before settling down. And then we’re off.

At first we cruise out into deeper water at partial throttle. I want to be sure we're clear of the many underwater snags that line this beach before applying full power.

When I'm sure the obstacles are behind us, I twist the throttle, but the engine accelerates sluggishly. I settle in at reduced throttle, waiting for the motor to clear, something I don't normally need to do except when it's cold. We putt-putt our way towards the green navigation light at First Narrows, where we'll turn towards Hole in the Wall. The engine puffs awkwardly as I advance the throttle, and dies.

The motor refuses to start. I disconnect the fuel line from the cruise-a-day, reconnect it, and pump the bulb. When I pull the starter cord, there's no sign of ignition. For the next few minutes, we drift in nearly calm water in First Narrows, near the green navigation beacon. I check the shutoff lanyard, make sure the fuel vent is open, and pump the fuel bulb a few more times. None of this changes the facts – this engine isn't going to start.

"I'm guessing it's the fuel filter," I say to Margy. "In fact, I was planning to replace it soon, because it's never been changed."

"No ignition at all," says Margy.

"But I think that's because there's no fuel," I reply.

"Here come the bear hunters. They must have seen that we're in trouble."

"It's easy for us to row from here," I reply. "But let's accept a tow, if they offer one."

The bear hunters' boat is headed our way. Their cabin is too far away for them to know we've been trying to get our engine started, unless they were using binoculars. When they get close, the boat slows and their engine stops. When our two boats drift within a few metres of each other, I recognize the local guide and a hunter from Texas we met a few days ago.

"So is this the hot spot?" asks the guide. "We saw you fishing here, so I guess it's a hot spot."

"No, in fact it's a cold spot," I reply. "At least as far as our engine is concerned. It refuses to start."

“Oh, we thought you were fishing, so we came over to ask you how you’re doing. Would you like a tow?”

“Sure, if you don’t mind. We could row from here, but a tow would be great.”

Margy lengthens our bow line by attaching another rope from the pile that lies between us. As we hook up to the other boat, I ask about their hunting progress.

“He’s already got his bear,” says the guide, pointing to the Texan who beams with pride. “Now we’re gonna’ try to catch some fish.”

I give them some ideas about where they might fish, telling them about my favourite spot between Sandy Beach and the point at the edge of Chippewa Bay. Then we begin the tow back to our cabin.

Bear hunters tow our tin boat

“Somehow it seems I should be discouraged about the engine konkin’ out like this,” I say to Margy as we slowly make our way home behind the bear hunters’ boat. “But I’m not. Tomorrow I’ll change the fuel filter before doing any more troubleshooting. And if it ain’t the filter, I’m sure it’s something else that’s simple.”

“Meanwhile, this beats rowing,” notes Margy. “Did you notice those guys didn’t ask why we’re carrying a sawhorse in our boat?”

“You’re right. Maybe they think we just carry one around all the time, in case we find something to cut up.”

* * * * *

The next day, I do what I can with the outboard to see if I can find the problem. I double-check everything involving the fuel system (which I still suspect is the source of the problem), including the tank feed lines and the see-through plastic fuel filter (which looks fine, but I replace it anyway). Then I move on to the ignition system, checking the spark plugs, which also look good, but I replace them, too. Now it’s time to call John.

His evaluation the next day points to the ignition coil, since we don’t seem to be getting any spark. But then his focus turns to the fuel system. He drains the carburetor and finds quite a bit of gunk-like contaminate, possibly from old gasoline. The engine finally starts, but runs poorly. Repeated draining of the carburetor finally resolves the problem. Later John traces the problem to the cruise-a-day gas tank, which is contaminated by water. I’ve learned that fuel contamination is a common problem in boat engines of all types, but in this case I didn’t go the extra step of draining the tank into a bucket to inspect for water. The good news – we’re operational again.

John works on the outboard motor

The truth of the matter is that all of this troubleshooting and being towed home by the bear hunters wasn't all that bad. After all, Margy and I will do almost anything to ride in our tin boat.

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Chapter 16

Slow Cruisin’

Maybe it’s because the cold season has been so mild. And I can’t remember a winter with less precipitation. Fewer storms and almost no snow combine to make the low-sun season encouraging. I imagine marching smartly into spring and summer, but it’s not to be. Instead, spring drags on with little sun and seemingly endless rain. Will summer ever arrive?

To make matters worse, I’m in my winter funk that appeared every year when I lived in California. More time indoors often led to near-depression persisting well into April. But in Canada, I’ve generally avoided these symptoms, probably because I spend so much time outdoors, even during the winter. That’s a plus I attribute to my off-the-grid lifestyle. So even with less sunlight in Canada, I manage to find more of it. This year, maybe because of the prolonged dreary spring, the seasonal blues move back in, and don’t seem ready to leave.

There are undoubtedly other contributors to the equation, but the fact remains that I’m now struggling with my off-the-grid lifestyle, a rarity for me. What I need is something significant to do during these April doldrums while the rain and clouds persist – something to bring me out of my funk. Then I have an idea that just might work, even though it begins with a routine problem.

One of my regular challenges this time of year is keeping the 24-foot Bayliner dry. It’s a boat that endures winter poorly, just like me. The battle involves airing it out on any day that it doesn’t rain, and sponging up areas where condensation persists. While conducting these routine tasks, I try to get into a better mood, one that normally comes with the change of seasons. By rigging the Bayliner for the warmer weather that is sure to come, maybe I can outsmart my idle winter brain.

The previous summer, this boat was replaced in the chuck by a larger 30-foot vessel that’s designed for summer cruising on the sea. When the bigger boat went into Westview Harbour, the smaller Bayliner came out, and is now moored at the cabin. At first, the plan was to sell the smaller boat, but the economic downturn produced a buyer’s market with prices plummeting. When I

advertised the 24-footer for sale, there were several immediate inquiries, including two couples serious enough to go for a test ride.

“I’m not sure I like the older style,” noted the man who accompanied me at the helm for the first demonstration ride.

Which is exactly why I love this boat. It’s a classic. After all my years with this fine vessel, I felt insulted. Which isn’t a good attitude when you’re trying to sell a boat.

The woman who rode with me on the second outing lifted the V-berth mattress, and felt underneath.

“A bit damp there, isn’t it?” she noted.

“It’s a boat. You’ve gotta expect a little water, you know.”

I’m sure it sounded extremely defensive, although I was using one of my favourite quotes from Hollywood’s Captain Ron. I didn’t bother to explain.

At that moment, I changed my mind about selling the boat. Margy and I had discussed the possibility of keeping the older Bayliner for use on the lake. We didn’t really need another boat, but parking at the cabin is free, and it would be nice to have a boat larger than our Campion for winter travel to town when the waves grow big. Besides, Margy liked the idea of taking some overnight trips on the lake, tying up to a logging dock or anchoring for the night. This boat would be perfect for the task.

So the Bayliner, which had been deconfigured extensively for a potential sale, now needs to be reconfigured for cruising on the lake. While the weather still refuses to cooperate, I begin to dream fair weather boating activities. With conditions still winter-like, I purposefully act as if spring sunshine is finally here, preparing the boat for it’s first cruise.

The dinghy, Mr. Bathtub, won’t have much use on the lake, and its position on the stern’s swim-grid is in the way of the backup 3-horsepower outboard motor. To use it as a “kicker,” Mr. Bathtub must first be removed, and then the outboard can be mounted. But now I have a new plan for the small motor – trolling as both a method of fishing and a slow-cruise mode of transportation. Since I’ve never used this small outboard for either purpose, I’m not sure it’s a practical plan.

I test the system while Margy is in the States. I remove the dinghy and mount the little two-stroke Yamaha on the swim-grid. While motoring out the breakwater entrance, I steer the kicker from the swim-grid. Once out in the open water of Hole in the Wall, I lock the kicker in place and try steering from the upper helm. The boat's stern leg provides adequate directional control, so now the Bayliner can be driven from either the upper or lower helm. With only 3 miles per hour of forward thrust, it will be a slow cruise, but perfect for trolling for trout. Besides, it's time for me to slow down occasionally and take in the shoreline sights up close. With the small downrigger from my tin boat clamped onto the aft deck, I can probe the depths for fish with my trusty red-and-white daredevil.

After the brief test run, I feel a sense of excitement about my first trolling cruise. Could I put up with 3 miles per hour all the way to the head of the lake? It would be an all-day trip, but think of the fishing territory I'd cover. Besides, the vroom-vroom stern-drive engine will be standing by to put me back up onto plane when needed.

Regardless of my enthusiasm for this plan, the weather isn't cooperating. Sunny breaks are expected over the next few days, but with single-digit nighttime temperatures. As a compromise for an overnight excursion, I could gear up for a day trip. Could I make it to Beartooth and back in a single short April day, or maybe even all the way around Goat Island? With the Bayliner's built-in engine on standby, I decide I'll go as far as I can, turning to the bigger engine, if necessary, to make sure I make it home before dark.

Reconfiguring the Bayliner for its new role on the lake means installing rod holders (removed in anticipation of a the boat's sale), outfitting the boat's cabin with kitchen utensils (similarly removed), and preparing the downrigger for trolling. I'll be ready for my first solo trolling voyage as soon as the sun decides to shine.

But just when I've started to feel better about my mid-April gloom, there's no sunshine to allow me to cast off from the cabin. To launch in rainy and cold conditions would make the trip less than ideal. But I don't need perfect weather either. With just a little sun, I can navigate north as far as time allows, and even

catch up on some of the 3 R's (reading, writing, and radio), swinging on anchor at prospective sunny spots along the way.

Finally, one day near noon, the clouds give way to sunny breaks. Towering cumulus contrast with a backdrop of brilliant blue. It's time!

There's not much to pack, since the boat's cabin has nearly everything I'll need for a day trip. I select a book to read (the first R), pack a clipboard to make taking notes easier (the second), and grab the FM radio (third!), along with some cold drinks and a few snacks. This is going work! – my doldrums are going to end today. I'm sure of it.

As I exit the breakwater, I steer the kicker from the swim-grid. Then I settle into the upper helm, chugging ever so slowly out of Hole in the Wall. With a left turn to the north, I angle towards the Goat Island (east) side of the main channel, right up against the steep cliffs that seem perfect for trout. Perfect, that is, during the heart of fishing season, which this is not. Mid-April is at least a month too early, but as a catch-and-release guy, I enjoy the process of fishing more than the catch. And on any given day, you never know.

The winds are light, but enough to require the full limits of the helm's wheel to stay on course. Going this slow, it takes a lot of steering wheel movement to head in the right direction, and there's a significant delay before any course change occurs. If you get behind it, the bow begins to swing so far to the side that the best decision is to just let it go, do a three-sixty, and get back on course after a complete circle. After several such instances, I pay closer attention, and generally keep ahead of the boat.

Kicker kickin'

Once I feel I've got directional control mastered, I leave the upper helm long enough to get the downrigger set up. Fortunately, nothing happens very fast at this slow speed. I can make adjustments to my course as I work on the downrigger, slipping into the cabin to adjust my heading from the lower helm. In a few minutes, I've got my flasher and lure overboard, trolling at a depth of 25 feet, which I figure is deep enough this early in the season. Then I go back upstairs, and set another fishing pole for surface trolling, using the rod holder on the command bridge. Downrigger on the starboard side, and surface trolling on the port. If there are trout along Goat Island today, I have both the shallow and the deep water covered.

I have lots of time to experiment with this setup, and soon settle into a slightly reduced power setting for the kicker. It's considerably quieter, which is

a big plus, and my speed seems relatively unaffected. I'm sure it's better on gas, too, a lesser factor when I consider how little fuel this motor burns. The self-contained tank has a capacity of only 1.2 litres, and my initial fuel consumption figures show I'm burning only two-tenths of a gallon per hour. I do the math in my head (the real third R!), comparing this engine to the other boats I drive. My normal lake boat (Campion) consumes about 6 gallons per hour, this Bayliner (with it's stern-drive) 12 gph, and the bigger ocean vessel 24 gph. A little mental arithmetic gives me some astounding figures. Boats are notoriously bad regarding fuel economy. For example, the fairly fuel-efficient Campion (when converted to miles per gallon) provides 3 mpg, this Bayliner 2 mpg, and the bigger ocean boat with its twin engines only 1 mpg. Imagine your dissatisfaction with a car operating at 1 mpg! By comparison, the small kicker is producing about 15 mpg. Of course, that's at the sacrifice of a speed ten times slower than those other boats. Still, it makes me feel good to realize the fuel savings.

The small tank of the kicker operates about 90 minutes before it runs dry. Then it's a quick refuel before we drift too far off course. I figure I'll need to top off the tank at least three times today.

I've underestimated how far I'll get. The distance covered at 3 miles per hour is less than I would have guessed, and now it looks like I'll be lucky to make it to Beartooth before dark, maybe not even to Second Narrows. That's okay, since the Bayliner's main engine stands ready to take me home.

The good news is that I'm far from bored. Riding close to the shore, I maintain a close watch for wildlife, while studying the vegetation. At this speed, everything is distinct and in focus, and there's only a 3 mile per hour breeze on the command bridge. In fact, it's getting hot, so I strip to a T-shirt and shorts, a nice change for mid-April. I pop peanuts into my mouth, sip on a cool drink, and keep an eye on the downrigger and both poles. I'm feeling a lot better about everything now, and yell out though no one can hear: "Feelin' good!" It's my self-proclamation that the doldrums have broken, and I owe it to slow cruisin'.

I haven’t seen a fish yet, and it seems apparent I’ll go the entire day without a bite. Who cares?!

I know that the Clover Lake logging dock on Goat Island is around the next promontory. I stay in close to the cliff, ready to turn as soon as I clear the point. Just as I reach the place where I’ll angle to the right, I suddenly see (and simultaneously hear) Terry’s green diesel tug chugging out from the dock. I didn’t expect to find any activity here on a Saturday, but Terry is obviously working overtime, just now completing his launch of a barge full of logging equipment. It’s a critical time for him, finishing his push from the rear of the barge, and now quickly moving his tug around to the front to engage the tow line.

It’s not a dangerous encounter for either of us, but it could have been if I’d been going faster. Now I can simply veer off towards the dock, getting behind Terry’s load while maintaining adequate clearance from the log pens. On the other hand, I don’t have control of the kicker’s throttle from the command bridge, and I can’t shift into reverse or even neutral. But I’m moving slowly enough that I can ease behind the barge. I wave, Terry waves, and he’s off in a burst of diesel power.

At the next bay, I cut the corner, trying to make up some time. It’s unlikely I’ll run across any trout in this deeper water, but I won’t be speeding, so I may as well keep both of my trolling lines out.

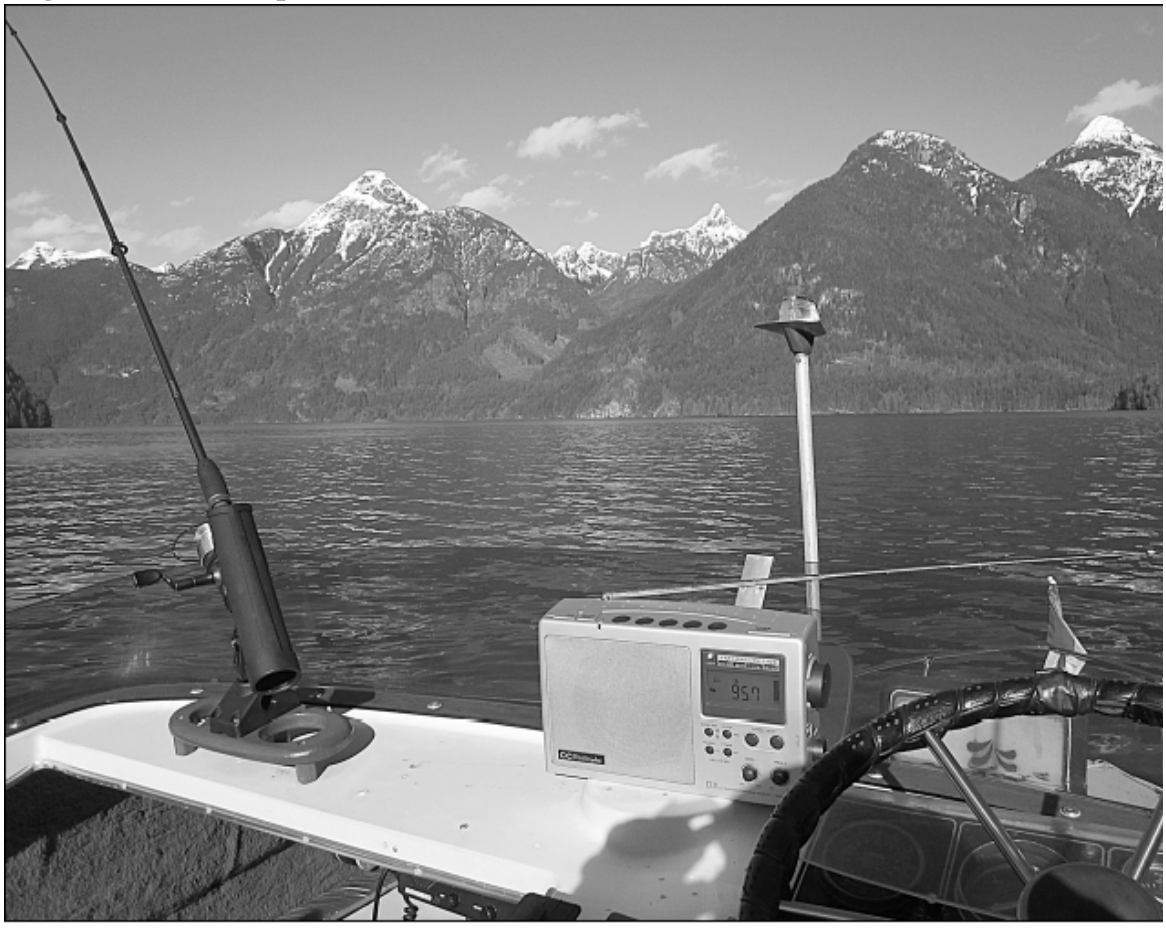
It’s pretty obvious I won’t make it to Beartooth, but I’d like to get as far as Second Narrows, my new goal.

Opposite Olsen’s Landing, the waves kick up a bit, and the temperature drops in the stronger wind. I slip back downstairs to put on my long pants and jacket.

The farther north I progress, the better my view of the mountains ahead. I'm motoring slowly, but the scene is steadily improving as the sun drops lower and the shadows lengthen, forming stark contrasts between the mountains and

the lake. Beartooth pops in and out of the clouds. It's not the highest mountain, but its Matterhorn-like steep peak is easily identifiable from a long distance.

I tune in CBC on the radio (third R!) as the national news begins. One of the benefits of slow cruising is the quiet that accompanies your travels, making listening to the radio a practical affair.



Approaching Second Narrows

Beartooth Creek is a distinct indentation in the landscape ahead. It seems so near, but it would take at least two more hours at this speed. There's not enough time before dark, so I ease to the right, cut across one final bay, and prepare to enter Second Narrows.

As I round the final point separating me from the entry to the other side of Goat Island, I troll close to the rocky cliffs on my right. Not far away is the island that marks the entrance to the Narrows. Around the next point, I catch my first sight of the small islands straddling the channel near Rainbow Lodge. Once

the recreational destination for executives of the local paper mill, the lodge has been converted to a personal residence. The buildings are brightly painted, making an eye-catching contrast to the deterioration evident in recent years. Just as I approach the islands, the kicker dies for the last time today – four tanks of gas, 4.8 litres of fuel (just over a gallon).

Second Narrows

The Bayliner's main engine cranks smoothly, and is purring and ready to go. Here in the Narrows, the sun has already set, but sunshine remains to the south. I'll have plenty of time to get home before nightfall.

This time of year, the temperature drops rapidly with the sun. I pull up my hood, in preparation for the increased airflow on the Command Bridge at 25 miles per hour. As I come up on plane, I adjust the trim tabs to level the hull. It seems like this boat is moving at lightning speed as I cruise along the other side

of Goat Island, and then quickly out into the sunshine on the south end. After six hours of slow cruising, I'll be through First Narrows and back home within a mere half hour. Fast is fun, but slow has proven itself mighty therapeutic on a significant day of seasonal and personal change.

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Chapter 17

The Cougar and the Bear

The JR Trail is one of my favourites. John and Rick built it nearly single-handedly as a link from the upper reaches of Heather Main to the trail leading down to Chippewa Bay. Before they completed this connector, the route between Chippewa and Theodosia Valley was substantially longer. This shortcut slices off a series of time-consuming switchbacks while it weaves through a beautiful grove of trees at the top and then down through an old logging slash. Besides the increase in efficiency, it's a fun ride on a quad – challenging, scenic, but well within the limits of an amateur like me.

This path is normally travelled on a quad. But once – only once – John and I (and Bro) hiked it from bottom to top, and then back down again. Although we'll ride this connector trail many times again, we'll probably never attempt another hiking excursion here.

Earlier in the day of this memorable trip, when we round a corner of the main on our quads, we encounter a deer. We're riding side-by-side on this wide logging road, except on corners, so we have the unusual advantage of being able to talk to each other as we ride. More accurately, with our helmets on and the quads engines roaring, we yell at each other.

A big doe appears right in the middle of the road in front of us, and launches herself directly down the dirt road when our quads spook her. We give chase, and the doe runs before us, showing no desire to jump off into the bushes where she could quickly escape. The entire way, Bro strains forward from the aft dog-compartment of John's quad, wailing his obnoxious siren howl, a loud, screeching cry. This high-pitched howl is what Bro uses for any large animal he encounters, especially deer and bear.

After almost a kilometre, the big doe finally leaps into the bushes to the side of the main. The deer is immediately invisible, and we bring our quads to a stop near the spot where she disappeared. Bro settles down by licking his lips (literally). Then he gulps with a mild burp, easily heard over the sound of our idling quads, and sits back down into the quad's rear compartment.

“That deer could have jumped off the main right after we saw her, but she just kept running,” I remark.

“Just stupid, I guess,” replies John. “I’ve followed deer a lot farther than this. It must really tire them out. That’s a big doe, but I guess she didn’t realize she could lose us just by leaping off the road.”

Unusual behavior. And it gives Bro’s lungs a workout.

We crank up our quads, and ride a few kilometres farther, finally stopping at the lower entrance to the JR Trail. Our plan is to leave our quads here and hike up to Heather Main, if we can make it that far. John expects late spring snow in the upper wooded area, where drifts usually remain until early summer under the protective canopy. Then we’ll hike back down to our quads, a good stretch of exercise on a long ride like today.

There’s a small ditch that separates the trail from the road, where John pauses and hunts through a few pieces of stray wood. This is the entrance to the slash, and he’s looking for an appropriate walking stick.

“You’ll need to find one, too,” he suggests. “It’ll give you extra balance.”

“Okay, how’s this one?” I ask, grabbing the first long stick I come across.

“Too long. Find one a few feet shorter. It’ll work better.”

In my typical lazy fashion, I elect to keep the tall stick. It works fairly well, but John (as usual) is right. A shorter stick would be easier to manage.

It’s a perfect day for hiking, not too hot, with occasional patches of snow at the far upper reaches of the trail, just before it joins Heather Main. Bro starts out in the lead, as he often does, usually falling back to join us as he gets tired from a climb. At first, he scurries up the trail, darting through the fairly open slash, sniffing his way uphill as he seeks whatever gamey smells he can find.

John follows Bro, and I fall into a comfortable gait behind them. The trail is easy on-foot, with our walking sticks a nice aid in keeping our balance through rough and rutted sections. After the first three-quarters of the trail is behind us, we’re ready to enter the shorter upper stretch that leads to Heather Main. We’ll leave the slash and enter a scenic grove of trees with a slightly steeper grade, and then we’ll make the final sharp climb (probably through snow) to the main. John pauses for a moment to rest, and I catch up to him. By

now, Bro has dropped back close to John, and the dog sits panting in the middle of the trail.

“It’s not much farther,” says John. “Once we enter the trees, there’ll probably be a little snow on the trail, and then a short climb to the road.”

“Suppose I lead?” I ask.

“Sure, have at it. Bro is getting tired, so he’ll stay back here with me.”

I look down at the panting Lab. In his older years, he’s put on a lot of weight, and it shows on him just like it does on people. His climbing ability is noticeably reduced.

Up we go.

Before we reach the grove of trees, I spot some gray scat on the trail, definitely not a bear, but I’m not sure what. So I call John over to investigate.

“Could it be a wolf?” I ask.

“Might be,” he replies. “Lots of hair in it, so it’s been eating rabbits or something.”

We enter the grove; me first, followed a few metres back by Bro, and then John close behind. The trees provide a picturesque canopy over our heads, the afternoon sun bleeding through in places. A snow patch here and there changes to a dense bank of white to our left, about a foot deep and extending out of sight into the woods. Just above the white drift of snow, I come to a screeching halt when I hear John suddenly start yelling.

“Get outta’ here! Get outta here! Git! Git! Git!”

He chops his words so fast that he’s on the second “Git!” before I can stop, turn, and see what’s going on. What I see is one of the most amazing sights I’ve ever witnessed.

Charging down the white lane of snow to our left (and slightly behind me now) is a full-grown Cougar. He’s running fast, right at John (or Bro) climbing a few metres behind me. And he’s not stopping!

John continues to yell, now waving his arms and walking stick high in the air and back down again, trying to make himself as large and loud as possible. Meanwhile, Bro is frozen in place, not even beginning his traditional siren-like howl.

The cougar reaches a spot less than 10 metres from us, and then veers abruptly away, disappearing almost immediately into the trees below us. He's gone, and John reaches down and grabs Bro by the scruff of his neck, just as the black Lab is recovering from his hypnotic state, ready to run after the huge animal.

"No, Bro! No!" yells John. Bro lunges towards the woods, but John holds him tight.

John and I stand transfixed, until John finally breaks the silence.

"He was probably going for Bro. But he could have gotten us, too. Why in the world didn't you start yelling?!"

"It happened so fast," I reply in excuse. "When I heard you shouting, I thought it was a bear. By the time I realized it was a cougar, he was already headed into the woods."

No excuse really. I was more spellbound than frightened. John who knew a lot more about what was happening had more reason to be scared than me.

"Let's get up to the road, right now!" says John.

We scamper up the few remaining metres to Heather Main, and then stand there in what seems like a safe place, reliving what has just happened.

I snap a picture of John and Bro, with the "J.R.'s Shortcut" sign in the background. The look on John's face isn't his normal playful pose, and even Bro looks subdued. The encounter has (only momentarily, I hope) changed them.

John and Bro “recovering” on Heather Main

Probably the cougar was stalking us, maybe even before we entered the grove. He came straight down the snowy path 90 degrees to our left, ready to pounce and be gone quickly (or maybe stay and fight).

“The scat we saw as we climbed the trail probably belonged to the cougar rather than a wolf,” I suggest.

“Could be,” replies John. “Lots of hair inside. Could have been rabbit or something bigger, like a deer.”

“His next scat might have included Bro’s hair,” I joke.

“He was going for Bro, I’m pretty sure,” analyzes John. “He could have just grabbed him and kept on going.”

“You think so?” I ask. “Bro is awfully big.”

“Not for that cougar. He was massive.”

That he was. And now we have to climb back down the JR Trail to get back to our quads. The cougar is still there, of that there is no doubt in our minds. But this time we won't be surprised.

We start down the trail, dropping into the forested grove, looking both ways, but concentrating on the spot where the cougar charged towards us and then disappeared. At the narrow lane of snow, we stop briefly and look at the cougar's big tracks. The cat definitely turned away less than 10 metres from us. We agree that (visually) the distance is about 20 feet, but we don't pause long enough to get off the trail to measure it. While we're stopped, I visualize the cougar's big eyes watching us from behind the trees.

We don't waste any time, and we intentionally make a lot of noise going downhill from here. John keeps Bro close beside him, his hand tight around the scruff of the Lab's neck. I'm ready to yell and wave my walking stick, but it's not needed. Now we're breaking out of the woods and entering the slash, and back into sunlight. In a few minutes we are far enough away from the trees to relax a bit. But we keep walking at a brisk pace, wanting out of here.

Lower down, and much more composed, John walks in front of me with Bro, holding a less-tense hand on the dog's neck without grasping the skin.

We can kid about it now.

"That could have been the end of Bro," says John, with a note of calm in his voice now.

"But what a hero he would have been in his demise – the dog that saved us from the cougar."

John laughs, but it's not his normal it-really-doesn't-bother-me laugh.

"Heck, he might still be stalking us down here in the slash," I add. "You might turn around, and look who's following us."

John, walking in front of me, turns around. He immediately begins yelling, but I know it's a joke. Yet I can't help but turn around, too.

There's the cougar again! This time, he's sitting on a big stump, about 15 metres behind us. He's higher than we are, looking down on us in a stalking stance. The glint in his eye is evident even from this distance. This cougar is not

letting us get away without showing us that this is his territory, and we've barely exited alive (especially Bro).

Stalked by a cougar

John picks up a thick stick from the ground. Still yelling (and me joining in this time), he throws the stick as hard as he can directly at the cougar. His toss has plenty of range (which shows how close the cougar is), but he misses his mark. He grabs another nearby stick, and throws it. Again he misses. Then a third stick in quick succession. This time the wooden projectile hits its target – Bam! Right in the head! The stick bounces off the cougar and falls harmlessly near the stump. The big cat doesn't even budge. This is one tough fellow!

Then, as John hunts around for another stick, the cougar leisurely jumps down from the stump, and strides back up the hill. He exits in a slow gait that

reminds us he’s clearly in charge. He’s leaving only because he’s done today, not because he’s afraid of us.

And we know it.

John, Bro, and I continue down the JR Trail towards our quads below, most of the time clinging silently to our separate thoughts. My mind contemplates the dichotomy of the beauty of the wilderness in contrast to its unforgiving nature. And how life and death ride so close together, often in an uneasy but exciting harmony.

Cartoon by Ed Maithus

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I’m still reflecting on the details of the cougar encounter. It’s now banked in my memory as one of the most extraordinary experiences during my years living off the grid. To have witnessed this beautiful creature in his hunting mode

is an adventure few have encountered, and I feel fortunate to have experienced it. There's something about big animals – cougars and bears come immediately to mind. They are frightening, of course, but also extremely beautiful. I often wonder how they are able to survive in the wild. Such big creatures need to eat a lot to sustain themselves. How do they manage such an overwhelming task? How do they stake out their territory and manage it? And how lonely do they feel, especially when new to a territory without a mate? What would it be like to live like a cougar or a bear?

Two weeks after the cougar encounter, I gather my gear for an evening of fishing. I suggest to Margy that we try an easy troll through First Narrows. It's already almost 8 o'clock on this early June evening, and the weather is in the process of turning breezy and cool, so there's no need to go far from home. We can try our luck nearby, and be home before dark.

So we gather our equipment, and motor out of the breakwater in our tin boat. After clearing the entrance, I maneuver around so we face the cabin, and shift into neutral. Our portion of Hole in the Wall has been in the evening shade for two hours. But on Goat Island to the east, "second sunset" is only now starting to climb its forested face, as the sun descends behind the Bunster Range to the west. It's a beautiful time of the day, with everything standing out in stark contrast in the disappearing light.

We pause for a few minutes, just looking at our home from this perspective, the floating sections dancing together in the light breeze. Woodshed, docks, garden, cabin – swaying gently back and forth in a synchronous motion that seems almost choreographed. All very familiar, and even more awesome than the first day I saw it.

We move on, as I slowly bring the tin boat up on plane, easing out of the Hole at a comfortable pace. In only a few minutes, we're positioned in First Narrows near the green navigation beacon, rigging our poles up for trolling.

I toss two plastic buckets out the rear of the boat to slow our pace. Over the years, I've found this boat is just a little too fast for fishing, even at idle, and the buckets slow us down to "trout speed." Margy prepares her favourite pole with the lucky lure she's used to catch a lot of big fish, and casts behind the boat

to get started. Meanwhile, from the back seat, I set up the downrigger, preparing to fish at a depth of 25 feet. Margy will cover the surface, and I'll be looking for the deeper trout tonight.

It doesn't go well. The downrigger reel is jamming, breaking my fishing line loose at the clothespin connector as soon as I try to lower it. I continue to fumble with it, while trying to steer the boat at the same time. When I look down to adjust my gear, the boat veers out into deeper water. I catch it with a wild swing of the outboard motor, only to overcorrect and drift towards the shore. After a few minutes of floundering to the left and right, I shift back into neutral.

"Why don't you bring your line in for now," I suggest. "My rig is all screwed up, and I can't keep the boat straight."

"I thought you might be learning to drive."

"Very funny. But I'm not exactly in the mood."

Which I'm not. That is, a minor frustration like this seems so important at the time. It's really only a small problem, but it has somehow gotten to me. Thus, I'm not particularly receptive when Margy says she sees something swimming in the water behind us.

"You mean a fish?" I ask.

"No. Something big."

"Looks like a log," I say, glancing behind the boat while trying to loosen the reel of the downrigger.

"Might be a USO," replies Margy, referring to the mysterious Unidentified Swimming Object from old wives' tales about the lake.

"Or an otter. But it's too big for that."

Now I'm half-convinced the log is moving towards Hole in the Wall, opposite to the wind. Although the shape is double humped, it's not much different from routine flotsam on this lake. And it's way too big for any critter that lives in the water.

"Do you think it's a bear?" asks Margy.

"Maybe. But are you sure it's moving? No, wait – it's definitely moving. I bet it is a bear."

By now I've hand-pulled the remaining downrigger line aboard, since the reel still isn't cooperating. I drop the cannonball in the bottom of the boat, haul the buckets in, and start the engine. In just a few seconds we're on our way to intercept a modern-day USO.

"It's a bear!" yells Margy, as we approach a little closer.

She's right. Its head forms the first hump and its rump the second. It's now mid-lake between Goat Island and the point near Max's cabin, a stretch of at least half a kilometre. But it's coming from Goat at an angle, a much farther swim, maybe a kilometre or so.

I pull past the bear from behind and turn back to ride in formation on the other side. Margy's camera is clicking, and we're yelling excitedly to each other, but at the same time trying not to scare the bear.

"Amazing!" I say at least a dozen times while we ride alongside the big animal, perhaps for five minutes.

"Listen to it snort!" says Margy. "He keeps his head in the water while he swims, then pulls it up to blow out some air."

Yes, I can hear him snort. It's a strange sound to hear in a lake.

"Imagine how much energy that must take," I reply. "He sure can swim!"

"Bear paddling," jokes Margy. "His head is probably so heavy that he has to keep it in the water as much as he can, just like an Olympic swimmer. Don't get too close!"

As if the bear is in agreement with Margy for his own reasons, he glances at us. Not a threatening stare, but I see fear in his eyes. He's swum all this way under very demanding conditions, and now there are humans to contend with. It's possible he's never seen people before, and this is a terrible first encounter.

Bear swimming from Goat Island

I know Margy is cautioning me not to get too close out of respect for this big animal, not out of fear for what he might do to us. I don't feel we are in any danger, as long as we stay swiping distance away. We travel a parallel course with the bear, less than 10 metres separation, with our boat slightly behind. I give him the breathing room I know he needs. It's awesome!

"What would cause him to swim all this way?" I ask. "How would he know what he might find over here?"

"Maybe it just wasn't working out on Goat Island," says Margy. "He's got to feed himself, you know."

Yes, he has to feed himself. A rush of other questions come to mind, like what happens if another bear has already staked out its territory where he's headed? These are the same kind of questions I've been asking myself about the cougar. Imagine you're a cougar or a bear, arriving in a new territory, and

wondering about how you will survive. Life can't be easy for these beautiful creatures.

I'm cheering him on now, talking more to myself than to him: "You're gonna' make it, fella'! You're almost there!"

The bear is close to shore now, and he slows down, probably half-walking on the lake's rocky bottom. I slip the shift lever into neutral, and we drift alongside the sloping cliff that forms the shore near Max's cabin. The bear comes up and out of the water, climbs onto a huge driftwood log, and shakes himself like a dog. We're watching him from behind, and he's soaked and skinny looking from this angle, like a shiny black horse. Maybe he isn't so big after all.

No, he's big! He turns sideways to give us one last penetrating stare. I see his full profile – a big black bear with a pale face. Beautiful!

The bear seems in no hurry at first, probably recovering some of his energy after the demanding swim. But his stay on the shore is brief. After turning to look at us one last time, he starts forward along the rocky ledge, looking for a place to enter the woods. In just a few steps, he turns towards the forest, and thrashed into the forest. In an instant he's gone, except for the wavering bushes that mark his entrance to a new world.

Two weeks and two massive creatures, both up close and personal. I think about them nearly every day, hoping they are resting easy at night in their forest homes. I live here, too, admittedly less off the grid than these animals. But together we share it all – one beautiful place where we somehow all get along in magical harmony.

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About the Author

From 1980 to 2005, Wayne Lutz was Chairman of the Aeronautics Department at Mount San Antonio College in Los Angeles. He also served 20 years as a U.S. Air Force C-130 aircraft maintenance officer. His educational background includes a B.S. degree in physics from the University of Buffalo and an M.S. in systems management from the University of Southern California. The author is a flight instructor with 7000 hours of flying experience.

For the past three decades, he has spent summers in Canada, exploring remote regions in his Piper Arrow, camping next to his airplane. The author resides in a floating cabin on Canada's Powell Lake in all seasons, and occasionally in a city-folk condo in Bellingham, Washington. His writing genres include regional Canadian publications and science fiction.

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