

WET

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Not many people can say that they owe their life to a fish, especially the herring. This small albeit tasty minnow can be found spawning in great numbers off the rugged coastline of British Columbia in springtime. The eggs have been a food staple of the Haida people for more than 10,000 years. Although highly interesting, this ethno-zoological detail was probably the last thing on Nelson's mind when his kayak began tottering in frothy ocean swell, 600km west of his cozy Vancouver basement suite. I'm quite certain actually, reflecting back on his frantic paddle-swatting efforts at staying righted, that he was brooding on another scientific tidbit I had so casually alluded to before the trip. That was the one about probably having only a couple of minutes to live if you took a swim in Queen Charlotte waters during winter. Valid or not, on a ski trip this simply doesn't factor into your mental repertoire, unless of course you find yourself going under. Then it only makes sense to scream like a schoolgirl.

In response to a high-pitched mermaid screech, Pete and I went on red alert and quickly scanned the scene. This wasn't easy since up to this point we were focusing on keeping our double kayak faced into the whitecaps, which also happened to be the direction the sideways rain was coming from. Since we had no freeboard it took several minutes and considerable risk to maneuver next to our bobbing companion, who was looking quite desperate. A portal hatch had leaked and his boat was nosing toward the ocean floor. Somebody had to do something, and since I was the only member of our armada with a lifetime kayaking history of greater than twenty minutes, I thought it prudent to make a safety announcement: *No matter what*, Nelson must not flip us. Of course, this is a particularly sobering statement to even the most altruistic of floating skiers. If we were all swimming, we would never flag down the coast guard cutter that was moored only 800m away, oblivious to our plight. These mariners were more concerned with monitoring the handful of fishing boats going after the herring eggs. Just when Nelson started turning blue, a Captain Highliner-looking guy in an aluminum skiff veered over in response to our waving paddles, and it became clear we would be rescued- by means of a fortuitous circumstance involving a very small fish.

Determination can sometimes be one's undoing, like a mouse going after cheese. In our case it was more like blind stupidity that led us to strike out a couple days later on a sophomore attempt. The rain had yet to abate and we still didn't know *exactly* what we were attempting- something about skiing in an archipelago of the North Pacific. It must have been a fit of boredom a while back that prompted me to select Haida Gwaii for a ski trip. Regardless, I always find it a simple pleasure to be in a place that instills such a primordial sensation. As for the other guys- Nelson had heeded the call for adventure without hesitation, although his outlook on life had recently been updated. To Pete, spring break meant either this or Mexico- probably an impulse decision which, given what was in store for us, he might have been regretting shortly. Our suffering, unlike that of a hungry mouse, would persist for the next

eight days. It must be noted however, that amid this gloomy imagery one should not forget about the blindly determined rodent that, on a rare occasion gets lucky and snatches a tender morsel.

And so we carried on through the tempest, this time in a speeding zodiac captained by Dynamite Doug. This guy made us feel like powderpuffs, the way he faced into the rain for two hours without blinking while recounting tales of logging accident survival. I was wearing my ski goggles, not exclusively for the rain but also to shed a rosy light on things. Doug knew the area as well as any modern inhabitant, making a living by chartering unwitting tourists like ourselves to the depths of Canada's rainiest locale. His suggestion was for us to commandeer a couple of old canoes he had stashed up Bigsby Inlet, and to use a lake system to penetrate the interior of the island. Doug wasn't entirely optimistic about the area's skiing possibilities, which was hardly surprising because neither were we, and we had planned the trip. There wasn't a speck of snow anywhere along the misty flanks of the San Christoval Range- the same mountains incidentally that were sighted by Juan Perez in 1774, just before he was intercepted by Haida boatmen. If the Spanish explorer had been able to claim title to the rugged shores we would all be living the vida loca. Although we weren't privy to Perez' mountain vistas, we held the same exploratory ambitions and did encounter our own set of difficulties in getting on shore. This was truly a vertical world of mossy cliffs and other green slippery things. Indeed, it took a few Navy Seal maneuvers to get our 40-kilo packs safely into the forest. Doug promised to meet us back there in a week then sped off to a home-cooked meal, leaving us the only people within the entirety of Gwaii Haanas National Park.

We had been warned about the crotch-busting blowdown and rain-soaked salal, famous to these parts, but expected to make it further than 300m in the first day. The rain continued to hammer down, so we searched out a camp spot on high ground- a logical place to build an ark if necessary- and holed up for the night. An inventory of dry equipment produced a very small pile that did not include my sleeping bag or the video camera. You know what they say about the Charlottes: if you don't like the weather, who the hell can blame you?

The next four days involved an advancement of just over a kilometre per day into the island's interior. The first lake had risen by two metres overnight, allowing us the novelty of canoeing through the trees as we shuttled our gear across. 'Overhanging' would be the only appropriate term to describe the lake's circumference. Somehow we managed to ascend a seemingly impenetrable waterfall complex at the other end, evidence that nothing is truly impossible (except maybe getting back down). Even more subtly than our progress, the rain began to cool into wet snow, greasing up the logs that we used to cross a raging gorge. We then had to down-climb a section of gnarled pines to access the second lake, where we finally found the other canoe tied to a tree ten meters above the current water level. While crossing the second lake the blizzard intensified, sending heavy waves of snow into our pleasurecraft. The only flat spot at the other end was of course directly adjacent to the lake, so what followed was a fitful, soggy night, with fears that the water levels would rise and send us back to the sea. I was finally lulled to sleep by the sound of snow sliding off the tarp and a subdued hissing coming from a hole in my thermarest.

Dawn came none-too-soon, bringing with it the surprise welcome of a winter bonanza. This in turn, had the motivational effect of re-awakening our skiing senses, charging us up for the death march

to treeline. With the blizzard over, we could finally see which direction we had to go, which meant re-crossing a portion of the lake. To our dismay, this was coincidentally (?) the portion that had frozen overnight. Afraid that he might be missing the only powder day of the trip, Pete defiantly set sail, hacking his way toward skiing freedom. Heedless of ice or snow, he charted a route to the far shore and with that we put the marine component of the trip behind us. Unfortunately, the non-marine component would prove to offer slightly more elevation gain (the words “vertical relief” came to mind, but only as a sadistic joke), so it still took another day of obstinate slogging to attain the treacherous subalpine zone. En route, we passed through groves of 1000-year old Sitka Spruce, boot-packed up snow-covered rock slab, and thrashed through what was formerly known as impenetrable undergrowth. Our entire objective had been re-focused to simply getting the damn skis off our backs and put to proper use. In that regard, we eventually established a base camp at 400m and prepared for a summit bid. Any hope of climatic constipation was put to rest- it was *go time*, regardless of conditions. In fact, as an aside, it was *go time* for everything- *go time* for dinner, *go time* for breakfast, *go time* for Yahtzee, you name it. All trips like this eventually develop an overused aphorism that serves to maintain group insanity when things are just getting a bit too real.

For our very real summit bid, we pretty much flew up the steep upper slopes with daypacks- despite the weather which had incidentally gone back to near zero visibility. Forward progress having been hard-wired into our systems, we had to press on even if the sideways graupel was acting contradictory to the *go time* philosophy. This was our only shot at glory. In consolation to our plummeting morale, the snow became deep enough to strap on the skins and we slowly hand-railed along the precarious ridgeline, ever gliding onward. At one point, while floundering in the midst of an onslaught of hail, I began to feel a strange buzzing sensation in my arms, and realized it was an electrical charge. I personally find there is nothing like an impending lightning strike to put a damper on your day out in the mountains. On the other hand, these conditions signified a convective behaviour in the weather, which was a possible indication that it might pass. Of course after nine days of constant rain and snow, a clearing trend was unfathomable, but men must have their dreams. Anyway, we had nothing better to do than dig in and wait. While we sat for two hours in that hunched-over miser position and passed around the remnants of the trail mix, the only words spoken were to the tune of “at least we tried.” All sense of why or what we were doing had literally become lost in the shuffle. What was clear was that we were high on a ridge surrounded by ocean, that Japan was closer than Vancouver, and we were beaten. So far on this trip, every time we hit a low point the situation miraculously got worse. At this point, we weren’t looking for another miracle, just plain mercy.

I still have a hard time believing what happened next. Moments before we were ready to head down, my ski pole started acting funny. It was casting what looked like a shadow on the snow beside my leg. Sure enough, in the next instant a strange yellow ball began to shine through the clouds. In a matter of minutes there was a definition in the surrounding landscape and even a pocket of blue sky overhead. Suddenly, our bleak and limited outlook had exploded into a world of far-reaching horizons. Our ridgeline perch became apparent as part of an island-long, knife-edge that rose above the azure Pacific, shimmering a kilometre below on either side. The scenery notwithstanding, our position on the ridge alone was enough cause for shaky knees. Just then, Nelson pointed out a raven that was flying

overhead on iridescent wings (his words were more like, “hey what’s that bird?”). It joined us in our lofty perspective for several minutes before flapping away. Knowing, of course, that we must view the presence of this mythical trickster as a sign (the Raven discovered the first people on these islands and kept their world from becoming boring), we quickly searched for an appropriate descent route. In simple terms, it was *go time* for skiing. Since, appropriately, there was a massive, snow-filled bowl directly in front of us, we readied ourselves for the pay-off.

Pete, with a sentimental look in his eyes, promptly clicked into his bindings and dropped into glory. Nelson followed with blissful hooting. These guys had surely earned their reward, I thought, as I remained on the summit just long enough to watch the approach of the next week’s worth of storms. Then finally, I too carved down the slope with a fulfilled sense of accomplishment, knowing that it’s one thing to be the first person to ski in a certain place, but it is entirely another to be the last.

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