

A Mushroom Story

Courtesy of Scott Mackenzie" <coastalmountainexplorer@yahoo.com>

It's 5:30 a.m.

The last days of August have arrived and summer is beginning to loosen its grip on the northwest of British Columbia.

The mist from the heavy downpour of the night before still lingers near the valley floor. The air is fresh, with a hint of campfire, and is energizing my body with every morning breath. The sounds of barely audible generators hum in the distance.

"Ah.... those are the lucky people," I think to myself. Triple "A" motorhomes, thirty foot fifth wheels, with all of the comforts of home. Hundreds of free spirits, all converging in one place. All searching for what?

Why have they all come here?

Small trailers, campers, tenters, homemade shacks, vans and people living out of their cars. My guess is that there are four hundred people here so far, just in this one camp, with more arriving every day. When you see it for the first time, you will understand why they call it "The Zoo." A town that lives for three months a year, and then just before the snow comes, it just disappears..... "Camp 69" as it is also known, (because it is located on kilometer 69 on the Kitiwanga highway) has three main streets, two general stores, a tire shop, mechanics for hire, hot showers for three bucks apiece, and anything else you feel that you might need. And I do mean, "Anything."

Why are they all here?

Is this a religious retreat?

Nope, it's just "Mushroom Madness."

Pine mushrooms that is, "White Gold," "Adventure Tea."

While waiting for the truck to warm up I finished my breakfast, a healthy, stick to your ribs type breakfast.

"It's going to be light soon," I thought to myself while sipping on my coffee.

"I hope that my partner for the day is almost ready, we have quite a drive ahead of us."

Jim, whom I had met the day before, is a new guy. I offered to introduce him to the mushroom patch over dinner table talk, the night before. He saw an opportunity to learn a few things, so he obliged.

I was always told that I should "buddy up," for safety when in the bush, so I always do. Just in case the unforeseen does happen. You're not allowed to carry a pistol in Canada, you know. Not even for protection. A rifle is too heavy and awkward, and bear spray might not do the job on a steamrolling grizzly bear. That's why I bring Bear Bait, but Jim, has not realized this yet. As long as I can run faster than Jim, that's all that matters.

"Pile in," I said rolling up.

"Throw your gear in the back, we have one stop and then we will get going."

Stopping at the general store is a morning ritual. Gum, chocolate and granola bars, fruit, cigarettes, "extra" lighters and some road coffees. Just a few "extras" next to packing an all-day lunch. Sometimes all day can turn into the next

day by accident. Believe me, "extra" is a good thing. "Be Prepared," Baden Powell would say. Pulling on to the paved highway we headed off with our fresh morning brews in hand.

"The sky is looking favorable, it's going to be a good day," Jim said. I had to agree immediately.

"Hopefully a good payday to," I giggled to myself. (Giggling is part of the sickness)

The smoothness of the paved highway doesn't last long in this territory. Pulling onto the Nass Forest Service Road, it is quite evident that the flawless paved surface of Kitiwanga Highway only lasts for five miles from the "Zoo" to the turn-off. Looking down the Nass Road, pot holes are lined up like tires on a Navy Seal training course.

"This road has claimed many vehicles and sent them to the scrap heap," I uttered.

Off-road driving has its appeal though. It's kind of a plaid shirt, gun rack in the back window thing. Eh!.... That's Canadian at its finest.

"You are now entering Nisg'aa territory," the sign reads at the road's start.

The very word "Nisg'aa" is a symbol of power and strengths. The Nisg'aa people have borne witness to all of the change that has come upon them and their traditional territories over the last ten thousand years. Respect them, and they will respect you. I find the Nisg'aa to be more approachable than other people from urban centres. Don't forget, you might be from Canada, but you're still a foreigner until you prove yourself a friend.

I am considered a friend by many, and many I consider a friend.

Making our way west along the Cranberry River we are headed for the "Mighty" Nass River. The road has been used heavily all week by logging activity, so it is due for a good grading at the week's end to smooth things out. "Ah..... so many patches, so little time," I blurted out to Jim, trying to break the silence in the truck cab. As we kept driving, I pointed left and right indicating patch locations.

"There's one, Oh, there's another one."

Jim looked at me with a, "Ya, sure buddy."

By this time we had past literally dozens of other camping communities.

"Anywhere you find fresh water you will find pickers camping," I said.

"Water is one of the three "W's" of camping. Wind, Wood, Water. Keep those things close by and it will make your shrooming experience a lot easier. After waiting on the back side of a one lane bridge for a logging truck to pass, I said to Jim, "I wouldn't want to bump into one of those on the blind corner that's ahead. We are just coming up to it."

This corner is just a little bit wider than one lane width, and the downhill side falls away thirty feet into slash and stumps. As we both made the corner I pointed out the mangled Hundai Pony on Jim's side of the truck. It looks as though it drove straight off of the road, flying through the air, travelling a great distance.

"What a wreck," Jim exclaimed. "Wow," he added.

I couldn't help but joke, "And They Walked Away!"

Driving is probably the most dangerous part of mushroom picking, next to bears and getting lost. This corner is also where the Nass Forest Service Road ends and the Nisg'aa Highway begins. Barreling down the Nisg'aa Highway, just before Dragon Lake, we turned north up over HODOO Mountain.

"There used to be some good picking on this mountain," I said to Jim mournfully.

Logging has wiped out eighty percent of the forest on this hill and eighty percent of the possible mushroom harvest

along with it.

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Deforestation is a visible cancer, evident anywhere you choose to point your eyes," Jim.

"All you have to do is look."

"It's right there in front of your face, if you really want to see it."

"If loggers and fisherman put back into it as much as they took during the 60's 70's and 80's, we wouldn't have any problems. How can you put anything back, when you're too busy taking to provide for the mouths in your family?"

"It's a vicious cycle. At the end we will look to one another and say,"

"Look where all this talking got us? Nowhere."

I finished by making excuses for myself - environmental issues tend to distract me.

Coming down the back side of the Hodoo, Jim and I descend into the Nass River Valley. As we slowed down for the last few pot holes, and creeped onto the bridge, I looked over at Jim and could tell that he was really liking what he was seeing.

The sun hadn't become visible yet, but the morning sky was starting to get bright. When the truck reached the high arc of the bridge, I stopped and asked Jim to step out for a moment. I turned the truck off. I only wanted us to hear the sounds of the Nass that occur naturally. It is a very powerful feeling, standing ninety feet over this river. Jim wasn't listening to me anymore. I was being upstaged by nature. He had been mesmerized by the brown raging froth.

"Don't stare too long," I preached.

"She will try and pull you in."

"The Nisg'aa also say that she never gives up her dead."

"I believe them," Jim murmured.

Pointing over Jim's shoulder, I let him see what he was in for, during the rest of his day.

"The side of that mountain is going to occupy the next eight hours of your life."

"I hope that you're up to it," I proclaimed, trying to stimulate Jim's aggressiveness.

"You must maintain a high level of physical and mental stamina in this game, for long periods of time," I said again, giving Jim's backbone a good verbal shaking.

He looked at me and said, "I'm ready." I believed him.

Jim is not the first person that I have brought to this patch. In the past I have brought other rookie pickers here to get a taste of what it really takes. I like to bring people here because this patch offers the most adventure. It's a well-rounded day's walk, with many obstacles.

Jim and I drove to the end of the bridge and where the bridge touches land again, we made a right turn.

"This is Nisg'aa land," I started to tell Jim.

"Don't ever come here without me or you may find some trouble," I said.

Not only is this reserve land and a traditional fishing site, but a family of Nisg'aa have been camping here for ten

years. This is their land and I come by permission only. We are all walking the same patch. It's only a few hundred yards from the bridge to the roads end. Jim and I have to drive right past their camp to park the truck. This camp is an amazing site and it never surprises me that they make it bigger every year. On the weekends, when the boys are not all working, they come from their home villages for their "vacation." Sometimes there are twenty people staying in this camp. Above their camp they fly the Canadian and American flags. Between them both they fly the Nisg'aa Nation's.

"This really does feel like the Klondike, doesn't it Jim?" He agreed.

"Well, we finally made it here," I said while backing up to face the river and putting the truck in park.

We both started to check and double check our day's supplies.

"You know Jim, one time in this very same spot I handed my friend Ralph a brand new lighter to carry as an extra.

The time came that day when we were too deep in the woods to get out in time before the sun set on us. That day the rain was coming down like you would expect in a rain forest. We located a place to sit and try and build a fire, waiting for the sun to come back up. After using all of my extra matches and burning out my lighter, I asked Ralph for his "extra" lighter. Which he had put down on the dash of the car, seconds after I had handed it to him, where it still laid. I didn't even have a chance to light my last smoke. I can't remember ever being that cold. Sleeping was impossible.

Later on in the night, the full moon broke through the clouds, lighting up the forest just enough to let Ralph and I make our way safely out of the woods.

I promised myself that I would never let that happen again, and never to wear just a t-shirt and a rain poncho into the bush on a cold day.

"Here Jim, pocket this lighter, and I'm going to put on this "extra" sweater.

Finally, with our packs on our backs, Jim and I headed off. We walked up river for a mile and a half. Jumping from rock bluff to sand bar and followed a "goat path like," trail up to our first obstacle.

The Kinskuck River is a feeder river that spills into the Nass. Up river, just one mile is a double waterfall, cascading almost one hundred feet. Any boater coming down stream unknowingly would find certain death. I chose just below those falls to put up my "zip line." I risked my life to put up that zip line.

Swimming across a raging torrent with a come along and a steel cable tied to my ankle was no easy task, by any stretch of the word "easy." Once I got my "sky-way" up it made access into my best patch a bit dryer of an experience. Not to mention safer.

One climbing harness and a pully and away you go..... zzzzzzzzip.... You're there.

After Jim and I made it safely across the zip line, we trekked on to the first set of benches. These benches are like stairs cut into the mountainside. These stairs produce endless quantities of pine mushrooms, and this is just the test patch. If it is good right here, it will be really good in the heli-patches.

"What's a heli-patch?" Jim inquired.

"A heli-patch is exactly what it sounds like," I replied.

"So many mushrooms in the patch, you need a helicopter to fly them all out."

There once was a time when I almost starved being a mushroom picker. If you are just walking through the woods aimlessly, not knowing what to look for, you won't have much luck. I like to take a few new pickers out every year, so others don't have to go through the same difficulties that I had when I started picking pines.

"This patch is very valuable to me, Jim," I said.

"It took me four years to work my way over those mountains to this spot."

"When I hit the mother lode on this mountain, I was hooked for life. As long as my legs will carry me up this mountain, I will return to pick my bounty of mushrooms, and every year they grow in exactly the same spot."

"Once you get to know a tree that produces mushrooms, you never forget."

I stopped talking to give Jim his first lesson.

"Do you want me to get those ones, Jim?" I said smiling.

"What ones?" Jim replied in confusion.

"Just stop right where you are and look around three hundred and sixty degrees," I said.

"Do you see them yet?"

"No, I don't see a thing!" Jim exclaimed.

"That's okay Jim, you don't have your mushroom eyes yet."

Kneeling down, right at Jim's feet, I broke the moss open with my fingers to expose six beautiful number one grade pine mushrooms.

"Wow, I can't believe that!"

"That's incredible!" He said, staggered.

"You can't even see them!"

"They are not above the ground!" He kept going on.

"I knew they would be here," I said.

"This tree never lets me down."

Jim and I both removed our packs and began searching the bench for more pines. In total, we found about ten pounds which was worth almost four hundred and fifty dollars at that day's price.

"Not bad for only two hours work, eh?" Jim just looked at me and smiled.

"Ya, you've got it," I said.

"Got what?" Jim replied.

"The fever, Jim..... Pine Fever,"

"Mushroom Madness."

We trekked on.