

Chapter 1

Mount Mahony

December winds blow strong and gusty from the southeast, a favorite direction for the creation of shipwrecks on the chuck, and a time to hunker down and avoid temptations involving oceans or lakes. This will be a rare night, a sleep-over in town. I am tempted to try the lower portion of the lake to see if it is safe, but that would provide little indication of conditions farther north. Pilots call these temptations sucker holes. You see a break in the clouds and go for it, only to find the path blocked by severe weather, and then the path behind you slams shut.

The condo's balcony door is cracked open – the living room is warm. The clanging of sailboat mast tackle broadcasts the wind velocity in the nearby harbor. Metallic quavering of the masts spells strong winds tonight, and there is no relief in sight. A wound up low-pressure system over the Queen Charlottes is deepening rather than moving. It draws air northward through the Strait of Georgia, directly over Powell River. Texada Island acts as a temporary buffer for the blast, only to refocus the winds through the Malaspina Strait, right outside my window. It is too dark to see the sailboats in the harbor, but I hear their masts' tinny clatter.

Sheets of rain pound against the balcony door, with a few drops forcing their way in through the narrow screen opening. The cold air swirls near the door, blowing extra energy into the roaring gas fireplace. This rain and wind is supposed to last for days, but forecasts this time of year are suspect. No one puts any faith in the weatherman's prognosis regarding two more days of rain, followed by sunny breaks, followed by more rain and wind. We take whatever comes our way, and life is geared to go on for months like this without major inter-

ruption. The Sunshine Coast (Rain Coast) is weather resistant rather than weather repellent. Everyone accepts the weather and just digs in.

Winter, with its short rainy days, is so different than the summer's nearly continuous sunshine and twilight (punctuated by downpours). The term "snowbird" is appropriate here, although only occasional snow marks this moderate coastal marine climate. It is rain rather than snow that dominates the winter, but the nearly constant clouds and darkness are what drive the locals to the south. These "rainbirds" travel widely during all months of the year, but the winter is when they go south to find the sun. Part of this extensive travel is induced by the island-like nature of Powell River. On paved roads, you cannot drive more than 25 miles in any direction before you hit the end of the road. And there is really only one road. Island fever, coupled with the gray overcast of the rainy season, generates locals who are automatically geared up to leave in the winter.

Children growing up here gravitate into two categories: those who are planning their permanent escape as soon as they are able and those who want to stay forever. They either hate it or they love it. There are few who fall in between.

In the winter, the rainbirds' focus of travel is Arizona and California. One of my favorite winter flight destinations from my home near Los Angeles is Phoenix. The flight takes me over stark desert terrain, and there is a particular winter spot that attracts hundreds of travel trailers in the middle of nowhere, grouped in wide circles like wagon trains. I gaze down on this bleak environment from my Piper Arrow, imagining that these are locals from Powell River, living their winter dream – day after day of Arizona sunshine.

I am stunned to learn that a popular garden-spot of retirement for Powell River residents is Hemet, California. This desert community, registering consistent summer temperatures of over 35 degrees C for weeks on end, is not exactly my idea of paradise.

I used to plan a winter trip each year to a cold destination. Now, Powell River is my winter choice. Living in southern California, it is always fun to have a bit of snow for the holidays. One year it was Denver, another year Salt Lake City, then Edmonton.

The visit to Edmonton was particularly memorable. There are few places more consistently cold and desolate than Edmonton in the winter. The frigid winds whip across the Alberta prairie, chilling Edmonton to daytime highs of - 30 C. I've never been so cold in my life, including a two-week winter military deployment to Alaska.

On this Edmonton trip, I ran into some local residents who were, ironically, en route to Anchorage to "warm up." I also watched a fellow at the Edmonton Airport run up to an airline counter, hold out his wallet, and yell: "Give me a ticket to Hawaii!" The Edmonton to Honolulu route must be particularly popular.

When I arrived in Edmonton in the dark (there is little distinction between day and night in December), the line for customs inspections was short. In fact, my wife, Margy, and I were the customs inspector's only arriving non-Canadian passengers. When he asked the purpose of our travel, I replied: "Vacation." The customs inspector gave us a suspicious look, laughed, and stamped us through.

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As I listen to the clanging sailboat hardware, I peruse the Canadian Tire ads, reviewing again the discount special on snowshoes and poles. It seems like a fine bargain, but my Powell River wilderness mentor, John, has said that I really don't want to go snowshoeing. Since he seldom misinterprets my real desires (although they often conflict with what I think I want), it is reason to take pause at the advertisement. Maybe this is just like my bout with trolling.

I am convinced that trolling for salmon is something that will thrill me, but John says I will be totally bored by it. I explain that trolling is perfect for me – kicked back and eating lunch, while waiting for the big strike. I often fish on Powell Lake for hours, casting and reeling in, without catching a thing. Yet I am never bored with casting – fish or no fish.

The ocean's salmon catch has plummeted dramatically in recent decades. The days of fish-after-fish are gone, but a recreational fisherman with patience can still catch a big one. I ask John lots of questions about salmon trolling, window-shop for rod holders, downriggers, and flashers, and finally take the plunge.

One summer afternoon, we enter the north end of Waddington Channel (prime salmon hunting grounds), all decked out and ready to go. I throw out my lure and flasher and let out lots of line. John guides the boat, all so slow and peaceful. The Yamaha four-stroke is the quietest, sweetest engine at any speed. At severe-slow it makes the summer breeze almost audible.

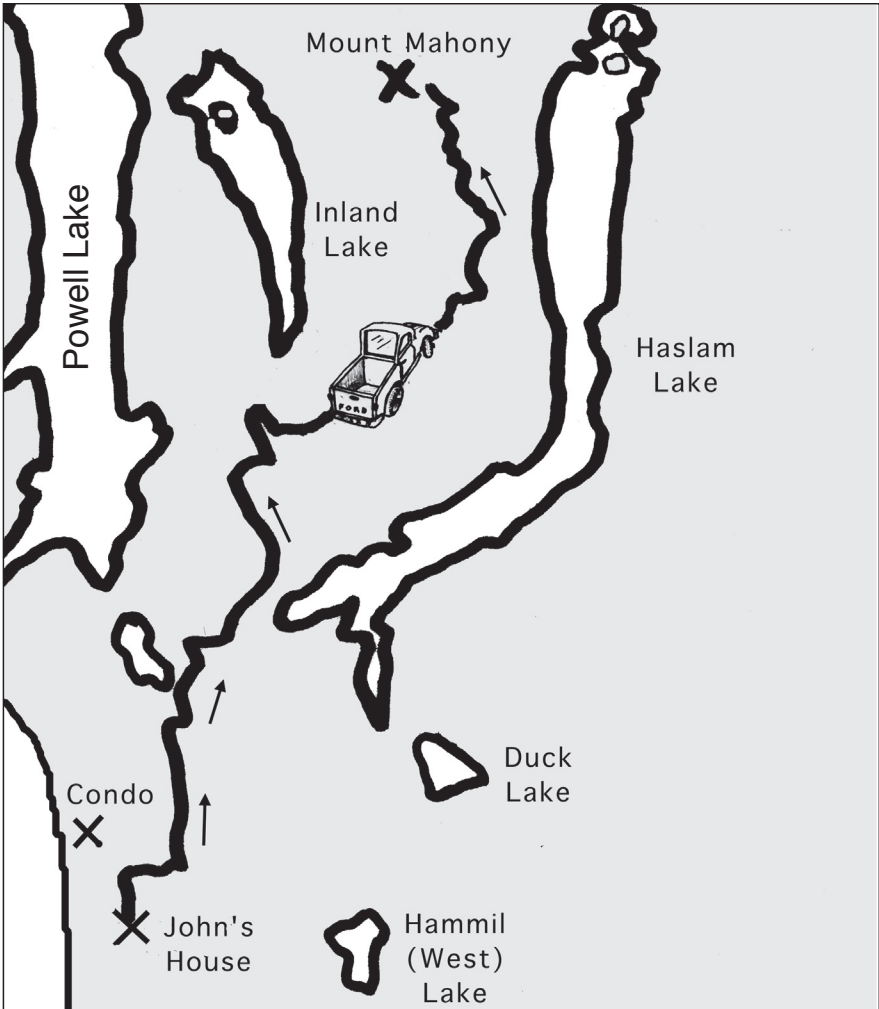
On this perfect day, I pick up my sandwich and settle into my deck chair, basking in the sun. At this slow speed, I can feel the penetration of the sun's rays, but it is not too hot to mar the moment. Conditions are superb, and I am finally trolling. John settles into the other deck chair, while periodically reaching forward to tap the steering wheel. We sit contentedly munching on our sandwiches, while the rod holders do all of the work. Nothing happens. We continue southbound, ever so slowly, and there is constant nothingness. John is right – this is boring. By the time we reach the mouth of Roscoe Bay, I've had it. John is right, again.

But snowshoeing, if nothing else, is an experience I want to at least try. Yes, it will be a lot of work, trudging through the snow. Yes, it will be difficult to find the right conditions – this is not exactly the Canadian Rockies. These rains are bringing snow to the high country, and there will be places nearby with tons of snow. How to get to those spots is a separate problem.

Modern snowshoes are cool looking. I purchase the deluxe kit that comes with adjustable poles and a CD-ROM explaining how to size the shoes to your boots and how to walk in powder. Since I have no computer on this visit to Powell River, the CD is never viewed. I try on the snowshoes and walk around awkwardly in the living room of the condo, chewing up the carpet with a terrible crunching noise from the crampons.

Margy purchases a similar set, and John has an older pair of snowshoes with more classic lines. John's enthusiasm for the outing is limited, but he humors me. Do I realize how hot I'm going to get under several layers of clothing, raising each leg high out of the snow on a mountain slope? There's nothing like being drenched in sweat in the freezing cold.

John likes to explore in the cold, using his quad to blaze new trails or simply pushing the limits of his pickup truck during a climb up Mount Mahony. In fact, he has been going up Mount Mahony with his nephew every evening for the past week. They leave late in the afternoon in John's truck, and come back down after dark (another challenge). What they do for hours on Mount Mahony in winter is beyond me, but they keep repeating it every day that there is snow. Once John finds a place he likes, he absorbs it.

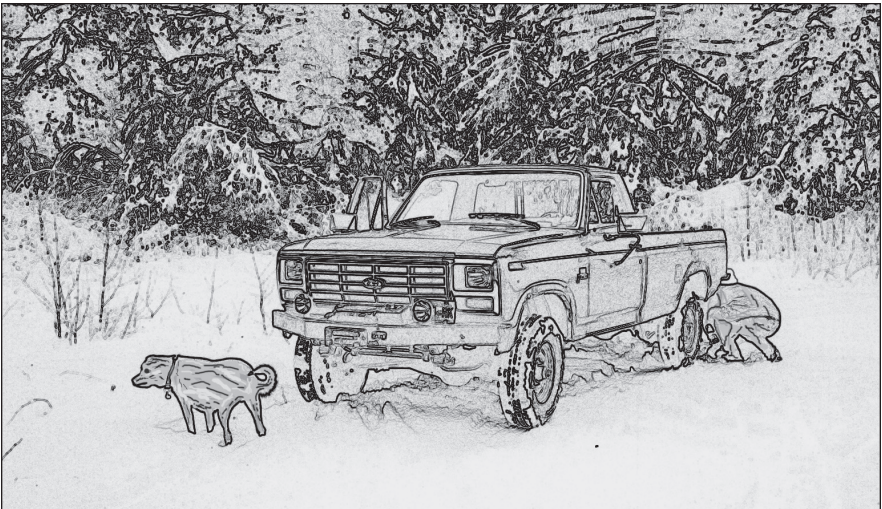


Roads to snowshoe country are impossible in my gutless car, and even John's truck is challenged by the climb. When the sky clears in Powell River, you can see the snowpack all around, but you can't get to it. Mount Mahony is the exception. The dirt road, only a few miles outside town, climbs steeply. We begin the climb on Christmas Day. Maybe this will be a new holiday tradition.

John's truck cab is crowded. Margy straddles the stick shift lever, John's dog, Bro, claims the adjacent part of the seat, and I'm plastered against the door. With our multiple-layers of clothing, it is a tight fit. As we begin the upward trek, the climb is in the rain, but it changes to wet snow within a few miles. The tires start to slip and slide, and John loves playing with the truck in these conditions. The ditches along the side of the road are deep and now disguised by snow.

As we climb higher, thick branches and an occasional small tree block the road, fallen under the weight of the heavy snow canopy. John stops to chainsaw our way through. He has been through this road the night before, but already it is nearly impassible.

We find a spot where the road temporarily widens, and we stop to install the tire chains. This is a cold and sweaty process, as well as a dirty mess. The rusty chains stain my new gloves, so now my gloves are wet, cold, and dirty. But we're going snowshoeing!



The rest of the climb is through rapidly deepening snow. It is coming down hard now, giant white flakes – a beautiful sight. The increasingly slippery road tests John’s driving skills. Tire chains, four-wheel drive, and an expert trailblazer can only accomplish so much. We stop several times to clear more branches with the chainsaw, but stopping on these slippery slopes is a tricky process. Getting started again is even trickier.

Finally, we can go no more. The truck’s tires spin and spin, and the vehicle slips backward at an awkward angle. John maneuvers to the side of the narrow road, onto the edge of a snow-covered ditch that we could never get out of in these conditions. He expects that others might try to climb as high as we have today, and he wants the roadway clear for them to pass. Who else would attempt this mountain under these conditions? Answer: Maybe one of John’s friends.

The snow on the road is eight inches deep, reduced well below the level of the snow in the adjacent woods by trucks like John’s over the past few days. This is the minimum snow depth for snowshoes. The truth is that regular hiking boots would work better in these conditions. In the adjacent woods, the snow is several feet deep, but pushing through the bushes is an almost impossible task, so we stay on the road and begin to climb.

Within only a few hundred feet, I am panting and sweating. It is a major effort to lift a leg high, clear the snow pack, push the snowshoe forward, and set it back down. John propels himself forward smoothly on his older-style snowshoes with bear-trap bindings and no poles. I struggle for forward momentum, and without my poles, I would be immobile. Margy is falling behind, puffing and panting, but refusing to give up. Bro romps playfully out in front of us all, hopping off the road periodically to pursue some imagined critter. He plays and barks, and we struggle and sweat.

There is a trail to our right, barely visible from the road. It is entirely covered by snow and blends into the terrain, but John knows it well. It takes us across a deep trench that Margy and I struggle to climb. We can only maneuver upward on the other side of the trench by turning sideways and digging our crampons into the slope. The snow is several feet deep, and it is here that snowshoes are the only

way to get through. The going is tough, but I'm pleased that we have a taste of real snowshoeing for the moment.

John points to a tree ahead, just off to our left. "See the boots?" he asks. What boots? I hardly see the tree in the near white-out of the falling snow. But John's eagle-eyes see something, so I stare at the tree as we continue to lift our snowshoes and plod ahead.

"Boots in the snow?" I ask.

"No, in the tree. About 30 feet up."

Sure enough, there on the lowest branch of a huge fir, two black boots dangle, hung from their laces. One of the boot's soles is barely connected, dangling below at a twisted angle.

"What in the world are they doing way up there?" It must be some kind of a joke. Who would climb that high in a tree and hang a pair of old boots?

"Lumberjack," answers John. "He just wore them 'til they gave out. Probably considered it a fitting memorial to his logging boots."

The trail continues for only a few hundred feet and ends at a clearing with a single large fallen log. We brush snow off the log and sit to eat our lunch. I'm wearing a pair of wool mittens over my gloves, and my fingers are still cold. I remove both mittens and gloves to get at my sandwich.

John is right, and he is wrong. This has been a lot of hard, sweaty work, and snowshoeing is not a process of gliding over sun-drenched snowy fields. But this place is like no other. Only those with an intense desire can get here today. Huge flakes of snow fall all around us, with the tops of the clouds so close that sunlight beams through in patches. And I've never tasted a more delicious roast beef sandwich.
