

Ancient giants of an Island canyon face the faller's saw

Stephen Hume, Vancouver Sun

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CAMERON RIVER - The first real winter weather had bedevilled the evening commute with an evil sleet. Overnight, temperatures dropped below freezing.

When I rose before dawn, I had doubts about whether to even try for my meeting with Phil Carson, Scott Tanner and Gary Murdock in the cold shadow of Mount Arrowsmith, the craggy Vancouver Island peak between Nanaimo and Port Alberni.

But some days you just get lucky. The cold front moved through, the thermometer nudged up a couple of degrees, and instead of black ice I found clear, wet roads, a cloudless sky and the molten amber of a stunning sunrise.

Murdock, a retired forestry technician, Tanner, a property manager who spent six years in municipal politics at Qualicum, and Carson, a filmmaker, had invited me to see something unique, a remnant of the primeval forest that once covered the Island.

We left our truck at a pullout on Highway 4 near Summit Lake and started hiking. It was mid-morning and one of those splendid days you never forget. Ghostly pockets of mist hung in the mountain hollows. The snowfields on Arrowsmith glittered in the sunshine. The air was clean and crisp.

The night's fast-moving storm had left about a foot of fluffy white powder on the ground and the trees were laden. Everywhere the forest rippled with the thump of snow clumps tumbling from the canopy, frequently down our necks.

We turned down a disused logging road, then on to an even less-used spur, following it uphill for a couple of kilometres, then down again until it petered out in the underbrush. Now we continued by easing our way over deadfalls and through tangles of salal.

The trail stopped abruptly. Before us was a precipice. In the slippery conditions, I stayed well back from the edge but I got close enough to look into the abyss. Far below, maybe the height of a 50-storey building down, I glimpsed the icy river roaring among a grove of immense trees.

"That's it," Tanner said. "Cameron River Canyon. Old growth doesn't get any older than that. This is about as pristine as pristine can be."

Then he turned to follow Murdock through a notch in the rock and down a narrow, barely defined path. Footing was treacherous but I managed to traverse the slopes hanging onto saplings and exposed roots.

After half an hour the path brought us back to the cliff face. We worked our way aslant down the steeply inclined piles of mossy rubble, past cave openings and undercuts until we came to one of the wonders we were looking for.

A massive western yew, its ancient, slow-growing trunk bigger around than my arm span, twisted away from the cliff. I pushed on to where the river raced past.

Here some of the biggest red cedars and Douglas fir I've seen soared up toward the thin ribbon of sky. They were huge, magnificent, probably 800, perhaps 1,000 years old.

Imagine that, trees already growing when Ethelred the Unready was king of England. I paused and listened to the wind shaking snow from the branches, the white noise of the river strangely muffled by the forest.

Then my three guides showed me the blue paint, the fluorescent pink marking tape. Incredibly, all these trees are marked for cutting, some within a stride of the river's edge.

"This remnant of the old forest survived because they couldn't get the timber out if they cut it," Murdock told me. "Not any more. These are all planned for helicopter logging."

Each one of these trees, its life measured in close to a millennium, perhaps more, might make an hour's work for some logger's chainsaw.

Nope. It ain't right.

This shoot the last elephant, harpoon the last whale, cut the last big tree insanity has got to stop.

This bit of ancient forest doesn't need to be turned into more toilet paper and two-by-fours. Somebody get on the phone to our premier. Tell him we want it saved.

Make the Cameron River Canyon part of Cathedral Grove in MacMillan Provincial Park, which is right next door.

Show us there's some genuine thought behind all that green talk.

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