

Diary Of A Mad Backpacker

I must be insane!

Just five days after completing the 56-kilometre Great Lake Walk, I'm in Port Renfrew with a group of Duncan Christian School students and chaperones preparing to tackle the 75-kilometre West Coast Trail.

If all goes well, that'll be 131 km of running, walking, hiking (and crawling?) in a span of just 12 days from Sept. 15 to 26.

I'm with the only group starting from the south that includes leader Tom Veenstra and other chaperones Darren Colyn, Meredith McAdam, Griffin Halme, Alicia Raycraft, Janet Wikkerink and Linda Lee.

Cole Humphries, Micah Wiebe, Ryan Pearce, Jordan Lee, Kurtis Briggs, Lindsay Bakker, Krista Wikkerink and Danielle Koekkoek are the students in the group.

As it turns out, I'm the oldest person in our group at 48. I'm still trying to figure out how I became a senior citizen so fast.

Whitney Green and her mom Stacey are also along for the ride to see us off at the start.

Whitney was supposed to do the trip, but can't go due to a knee problem.

The North 1 group that started the previous day from Pachena Bay includes leader and principal Kevin Visscher and chaperones Marius Popma, Victor Gamble, Brenda Vanderschaaf, Affie Duifhuis, Geri Seinen, Jan Debree and Renee Debree.

The student contingent for North 1 includes: Matt Van Boven, Kevin Gamble, Steve Burke, Brandon Deveault, Trevor Thompson, Sarah Klassen and Leanne Vanderschaaf.

The North 2 group starting two days later from Pachena Bay is led by DCS teacher Norm Brandsma, with Teunis Verhoog, Kathryn Coopsie, AnnaMarie Rutishauser, Wendy Percy, Joel Duifhuis and Nic Abram as chaperones.

Hayden Coopsie, Cam Luney, Jarvist Martin, Brett Percy, Josiah George, Katie McIntyre and Aurore Clemens are the students in North 2.

After gathering up our gear at DCS, the trip to Port Renfrew and our first night's stay at the Osprey Cabins goes by rather quickly for the south group.

We've decided to arrive a day earlier than planned to get a head start on the most grueling portion of the trail.

After eating lunch on the road, we're in Port Renfrew in plenty of time for our 3:30 p.m. orientation session. Fortunately, we arrange an earlier time for the session and have the rest of the afternoon and evening to unwind.

The orientation is presented in quite a humorous fashion by the Parks Canada representative, although most of us are still feeling the butterflies in our stomachs about what lies ahead.

We head back to the cabins to unload our gear for the night and make sleeping arrangements. Four chaperones are in one smaller cabin and the rest of us — that's nine students and five adults in one cabin sharing one bathroom, if you can believe it — all pile into another slightly more spacious cabin.

"It smells like way too many people," quips student Jordan Lee.

Needless to say, the sleeping quarters are tight. I'm on the floor and so are a few others at different places, with the rest occupying couches and the two cramped bedrooms.

Hey, if we're going to become a close-knit group, this is the way to do it.

Lasagna is heated up in the kitchen to feed the masses, with salad on the side. And pie for dessert.

Man, this trip is going to be a piece of cake at this rate.

Veenstra has us all turning in early around 9:30 p.m. Naturally, no one sleeps too much due to the excitement and nervous anticipation.

FIRST DAY (Friday, Sept. 21)

Wake-up call is at 6 a.m., breakfast at 6:30 and we start loading up the vans at 7:15. The Butch Jack ferry service across the Gordon River doesn't normally start until after 9 a.m., but we've made it worth Jack's while to take us an hour earlier.

The ferry trip to the Gordon River Trailhead takes all of a few minutes.

Once on the other side, we're ready to start the hike.

"We can do this," says Danielle Koekkoek to psyche up the team.

Nurse Griffin Halme helps Alicia Raycraft to tighten the buckle on her pack and it promptly snaps off. A roll of duct tape comes in handy for the repairs, but Raycraft can't unstrap her backpack for the entire day during breaks without removing the tape.

The start of the hike is grueling, slow and very muddy. Pastor Colyn slips on a ladder in the early going and takes a nasty tumble down a side hill.

Halme wraps his thumb and Colyn remarkably continues none the worse for wear, with the aid of some painkillers.

"Now I know why I was hanging out with the nurses," jokes a good-natured Colyn.

The highest point of the trail is reached three and a half kilometres from the start, but it's been an uphill struggle all the way. Everyone is packing food for the entire trip and the packs are heaviest for the most difficult section.

Lunch is around 12:30 p.m. near the five-kilometre mark. Lunches generally consist of bagels or wraps and cream cheese, with packaged oatmeal, dried fruit, hot chocolate and cider for breakfast, and pepperoni, soup and Sidekicks pasta for dinner.

We've passed quite a few hikers going the other way by that point, including one particularly industrious man from Calgary who in effect hired a sherpa to pack his equipment. He romps down the trail away from us with arms and legs flailing since he's not carrying any weight.

Jordan Lee makes an effort to have photographs taken with all the people we pass on the trail. There are others from Dallas-Fort Worth and Ontario.

It starts to rain in the afternoon and things get more miserable as the day wears on.

We stop to gather water from a stream and purify it before moving on. Some of it is done with a pump and the rest with drops.

Darkness is setting in fast due to the overcast conditions and the rain becomes steadier.

The ponchos go on and hood covers for the packs to try and keep everything as dry as possible, but it's a futile effort.

Linda Lee later slips on a bridge and injures her knee but manages to limp into camp.

The best spots in camp are taken when we arrive at Camper Bay and everyone is exhausted. Everyone scrambles to assemble their tents and Janet Wikkerink is good enough to help me with mine since my outdoor camping experiences go back to the days of heavy canvas tents in my youth.

Firewood is gathered quickly, tarps put up and more water purified as we rush to do our chores with the last available light.

The fatigue has most of the kids downtrodden about the trail experience.

A ray of hope emerges as the skies begin to clear while Veenstra, Briggs, Jordan Lee and I chat around the campfire until 11 p.m.

DAY ONE TRAIL RATING (Gordon River to Camper Bay, approximately 12.5 km):
Extremely tough.

SECOND DAY (Saturday, Sept. 22)

Evacuation arrangements have to be made for injured Colyn and Linda Lee, leading to a later departure than anticipated for our group of 11 a.m. We find out later they only had to wait a few hours before being picked up by helicopter.

Some of the kids want to quit because of aches and pains. But the rest of the group eventually soldiers on and it's another tough day. The weather has improved but a never-ending succession of ladders makes it a grind for everyone.

I'm carrying extra weight with a tent and tarp after the departure of Colyn and I'm definitely feeling it. The pain alternates between my left and right knee so I'm careful not to overdo it.

Looking up at some of the highest ladders is enough to make anyone squeamish, but there's no turning back.

"I'm afraid of heights, but I did it," said Bakker.

"Where's the next one?" quipped yours truly after going down one ladder after another into Cullite Cove.

Lunch isn't until 3 p.m. at the far end of Cullite Cove and we still have a long way to go.

There are not as many ladders later in the day and the sun breaks through the clouds.

We're still rushing to beat the clock and get into camp at a decent time.

Micah Wiebe is hurting but waits for Raycraft and myself at the back of the pack. We all walk in together to the Walbran site and it's nice to see and hear the ocean after being in the woods virtually since the start.

DAY TWO TRAIL RATING (Camper Bay to Walbran Creek, approximately nine km):
Very tough.

THIRD DAY (Sunday, Sept. 23)

It's a great start to the day, cool by the water but clear and sunny.

Everyone is still feeling the effects of two grueling days, but the dismantling of camp goes more smoothly and we're on our way along the beach for the first time.

Koekkoek uses her brilliant voice to break up the monotony by leading some trail songs.

Later, all the hikers at the back of the pack partake in a little game of 'I'm going around the world and I'm going to take' something from A to Z. Each person takes a turn naming an item starting with each letter.

It's nice to walk along the beach, but still tough going on some of the soft, grainy sand and the boots sink in quite deep with each step.

"There's no easy parts on this trail," says Raycraft matter-of-factly.

We make much better time on the beach and eventually cross paths with the North 1 group at Chez Monique's, a virtual beach oasis where you can purchase a hamburger for a mere \$12.

Establishment namesake Monique isn't there, but Mike, a young Australian who did the trail a few years earlier and decided to come back to hang out on the beach, cooks burgers for the masses. He's also catering to a group that's coming in by boat that night.

I don't eat ground beef but big Mike has some pork that's already been cooked for the evening group and whips me up a pork burger. Not bad!

We have a nice visit with the other group, hearing their tales of woe and triumph before moving on.

The Carmanah Lighthouse is only a short hike away in the distance and we take a quick break there to replenish the water bottles and enjoy the sights. A couple of whales are spotted spouting off-shore as well as sea lions all along the route and, of course, the regal eagle.

We arrive at the Cribs Creek site around 4:45 p.m. with a lot more time than usual to set up camp and kick off the boots to enjoy the soft sand. That's after all the chores are done, of course, including the loading of the food into the bear caches so we don't attract any unwanted visitors.

I take advantage of the extra time to interview the students one-on-one and see how they're feeling about the trip. Their comments appeared primarily in the second part of this feature in the newspaper.

Tents are erected in a wooded area due to a threat of rain moving in overnight.

DAY THREE TRAIL RATING (Walbran Creek to Cribs Creek, approximately 11.5 km): Moderate.

FOURTH DAY (Monday, Sept. 24)

Tom (The Terrific) Veenstra is out of bed at 3:45 a.m. because he thinks he hears a raindrop. He wants to make sure everything is under control before the kids and big kids rise from their tents.

He never does return to bed, operating on sheer adrenaline, I'm sure, for the entire day at that rate of sleep.

We're actually a full day ahead of schedule with the option of taking a day off on the trail if we want.

But with an iffy long-term forecast, we decide to press on in case we hit some more inclement weather at the end of the trip.

We're up early again at 6:15 a.m. with that familiar wake-up call from Veenstra: "So and so, breakfast in 15 (minutes)."

We're hiking again by 9 a.m. under cloudy skies. We're high on the trail again, but at least you can view the ocean while plodding through more thick mud.

We stop at the end of a hill climb near Clo-oose where Halme defends his title over Veenstra for having the smelliest armpits.

Briggs, Jordan Lee and Koekkoek have the unfortunate responsibility of being the judges.

A short time later, we're at the Nitinat Narrows where we run into the North 2 group.

Teunis Verhoog is hauling a whopping 80 pounds of backpack weight and is a bit dismayed to discover Veenstra's much lighter load.

Veenstra takes some of the weight off the shoulders of others to keep pace with Verhoog and the heaviest backpack contest is on. Briggs, Lee, Wiebe and Janet Wikkerink are all hauling enormous loads well over their limit.

I figure my backpack is in the 55-pound range.

We greet the students' DCS classmate Jill Elley, who's been driven to the Nitinat site by Karen Boer. Elley doesn't have any legs to actually hike the trail, but is happy about the opportunity to be there.

Fresh crab is offered at the dock for \$20 a crack. I figure I'd better indulge in that and several others take advantage of the feast.

After a nice break talking with the other group, our day is only just beginning. We take the short boat ride to the other side of the Nitinat crossing to resume our hike and the weather begins to worsen.

Drizzling rain in the afternoon forces us to go right past our intended campsite at Tsusiat Falls because there isn't any shelter so we press on to the Klanawa River.

Time is not on our side again, as we have an additional 2.5 kilometres to cover. Raycraft and I are the last to arrive in camp after the short cable car ride over the Klanawa River and it's getting dark fast.

Everything's wet in camp, even though we have a sheltered spot under the trees.

Tents go up in the dark and soup isn't served until 9 p.m. The pasta part of the meal isn't ready until 10 and some members of the group have already curled into their sleeping bags by then.

I really dragged my butt on this section, but then I thought about the recent Great Lake Walk and figured that might have something to do with it. My knees are much better but the weight of the pack is taking a toll on my back during these long days.

DAY FOUR TRAIL RATING (Cribs Creek to Klanawa River, approximately 19 km):
Extremely tough.

FIFTH DAY (Tuesday, Sept. 25)

The day begins with no rain, just drops falling off the trees onto the tents from the previous night. It's mostly cloudy with a few sunny breaks and Veenstra declares it's going to be a good day.

We're trying to beat the tides and start walking along the beach just after 9:30 a.m., with the finish of the WCT only about 23 kilometres away.

We're still ahead of schedule and will finish the trip early rather than spend an extra day on the trail.

The hike is split up between the beach and trail. Chunks of the many shipwrecks that have occurred in the region over the years, including the Valencia in 1906 and the Michigan steamer from 1893, are witnessed along the shoreline.

We arrive nice and early into the Michigan Creek camp at 3:30 p.m. The kids set up a great volleyball court and let off steam on the beach with a casual game in shorts and T-shirts or no shirt at all in Lee's case.

The weather turns sunny in the late afternoon and everyone has a chance to dry out the tents and equipment.

We have a virtual feast for dinner of minestrone soup, rice and mashed potatoes and gravy, cooked up by our master chef McAdam and advisor to apprentice chef Veenstra.

We sit around the campfire for a couple of hours doing testimonials on each member of the group. Highlighting everyone's good qualities helps us all realize how much we've accomplished and contributed.

DAY FIVE TRAIL RATING (Klanawa River to Michigan Creek, approximately 11 km):
Moderate.

SIXTH DAY (Wednesday, Sept. 26)

Wake-up call is at 6 a.m. for the grand finale to Pachena Bay.

Everyone is excited about finishing the hike and we're on the trail by 8:45, arriving at the Pachena lighthouse about 45 minutes later.

A helicopter arrives to drop off mail and we enjoy hanging out at the lighthouse before departing at 10:40 to complete the final 10 kilometres.

Some of the walking is tough due to more muddy areas and huge fallen trees from last year's severe windstorms, but the path gets wider toward the end and the terrain is not too difficult. More ladders slow us down during the last kilometre.

Unfortunately, Bakker drops her camera while climbing one of the last ladders on the trail and she has more than 300 images on it. We manage to convince her to finish climbing the ladder and then we'll send someone up to look underneath.

Superhero Briggs comes immediately to the rescue. He drops his pack, goes up the ladder, finds the camera, reaches down to grab it and then takes it to an eternally-grateful Bakker at the top.

Briggs then descends to retrieve his pack, climbs back up with it and the group carries on. The group elects me to lead the way down the final section to the finish and I promptly miss the turn to the Pachena Trailhead building! Oh well, what's another kilometre or so after that length of time?

DAY SIX TRAIL RATING (Michigan Creek to Pachena Bay, approximately 12 km):

Moderate.

WRAPUP

Stacey and Whitney Green, Joanne Bakker and Linda Lee are all there to greet us at the triumphant moment.

We pack up the gear, get a change of clothes and prepare to head home after the experience of a lifetime.

After traversing through the woods in difficult conditions and sticking together, we can't find our way around in civilization. Two of the cars in our cavalcade are separated from the other two in Port Alberni and we wind up at different McDonald's restaurants.

The group is eventually reunited for some grub and we receive a hero's welcome from family and friends back in Duncan around 8 p.m.

A hot shower that night is worth a million bucks! I weigh myself the next day and find I've lost five pounds in the six days on the trail. It certainly didn't surprise me. It's a tough way to lose it, but I definitely needed to trim down a little!

I have only one blister on my left heel so I'm happy how well my feet have held up.

I decide to leave my scraggly beard for a few days that leads my publisher Bill Macadam and Cowichan secondary field hockey coach Gillian Braun to refer to me as the Bushman. The beard finally comes off after 10 days during a heavy shaving session that officially puts me back in the real world.

Now that it's all over I remember what Veenstra told me before the trip. He said to savour every moment because the time passes very quickly. It didn't seem like it at times on the trail, but that's certainly how I feel now.

The days run together in your mind after a while and don't seem so bad after the fact.

The students, I'm sure, have turned their initial horror stories into folklore during chatter around the school.

Of course, Veenstra has already booked for next year when an entirely new group of students will take their turn on the WCT, putting their characters and ambitions to the ultimate test.

