Three Cabins, Three Solitudes: Women Take to the Woods

Daryl Johnson set out to experience solitude. "I just wanted simple surroundings, with a few of my books, my binoculars and telescope. And quiet," she says. "Well, except for birds, crickets, the wind. Anything that isn't what I'd call noise." Johnson is a hiker, serious birder and naturalist. In 2003, just shy of her sixty-seventh birthday, she decided to try living the way she had fantasized, if even for a short stretch.

The 250 square foot cabin Johnson stays in is perched above a willow marsh on a small shallow lake in BC's Central Interior. Her brother and sister-in-law have lived two kilometres down the shore for thirty-five years and it was friends of theirs who generously offered Johnson their cabin.

"It was perfect," says Johnson. "The first Spring I ran around looking at everything. The porch over the marsh, the outhouse, the woodpile."

Johnson has spent years reading conservationist and naturalist writers such as Thoreau, John Muir and Edwin Way Teale, as well as Buddhist philosophy, so with Johnson's innate love of nature and aloneness, it was coming together. She already lives a simplistic lifestyle in a small home with her husband on southern Vancouver Island but can hear neighbours talking, lawn mowers running, semi trucks on the highway in the distance. And there are the societal expectations--answer the door, answer the phone, put on clean clothes to go to the store. "I'd never been really alone much in my life. I just wanted to feel what it was like," she says. She was already familiar with the solitude of others from her reading.

"I wanted to do my yoga, meditate, walk for miles and identify birds, butterflies, plants and dragonflies and just try to focus on being where I was. It's called mindfulness. Leaving the past and future alone. It's not easy."

Johnson opted for self-sufficiency, so rather than use her siblings' amenities, she scrubbed her clothes in a wash basin on the deck. One hot wash day a butterfly landed on the

window ledge and stayed for an entire rinse. Johnson found bathing in the spray of a sun shower hung from a pine limb equally satisfying, with only the mountain chickadees to tell the tale.

Johnson journalled her stay--times of sunrise and sunset, wind and lake conditions, the shrill whistle of ospreys, red squirrels in the spruce trees outside. She even recorded measurements of windows and counter space, not knowing that the invitation to stay would carry on through the years, and that she would continue to make the annual 1000 km drive to the cabin. In the solitude she learned to be herself. Johnson acknowledges that not being herself is self-imposed, that it's just easier when she's alone.

"I wish I'd realized a lot earlier in life how important being alone was. Especially when I was raising [my] kids."

Johnson decided to experience winter solitude in 2008. She took the bus up-country instead of driving, hauling along a new pair of felt pack boots and long underwear. Her brother and sister-in-law had replenished the firewood with beetle-kill pine from the property so Johnson would just need to split kindling. They greeted her with their son's down parka. The temperature dipped to -30 degrees during her four-day cabin stay, which was as she'd hoped. Johnson learned "how not to roast herself out of the cabin during the night," followed snowshoe hare tracks by day and felt "a unique aliveness because I was dependent on myself. Especially in cold like that." She kept fruits and vegetables fresh without freezing by placing them in front of a crack in the door.

Special things happen at the cabin. During one visit, Johnson and her brother had gone for a hike along a nearby lake, carrying a photo from 1912 of a Carrier woman and her daughter. They were looking for the location of the photo as part of some research Johnson's brother was doing. They nearly stumbled over a pelican whose head was bent right around to his wing, his bill stuck open and held fast with a length of cotton cord. The bird could only flop and, perhaps due to exhaustion, held still while the siblings cut the string away. He flew off immediately amidst their whoops of joy. The bird landed on the lake and fell asleep, his head resting in natural pelican

posture against his body as he floated.

A favourite quote of Johnson's was written by Henry David Thoreau and sums up her solitude at the cabin: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

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Chris Francis is outgoing and social. Solitude at her cabin was just a by-product of being single. After having travelled and camped in BC's Chilcotin country for twenty-five years with her husband, she lost him to a stroke in 1978 but continued travelling BC on her own. Francis chose the secluded cabin community at Charlotte Lake as a home base for holidays with her grown sons and friends.

"The first time I was there, I was 59. That was 1986 and I'd driven the truck and camper in on that old forestry road with all the ruts and potholes. It was the beauty of the lake that got me."

She returned the next year and purchased a cabin on the sunny, northern shore. It sits atop a small slope above the lake and faces the Charlotte Alplands, a protected alpine region in the Coast Mountains. Regional author Chris Czajkowski built three of her log cabins in the Alplands and ran a wilderness tourism business there until 2011 while writing and publishing her adventures. Czajkowski's name is synonymous with gutsy women in the wilderness.

"I've read all her books," says Francis. "She'll pack a lunch and go out in the winter on snowshoes with her dogs. Now that's living."

When Francis purchased her property, the cabin was 480 square feet with a combined kitchen-living area separated by a large woodstove, plus one bedroom and a three-bed sleeping loft. One of her sons has since built on a bedroom addition and the family added a shower room with on-demand hot water. Francis also has a portable generator which she uses to power a

wringer washer. Her sons haul both pieces of modernism into the pine woods behind the cabin at the start of each summer. Laundry is an outdoor sport, and jeans flap dry in two hours with the hot summer wind. Food storage and cooking are nearly like home because of the propane fridge and stove. Francis lights the pilots when she arrives, or if her friends next door are there they'll do it for her. The cabin is also within an hour's drive of Nimpo Lake and Anahim Lake for fresh produce, home-baked goods and local gossip.

Because Francis is retired, she can head to the cabin whenever she likes. In between family trips she would make the two-day drive from Vancouver Island once or twice a year, just herself and her dogs. She discovered like-minded people at the lake who also relish the dusty, dry winds of ranch country and who, like herself, will hop in the boat to troll for trout, or explore back roads on a whim. A trip to Bella Coola is a long day, but a favourite outing. Driving down the notorious "Hill," with its grades of up to eighteen percent is worth the scare for the occasional glimpse of mountain goat, marmots and bear. And for the friendly people in the tiny ocean-side community. The valley is cradled by jagged, snowy peaks like a Swiss postcard.

Francis reads in her hammock on the deck, explores the shoreline for driftwood, walks her dogs in the sandy pine woods and "slaps a paintbrush around." But it is picking mushrooms that she especially loves. Many Septembers would see her at the cabin after pines. Her friends in the cabin next door were equally keen.

"We would take the vehicle as far as we could, then walk the trail at the end of the lake. There was lots of blow down. We'd go under the logs, over the logs. We were brutes for punishment, and hungry for mushrooms."

After filling boxes with the fragrant white fungi they would whisk the soil and needles off and drive to the buyer in Anahim.

"We pretty much ate all the money we earned at the restaurant on the highway," she laughs. "It wasn't about money though. We had the fever."

Francis figures she is a bit old for it now.

"I probably couldn't bend under the fallen trees," she laughs."But I'm still a bearcat for that country. I'm going to keep hopping in my truck with my little dog and head up there every summer as long as I can."

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Margaret Pearson wasn't looking for solitude. She was plunged into it against her wishes when husband Barry passed away in August 2010. Pearson was sixty-eight at the time. The couple had holidayed annually at Sunray Cottage on Nelson Island since 1990. A double love affair for Pearson who had been "smitten" by their leased homestead upon first landing on its shores the year before.

Pearson made a trip to Sunray with family and friends the month following her husband's death. He had wanted to get a new shake roof on that year and they got it done. Two years later Pearson made her first solo trip. She purchased a 17-foot Double Eagle, a smaller boat than what they'd had together, and learned to run it.

"Barry would have been so proud of me," she says.

Pearson was dubious about the solitude, but once she relaxed back into it, "being alone began to be okay." Although there are still ups and downs.

Sunray Cottage is nestled into the edge of the trees, fifty feet from Cape Cockburn's south beach. It is known locally as Harry Robert's cabin, after the pioneer who built it and homesteaded the property in the mid-1930s. The cabin was constructed along a slight slope, incorporating sixteen walls of logs into a spiral design which leads from the kitchen door, around through the living room, up a few steps to the bedroom and up a few more to the sleeping loft. There is likely 400 square feet of indoor space if you count up all the jigs and jogs. Windows are screened, rather than glassed in and although the blackened cement fireplace Roberts built is still workable, Pearson opts not to light it. The logs of the cabin are as dry as dust, and surrounding Gulf Island

foliage is just as flammable most summers. When evenings are cool, Pearson layers on sweaters and uses a portable propane heater for backup. The three-burner gas stove she packs in each trip is a small heat source as well. Lack of electricity is not a problem.

"I go to bed when it's dark, get up when it's light. Sometimes I read with a flashlight under the covers," chuckles Pearson. "I also have a Princess Mosquito Net over the whole bed."

She sold the boat after making three trips during that first summer of solitude. Moorage and maintenance were expensive, packing extra gas was inconvenient and, worst of all, if it was blowing too hard Pearson couldn't come and go as she wished. Hiring a water taxi was the answer. Pearson's trips are generally just a week at a time due to lack of refrigeration. A block of ice in a cooler will last that long, and a bucket hung down the well is good for items like eggs and juice.

Pearson gives tours of the property and cabin each time she's there, as Sunray is a well-known heritage site and boating destination. When Harry Roberts sold his three hundred and fifty acres, ten acres that border the cabin was allotted to the Sunshine Coast Regional District as parkland. The rest has since been purchased by BC Hydro. Pearson wants to preserve as much of the land as possible for the sake of local and natural history, whether she can continue to lease or not. At present there is no formal historical designation, but Pearson works toward it by keeping track of visitors and nudging BC Hydro verbally and in writing as much as is tactful. Some summer months have seen more than two hundred people sign the guest book.

On a recent trip to Sunray, two retired canoeists from Oregon who have explored the local waters for forty years were stranded by weather. They had been circumnavigating Nelson Island when a summer southeaster decided to blow.

"They pitched their tent in the yard and we had some great conversations about their travels," says Pearson. "I always meet interesting people. One of the men was an artist and the other guy was Powder Man. He'd been the publisher of a ski magazine."

"People over the years have said to me, this is a healing place. I never understood what they meant because I was so busy being there."

On each visit Pearson clears Himalayan blackberry and Scotch broom from the property to keep them from taking over as they had once done. She also walks the beach daily with her dog Yogi and picks up garbage.

"There's not much anymore," she says. "People are getting better. Years ago I would have garbage bags full every trip."

"I never get tired of looking out on Malaspina Strait, watching the boat traffic and the weather. It's so peaceful. And now I know what they mean about healing."

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Three unique women, three unique solitudes, with the commonality of+ deep feelings for place. Each of them puts in considerable effort to be at their cabins and all have family members who help make their cabin stays possible--pumping drinking water, stocking firewood, rebuilding rickety log walls. As Johnson succinctly sums it up, "Cabins are our own little world." And that, perhaps, is the essence of each woman's sojourn.