



Quentin Farrell, his mother, Marlene, and sister, Alice, disappear into the forest of northern Vancouver Island. Over 100 years ago Danish-Canadian pioneers attempted to settle this remote coastline. This easy-walking section of trail is a converted settler's road.

# Taking a family into the *wilds* of Vancouver Island

STORY BY MARLENE FARRELL  
PHOTOS BY KEVIN FARRELL

**W**e broke through the forest edge to the welcoming sight of the ocean. The expanse of white sand was crisscrossed with tracks.

The wolf and bear tracks went our way, down the beach toward Laura Creek. They disappeared in the heaps of seaweed drying in the high tide zone, not far from our next campsite.

The river otter tracks dissected our lines as they went back

and forth from woods to sea.

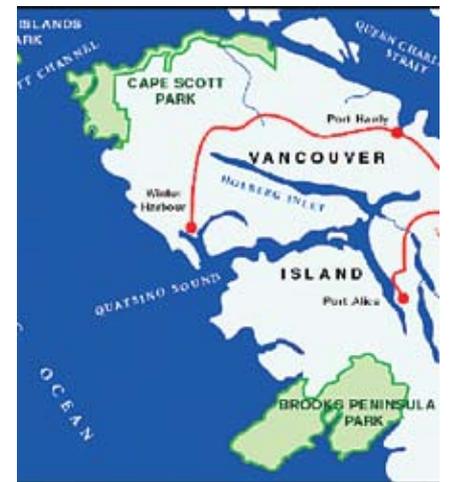
This was their world. We were the guests. The tide will have swept away our footprints when they pad along the sand again. The eagles will careen and screech whether we are there to hear it or not. The osprey will plummet in what appears to be a bone-shattering dive into shallow surf for its dinner even when we aren't there to have our breath taken away.

We were on day three of a 10-day backpack trip in Cape Scott Provincial Park on the northern tip of Vancouver Island. We

had backpacked every summer since our youngest, Alice, was two and a half. Alice, now 7, and Quentin, 9, were ready for higher mileage.

My husband, Kevin, and I were able to increase our number of days out by planning a T-shaped route and a food cache of three days worth of food that we would collect when we retraced our steps.

To get to Laura Creek the wooded trail had been mud, roots, and more mud. Occasionally there were boardwalks but mostly we hopped from a



Cape Scott Provincial Park lies on the tip of Canada's Vancouver Island.

log bobbing in the mud to an exposed tree root to a trampled fern. It was not walking; it was wobble and squelch.

Surprisingly, Quentin and Alice loved it. After skirting one bog pitted with six-inch deep boot prints from a more careless hiker, Alice said, "There are times when I get going and I feel like I can hike all day!"

Quentin hardly noticed the mud as he and Kevin spun tales



Alice, Marlene and Quentin explore tidal pools in Fisherman's Bay.

about robot dogs with removable butts that would drop bombs over enemy territory.

A trip to the ocean is a return to child-like awe. And a trip to a rugged and remote coast, like Cape Scott, is to go further, to go deep into wonder at the teeming life in every tide pool and to scamper about, carefree.

We jumped waves, screaming with the exhilaration and the tingling on our skin. Contentedness wrapped us like a blanket as we sat by our beach fire, watching dolphins porpoising in the sunset surf.

"Can you make me another s'more, Mommy?" Alice asked.

"Of course!"

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I admit I was worried at the trailhead.

We had driven for a day and a half and were thus committed to this venture, which included

starting with a car and rocket box load of food and gear — how would it ever fit on our backs?

Kevin reminded me, "We just have to make it through the first day." Then we would cache some food and fuel in a bucket suspended from a concealed tree branch. Our packs would immediately feel lighter.

With gritted teeth, I survived. Better Kevin and I, who carried packs that were half our weight, should be the work mules, than the kids, who carried daypacks. Later we had their little fingers knead the tired knots in our backs.

The trail was beautiful. We traipsed along boardwalks that were dry and sturdy, and boulevards of green ferns, skunk cabbage, and endless salal plants. Giant spruce, hemlock and cedar towered over us.

On the second day we arrived

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A mama black bear scales a tree easily to protect cubs nearby.



Hiking among the sea stacks at San Josef Bay.

## Walking in the wilds

▶▶▶ Continued from previous page at Nissen Bight. I heard and smelled the ocean long before I saw it.

As I sat on a large driftwood log, the sea demanded my attention. The live and decaying debris left by high tide carried an intoxicating stench. The din of the waves punctuating the water's quieter whoosh was pleasing from a distance. Sand fleas hopped on my toes as if they were fleshy rocks. Bald eagles flew overhead, and I heard their happy cries.

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As I woke up each morning my head wasn't whirring with schedules and details. My challenges were floundering out of the tent without waking the family, popping in preferably sand-free contacts, and then scanning the area for wildlife while I brushed my teeth.

I indulged in time to myself with my journal. Then I was ready to make hot drinks for my tousled-haired kids and scruffy-chinned husband as they stirred.

When we were not hiking



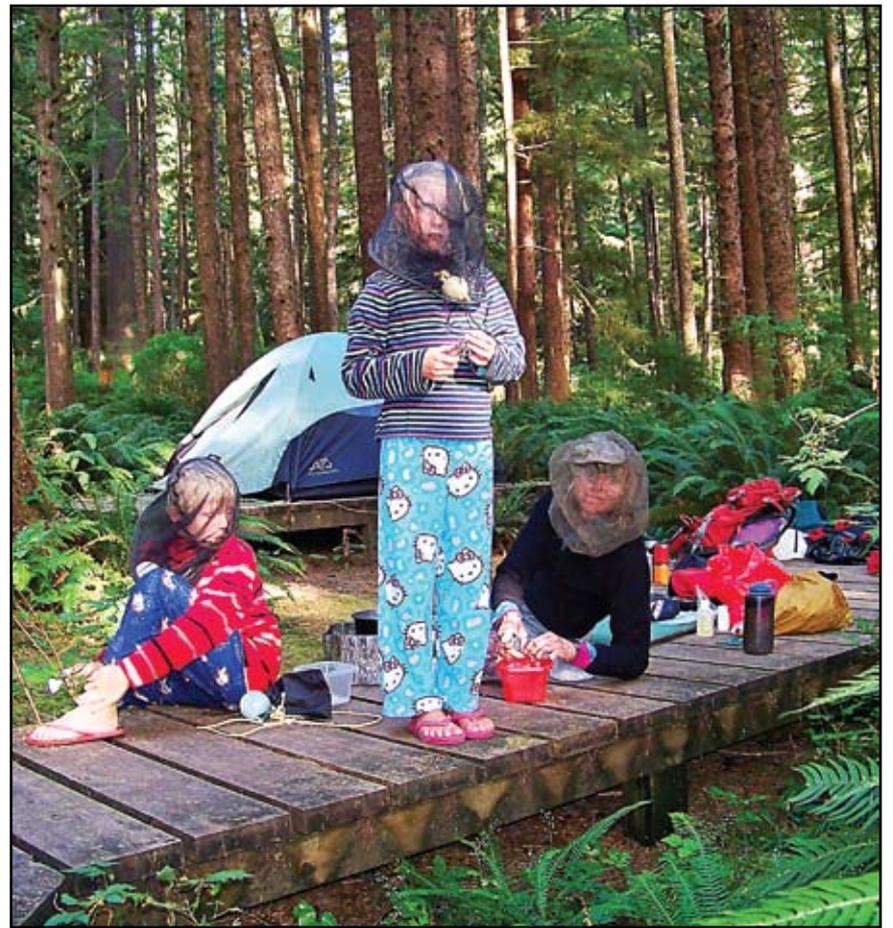
Marshmallow gratification — by the end of the trip, Quentin had roasted and eaten about 50.

there were many opportunities for unadorned play. Alice gathered up her classroom of little buoys that had names like Windy and Bubble. Or she practiced cartwheels and handstands in the firm sand. She even gave me a few lessons and praised my lopsided cartwheels.

Once, Quentin scratched intently on a wide stretch of sand. He told us, "I've made a choose-your-own-adventure game." We dashed about, each following different arrows to complete the game before the tide washed it away.

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Would I recommend Cape



Camping at Eric Lake, protected against unwanted buzzing "friends."

Scott and the North Coast Trail to families?

Honestly, no.

The equation tipped in our favor because we had 9 out of 10 days of sunshine and Kevin and I are used to being half mule.

The untrammelled beauty of the beaches surpassed the Washington coast for us, and we had rare and wondrous wildlife encounters.

Every day there was a new one. Barred owlets woke us up at night with their eerie hisses above our tent. A pine marten, fleeing our approach, paused and looked me in the eye. A mama bear climbed a huge trunk to stare at us with a mixture of curiosity and wariness.

But this was a tough and dirty hike and we saw no other children out on a multi-night backpack trip.

The abundant wildlife also meant keeping Quentin and Alice close to us. We didn't want them to be alone if a cougar or bear crossed their path.

I think I can speak for my family that the challenges did

make the moments sweeter.

I remember one morning at Nels Bight when Alice woke early so we explored the tide pools together. As we leaned over them we could hear the crackle of the barnacles opening their plated doors. We watched the tiny tentacles of the crown of thorn sea star bend and probe.

Alice pressed the anemones to receive a satisfying squirt. Looking up, we followed the progress of fishing boats on the horizon.

The trip was overflowing with these marvelous shared experiences.

The kids collected special shells, Kevin captured the adventure with his camera, and I was happy to horde a pocketful of memories.

*To see a gallery of photos of the Farrell family trip, search Facebook for "Kevin Farrell."*

*Marlene Farrell, a Leavenworth resident, writes articles and blogs and is working on children's fiction. In her free time she runs, bakes and goes on adventures with her family.*