

Spirited away

It's hard to imagine a more tantalising-sounding destination than The Great Bear Rainforest. On a mission to spot its unique near-white spirit bears, Mark Carwardine finds Canada's coastal wilderness more than lives up to expectations

I was standing on an ancient granite boulder, overlooking a gurgling creek, when I sensed a sudden movement behind me. Turning around, I looked straight into the eyes of a huge, male black bear. He had ambled out of the forest and was just a few metres away.

There was nothing else to do but say “hello” in the calmest voice I could muster, and take a picture. The bear yawned. Then he looked up and down the creek, like a young child about to cross a busy main road, and wandered down to the water’s edge.

This was my first visit to Canada’s Great Bear Rainforest, a breathtaking but fragile wilderness of ancient trees, fern-clad canyons, glacial waterfalls and unnamed islands, which stretches seamlessly from the northern end of Vancouver Island all the way to Alaska. Covering an area about twice the size of the Serengeti, this extraordinarily diverse ecosystem has greater biological productivity than a tropical rainforest — and a future just as unstable.

My home for the week was Princess Royal Island, British Columbia’s fourth-largest island and the heart of this huge swathe of primeval forest. My aim was to see the jewel in the crown of Princess Royal — a special animal found nowhere else on earth.

I was based at a wonderfully luxurious (and pricey) eco-sensitive lodge, the King Pacific, on the north-west side of Princess Royal Island, about 150km south of the Alaskan border. Resembling an outsized ski chalet, its only neighbours are a family of river otters and a bald eagle standing guard in a treetop nearby. Getting to the lodge was an adventure in itself, since Princess Royal is accessible only by boat or plane. I flew from Vancouver north to the little town of Bella Bella on a 30-seater twin-propeller plane, then transferred to an eight-seater floatplane that was about to celebrate its 50th birthday (and didn’t look a day younger).

My charismatic and talkative pilot, ‘Ducking Dave’, was the kind of man who could roll a cigarette, read a map, fly a plane and discuss the breathtaking view all at the same time.

Flying over the forest was utterly mesmerising: a bewildering jigsaw of islands, tantalisingly rocky shorelines and dense green forest — all in the shadow of distant, white-tipped mountains. It exceeded all my expectations and there wasn’t a person in sight — or so I thought, until Dave gesticulated excitedly. “Look!” he shouted above the roar of the engine. With my eyes screwed up in the sun, I followed his gesture and saw nothing but water and trees.

“Where are you pointing?” I asked. He swung the plane around sharply, the force pushing me firmly back into my seat, and pointed again. “There — that log cabin down there. Isolated, huh? What a cool place to be!”

Dave took me right to King Pacific’s front door and a waiting glass of champagne. This wasn’t going to be one of my toughest assignments.

The following day my guide — a bear of a man called Bruce — took me to neighbouring Gribbell Island, where he’d built a wooden observation platform next to the Ryordan River. Bruce is a member of the Gitga’at tribe from Hartley Bay, a small First Nation

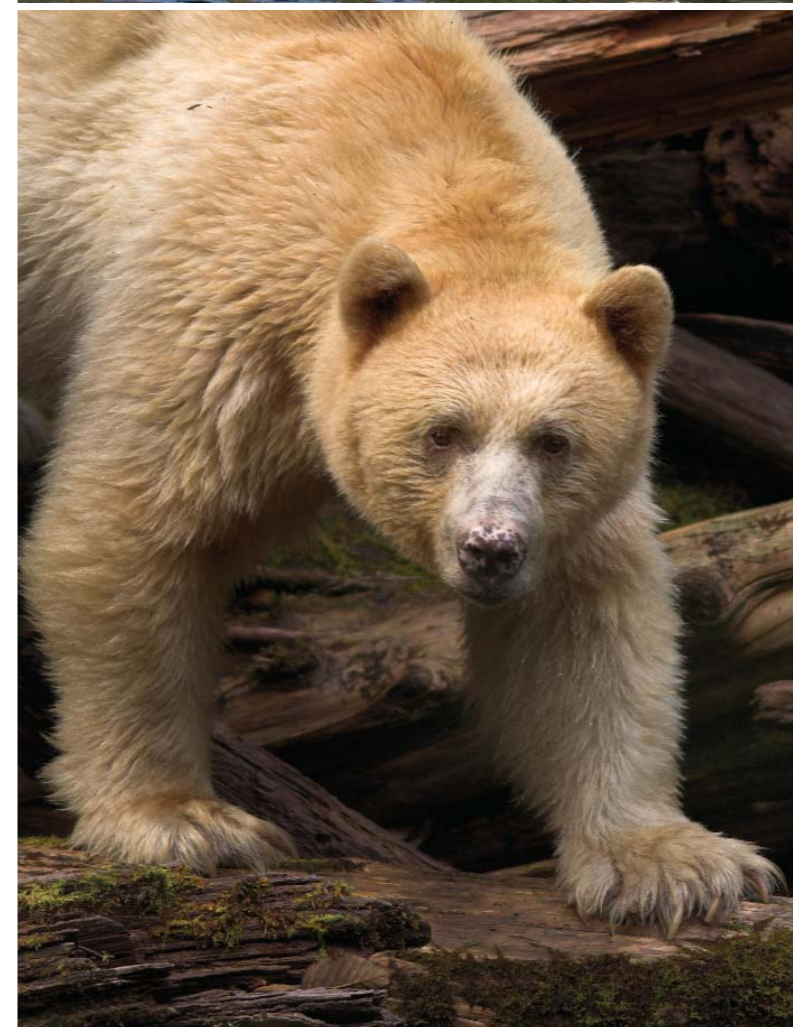
community about an hour away by boat. He seemed to know every creek, rock and branch of his native land and filled me with confidence. He walked fast, though, and I had trouble keeping up. He meandered through the forest as if he were on a Sunday stroll, while I stumbled behind, tripping over tangled roots, slipping down muddy banks, losing my boots in wet, spongy moss carpets. By the time I caught up, Bruce had cleared all the fallen leaves from the platform and poured two welcome cups of coffee.

“Why are you so out of breath?” he whispered in mock surprise. A huge grin spread across his face. I explained, rather lamely, that it must have been because I was carrying so much camera equipment. “Ah yes,” he agreed, “you photographers are always out of breath.”

We sat quietly for several hours, listening to the gentle patter of rain on the makeshift tarpaulin roof, and trying not to make too much noise while swatting huge, buzzing clouds of no-see-ums — minuscule insects with surprisingly painful bites. ▶

oo A black bear came to the river, caught a salmon and was back in the trees before I’d registered what was happening **oo**

Opposite: One of the few ways to access the Great Bear Rainforest is by floatplane; despite their colouring, spirit bears are not albino; humpback whales use bubble nets to feed



Florin Leeuwenberg/TCS; Mark Carwardine



◀ Bruce was a man of few words, but every so often he'd signal to me and there would be a pine marten running across a log, a Sitka deer peering out from the opposite edge of the forest, or some other animal that I'd probably have missed with my unaccustomed eyes. Bald eagles were calling incessantly lower down the valley. Then a black bear wandered into the river, caught a salmon with little more than the flick of a wrist, and was back among the trees to devour his catch almost before I'd registered what was happening.

We were just about to pack up and walk back through the dripping forest to the boat when an apparition appeared on a bend of the river upstream. It was a black bear in a white coat. It stood on the bank for a few moments, munching on a freshly caught salmon, and was gone.

I felt as if I had seen a ghost, but I'd actually seen a spirit bear. And that was why I had travelled halfway round the world.

ALSO KNOWN AS THE GHOST or Kermode bear, the spirit bear may be predominantly white or creamy white but it's not albino — it has normal pigmentation in its eyes, nose and skin. In fact, it's an extremely rare colour phase of the American black bear. Scientists say the whiteness comes from a recessive gene (and so, in a strange twist of nature, a spirit bear's parents can both be black). Native legend,

Mark Carwardine

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however, has a more intriguing explanation. It tells the story of the Raven, the Creator who came from heaven during the last ice age to make the world green. On a visit to Princess Royal Island the Raven made every tenth bear white, as a reminder of the snow, and designated this little corner of Canada's 'forgotten coast' the home of the spirit bear forever. Spirit bears play a supremely important role in Gitga'at mythology, and legend has it that good fortune rewards anyone lucky enough to encounter them.

Since there are fewer than 100 spirit bears alive, I certainly counted myself lucky after I'd seen just one at a distance. But later in the week I was paddling along the edge of the creek, by that ancient granite boulder back on Princess Royal Island, when I heard another slight rustling in the forest behind me. This time I turned around and made eye contact with a ▶

Above: King Pacific Lodge is a spot of luxury in the wilderness

◀ beautiful spirit bear. The bear considered me for a moment before wandering down to the creek to fish. We spent nearly an hour together, sometimes almost within touching distance, before my new-found friend ambled out of sight among the trees on the other side.

IT WAS THE WHALES that tempted me back for a second visit, this time to explore the GBR by boat. It may not have been so luxurious, but it was considerably cheaper. There were 15 like-minded people on board, with four crew — a skipper, deckhand, cook and naturalist. Having boarded at Bella Bella, roughly midway between the northern tip of Vancouver Island and Prince Rupert, we had nearly two weeks to explore. There was just one problem: too much to see and do, and we couldn't resist using the onboard inflatable to venture ashore.

One day we hiked through the shadowy forest, darkened by the sun-blocking canopy of some of the oldest and largest trees on earth: Sitka spruce, red cedar and Douglas fir — some up to 100m tall and 1,500 years old. The next day we learned to track wolves (wolves eat just the head of a salmon and leave the rest, while bears eat the rest and leave just the head); crawled around on our hands and knees studying banana slugs; collected fresh blueberries and huckleberries for supper; and kayaked alongside a mother grizzly with her three cubs.

Our long days at sea were just as eventful. On several occasions we were surrounded by feeding humpback whales doing the unimaginable: fishing with nets made of bubbles. Each time we watched the bubbles rising to the surface, as the whales swam in a huge circle around a shoal of fish hidden beneath, and readied ourselves for the climax of the action. Then hundreds of tonnes of gaping mouths would simultaneously explode out of the water.

We followed a family of orcas by the light of the moon, their rhythmical blows both strangely evocative and calming, and cruised by a boisterous summer rookery of Steller's sea lions. Our nights were spent anchored in secluded fjords, the silence punctuated only by howling wolves and wailing loons.

The best time for wildlife in the Great Bear Rainforest — and really the only time to see spirit bears — is September. This is when I visited on both occasions and it paid off — quite simply because it's the height of the salmon run. Pacific salmon are the lifeblood of the region. For a few weeks every autumn, waterways team with the spawning and dying fish and it is this surge of food that attracts a host of other wildlife out of the forest — including spirit bears.

I only met one local who had seen the elusive creature at any other time of the year. They spend the winter fast asleep and most of their waking life hiding in the forest's dark recesses.



Above: Activists have helped secure the protection of one third of the Great Bear Rainforest — but is it enough?

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the once-pristine wilderness. Left to their own devices, destructive commercial loggers would liquidate an entire 10,000-year-old virgin forest in less than a human lifetime.

But conservation groups and First Nation communities (who have been stewards of the 'forgotten coast' for thousands of years) have been fighting to protect the forest since the late 1980s. After several Premiers, umpteen Ministers of the Environment and countless presentations, meetings, reports, protests and arrests, last year the Canadian Government announced a newly-brokered deal that will preserve about a third of this vast area specially for wildlife.

It's good news, of course, but Bruce worried me with an agonising thought: "I wonder if protection of a third is enough? What they're really saying is that two-thirds of one of the most important wildlife regions on the planet is now up for grabs."

He's absolutely right, of course. Admittedly, the agreement does specify that any logging and mining in the area must be sustainable. But anyone who believes that is optimistic, to say the least. After decades of unsustainable practices and ecological destruction, Canada's logging industry already has an appalling track record.

Perhaps it's unrealistic to wish that every last tree could be saved but perhaps, for the sake of the spirit bears and all the other temperate rainforest inhabitants, we should be aiming a little higher? ■