

After surviving a clearcutting in 2011, Canada's second-tallest Douglas fir helped reignite old-growth-forest conservation.

Big Lonely Doug

THREE SUMMERS AGO, I stopped in Port Renfrew during a Vancouver Island road trip with my then-11-year-old daughter. Tucked into a remote inlet on the southwestern tip of the island, the sleepy town occupies ancestral lands of the Pacheedaht First Nation, whose name translates to “children of the sea-foam.” From the town’s small wharf, we watched bald eagles glide through the misty sky over aptly named Snuggery Cove. Puppy-faced seals cruised waters ringed by evergreen mountains veiled in fog. But it was Port Renfrew’s newly minted reputation as the Tall Tree Capital of Canada that most intrigued me. So last September, I returned to meet up with big-tree hunter and conservation photographer T.J. Watt.

At one time, about 13.5 million acres of Earth’s most magnificent old-growth rainforests blanketed Vancouver Island, and for nearly a century, logging rooted Port Renfrew’s economy. Industry decline and mill closures in the early 1990s turned the once-bustling community into something of a ghost town. Then, in late 2009, Watt began fighting to protect the 123-acre swath of old-growth forest the Pacheedaht called T’l’oqwxwat. He worked with the Ancient Forest Alliance to promote the newly nicknamed Avatar Grove, and the tourists began to arrive.

A few years later, in a clearcut forest near Avatar, Watt measured a lone tree that had been spared the chainsaw. At 230 feet, that tree turned out to be the country’s second-tallest Douglas fir; it soon became known as

Big Lonely Doug, an unwitting monument to the fragility of old-growth forests everywhere.

Watt took me on a tour of some of the area’s remaining pockets of intact old-growth, then on a pilgrimage to Doug. Ribbons of fog hung over the water as we crossed the San Juan River en route to Gordon River Road, the valley’s principal logging artery. At our first stop, Avatar’s trailhead, a cluster of sun-bleached candelabra tops punctuated the sky above the canopy. Those forked crowns, often a telltale sign of old-growth western red cedar, hinted at what the forest held in store—towering hemlocks, giant Douglas firs, and several huge cedars with enormous burls protruding from their trunks.

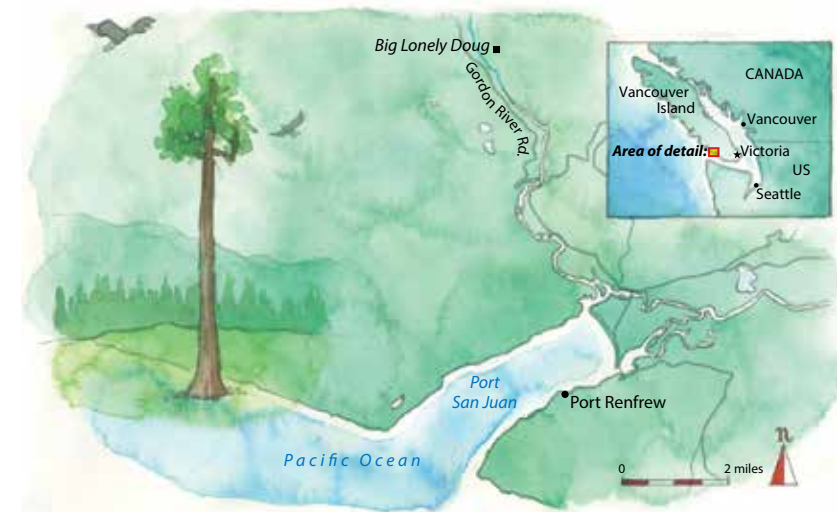
The moment we stepped onto the trail, I was hit with composty aromas of leaf mold and loam as water music—the rush of the Gordon River, a burst of raindrops being released from the canopy—played in my ears. Winding among arboreal behemoths,

Its neighbors reduced to splintered stumps, the immense Douglas fir is the last remnant of an ancient forest that likely survived for a millennium.

I half expected a brontosaurus to swing its head out, chomping a mouthful of foliage.

Ancient forests have the most biomass per acre of any ecosystem on Earth, housing trees of varying sizes and ages that sequester vast amounts of carbon while providing habitat and forage for threatened species like marbled murrelets and Sitka black-tailed deer. When big trees get old and fall, they create gaps in the canopy through which sunlight can enter. Sword ferns and salal bushes spring from the spongy earth, epiphytes sprout out of the thick duff accumulating on branches a hundred feet in the air, and decaying logs act as nurseries for armies of baby hemlocks. That age spectrum affords these forests their incredible complexity. The secret ingredient is time.

We drove a mile from Avatar Grove, and the



landscape changed dramatically. Swaths of clearcut marred hillsides once covered in majestic conifers. Tree trunks too small or misshapen to mill into lumber looked like a giant’s pick-up sticks.

We walked down a semitrodden trail to where Big Lonely Doug stood, straight and tall, in the middle of a cut block. As we approached, the lone tree ballooned like an optical illusion, its mass stretching toward the sky. It’s impossible to grasp Doug’s enormity until you’re right beside it.

I laid my hand on its thick armor of bark and craned to take in the tree’s soaring evergreen crown. Despite Doug’s majesty, I felt deeply sad. This scene wasn’t a mystical playground of living, breathing trees like Avatar Grove but one of brittle wreckage. Its neighbors reduced to splintered stumps, the immense Douglas fir is the last remnant of an ancient forest that likely survived for a millennium. Until the chainsaws came.

Fortunately, the antidote was nearby. Bordering the cut block, our third stop, Eden Grove, offered a glimpse of what Big Lonely Doug’s surrounds must have looked like before they were logged. Shafts of sunlight illuminated the lush understory and cast a warm glow throughout the apse of trees, a few with trunks more than 12 feet in diameter. Near the end of the trail, a Day-Glo flash caught my eye—a ribbon reading “Falling Boundary” fluttered in the breeze.

Unlike Avatar, Eden Grove, which was targeted for clearcutting at the same time as the forest around Doug, remains unprotected. And the saws could arrive any day.

—Gina DeCaprio Vercesi

WHERE Port Renfrew, British Columbia

GETTING THERE Port Renfrew is a 69-mile drive along West Coast Highway from Victoria, on Vancouver Island. The well-marked Avatar Grove trailhead is less than eight miles from town. Big Lonely Doug and Eden Grove are about three miles beyond Avatar.

WHERE TO STAY Overlooking Port San Juan at the end of the town wharf in Port Renfrew, the Wild Renfrew Seaside Cottages offer a cozy home base with gorgeous ocean views.

WHEN TO VISIT These ancient temperate rainforests truly come to life during fall and spring.

SIDE TRIP Big-tree enthusiasts can also visit the Red Creek Fir, the world’s biggest Douglas fir; the San Juan Spruce, one of Canada’s largest Sitka spruces; and Jurassic Grove, another magnificent unprotected ancient forest, all within a short drive of Port Renfrew.

SUGGESTED READING Harley Rustad’s *Big Lonely Doug: The Story of One of Canada’s Last Great Trees* outlines the conflict between logging on Vancouver Island and the efforts to protect its endangered forests.

MORE Visit ancientforestalliance.org to view the detailed Port Renfrew Big Trees Map.