

A Letter from the Editor:

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the July issue of *Hanna's Happenings*! This month I'm sharing my experience backpacking the West Coast Trail, a trip I'd been looking forward to all spring and summer.

I went on my first backpacking trip my sophomore year of college on a trip organized by Gonzaga Outdoors, the outdoor recreation program I later worked for as a guide. I was captivated by the pace of life in the backcountry, and energized by the way my body rose to the challenge of long distance hiking with a heavy pack. Over the years I gained the skills (and gear) to go out for longer hikes in more remote places; I learned to plan trips for large groups of participants as a guide, and experimented with solo outings in places I was more familiar with. I couldn't, and still can't, get over the freedom I found in outdoor adventure.

Despite my penchant for adventure, I hadn't made it out for a multi-day backpacking trip in the past two years. So when I got invited to join a friend on their week-long trip to one of Canada's most iconic trails, I said yes immediately. Since then, I've barely thought about anything else. I spent days, studying the trail, prepping my gear, and training my body for the trip ahead.

Although things did not go exactly as planned (adventure rarely does), hiking the West Coast Trail was truly a life-changing experience, and I'm excited I get to share the story with you.

Thanks for reading. I'd love to hear about your summer adventures, or better yet, let's plan an adventure together!

With love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hanna Clements". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Hanna" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Clements".



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Backpacking the West Coast Trail | Hanna's Happenings

The Hike of a Lifetime

The West Coast Trail is a 74 km (47 mile) trail on the western shore of Vancouver Island; the trail was established hundreds of years ago by Huu-ay-aht, Ditidaht, and Pacheedaht First Nations, and was opened to hikers in the 1970s. Parks Canada proclaims the trail to be “the hike of a lifetime” and I certainly agree: it weaves between forested and beach landscapes via a rugged, rooted trail, rickety bridges, and a hundred steep ladders. It is the longest backpacking trip I’ve ever attempted, and our hiking party had planned an aggressive 6 day/5 night itinerary in late July.

Gearing Up

A back injury and a few seasons had passed since my last backpacking trip, and the nerves built steadily in the weeks before we left. I channeled my anxiety into preparation, including trying something I’d never done before: making my own dehydrated meals to eat while on the trail.

I developed meal kits that were easy to cook at camp and, more importantly, actually good to eat. I’m particularly proud of the dinner menu I developed making use of my dehydrator and my mom’s freeze dryer: pesto pasta with white beans, biscuits and gravy, burrito bowls, and a version of this backpacker pad thai.



As the trip got closer, preparations took over my mind and my apartment: piles everywhere, overthinking each and every item that went in my pack, twice. The final days crawled by. Until finally it was 4 AM, alarms blared and the long journey to the trailhead began. Our party travelled by car, ferry, and bus all day to make it to Gordon River at the south end of the trail.

On the Trail

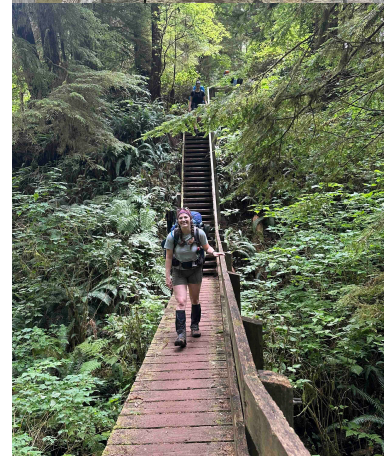
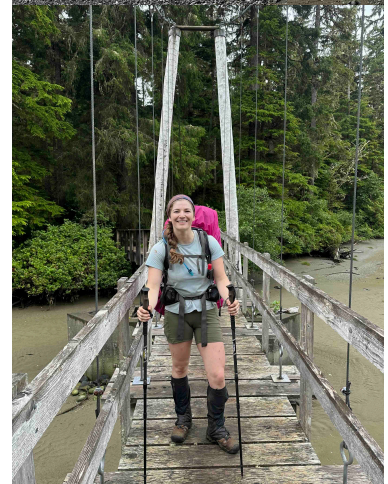
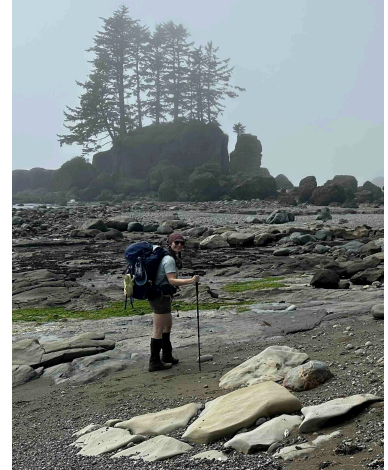
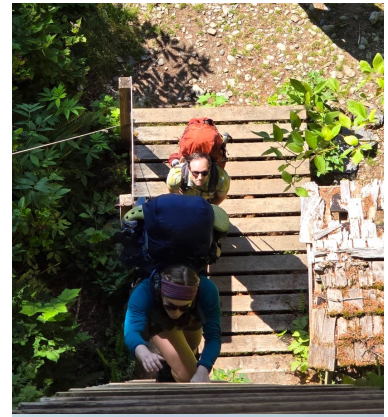
Despite the long travel day, we didn't actually start hiking until the next morning. From trail reports and maps I expected the south half of the trail to be more challenging, and I was looking forward to getting it over with early.

Challenging was an understatement: the trail starts with a nearly vertical climb up a ladder, and continues in an unrelenting fashion. Sadly the tides did not allow for our party to complete one of the most iconic sections of beach trail, and instead we toiled through the muddy forest. I was completely drained after hiking "only" 13 km in about 9 hours and beyond happy when I finally lay down in my tent.



Pushing through that first day of hiking was a physical and mental journey, and the heaviness of my and Alex's packs made it clear that I made a critical error in overestimating food needs. Still, we pressed on through day two of boggy terrain, ladders, and rickety bridges.

On the third day, we broke through to some of the easier beach sections of trail. I laughed out loud when I stepped onto a firm, smooth sandstone ledge. A firm ledge to walk on, a clean shirt, a cup of water I didn't have to filter myself; it amazes me how quickly my sense of luxury changes when I'm on trail.



Wildlife & Beach Treasures

The transition from the forested south end of the trail to the beachy middle was accompanied by an increase in wildlife signs and sightings. My main hope was to see a sea wolf, and while I didn't lay eyes on one, we saw prints in the sand (some bigger than my spread hand) and even some scat off the trail.

We had the good fortune to see a pair of sea otters skittering out of the surf one foggy morning, but my favourite encounter was at Cribs Beach camp. We were treated with a show: an eagle fishing its meal out of the tide pools, that was suddenly interrupted when a whale was spotted close to shore. A pair of grey whales, in fact, that stayed close to camp for almost an hour, slowly diving and surfacing as they scooped dinner off the sea floor. It was a moment that felt too good to be true.

The other treasure of the beach sections was sea glass. It's the only thing you're allowed to take from the park, since it's technically trash. I came home with a small handful, worn smooth by who knows how many decades in the surf.

Changing Plans

On the fourth day of the trip, plans began to change as it became clear that a prior injury would prevent a member of our party from making it to the north end of the trail. We exited the trail at Nitinat Lake, with fortunate timing since severe weather arrived later that day. Hikers were

Carl & Shelley's Crab Shack

While the wildness and wildlife of the trail were the highlights of my trip, a close contender was my visit to the iconic "Crab Shack" at Nitinat Narrows, run by Carl and Shelley Edgar for over 50 years. Their Dungeness (my all-time favourite food) was as fresh as could be, but was somehow outshone by the halibut fillet, which was so good I don't know if I'll ever enjoy halibut again.

In addition to making delicious meals and providing a cozy place for hikers to dry out, the Edgars operate the Nitinat Wilderness Charters ferry, which was instrumental in our early exit from the trail. The day spent waiting for the ferry at the Crab Shack with Carl and Shelley's family was a lesson in hospitality, and a rare chance to hear the trail described by people who live alongside it.



stranded and over 70 were evacuated from the trail due to flooding.

Adventure Aftermath

Returning to routine after an epic adventure is its own kind of adjustment; life feels flat and ordinary in comparison, lacking the total engagement of the days before. There's still muddy gear to wash and laundry to sort, but already, I'm planning how to get back and finish the trail.

