

LEARNING TO COUNT

By B. J. Campbell

The Game Warden boards the eighteen-foot boat as I give it a final shove away from shore. He places one hand on the steering wheel like it's a stack of Bibles and waves a pledge with the other.

“See you with more supplies in two weeks, Bob!” he calls over the pulsing engine.

As I stand beside Granite Creek near the stack of boxed provisions my employer and I unloaded from the boat, I bank on that promise.

As an afterthought, he turns to point at my small boat moored nearby. “Keep your boat in the bay here, if you see any black...” he yells.

“See any black...what?” I yell back, but the engine drowns our words as his craft speeds away over choppy waves. The boat and cheery salute grow smaller and finally disappear around the point. In its wake, the boat leaves an alarming silence. Mine is the only voice I'll hear for two weeks, so I speak right up.

“O.K., Rex.” Dependable as nightfall, my black Airedale-German Shepherd perks his ears at the sound of his name and searches my face for instructions. “It's time you learned to count fish!”

Yes, indeed, I'm ready to count my own share. This morning the Game Warden and I constructed a good, solid wooden weir to wedge across the width of the creek. The weir is the right size and shape to delay the Kokanee, the landlocked salmon we call Bluebacks, as they return from Idaho's Lake Pend O'reille to their natural spawning beds

further up the creek. The weir slats, like teeth of a giant comb fastened to two pine pole handles, allow free travel of creek water through the barrier, bound for the lake. The Kokanee congregate and mill on the lakeside, waiting for their turn to pass into Granite Creek through the metal throat of the weir, just big enough for about a dozen fish at a time.

Checking the hand-held counter in my pocket, I click the metal advance button a couple of times with my thumb. Sure enough, it works. I can, and certainly will, count on it.

“Time to settle in,” I speak aloud while I heft a cardboard box of canned beans, peanut butter, oats, chicken noodle soup. “Might as well get comfy since I plan to be here most of the fall.”

I cart the box to the precarious cabin a few yards up the creek. Whatever holds up the structure isn't clear to me right off the bat since it perches astride the creek on large chunks of tree trunks propped at odd angles. From inside near the front of the dwelling, I look down through the cracks between floorboards and see rushing water just inches away. On a hot day like this, the water looks pretty inviting.

The cabin offers other comforts as well, like the wood cook stove, plenty of space for my cot, a few pans and utensils. I stash my box in a small wooden cabinet meant to keep the chipmunks out of my food. A criss-cross of forest light filters into the single room through the unchinked spaces between all the logs.

I tell Rex and myself, “This is air-conditioning at its basic best.”

No other place on earth holds any more appeal. I'm camping. In solitude. The nearest neighbors, the Sullivan brothers, live another mile's hike up the creek. I'll go to

see them another day, but first thing tomorrow I will hike to the top of the ridge. From the ridge on Schafer Peak, the Green Monarch Mountains plunge 3200 feet straight down to the water, then further into the deepest part of the lake. From up there I know I'd be able to see the five miles across the lake to Garfield Bay, where I grew up, and to Talache over on the southwest shore.

Whistling, I haul my lantern and the rest of my supplies up the small slope to my new digs. Rex keeps smiling and lunging at me like he, too, thinks of this as a vacation. "Get serious, fella!" I warn him, but I know he's right.

Tonight Rex and I sit beside the weir counting fish. Whenever the fish congregate by the trap, day or night, we count those fish, as they have to pass through the weir's galvanized metal throat. Like ghosts in the lantern light, the fish shadows on the shiny metal make the counting pretty easy. I could swear the sightings happen, but all I have to prove them is an ever-changing number tallied on the counter in the palm of my right hand.

Many nights I count fish from sun down to sun up. After most of the fish pass through the weir and on up the creek, another three to four hundred gather in the pool in an hour's time. At this rate, I'll see more than seventy-five thousand Bluebacks pass me in my two months on this job.

On this first night I can see my breath like another ghost in the lantern light, but I'm used to brisk fall nights.

The second night, I dig out my jacket.

The third night I build a campfire near the weir so Rex and I can fight back the frost while we keep track of Bluebacks.

Fish traffic slows a little the next day toward evening, so I crawl into my sleeping bag in my air-conditioned cabin for a few hours' sleep before resuming my fish vigil. I awake with Rex in my face, whiffling like he's trying to make up for all those thoughts he's had in English but never spoken to me.

"You've got two inches of snow on your sleeping bag," he would say if he could. "I'm sure you should do something about that."

Darned if I know what to do in the long run, but this calls for a fire in the cook stove right away. First things first. But I can see that, in between keeping up with counting the runs of fish up the creek, I'll be doing a little winterizing today.

I chop enough wood chunks off a nearby downed buckskin Tamarack to last me a few more days. The breezeways between the logs of the cabin are many and wide. I have nothing to fill or cover the cracks, so instead, I put on all the clothes I brought along.

Short days and long nights follow. With each flurry, the snow stacks up another couple or three inches. The Bluebacks continue their headlong rush up the creek. Even when the running water of the creek freezes over, the fish still navigate under the ice. I watch my fourteen-foot boat on its mooring, transform into a block of ice, growing a little larger with each wave. Rex and I huddle together by the weir, wearing icicle breath mustaches.

For several days, anytime day or night, we sit and listen to the sound of wood surprised by the early winter. Sap-filled trees split open with a big bang because they froze too soon. Boards on my cabin roof freeze solid and pop nails out. Same with the

nails holding the hinges on my little grub cabinet, and if I had a banana in there, it would be frozen solid so I could pound those nails back in with it.

By now, however, the grub cabinet holds a lot of nothing and one can of pork and beans. The Fish and Game Department will come with fresh supplies soon, even though they are now six days overdue. “If I can just keep from freezing to death,” I tell myself through chattering teeth, “I’m sure I can last.”

Three sleeping bags and a large dog don’t come close to keeping me warm, so I stoke up a bigger fire in the wood cook stove. When Rex climbs into the oven and curls up there without scorching a hair, I know—I require an alternate plan.

The Sullivan’s. I have neighbors. True, those twin brothers live another mile up the creek, but apparently they are holed up and doing all right. Now in their seventies, they’ve lived right where they are for decades, so they would know what to do next.

Rex and I knock at the door of their big, solid, draft-free log cabin this morning. Both brothers welcome me like my visit is a major event. Together they usher me into their toasty living room where the crockery plates on the breakfast table catch orange light from the fire in an open fireplace.

“Have some of my brother’s sourdough biscuits,” brags one brother hospitably while the other pours coffee.

“Family recipe,” the other responds modestly. “We’ve depended on the same starter for everything we bake for as long as we’ve lived here. You can make...” Here he takes a breath, and the other brother continues the thought as though their brains are linked.

“...pancakes, bread, cookies, cakes, you name it,” he says. “I’ll send some of the starter with you for your camp.”

I tell them about my empty larder and my growing doubts that the Fish and Game Department will return with supplies in time to save me. Had the Sullivan’s heard any news from the outside world that could account for the delay, I wonder? An earthquake? A tidal wave? Some major disaster-related lapse in North Idaho communications?

Neither brother has heard a thing. Well, how could they, when the lake is their only access to civilization? A mail boat stops by at the little dock at the creek mouth on rare, irregular occasions, but none of us have seen it lately either.

“You’d better take some of this flour and sugar, too, Bob,” lists one brother as he springs into his provision-packing mode.

“...and some salt and lard, and some beans and...,” the other continues. “But stay over tonight and warm up.”

Best idea I’ve heard out loud for about three weeks. Rex and I climb into the Sullivan’s dependable, warm loft and sleep like puppies. In the morning, we return to our frozen fish counting post, fortified with a sourdough pancake breakfast, provisions to last several more days, warmer clothes for me and a great deal of advice about the lake if I decided to make a run for it.

“You can count on that lake to doublecross you...,” says one Sullivan, and the other continues.

“...anytime you trust it completely. Yep, that’s one thing you can always count on.”

I've thought on that bit of wisdom for another week and a half, until my larder is empty again, and the Fish and Game Department has not yet sent anyone with supplies.

On this gray, quiet morning when the lake and the sky match, I chip the ice off my open fourteen-foot aluminum boat, crank up its little ten-horse power outboard and turn the bow out toward the point. Rex will be all right at our campsite because I'll be right back with supplies. Rounding the point on still water, I see a low hanging bank of dark clouds over toward the east.

Next I notice the black line on the water along the horizon. I saw that black line once, years ago, and it meant churning water. I could turn back now, but I chose to keep my bow toward Garfield Bay.

The black wall rolls down on me so quickly, it would have caught me even if I had turned back at the point. Within two minutes I am in raging hell, as if I had taken a wrong turn into the ocean, bypassing a North Idaho lake. Waves crest and break over the boat, and I have no choice but to quarter into the waves and run down the trough between waves every so often. With each run, my boat takes on more water and badly needs bailing, but I'm busy holding onto the outboard handle to guide the boat as though it makes any difference.

Through the swirling sub-freezing air and water I see people standing along the dock in front of Sam Miller's store maybe half a mile yet over into Garfield Bay. "A hardy bunch, to be out for entertainment in this storm," I think. "Maybe someone will see me. Maybe one of them has lost his mind and will attempt a rescue."

But as I run down a few more troughs and draw closer to shore, now I can see the people waving wildly, cheering in my direction although the sound of their words is lost

in the freezing wind. Encouragement from a distance is the best they can do. I count on them to keep cheering so I can keep going. It is enough.

I open the throttle and run the boat up onto the beach beside the people. Eight or ten men are here to haul it out the rest of the way. In the distance, past my numbness, I hear two men discussing someone. It can't be me they're talking about, because I'm OK.

"His hands are frozen to the throttle," one murmurs.

"Let's try prying," another suggests quietly. "Rub his hands a little. See if some circulation might loosen them up. Yeah. Now...now pry a little again. Easy now..."

They extract me from my frozen boat pilot position and carry me into a room as hot as a blast furnace. Mrs. Bullis, Sam Miller's sister, has gathered snow into the bathtub just for me, and packs me in it to thaw slowly. She keeps telling me the advised first aid is the snow treatment. That and the shot of whiskey she gives me now and then.

I thaw out, even get warm, overnight. I survive. The combined effort of all those people saves my life, I'm sure of it.

In the morning I call the Fish and Game Department, and I buy supplies, including canvas to cover cracks between my cabin logs. After the storm passes, the Game Warden gladly ferries me back over to my fish counting camp in his small cabin boat.

On the way back across the lake toward my Granite Creek campsite, I reflect on what I'm sure of. First off, I can trust the lake to double-cross me. Therefore, escape via my own boat again will be my last choice.

When the Game Warden helps me unload that second wave of supplies in the snow, and I give his boat a shove to turn him homeward, I see his hand go up again in

that old familiar salute. I don't hear any warning this time about looking out for the mysterious black thing, since I found it.

“See you in a couple of weeks, Bob,” he waves. “A couple of weeks, for sure.”

Possible, but not a sure thing, I know now. I have tucked in a few extra supplies just in case. That turns out to be a darn good idea because, in another couple of weeks, hundreds of deer come down to the creek, driven by deep snow and hunger, and take over my campsite. A Chinook blows in the following week and melts the deep snow overnight and causes a flash flood that sweeps away my weir and drives me out of my cabin.

The fish traffic slows dramatically and concludes my project anyway toward the end of my second month on the job. Considering all of the above, I won't wait any longer for the Fish and Game boat to come get me. I catch sight of the phantom mail boat, a twenty-five foot seaworthy cabin cruiser, hail it, board it to Bayview, and leave behind my wreck of a campsite forever. The Fish and Game can pick up my little death trap of a boat later.

By the time I leave Granite Creek for good, I finish my reflection on the objects of my trust. No matter how well I map out my life in every crisis so far, a factor remains that I never imagined: My life seems out of my hands. The kind people whom I have not even factored into my backup plans are the ones who shower me with rescue. I figure that the Person in charge of my life provides another human being to show me compassion in the nick of time.

I know now I can count on it.