

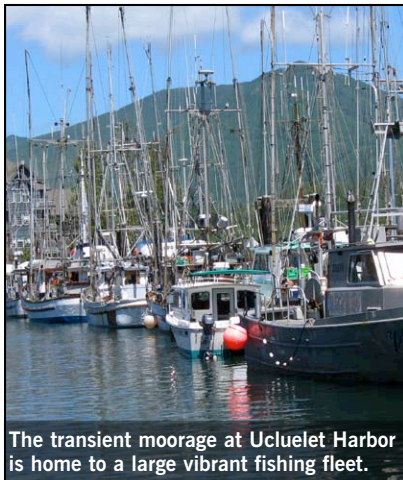
# Wilderness Boating

By John Gray

Bears on the beach, humpback whales, bald eagles, legendary fishing, world-class scuba diving, tree-covered islands, and steep mountains. They found all this and more in the Pacific Northwest's Barkley Sound

The terminus of Pipestream Inlet with 1,000-plus high mountains on each side and depths in the triple digits.

**B**arkley Sound in British Columbia, Canada, is on Vancouver Island's rugged west coast, whose beauty is typically enjoyed by the big boats that can transit the Strait of Juan de Fuca and brave the Pacific Ocean. But it's also accessible to trailerable boats by launching at Port Alberni, a seaport 30 miles inland and connected to Barkley Sound by an inlet with deep water, steep mountains, and splendid scenery.



The transient moorage at Ucluelet Harbor is home to a large vibrant fishing fleet.

Shaped like a rectangle that's about 12 miles long and 10 miles across, Barkley Sound is open to the power and force of the Pacific Ocean. In the center of the Sound are the Broken Group Islands that are part of Canada's Pacific Rim National Park; these provide many safe anchorages and opportunities for exploration.

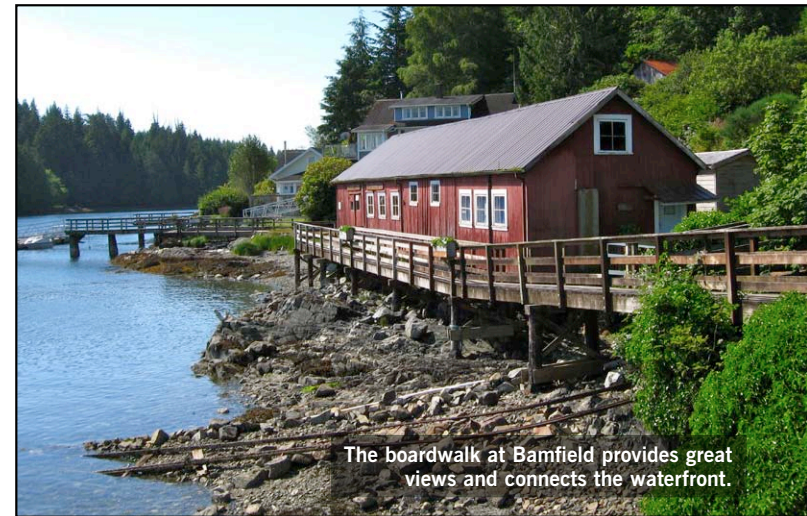
the experience is worth it.

A trip to Port Alberni from the mainland typically begins with a trip on the BC Ferry System from their large terminal at Tsawwassen, to Duke Point, which is south of the city of Vancouver. The cost of the two-and-a-half-hour trip to Nanaimo isn't cheap. Our truck and

Late fall, winter, and early spring usually bring over 200 inches of rain, periods of snow, and often freezing temperatures. Late summer and early fall can bring dense fog in the morning hours that can shut down most of the boating until it clears at midday. Afternoon winds are common and can blow up the Port Alberni Inlet, to the point of small-craft warnings being issued. But with the right timing,

trailer, measuring 52 feet, cost us over \$200 for a one-way trip. Our Ranger 25 Tug looked like it was inside a huge whale as it sat on its trailer deep within the ferry's bowels.

From Nanaimo, Port Alberni is about a two-hour drive on a very good highway. But there's about a mile of an eight-percent grade to the top of Alberni Summit and then about 10 miles of a six-percent grade down to the edge of Alberni Inlet. The trailer's brakes must be in good condition and attentive driving is essential. We applied the advice provided in the May 2010 *BoatU.S. Trailering Guide* to assess our trailer's brakes and then did the needed repairs. Even with conservative driving, the disc brakes for our 9,000-pound load were too hot to the



The boardwalk at Bamfield provides great views and connects the waterfront.

touch for about an hour after we stopped.

Port Alberni, population 12,000, was the center of Vancouver Island's logging industry for decades. Today, fishing and tourism dominate the economy. A car is necessary to get to the big retail stores that were built on the highway



coming into town, but shops and good restaurants are walking distance from the downtown moorage. The Port Alberni Port Authority oper-



Sea life is abundant at the tide retreats to expose the many tide pools.

ates all the marinas and boat ramps in the area. The most popular boat ramp is at Clutesi Haven Marina that is just upriver from downtown. The ramp fee is \$12 and there is an additional charge to park overnight. Most local boaters typically park in a large field across the street from the ramp at no charge.

On our first day, we drove, took the ferry, and launched at Clutesi on a late afternoon in early July. Then, we motored past Port Alberni's commercial fishing docks and the last of the big lumber mills and stopped for the night seven miles later, at China Creek Marina, that was packed with sportfishing boats. We enjoyed the low-key genuine graciousness of the Canadians as they welcomed us and admired the Ranger 25.

Fishing is taken very seriously here. Millions of sockeye salmon return from the Pacific in July and the Port Alberni Inlet can have hundreds of small boats fishing for them. Many of these fishermen put in at China Creek Marina and stay at the campground. On the morning of the second day, we awoke to the sound of boots on the steel grating of the ramp, and boats leaving the marina before sunrise, and later watched most of them return during our breakfast because they'd caught their daily limit within 90 minutes. There's another salmon season later when the big chinook salmon or "springs," as the locals call them, come into Barkley Sound in late August. Fishing for halibut, also known locally as "hallies," often requires venturing out into the Pacific. Between storms, the Pacific can be a safe place, but the boater must be willing to adapt to the changing weather and sea conditions.

We discovered a wooden float in San Mateo Bay where Alberni Inlet joins Barkley Sound and had lunch. These floats were installed by the government years ago and are rarely maintained. Some charts show them, but whether they have survived another winter is a gamble. This bay, like so many in Barkley Sound, has an aqua-farm in operation. Many of these grow oysters to help bring back the stock.

Two sportfishing boats joined us on the wooden float and we fell into enjoyable conversation, an experience that repeated itself several times while boating in this remote place. We had come to cruise Barkley Sound and the islands and knew almost nothing about fishing. These fishermen lived in the region and fished here often. They shared their knowledge, taught us, and exchanged two beers for a fair-sized sockeye salmon.

All the destinations within Barkley Sound are within a few miles of each other. After lunch, we moved on to Poett Nook, attracted by the narrow entrance that protects this lovely harbor. We opted to anchor in 30 feet of water instead of staying at the marina, had the sockeye salmon for dinner, and later used the head and body parts to catch crab.

On the third day, we made the short trip to Bamfield, a small village posted on the southwest corner of Barkley Sound. Bamfield is accessible by vehicle but the road is dirt and gravel. The Canadian Coast Guard has a substantial presence here, a testament to the challenges that mariners can face. We walked the boardwalk, noting the classical music festival that would be starting in the coming days, and toured the harbor to see the services boaters could enjoy.

We opted to head for the Port Alberni Yacht Club's outstation on nearby Fleming Island, passing through the narrow Robber's Passage, and found it in a protected cove. This was not a group of snooty people in their huge floating palaces; this was a delightful experience because of the friendliness of the people. We met Norman and his wife Melanie who share in the care and maintenance of several hundred feet of dock space that is used by the club members and is open to the public. Finding potable water

can be an issue in Barkley Sound because of its remoteness. The outstation provides water, so we filled our tank. Later, we hiked trails cut through the rain forest by the club's members and enjoyed splendid views.

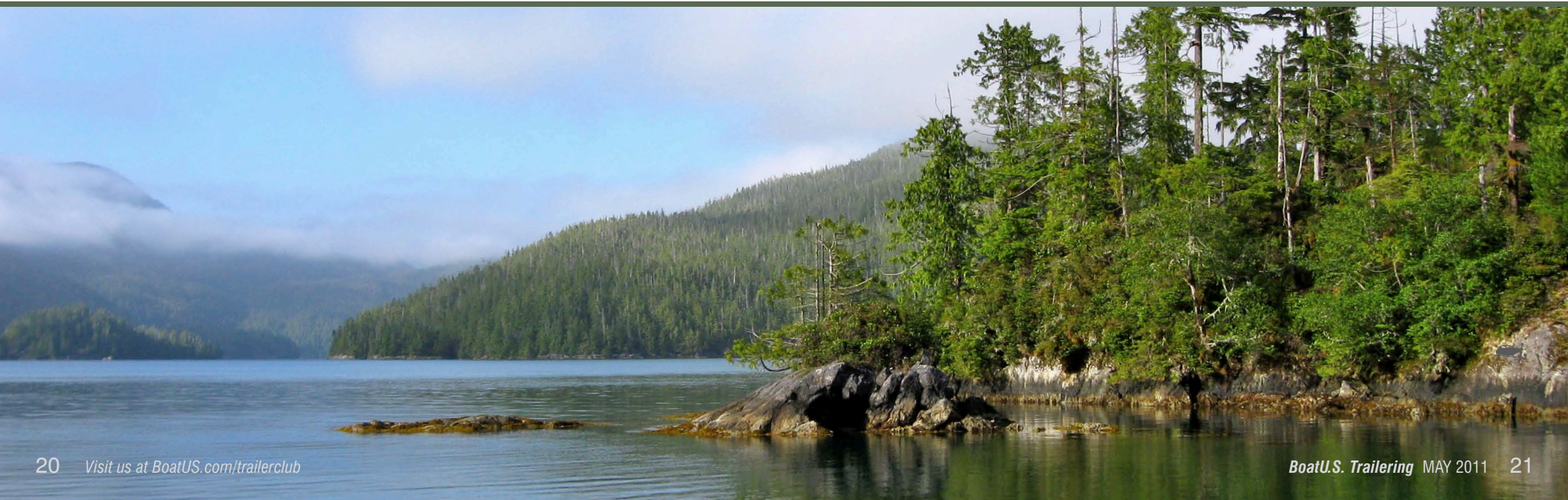
On the fourth day, we motored through a medium chop coming from the ocean and into the protection of the Broken Group Islands and settled into a cove tucked back into Nettle Island. A dinghy ride led us to several big trawlers swinging on their anchors and a vacant floating ranger station. A stern tie line was taken to shore as a breeze blew over the island and we



The waterfront at Bamfield and the Canadian Coast Guard station

knew we did not want to swing in this cove.

The next day's destination was only seven miles away and as we cleared Nettle Island, we saw the distinctive spout and then the tail fin of a humpback whale as it fed in the channel! We idled and drifted along for 30 minutes, as the







Ucluelet Harbor is home to both commercial and charter fishing fleets.

whale would surface, gather air, and then dive deep. As we motored away, a harbor porpoise played in our bow wake. The weather forecast warned of a small-craft advisory later in the day, with strong westerly winds. We opted for a bay that was protected by three islands in the Broken Group. Though the entrances to this bay are deep, the rocks and reefs must be carefully watched and given a wide berth. Once inside the bay, we joined a dozen other trawlers and sailboats to wait out the weather. We



took the dinghy around to explore the oyster beds and the campgrounds used by kayakers. In the fading twilight, the wind rose to rattle the cockpit canvas and we paid out more anchor rode as a precautionary measure. But the Danforth anchor held fast like it always had.

The next morning, the wind abated and we made for the other substantial community in Barkley Sound

located in its northwest corner. Ucluelet (pronounced you-CLUE-let), commonly called "U-Kee," is more populated than Bamfield and has a larger harbor. A paved road that crosses Vancouver Island also serves the community and nearby Tofino, but the combination of steep grades, tight turns, and narrow width can raise second thoughts for many trailerable boaters. The approach to Ucluelet requires a short and unprotected encounter with the Pacific Ocean. We were pushed by ocean swells and a sustained wind of 20 knots pushed us down the bay as it was awash in whitecaps. Ucluelet's harbormaster answered the VHF radio immediately and directed us to the last spot in a crowded marina. Our boat fit perfectly in the last 25 feet of dock space.

The windy weather kept the large fishing charter fleet at the dock. We enjoyed their storytelling, and gesturing of just how big the fish were. Over the next two days, we bought fresh shrimp from a boat, did laundry, shopped the stores, walked the trails on the ocean side of this peninsula, and provisioned at the local market.

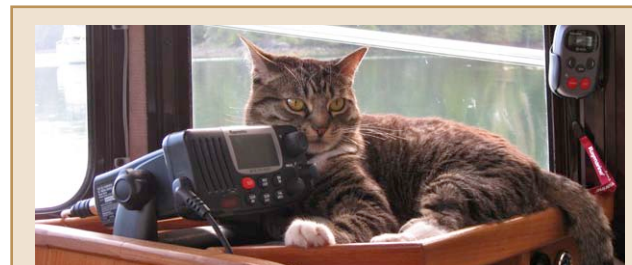
Eight days into our trip, the weather eased and we motored out of Ucluelet for our next destination, 15 miles away, at the northeast corner of the Sound. The water was now flat and the low clouds lifted to reveal the mountains that protected the mainland from the storms that can rage across the Pacific Ocean. We anchored behind Refuge Island in 45 feet of water, intending to explore Lucky Creek, which is only accessible during a high tide. At the mouth of the creek where oyster beds that form a barrier at low tide. Floating over oyster beds and slowly motoring up the creek, the feel was

more of a bayou in the Southeast rather than Vancouver Island.

On the morning of the ninth day, Laurie spotted it first. Looking over my shoulder and out the cabin door, she paused with a forkful of scrambled eggs in mid-air and said, "Bear, on the shore. Right now." A mature black bear was 100 yards away, lumbering along the shoreline at low tide, using its massive paw to roll over a rock, sniff it, and eat the sea life. The bear followed the water's edge for the next 15 minutes before it turned and disappeared in the tree line. Later, we took the dinghy to closely explore the oyster beds and tide pools, and admired the variety of sea stars and mussels – and, yes, we were on the lookout for bears!

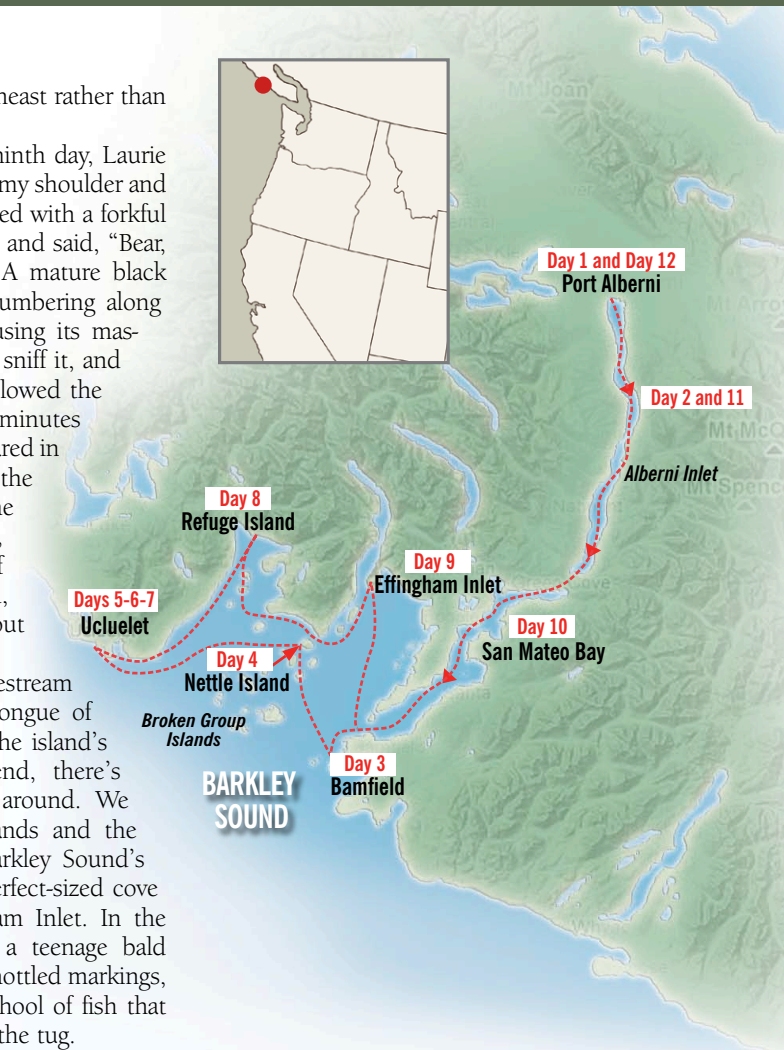
Then, we headed up Pipestream Inlet, a narrow and deep tongue of water that went deep into the island's mountain range. At the end, there's no option except to turn around. We explored the Pinkerton Islands and the Alma Russell Islands on Barkley Sound's east side before finding a perfect-sized cove near the mouth of Effingham Inlet. In the waning light, we watched a teenage bald eagle, distinctive due to its mottled markings, and we tried to hunt the school of fish that kicked up the water around the tug.

In the early morning the next day, we watched another young black bear forage the beach for breakfast. It stood on its hind legs and sniffed the air but it didn't acknowledge our presence. Our cat Boots saw the bear, hunkered down on the tug's bow, and peered at it over the short ledge until the bear sauntered back into the woods.



### Boating With Boots

Boots the cat has been traveling with John and Laurie Gray since 2008. She's seen British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest, run the docks at a Tennessee marina, and explored Mississippi lily pads thinking they were grass. That's where Boots learned to swim, but she prefers to stay onboard.



We completed the circle of Barkley Sound by ending the day back at San Mateo Bay, running with the wind and waves against our transom or, as someone once defined that feeling, "going with God." On the same wooden float where we started the trip, we met new fishermen and exchanged more stories and laughter.

At the end of 12 days, we were back in Port Alberni, having used the westerly wind and the rising tide to quickly fly up Alberni Inlet. We were gone 12 days, cruised 171 miles, burned 60 gallons of diesel, and used 50 gallons of water to boat in the wilderness – an unforgettable time of splendid scenery and gracious people.

*Trailer Club member John Gray last appeared in the February 2010 issue of BoatU.S. Trailing when he wrote about taking his Ranger 25 to Princess Louisa Inlet in British Columbia. Read his blog at [www.laurieann-ranger25.com](http://www.laurieann-ranger25.com).*