

Vancouver Island



**Justin Hollett's BJ60 with the Broken Islands
in the distance.**

Photo by Mike Waters

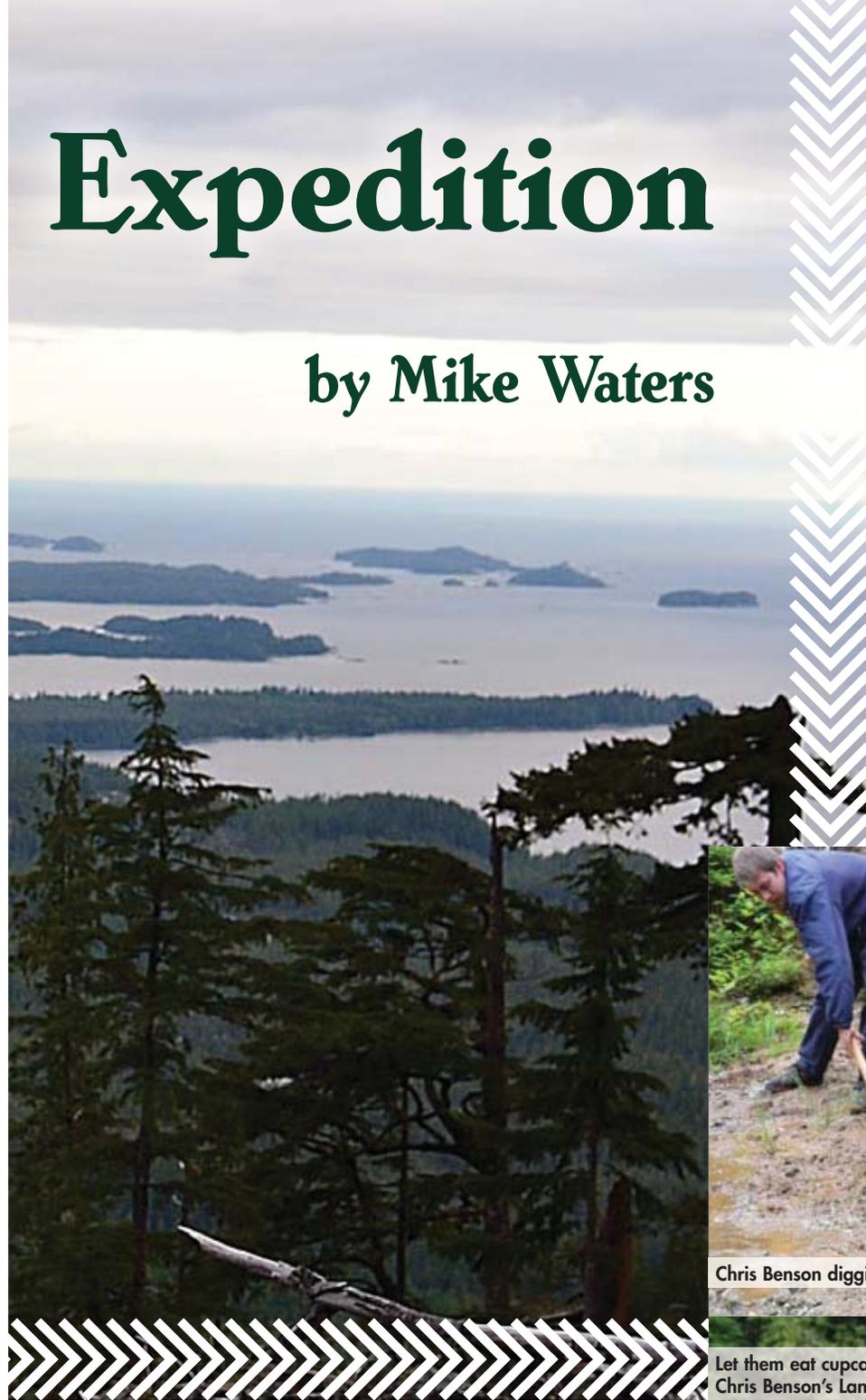
Years ago, when my buddies Chris Benson and Justin Hollett bought FJ40s and introduced me to Land Cruisers, I had to buy an FJ40 as well. Mine was a little worse for wear and actually had what appeared to be paper mache in some of the bodywork but nonetheless, I loved that rig.

Expedition

by Mike Waters

Mike Wavrecan met up in Parksville to prep for our expedition. Besides food and camping gear, we equipped my Cruiser with a winch so that all three Cruisers had one installed, just in case. After some last minute adjustments and tire kicking, we were ready to hit the dirt.

Our initial plan was to get high into the mountains behind Tofino Inlet. The Lost Shoe Trail was our starting point and from the maps, it appeared that a tangled mess of logging roads (some active and some deactivated) about 40 km in could potentially get us into the mountains. Just past the Kennedy Lake Bridge, Chris took an optional trail just for fun, to try to tackle a short, steep rise. It looked simple enough but as his front end lumbered up the beginning of the ledge, his rear end mired itself in mud that was much deeper than expected. As Chris had brought the only shovel, we thought it fitting that he should be the one to wield it and so we gave moral support and the odd bit of advice as we ate cupcakes and watched him sweat his Cruiser out of the sludge.



Chris Benson digging out his rig. Photo by Mike Waters.

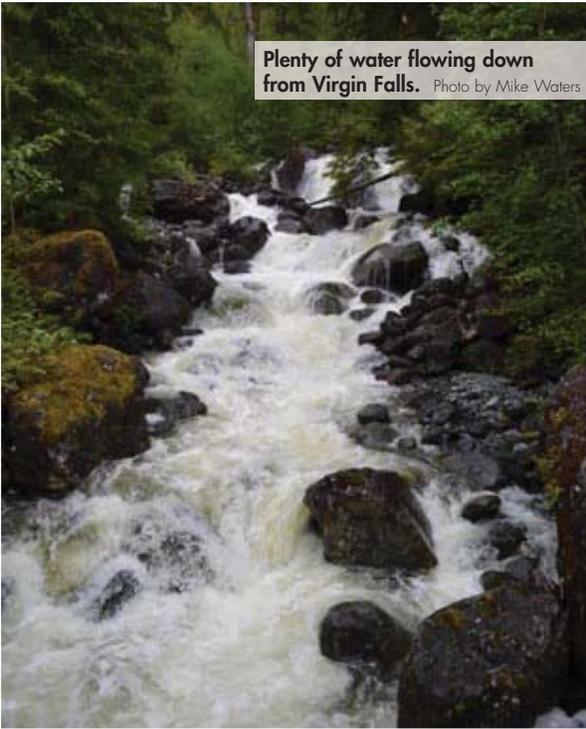


Let them eat cupcakes—the author “helping” to extract Chris Benson’s Land Cruiser. Photo by Mike Wavrecan.

When they sold their FJ40s and bought BJ60s, then I also had to get a BJ60. It took a little while for me to find the vehicle I wanted but it finally happened in 2009. We turned wrenches on the Cruisers in Justin’s Dad’s garage for years and always said that we should take a back roads trip with all three vehicles. A real expedition, not just an afternoon of wheeling—a trip like the adventures we’d seen in the pages of this very magazine.

We’d all been off-road over much of Vancouver Island at different times but none of us had ever ventured into the backcountry of the west coast of the island. So excitement was in the air when things finally came together this past year and after juggling work schedules and family commitments, Justin, Chris, myself and our buddy

Plenty of water flowing down from Virgin Falls. Photo by Mike Waters



Once Chris freed his vehicle, we kept climbing on a logging road that seemed to perpetually split and veer off into steep, overgrown trails. The way seemed promising but the uppermost trail ended abruptly in a slash pile at the back of a cut block. In British Columbia—especially on the island it seems—this scenario is commonplace. We consulted our maps and a GPS to determine our location and eventually realized that a map line we thought was a single dotted track turned out to be two separate tracks on either side of a mountain ridge. Day one and we were lost already.

We headed back down the mountain and had a look at Virgin Falls while we regrouped and made a new plan. We decided to keep wheeling but head south back out the Lost Shoe Trail and try another potential route into the mountains. After hitting several other dead ends, we happened upon a campsite. The rotting plywood cabin was most likely used for a party in the bush by occasional hunters or groups of teens. It was situated on the river but had no real view or redeeming features and since it was still early in the day, we moved on. The drive got more interesting for Justin on the way back out to Highway 4. It was like the forest squeezed down on him as he went by, gave him a hug and didn't want to let go of his rig. He lost his spare tire, roof rack and side mirror to a low hanging tree but luckily no major fixes were required.



Easing Justin Hollett's Cruiser through tight trails toward Handsome Mountain. Photo by Mike Waters

We eventually spent the night at Salmon Beach near Toquaht Bay. We hung out amongst the bears at the water and had a good night.

The next day, we kept heading south into the mountains behind Toquaht Bay. What better place for a few handsome guys to attempt to reach than a place called Handsome Mountain...?



The forest holding tight to Justin Hollett's BJ60. Photo by Mike Waters

Shortly into our ride the second morning, I mentioned to Chris and Justin that my clutch had started feeling really soft. We pulled off at a lakeside campsite and the tools came out. I'm not nearly as mechanically inclined as Chris and Justin but before I knew it, parts of my rig were strung out on the ground around them and the occasional, "Oh man, that's not good" could be heard. Everything was removed in good order but I sensed some hesitation with the

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Handsome Mountain, rising modestly to 3,143 feet. Photo by Mike Waters

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parts all going back together without any orphan bolts or screws being left on the ground. However, once things were reassembled, we hit the road with no issues.

Handsome Mountain just sounds like a real man’s destination and we quickly found the spur road that connected to it and that was when the real off-road adventure began. We all helped clear a path on what used to be an old logging road. The path narrowed and became a trail, which closed in with thick brush and logs that we had to skirt around using a spotter. At one point, the road washed out down a gentle slope so we heaved rocks and carried stones to build up the trail. All this effort and again our journey was cut short by a dead end.

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Aerobic exercise—British Columbia style. Photo by Mike Waters



The trail up Handsome Mountain required some clearing. Photo by Mike Waters

There was no road up the mountain but we had made it within view of an amazing lake at the foot of Handsome Mountain. It would have been great to camp on the lake but without an excavator, bulldozer or an army of loggers, the remaining 400-yard stretch to the water was nearly impassable—even on foot. This setback was greeted with some colorful language but we were still all smiles. We backtracked yet again and decided to keep trying to head as high up into the mountains as we could go. This time, we were beyond the maps and GPS. We just committed to following and trying out trails and logging roads that went uphill. This approach eventually paid off as we found another promising logging road and kept climbing.

Several wind fallen trees, about four feet in diameter at the butt, crossed the road shortly into our route. Our master sawyer Chris powered through them with the chainsaw we had in our gear and we all grunted giant rounds of cedar off the road. One gigantic tree looked as if someone had fallen it just to get at a huge burl about fifteen feet up the trunk; the rest of the carcass lay across the road. Four trees across the road later, we came upon what turned out to be our main obstacle of the trip: a creek that was previously spanned by a bridge and a giant culvert. The crossing had been deactivated and the banks into the water were now tall and steep. Chris and Justin surveyed the scene and we contemplated our second round of roadwork that day. But first things first, we decided to hike around the creek to see if the effort we were going to have to put in would be worth it related to what was on the other side. A quick ten minute walk yielded views of what we figured was Pipestem Inlet at the very back of Barkley Sound. If we could see Pipestem and the road went higher into the west, who knew what kind of amazing



Exploring a much improved logging road. Photo by Mike Waters

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Justin Hollett taking the lead on a creek crossing. Photo by Mike Waters

view and campsite could be above us! We were stoked, headed back to the Cruisers and rolled up our sleeves.

After building up a section of the bank on the far side of the creek, we had to line up a route through the rocks on the near side. With spotters in place, Justin attempted to cross first. Easing into the creek, he had to avoid a large boulder that could have been a real rocker panel remodeler but once around it, the Cruiser scrambled over the slippery bits and made it to the other side. The BJ60 then hit the berm on the other side of the creek and bounced so much that it looked like it was going to roll. We stopped, threw more rocks under the Cruiser to build up the bank and then Justin scrambled up the other side.

Chris took his rig through next with no hang ups now that we knew the line and the far side was built up enough. We kept on along



The Broken Islands Group at the entrance to Alberni Inlet. Photo by Mike Waters

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Tofino Inlet, on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Photo by Mike Waters

the deactivated road through huge water bars where I'm sure other longer wheel-base trucks would have been hung up. After a long day of wheeling, the age of the BJ60s was starting to show through. Justin's Cruiser was losing power and stalling on the steep sections and the custom hydraulic emergency brake on Chris' Cruiser kept failing at the most inopportune times. More than once, we were all clearing the way ahead and Chris had to sprint back to rescue his Cruiser as it was creeping back down the mountain.

As we sweated away at reopening the road, it was the view that kept enticing us to

keep going. Climbing higher and higher, the view kept expanding over Barkley Sound. After hours of wheeling, winching and cutting huge root wads and logs, we arrived at what was the best camping spot any of us had ever seen: level ground and an expansive view of the entire Broken Group of Islands and Barkley Sound.

After working so hard and wheeling all day, we took in the view for a while before we set up camp. Looking out at the islands and the expanse of ocean beyond—with only Japan as the next landfall—my thoughts wandered to those who saw these islands

on actual expeditions before us. First Nations have been here for millennia but Europeans only ventured here in the latter half of the 18th century. The sailors at that time would have never seen the birds' eye view we were afforded now. As I set up the bed in the back of my rig, I felt incredibly fortunate to have arrived at this place.

Sitting around the campfire, as our view of the sound shone in the moonlight, we shared some laughs and caught up. We're definitely not the same guys that bought our FJ40s and BJ40s so many years ago, but sitting there with the BJ60s in a row on that ledge looking out at the Pacific, I realized a big part of how and why we had kept in touch over the years was talking about and working on our Land Cruisers. Keeping these old vehicles going and getting out into the wilderness—that's what it's all about. The view was fantastic but the great thing about the trip was sharing the adventure. With the weekend drawing to an end and faced with the reality of needing to head our separate ways in the morning, I couldn't help but hope that our next off-road trip together wouldn't be that far down the road.

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