



*Inspired as a child by Farley Mowat's books about Canada's wildlife and wilderness, a park warden, his filmmaker wife, two-year-old son and dog embark on a cross-country journey by canoe, train and sailboat, retracing the places and stories featured in those celebrated books*



# *Following Farley*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KARSTEN HEUER

Porter, please! Author Karsten Heuer's son Zev and dog Willow guard the family's canoe while waiting to board a train in Churchill, Man. Leanne Allison and Zev (ABOVE) take a reading break during the first leg of the journey.



The “Finding Farley” adventure began on the Bow River (OPPOSITE AND BELOW), two blocks from Heuer and Allison’s home in Canmore, Alta. They travelled by canoe, car, train and sailboat (MAP) across seven provinces and one territory, photographing, filming and making notes along the way while, at the same time, answering an endless stream of questions from their two-year-old and keeping him safe and fed.

through the eyes of a nature-hungry dog and kid. Under the tutelage of Mowat’s carefully crafted sentences, my reading improved, as did my understanding of my own country. I learned about Canadian wildlife and threats to them in *Never Cry Wolf* (1963) and *A Whale for the Killing* (1972), and was exposed, through his encounters with starving Ithalmuit around Nueltin Lake, to the history and mistreatment of aboriginal people in *People of the Deer* (1952) and *The Desperate People* (1959).

These stories were, I suppose, part of what propelled me to study ecology at university and to become a wildlife biologist, working for Parks Canada in Banff and Ivvavik national parks. Before long, I, too, began writing books about my experiences with wildlife and wilderness, telling stories that couldn’t be shared with scientific data alone. The second of my books, *Being Caribou* (excerpted in *CG* March/April 2006), about a five-month trek I made with Leanne following the migration of the Porcupine caribou herd, helped complete the circle. On the eve of its Canadian release, I sent a copy to Mowat, who is now

87, along with a letter explaining the influence he’d had on my life. A month later, a one-page response composed on a manual typewriter arrived in our mailbox. “One of the best, most evocative and hard-hitting accounts of man’s inhumanity toward life,” he said of my book, and then extended an invitation to visit that would shape the next year of our lives.

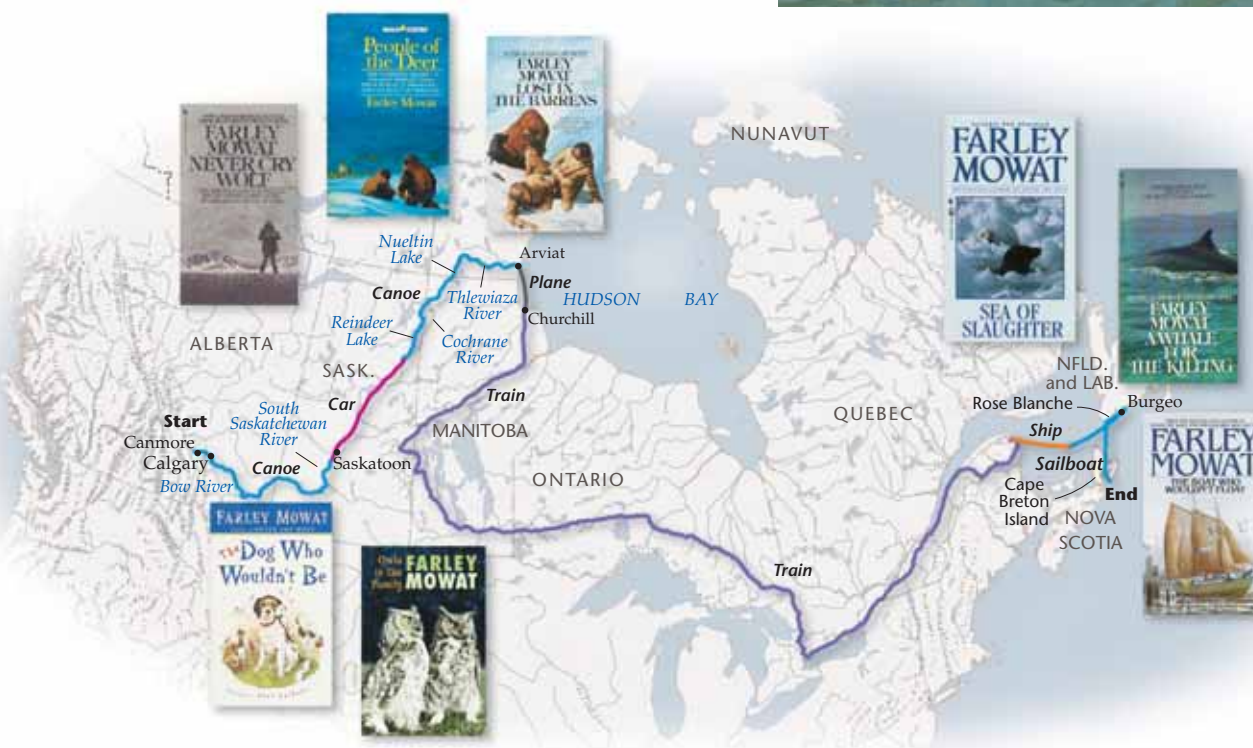
I think Mowat expected that we would fly to Cape Breton Island to visit him at his farm, but given the adventures he’d had, jetting across the country in a few hours to meet him didn’t seem right. So we decided we would do it in the style of the Viking Norsemen, old Newfoundland fishermen, Inuit hunters, Arctic explorers,



A TATTERED PAPERBACK copy of *Never Cry Wolf* lay open on my lap as I steered our canoe across the inky waters of Nueltin Lake, which straddles the Manitoba-Nunavut border. Behind us, tucked into the twisted spruce trees on shore, purple fireweed grew from the ruins of the trapper’s cabin where Farley Mowat, then a young writer and naturalist just home from service on the battlefields of Europe during the Second World War, had stayed for two summers 60 years ago. Ahead, somewhere on the “yellow sand esker ... winding sinuously away in the distance like a gigantic snake” was the Arctic wolf den he’d written about in one of his best-known books. We were paddling toward it to see whether it was still in use.

Getting to Nueltin Lake hadn’t been easy. Since leaving our Canmore, Alta., home 2½ months earlier, my wife Leanne and I had paddled with our two-year-old son Zev and dog Willow across the prairies of Mowat’s childhood. We had then dragged, lined and otherwise struggled with our canoe up the northern Manitoba river he’d followed, humping loads over the same overgrown trails he’d portaged with his Metis guide in the late 1940s and negotiating the same “roaring torrents” of the Thlewiaza River down to Nueltin Lake. But pilgrimages aren’t meant to be easy. And a pilgrimage this was. Mowat’s books were serving as our maps across Canada, and our purpose was to revisit their narratives as we travelled through the prairie, northern and maritime chapters of his life. The journey’s end would be an encounter with the author himself.

Like many Canadians, I grew up reading Mowat. *Owls in the Family* (1961), his memoir of his childhood in Saskatoon, was the first chapter book I ever finished. I then dug into *Lost in the Barrens* (1956), one of his first novels, and *The Dog Who Wouldn’t Be* (1957), a tender but lighthearted account of the Depression years on the prairies told



*We would paddle, ride the train and sail across the country to see Mowat in a five-month-long journey.*

Paddling into Calgary (RIGHT), Heuer and Allison haul their canoe out of the river and march downtown (BELOW) to mail their first letter of the journey to Farley Mowat. On the lower reaches of the Bow River, Heuer paused the expedition to photograph a copse of cottonwoods against the prairie sky (OPPOSITE).

crusty sailors and other characters that peopled his 39 books. We would paddle, ride the rails and sail across the country to see him, covering its daunting distances in five months.

Such slow and deliberate travel has its challenges, of course, which were exacerbated not only by the demands of Zev and our hyper border collie, but also the intricacies of our decision to shoot a documentary for the National Film Board of Canada as we went. What was barely manageable as we crossed the prairies in May and June became overwhelming in the boreal forest in July. No sooner had the river currents switched against us than the bears became numerous and more curious. Portage trails were elusive. Resupply points grew farther apart. When the wind was blowing, it was against us, and when it wasn't, the bugs made us wish it was.

Oh, God, the bugs.

We finally had a little breakdown on the night we were camped within sight of the old log cabin on Nuelin Lake. White-crowned sparrows trilled from the few spruce trees brave enough to poke north of the treeline, and in the distance, a family of loons called from a tundra pond. Linking the two were the trails of the Qamanirjuaq caribou herd, smoothing an otherwise ragged transition between forest and Barren Lands with their graceful, curving lines.

We were eating dinner, a meal that was more blackflies and mosquitoes than beans and rice. Suddenly, in addition to our accumulated exhaustion, the swatting and the gymnastics of dining with a head net on became too much. Grabbing Zev, we stormed off to the tent in



*Halfway across the prairies, Zev and I climbed into a cottonwood tree to hoot at a great horned owl.*



a rage that, to our embarrassment, he would re-enact for weeks to come. It lasted the two hours it took to kill the thousands of insects that came in with us and oscillated wildly between horror and glee. Then, a little more calmly, we began the nightly routine of doctoring the worst bites. In spite of our head-to-toe "bug-proof" clothing, all three of us were covered in welts. Leanne didn't utter the question, but it was certainly on my mind: Why had we embarked on this journey?

I reached for my bag of books, pulled out *The Desperate People* and began reading aloud. It was a powerful passage about starvation, about true suffering in that very landscape only a few decades before. As images of dying Ihalmit babies and contorted adults lifted off the page, what had seemed horrific a few minutes before suddenly became trivial. Throughout our journey, such Mowat-inspired moments helped us across the high points as well as the low, like the time, while rereading *Owls in the Family* halfway across the prairies, Zev and I climbed into a giant cottonwood tree to hoot at a great horned owl. A crossover moment of timelessness. A gem held out to the pilgrim. It was the kind of moment we were searching for now.

IN A LAND DOMINATED BY BOGS AND ROCK, we had no trouble finding the only sand esker for kilometres. And within minutes of coming ashore, we knew we were in the right place: the shoulder blades, shin bones and vertebrae of wolf-killed caribou lay strewn across the old glacial riverbed, along with piles of hair-filled wolf scat. The signs were recent but not fresh; most of the scat was bleached by sun and rain,



*I couldn't send a message until we had canoed another 300 kilometres to Arviat, on Hudson Bay.*

and the few threads of sinew still attached to the bones were as brittle as twigs. By the time we found the entrance to the den, we already knew what the lack of fresh tracks meant: wolves still used the area that Mowat had made famous but hadn't denned here this year.

Or had they? Later that night, after Leanne, Zev and the dog were asleep, a wolf visited our camp. I was on a nearby knoll at the time, savouring a toddler-free moment of late-evening sunshine, when a whisper of movement caught my eye. It was a white wolf, and it had already seen me but nonetheless continued toward the tent with a relaxed stride. I prayed for everyone inside to stay asleep as it padded to within five metres of the thin nylon shelter. In a testament to the wolf's stealth, no one stirred, not even the dog. Without pausing, it continued up a nearby slope and, as fast as it had appeared, slipped into the shadows and was gone.

I wrote about the incident in my next letter to Mowat, describing the wolf's creamy colour, regal size and commanding demeanour as best I could. He delightedly replied that it was likely one of the progeny of the alpha male and female he had spent so much time watching while researching *Never Cry Wolf* 60 years before.

That exchange of letters took more than a month. I couldn't send my handwritten message until we had canoed another 300 kilometres to the Inuit community of Arviat, on Hudson Bay, and Mowat's response didn't reach us until we had covered another 2,000 kilometres by train, ship and sailboat and walked into the post office at the next major stopover in his life story, Burgeo, N.L.

But when I was standing there on the tundra, the thought of the time lag in our correspondence didn't matter. By then, I had a pretty fair sense of what Mowat's letter would suggest: that attached to every landscape is an undercurrent of wildness, a story of geographic potential and biological belonging, the very kinds of stories he'd spent so much of his life articulating. Our gift back to him was a first-hand report that told him those stories were still out there among the owl-filled cottonwood groves of the South Saskatchewan River, with the wolves on southern Nunavut's tundra and, as we were soon to find out, among the great fin whales of Newfoundland's rugged southwest coast.

IT'S BEEN SAID THAT TO GAIN the respect of its friendly people, the best way to arrive on the Island of Newfoundland is by small boat. Even better, we found out, is to arrive from Quebec in a gale-force wind and four-metre seas with freshly ripped sails. Throw in a blond-haired two-year-old stepping nonchalantly ashore while a wharf full of stormbound fishermen looks on, and you're certain to attract the attention and sympathy of the entire town. Or so it seemed. Within hours of blowing into the town of Burgeo, Leanne, Zev, our skipper Tam Flemming — an



TOP TO BOTTOM: Zev checks his mom's camera angle. A beaver-gnawed cottonwood. Willow guides Heuer. Allison lines the canoe up the Cochrane River in Manitoba.



Heuer scrubs up (TOP) on Reindeer Lake at the Saskatchewan-Manitoba border. Zev drags his own canoe (BOTTOM) along the shallows of the lower Bow River in Alberta.

*Each morning, the harbour came alive with the comings and goings of the small boats of inshore fishermen.*

adventurous friend of a friend who took a month off work to sail us from Quebec's Îles de la Madeleine to Newfoundland and Nova Scotia for the chance to meet Mowat — and I had enough offers of meals, beds, showers and loaned vehicles to last us weeks, if not months.

This was the very sort of hospitality that had greeted Mowat and his new wife Claire 45 years earlier when they, too, had put in to Burgeo's sheltered harbour in a 30-foot wooden schooner, the *Happy Adventure*, the inspiration for Farley's hilarious book, *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float* (1969). Their original plan was to stop only as long as it took to repair their engine, but they were so taken by the area's rugged beauty and the generosity of its people that they stayed for six years.

Part of the attraction, wrote Mowat, was the isolation. The small outport fishing community was a place where he could "escape from the increasingly mechanistic mainland world with its ... witless production for mindless consumption; its disruptive infatuation with change for its own sake."

But even isolated Burgeo succumbed to the "bitch goddess, Progress." In the four decades that separated Mowat's arrival and ours, a paved highway had linked Burgeo to the larger towns and cities of Newfoundland, and its mainstay fishing industry had collapsed, forcing many of its workers to commute to Alberta's oilpatch for months at a time. Indeed, during the week we visited, more than 30 percent of the men in the community of 1,600 were gone.

Yet vestiges of the old ways remained. Each morning and afternoon, the harbour around Flemming's sailboat came alive with the comings and goings of small open boats that, aside from the outboard engines and occasional depth sounder, differed little from the cod-fishing dories of 100 years ago. These were the inshore fishermen who, unlike the purse seiners, bottom trawlers and other modern monstrosities that Farley condemned in *Sea of Slaughter* (1984), ply the narrow fiords and hidden backwaters of Newfoundland's convoluted coast with simple hook-and-line tackle that yields no bycatch and doesn't harm the sensitive ocean floor.

It was one of these fishermen, Max Strickland, who came alongside our moored sailboat one evening and shyly offered to take us to the site of the sad event that led to the Mowat's departure from Burgeo.

"I knows you're 'ere because of 'im an' what happened," he said in his thick Newfoundland accent. "I wunnit be sure you sees de place for yourselves."

The place was Aldridges Pond, a lagoon tucked into the rocky coastline just five kilometres from the small town, and the event was an 80-tonne fin whale that had become trapped within its confines after chasing a school of herring over the shallow entrance on a high tide. For the next two weeks, Mowat and a few friends had struggled to save



Zev collapses for a nap (MIDDLE) during a lunch stop on northern Saskatchewan's Reindeer Lake and adjusts to a life with biting bugs (ABOVE) in northern Manitoba.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Allison and Zev take in the scenery along Newfoundland's southwest coast, above the Rose Blanche Lighthouse. A bull caribou approaches on the tundra

near Hudson Bay. Allison hauls gear across one of the many portages on their two-week ascent of the Cochrane River. Heuer and Zev in the sailboat en route to Newfoundland.



Sixty years ago, Mowat lived in this trapper's cabin (LEFT) in the Barren Lands of Nunavut, observing the wolves that occupied this den (BOTTOM), which he described in *Never Cry Wolf*.

*He was apologizing, trying to say that not all the people of Burgeo were whale killers.*

the starving whale while other citizens of Burgeo had riddled it with bullets. The tragic story, told in *A Whale for the Killing*, is one of Mowat's most powerful and moving books.

The storm that had mired our earlier passage from Quebec had dissipated over the past few days, and Strickland's motorboat skimmed across the calm ocean without so much as a bump. Tidal currents and hidden reefs riddled our route, but he seemed oblivious to the dangers, steering with one arm while he held Zev smiling on his knee with the other. For a toddler accustomed to paddles and sails, the wide open throttle was pure bliss.

By the time we arrived at the pond's narrow entrance, Strickland had started to talk more freely, pointing out the cliff-lined coves where he fishes for lobster, cod and halibut; the slopes where he and his wife go berry picking; the spots under the eagles' nests where he likes to drift in his boat while gutting his catch or eating lunch. His voice was reverent as he spoke, maybe even apologetic. Then, as he turned the boat around, lifted up the prop and began backing up the shallow passage where the whale had chased the herring, I realized he was apologizing. He was trying to say that not all the people of Burgeo were whale killers.

Leanne, Zev and I returned to the pond in the sailboat's dinghy the next evening, taking an hour to row a distance that the motorboat had covered in 10 minutes for the privilege of being there alone. The lagoon isn't big — the size of just two Olympic swimming pools — and as we oared around its breadth, we tried to imagine the chaotic roar, splash and booms of motorboats running a great sea mammal aground in such a confined space while rifle fire ricocheted off the granite cliffs. After a few minutes, Leanne asked to go ashore so that she could film Zev and me floating around the watery



grave. I dropped her off on a ledge of wildflowers, then slid back out onto the water and read from Mowat's book:

"As she moved slowly away from us, she left ribbons of dark discoloration in the water. These were coming from the great swellings which had formed beneath her skin. I could see one of them pulsing out a dark flow of blood; and I realized that those swellings were vast reservoirs of pus and infection, some of which were breaking open to discharge their foul contents into the cold seawater.

"As I watched, stunned and sickened, the whale continued to move across the pond. She did not submerge. I doubt if she had sufficient strength to do so. Almost drifting, she reached the opposite shore, and there she rested her mighty head upon the rocks."

**WE SAILED OUT OF BURGIO** the next morning, happy to be moving again but still saddened by the ghost of the whale whose blood had stained all of humanity. And the killing hadn't stopped. That morning, while listening to the CBC Radio news as we rigged the sails, we heard about a Japanese whaling expedition headed for the Antarctic Ocean. In addition to 850 minke and 50 fin whales, they planned to harpoon up to 50 humpback whales for the first time since hunting the endangered species was banned 44 years ago. A quote of Mowat's from an interview I had once read popped into my head as the last of Burgeo's barrier islands slipped behind us: "God, I think I'll resign from the human race."



Claire (BELOW, at left) and Farley Mowat spend summers at their house in Cape Breton (LEFT), the end point of the expedition for Heuer, Allison and Zev.



But there was hope, literally tons of it, and it came in the form of a pod of finners a few hours later. I pointed over the starboard rail to the great plumes of mist blowing out of the waves, and Flemming shouted for me to push over the tiller as he pulled in the mainsheet. Armed only with binoculars, we, too, were off to hunt whales.

As we drew among the feeding pod, three of the great cetaceans pulled alongside the boat, their sleek black backs arcing out of the water with each surfacing breath. There could be no doubt they were fin whales — the second largest animals ever to inhabit the planet — and as the great beasts sounded beside us, I wondered aloud how one of their kind could have fit, let alone survived for more than two weeks, in that tiny lagoon.

I made a mental note to tell Mowat, but this time, I would do so in person. If everything went according to plan, we would cross Cabot Strait and sail right to the shore of his Cape Breton farm in seven days.

**IT BEGAN LIKE EVERY DAY** had in the previous five months. Shortly after breakfast, Zev's two-year-old mind demanded the outlines of a plan.

"Where are we going?" he began as we sailed out of Cape Breton Island's St. Peters Canal.

"To visit Farley Mowat," I answered, just as I had 150 times before.

But from there on, the conversation took a different tack. No more abstract explanations of time and distance. No more maps of provinces, river systems and oceans hastily drawn on a piece of paper or scratched in the sand. I waited as his tiny lips wrapped themselves around the next question — "Today?" he asked — and then I pounced.

"Yes!" I cried as we rounded a forested headland. "There!" I pointed at an old two-storey farmhouse overlooking the water. "That's where Farley, Claire and Chester the dog live!"

Zev was stunned. After 5,000 kilometres of paddling, lining, portaging, train riding and sailing, we were now just a few hundred metres from Mowat's door. Zev studied the simple white clapboard home as we pulled into the shallow bay and dropped anchor.

"Oh, oh, I see them," he suddenly cried. "Persons and a dog!"

Indeed, two people had started down toward the beach, where a small crew from the National Film Board had gathered. I looked through the binoculars and confirmed to

*It was Farley Mowat, for God's sake, on shore to greet us. What the hell was I going to say?*

Flemming that all his ocean navigation had been successful: one of them had a beard.

Flemming elected to stay on board and keep tabs on the sailboat as Leanne, Zev and I clambered over the rail into the dinghy. It was a beautiful fall day, and a gentle ocean breeze pushed us toward shore. Yet for all its coolness, the moment had me sweating more than on any midsummer portage. I took a few pulls on the oars, then snuck a glance over my shoulder. It was Farley Mowat, for God's sake, standing on the shore to greet us! What the hell was I going to say?

As the oarlocks thumped-thumped against the gunwales, I recalled the questions I'd left with five months before — about the power and persistence of stories in the landscape and how they affected people's perception of the land. Like any good pilgrim nearing The End, I now realized the journey and Mowat's books had provided most, if not all, of the answers. The role of the wise elder was only to be a good friend.

The bow of the dinghy hit the gravel, and I leapt into the gentle surf as Mowat walked toward us. I offered my hand, but he scoffed at the formality and, instead, pulled me in for a hug.

*Karsten Heuer is a seasonal park warden, author and explorer who lives in Canmore, Alta. His fourth book, Finding Farley, will be released in fall 2009. For more on this trip and the upcoming NFB film, go to [www.necessaryjourneys.ca](http://www.necessaryjourneys.ca).*



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