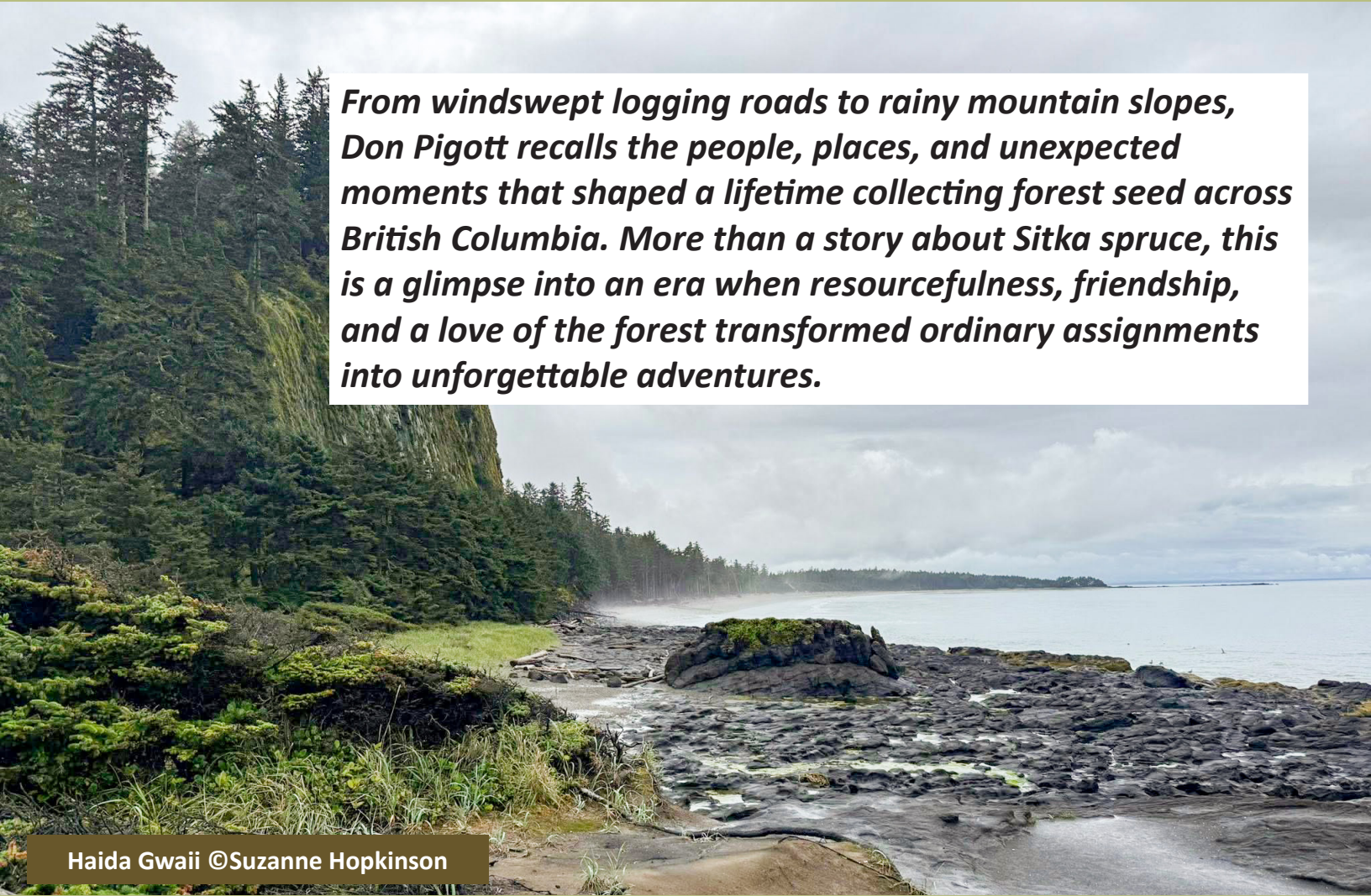


SEEDY BUSINESS STORIES

By Don Pigott

SITKA SPRUCE COLLECTIONS IN HAIDA GWAI

(QUEEN CHARLOTTE ISLANDS)



From windswept logging roads to rainy mountain slopes, Don Pigott recalls the people, places, and unexpected moments that shaped a lifetime collecting forest seed across British Columbia. More than a story about Sitka spruce, this is a glimpse into an era when resourcefulness, friendship, and a love of the forest transformed ordinary assignments into unforgettable adventures.

Haida Gwaii ©Suzanne Hopkinson

In mid-September 1983 I was approached by Ed MacDonald, the Stock and Seedling Coordinator for MacMillan Bloedel (MB), to see if we could help out with a couple of small Sitka spruce collections in the Queen Charlottes. Ed and I had worked together at MacMillan Bloedel for many years and I was always happy to give

him a hand. He planned to make two small helicopter collections on the Rennell Sound Forest Service Road, roughly half way between Rennell Sound and Yakoun Lake. Both were slightly higher elevations than the norm for the Charlottes at 300 metres and 475 metres. He planned to ship a cone rake to Queen Charlotte City



Sitka Spruce

and have a few folks from MB unload the rake that Vancouver Island Helicopters would use to harvest. But working weekends for their staff was not an option. All he really wanted from Gerhard and I was to provide some grunt power to pick the cones off the branches on the ground. He only planned to collect 20 hectoliters (80 sacks from each elevation). As it turned out, we had planned to go north in early September to start making range-wide collections of all four species of alder for the Canadian Forest Service, a contract we had only recently secured.

We talked it over and asked Ian Wyndlow and Paul Gallant to assist us. They were eager for a road trip, so on September 22 all four of us crammed into my 1982 Dodge regular cab pickup and drove north to Port Hardy where we caught the Queen of the North to Prince Rupert. The ferry left mid-afternoon and arrived in Prince Rupert early in the morning on the following day. We had dinner on the boat, and spent more than enough time in the bar watching the entertainment. There was a very attractive blonde chatting up all the male patrons, and she would occasionally disappear, leaving us to speculate on where she went and what she was doing. Rather than have the expense of getting “staterooms” we curled up in lounge chairs for the evening. The next morning we arrived in Prince Rupert, and shortly after caught the ferry to Skidegate near Queen Charlotte City. I remember as we pulled into Skidegate how dull and dreary it was, and we all agreed somewhat depressing. We met Ed MacDonald at the Sea Raven Motel and went to dinner at a great Chinese Restaurant called “John’s”.

Ed filled us in on all the details and after dinner and a couple of beers we went to bed. There was a room crisis at the Sea Raven Motel, so we all shared one room with two beds and two cots. The following morning, Saturday, September 24, Ed led us up to the collection sites before he flew back to Nanaimo.

It was an average crop with low to moderate seed count, but they needed seed from this elevation. The cones were also quite green and a bit immature—however, the germination turned out not too badly. It was a cold rainy day with occasional periods of wet snow. Our first mistake was to have forgotten to bring gloves with us. There is nothing more miserable than wrenching immature cones off prickly spruce branches in those conditions. By the end of the day our hands were cold and raw. Despite the conditions, we were able to pick 54 sacks of cones the first day. Fortunately, we were able to purchase gloves in the General Store that evening.

John’s Restaurant became our go to place for dinner. The Chinese food was exceptional and always piping hot. We had dinner there every evening. They would also make up sandwiches for lunch the following day.

Breakfast was another story. The only place open early for breakfast was Margaret’s Café. Margaret was a real character. The first morning we that we went there were only three or four people sitting down eating. We sat at a table waiting to be served. There was no sign of activity what so ever. Finally one of the patrons said, “If you want coffee you have to help yourself.” We all got a coffee and sat down again. After a couple of minutes, the same fellow said, “Margaret had a date with Captain Morgan Last night. If you want breakfast, you have to make your own.”

We went into the kitchen, which was a bit of a disaster, and made some toast and then left some money on the till. The following mornings Margaret did show up and we had passable breakfasts made by this kind, gregarious soul.



Our cone picking shelter

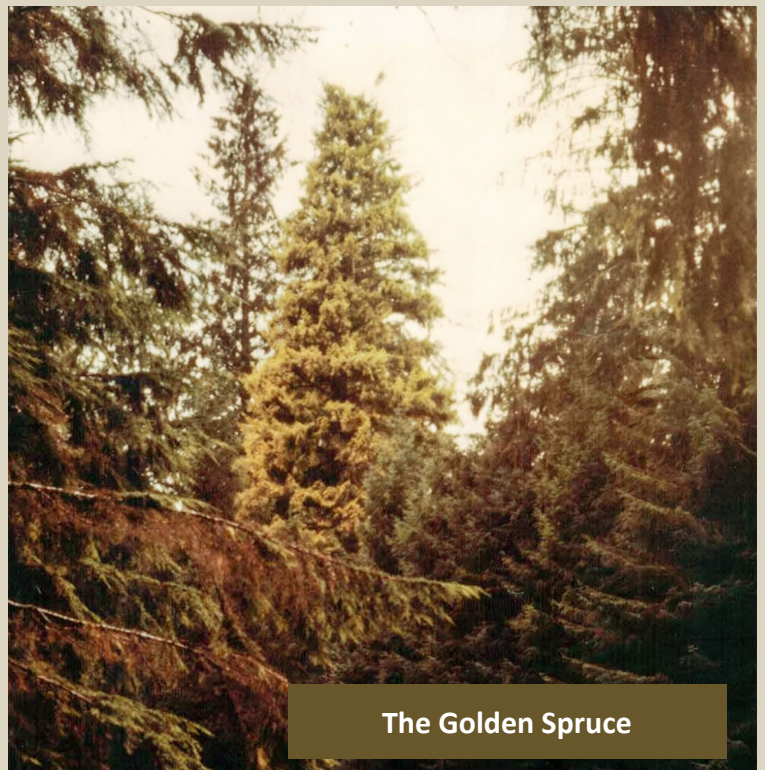
On the following day (Sunday) we arrived at the higher elevation site to discover a light blanket of wet snow on the branches and cones. When we had purchased gloves, we had also purchased a roll of poly which we used to fabricate a shelter over the road with the piles of branches and cones. The snow melted quickly, but the steady rain and drizzle persisted. We still managed to pick another 50 sacks of cones. In the evenings we would crank the heat up in our room to help dry our gear, and watch some movies on the one channel available.

On the Monday, we finished off the last of the cones very early, (roughly 25 sacks), and then took a tour of the Island, including the Golden Spruce, and North Beach-Tow Hill on the very north end of Graham Island.

On the trail into the Golden spruce viewing area, squirrels had dropped large quantities of spruce cones to the ground, and they were much larger cones than the ones we had been picking at the higher elevation sites.

The following morning, we caught the ferry to Prince Rupert, dropped Paul and Ian off in town, and gave them enough money for the ferry to Port Hardy, plus rooms, and bus fare back to Nanaimo. I remember Ian telling me later that rather than spend money on a bus, they decided to hitch hike from Port Hardy to Nanaimo and pocket the money!

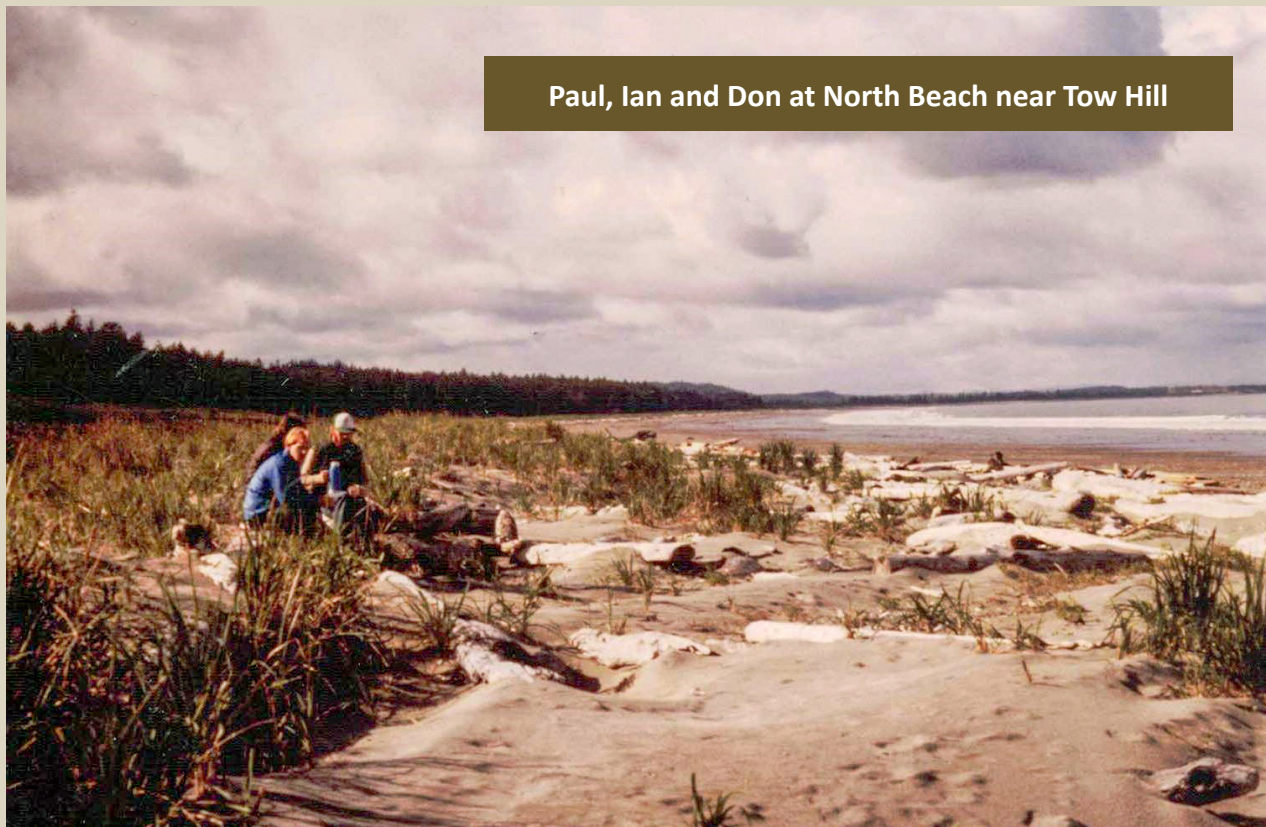
Gerhard and I left Prince Rupert and headed east to Terrace then north towards Dease Lake to start the range-wide Alder collections. To be frank, at that time we really were not that experienced in distinguishing between the four species that we had to collect in each region of the province with our most northerly collection to be north of Dease Lake. So, as one person drove, the other read our various plant and tree identification guides out loud to the driver. Some 10 hours later, after multiple stops for meals, changing a flat tire, and a bit of fishing, we arrived at Eddontenajon, an hour south of Dease Lake, late in the evening, and got a motel room. The next day we started the alder collections, but that is another story...



The Golden Spruce

Footnote:

This was the first time we had collected Sitka spruce. However, this was not the last. Over the next 20 years, we contracted local residents of Haida Gwaii to collect Sitka spruce cones for us in multiple years. There was a good market in Europe at the time as Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) was an extremely popular seed source. Fortunately, the local residents had been collecting spruce cones for decades, and eager to earn extra cash. Jessie McNab also collected Sitka spruce when she lived there. Also, after the introduction of squirrels to the Islands, cones that were dropped to the ground were extremely abundant, and easily harvested.



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