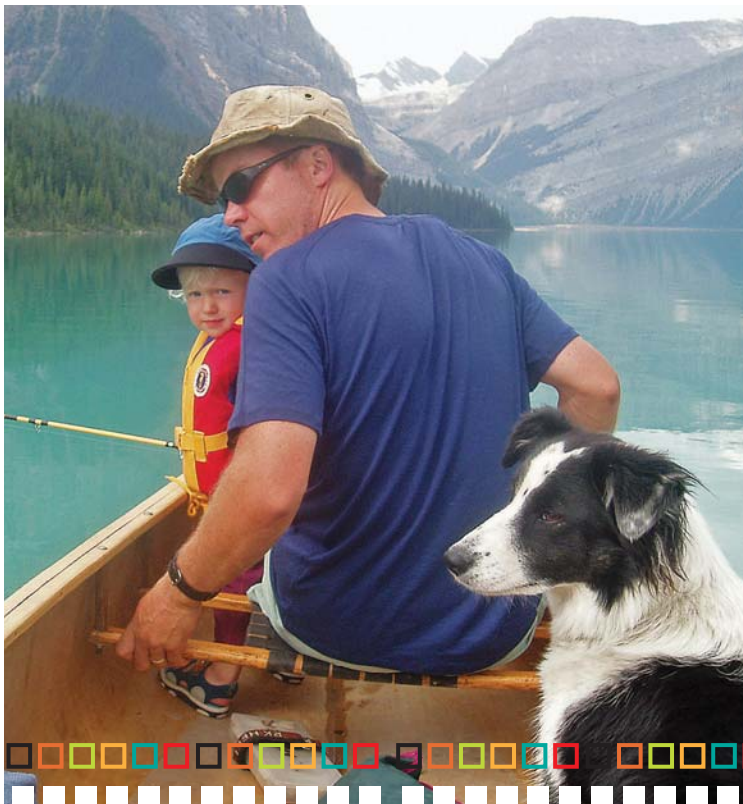


the Land of “Why?”

A quest for adventure,
family style

By Meghan Ward



Getting from A to B

“Why don’t we canoe there?” joked Leanne, not knowing what kind of adventure those five words would set in motion.

Upon receiving an invitation to visit famed Canadian author and conservationist, Farley Mowat, Leanne and her husband, Karsten, were discussing how their family would travel from Canmore to Cape Breton Island to Farley’s farm. Both conservationists themselves, Leanne and Karsten naturally considered canoeing as their means to get from A to B. As a couple, they had self-propelled on long trips many times before.

This time, though, they would travel across the country with a two and a half year old.

Adventures in Parenthood

For many parents, the thought of pursuing large adventures such as this in the outdoors is simply unfathomable. Packing and planning for both yourself and for your children is just too much to handle. “Let’s just wait until they are older,” you say, only to discover that the more you get into a routine, the harder it gets to take on such projects.

It is also unfathomable to some who have not yet had children and to those weekend warriors who fear what parenthood will do to their freedom, to take risky and extended trips in the big wild. Nonetheless, the urge to start a family is there, and it can be as strong as one’s inclination to summit another peak, hit up some sweet slopes, or venture off into the wild for a few weeks. So, how does one go about pursuing these adventures as a parent?

Starting the Family

Filmmaker Leanne Allison and Karsten Heuer, a wildlife biologist, park warden and author, dated over thirty years ago back in kindergarten,



and eventually “re-met” fifteen years later. Leanne always loved the outdoors, even as a kid. When she was 10 years old, she went to camp and discovered she really thrived in the wild. Looking back, she remembers brushing her teeth under the stars and thinking, “this is it. This is the life for me.” It should come as no surprise then that her love of the outdoors is also what connected her to Karsten.

Years of friendship and tripping together led Leanne and Karsten to the Y2Y Hike, where they trekked from Yellowstone to the Yukon gathering information on ecosystems along the way. Shortly after getting married, they embarked on another long adventure, following the endangered Porcupine Caribou migration for 1,500 kilometres, documenting their journey in an award-winning film and book, *Being Caribou*, which was shot and directed by Leanne. Shortly after this trip, Leanne gave birth to their son, Zev, and thus began the biggest adventure of their lives.

The Joys

Their transition to parenthood wasn't easy. “Don't kid yourself into thinking nothing will change,” says Leanne, “because it will.” Unaccustomed to staying home, Leanne was often the caretaker while Karsten continued to work as a park warden.

Before Zev, Leanne and her husband also used to spend lots of time apart, giving each other the liberty to pursue opportunities as they arose. But a baby in the mix required all hands on deck, whenever possible. It was a challenge far greater than any 1,500-kilometre hike they had done in the past.

Leanne explains that additional pressure comes from the expectations from others regarding how one should raise their child and what parents can and cannot do with a child in tow. Nevertheless, her inclination towards adventure never held her back from introducing Zev to the wonders of the great outdoors.

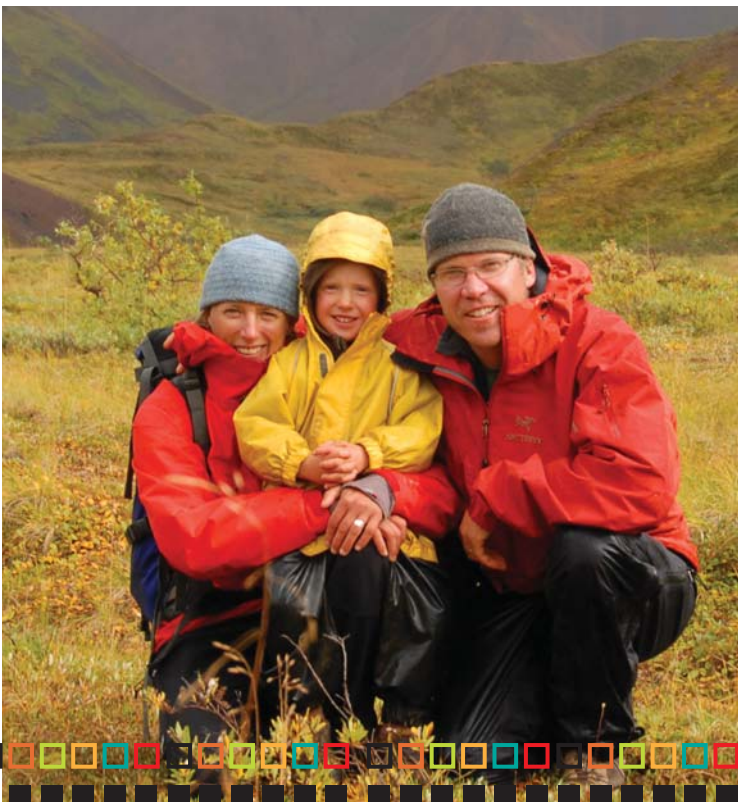
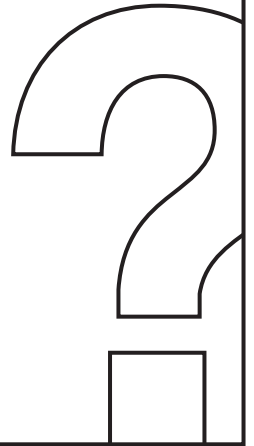
“Living in a place like Canmore,” Leanne reflects, “gives us opportunities to find adventure in even the smallest of things.” By introducing Zev to the outdoors at a young age, they hoped to instil in him the sense of satisfaction, joy, and wonder to be had in the natural world. By helping him feel connected to it, he may also want to conserve it.

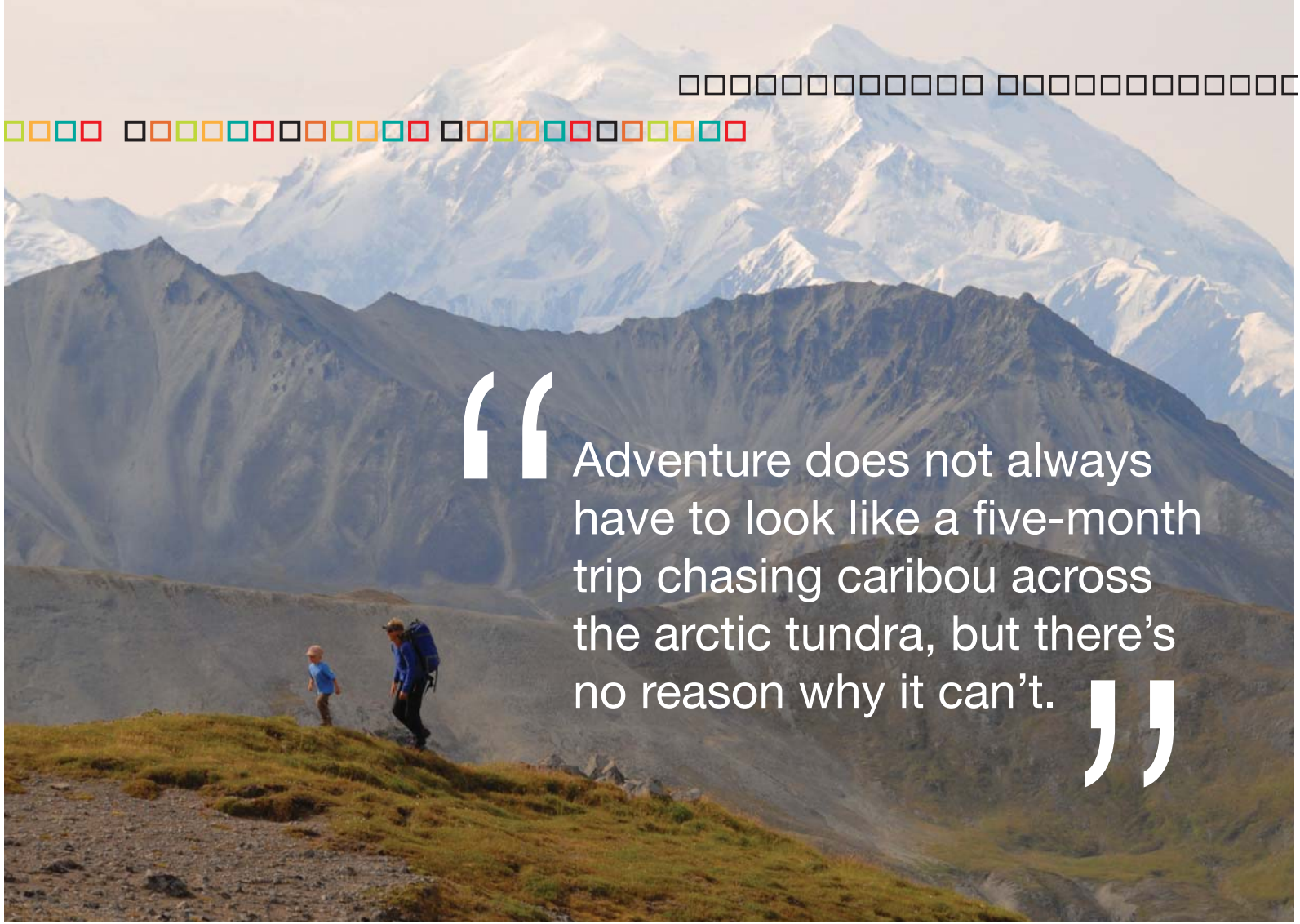
Ultimately, for Leanne and Karsten, the challenges never outweighed the joys of having a family. “Until you have a kid, you don't know what you're missing,” says Leanne.

Finding Farley

Adventure does not always have to look like a five-month trip chasing caribou across the arctic tundra, but there's no reason why it can't, according to Leanne. When the opportunity to visit Farley Mowat arose, there was no question of whether or not they would go. The debate was about *how*.

“Inquisitive as any other two year old, Zev had questions about the landscape and what he was seeing, drawing his parents out of their habitually reflective state and into a land well known to toddlers, the **Land of “Why?”**.”





“ Adventure does not always have to look like a five-month trip chasing caribou across the arctic tundra, but there’s no reason why it can’t. ”

The plan was that they would travel by canoe, train, and sailboat all the way to Farley, setting up food caches along the way, but this was about as far as the planning went. The family had no idea of what to expect on a day-to-day basis, let alone travelling this distance with a young child. So they set out from Canmore totally open to whatever might come their way.

On May 15, 2007, after rolling their canoe from their home down to the Bow River, Leanne, Karsten, Zev and their border collie, Willow, embarked from Canmore. On this journey, they traveled 5,000 kilometres, with multiple portages, hard paddles upstream, long train rides, encounters with wildlife, choppy seas, and the nastiest of villains, the insects. Retracing the geography of Mowat’s books, the young family didn’t take the most direct route, paddling north, instead, to where Nunavut meets Manitoba, before continuing east towards The Maritimes. Once there, the family hopped on board a 30-foot sailboat destined to give their stomachs a test, and eventually arrived at Mowat’s doorstep on Cape Breton Island. At times, the trip was challenging enough for two adults, never mind for the toddler they brought along.

But, Zev took it all in stride, and is often pictured waiting patiently

throughout the film, perched on a rock overlooking the water as his dad wades the canoe past some rapids, or playing with objects only found in the natural environment, the only playground he would know for six months. While Zev was keen on entertaining himself, keeping him occupied remained a full-time job for his parents.

On other long trips, Leanne and Karsten had learnt to make peace with the silence and to wait patiently for the landscape to come alive, which often led them to incredible encounters with wildlife. But with a young child came constant chatter. Inquisitive as any other two year old, Zev had questions about the landscape and what he was seeing, drawing his parents out of their habitually reflective state and into a land well known to toddlers, the Land of “Why”.

Finding Farley won the Grand Prize and People’s Choice Award at the 2009 Banff Mountain Film Festival. The film showed true adventure without compromises even though Leanne and Karsten were taking their voyage as a family. They simply allowed the adventure to happen, steering away from contriving it or shaping it for the purposes of the film. And—the audience loved Zev, who stole the show. Seeing the adventure through his eyes brought a sense of joy and playfulness to the journey.

Lessons Learned

Looking back on the trip Leanne reflects on how some parents would be freaked out by the idea of bringing their child on such a journey, but she and Karsten already had a level of comfort in wild environments. Their previous experience was integral in preparing them to bring their son along.

“It is in these wild environments that our awareness is heightened,” said Leanne. As a parent, one would never intentionally put a child in harm’s way, including potentially harmful situations in the outdoors. “Natural dangers are much less threatening than dangers of our modern world,” Leanne explains. “Mosquitoes have nothing on the dangers of driving cars and busy streets. By the time Zev is old enough to really learn about safety issues, he’ll have already been paddling and hiking for years.”

“Also, we’re so addicted to our comforts,” said Leanne. You don’t need to tell your children that an experience could be difficult or scary. Children simply don’t have these apprehensions at a young age and, ironically, it is something that we teach them as parents. For instance, when the bugs were relentless, Leanne and Karsten would be going crazy while Zev continued to play, unaware of the annoyance. There was nothing they could do about it other than to abandon the trip altogether, and in those moments, Zev turned out to be a role model for them.

“It also seems we’ve forgotten that children used to travel in the wild all the time,” Leanne reminds us. The children of pioneers to Canada would have journeyed long distances in their voyages in this new land. We have walked so far away from our roots as humans that trips such as Leanne and Karsten’s now seem unthinkable to many of us.

Finding Farley shows us that children can inspire adventure in the same way we want to bring adventure into their lives. It is in the small things that children can find the most unexpected adventures. “Every new beach was like a whole new world to Zev,” explains Leanne. In turn, the experienced adventurers began to see the world in a whole new way, too.

The Next Adventure

Since Finding Farley, Leanne, Karsten and Zev, now five, continue on with adventure on a smaller scale, whether canoeing up the Bow River, even in winter, or skiing up to Rockbound Lake behind Castle Mountain.

Taking every day in stride, these parents don’t have any big trips planned, but that is the way it always happens for them. The big trips will surface, and until then, taking advantage of the incredible natural world around Canmore is what inspires them every day.

Finding Farley is a story about stories, each embedded in the other, the lives of Karsten, Leanne and Zev intertwining with Farley himself. But more than that, their experiences brought the story of the landscape into Zev’s life—a story that will stay with him forever.

It isn’t always easy, but as Leanne put it, “You have got to keep taking what you love about adventure into your family life.”

The reward of having a child connected to the natural world far outweighs any challenges that may await you on the journey. ☐

TIPS for traveling with WEE ONES

Just do it. There will always be someone who thinks you shouldn’t do it or too many details to figure out, but you have to start somewhere.

Let them teach you. Kids see the small things and don’t have the same apprehensions. Trust your instincts. As a parent you won’t let anything happen to the dear thing, especially in the wilderness.

Even little adventures are time expanders. A week in the wild can feel like five months. This is precious time with your kids.

Remember they grow up fast. Soon they will be off adventuring on their own, and this could be harder on you than taking them along as infants.

For a great resource for families who love adventure, check out The Outdoor Parent at www.theoutdoorparent.com.

To keep up to date on what Leanne and Karsten are up to, check out their website: www.necessaryjourneys.ca.

