

routes through canoe country



□ by Chris Williams

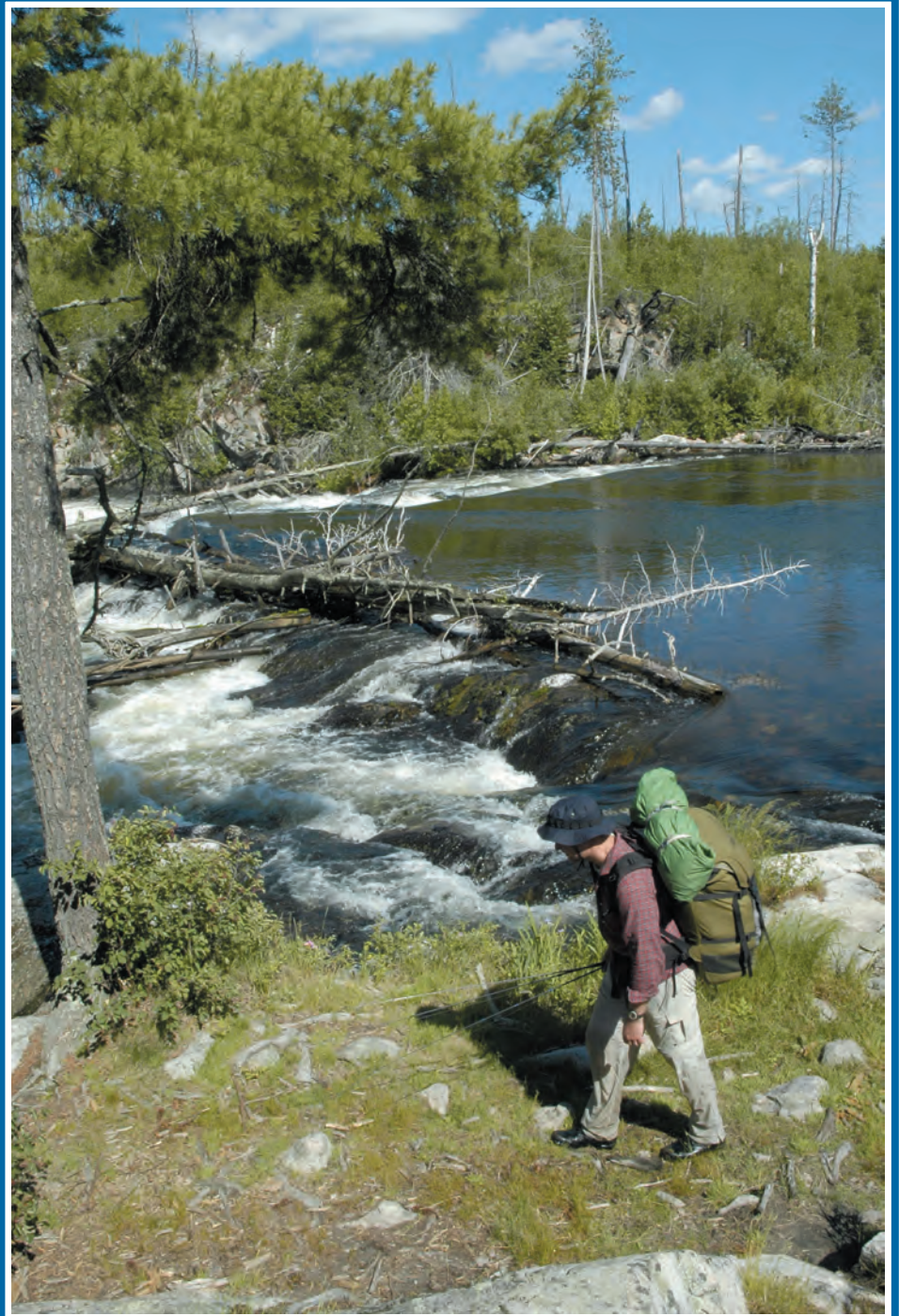
Quetico Circuit Through Kawnipi

I rented the movie *A Beautiful Mind* only because the television commercial showed a map highlighting Prairie Portage. Disappointingly, it played no significant role in the plot. The movie depicted a brilliant schizophrenic mathematician whose mental disorder caused him to believe he could find hidden messages in newspaper articles. He would hang the papers on his walls until the cryptic message magically lit up for him to see. Oddly, this is similar to the way in which I plan canoe routes in Quetico. My friends and I pick a few lakes we want to visit, and then I stare at maps hung on my basement walls until a circuit beginning and ending at Prairie Portage reveals itself to me.

I've been traveling to Quetico with the same group of friends for 14 years. Our first trips were organized through our scout troop, and when we became too old to be Boy Scouts we began canoe tripping on our own. Last winter when everyone was in St. Louis for the holidays we decided on a 10-day trip. The featured lakes of this trip would be Glacier, the Poet Chain and the chain of lakes between Trant and Silence.

Our crew consisted of six: Steve, Jim, Kevin, Wedge (whose real name is Steve), Paul and me. All of us had done at least six trips together except for Wedge's brother Paul who's been on a number of Quetico trips with other groups. Communicating with everyone proved difficult at first because we live in three different states. Finally, we created a website with a guest book that served as a message board for sharing information.

Eventually, everything fell into



BRIAN BORKHOLDER

The Falls Chain, flowing into the east end of Kawnipi, has some potentially dangerous portage landings. Carefully portage around all the rapids in this stretch.



The west end of Kawnipi empties into Shelley Lake at this pretty rapids. Definitely worth stopping for a photo.

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place. We planned and revised menus, compiled gear responsibilities, had a big grocery shopping trip, coordinated airport pick up times and agreed upon our route. Our plan would give us two layover days and a couple of really long paddling and portaging days, just the way we like it. In late July, after months of planning, we found ourselves reunited in the Duluth airport.

As always, we stayed at Canadian Border Outfitters the night before our trip began. After discussing our route with the people in the office, they were able to contact a long-time Quetico guide named John to come in and fill some gaps in our map data. He'd obviously spent a tremendous amount of time in the interior of the park and was able to give us invaluable information about portages, campsites and fishing spots. This additional knowledge allowed us to expand our planned route into some new lakes on our sixth and seventh

days.

We rose early, breakfasted quickly and headed out on the towboats to Prairie Portage. We wanted to be first in line to check in with the ranger, because we planned to go a good distance the first day. Unfortunately, a few others had the same idea. Thirty minutes before the office opened we found ourselves third in line.

Soon enough we were underway, and by the time we reached the beach portage out of Bayley Bay, we caught up with the first group from the ranger's office. Our portaging style usually can be described as organized and efficient, taking one trip across with none of the gear ever touching the ground. On this day, our first few portages, our style was self-described as young, strong and stupid.

Our canoe of choice was the 18.5-foot Alumacraft. This allows three people to paddle in each boat. Inside the canoes we carried two bulging food packs, a solid

crew gear pack and three lighter personal gear packs. Usually the person carrying the canoe assists the others in loading up the packs and loose gear then takes the lightest pack and "double dips" by carrying a pack and a canoe across. Upon arrival on the good side of the portage they carry out into the water, set the canoe down, drop their pack in and then unload the packs from their two boat mates.

Because the first portage was an easy one, we decided to initiate Paul into the double dipper's portage club. Unfortunately, because we were so anxious to move ahead of the other crew at the portage, we didn't take time to adjust the pack straps or portage yoke to Paul. This caused him a great deal of discomfort and slowed down the entire system. Later in the day when we figured out what the difficulty had been, we dubbed it "malfitance."

The next portage was the short "Singing Brook" between Burke

and Sunday. With one crew of paddlers right behind us and another on the lake on the other side, we tried to take the portage as quickly as possible. This distance didn't justify organizing double loads; each of us just grabbed something and went across.

It worked out that Jim came back to take the canoe. He's a very strong portager who usually takes the heaviest pack but not a canoe. This lack of canoe practice caused him to slip and take a seat in the lake in full view of all of us and quite a few fellow Quetico travelers. Fortunately he was uninjured, but we were zero for two on our goal of efficient portages.

Our next few portages into and out of Meadows Lake went better, except for deadfalls and those pesky "crowds" that slowed us down. We crossed paths with probably six crews on these next two routes. At one point I nearly trampled a small child who was walking the other way with her head down. I was "double dipping" and almost not agile enough under load to dodge the young girl who actually walked all the way under my canoe before realizing I was there.

After a well-deserved lunch break just south of Louisa Falls, we took the "big up" carefully, with the respect this steep climb deserves. No one carried a double load, and we took the canoes up separately with experienced carriers underneath and the others standing nearby to help when needed. Once we were on Louisa, we finally found the solitude we had been rushing around looking for all day.

Louisa Lake is big, beautiful and very clear. On a sunny day it is as scenic as any lake in Quetico. Being right next to busy Agnes, we always expect to see other paddlers there but never have. We passed one mega-brood of 18 baby mergansers with one overworked Momma en route to our campsite

on a large, predominantly burned over island in the middle of the lake.

After setting up camp and snacking on the abundant blueberries, some of us napped while others jumped off the 10-foot "cliff jump" at one side of the campsite to blast away the sweaty grime of one hard day on the trail.

Most of the afternoon we watched helicopters and planes fly by to our south and assumed a fire was burning somewhere to our southwest. In the early evening Wedge and I went out to a lake trout hole we had found a few years ago, and it again produced for us as we trolled flashy deep diving crankbaits. The rust of not fishing much this season was obvious as we only got one fish into the boat. It joined an already large meal of grilled venison steaks, fresh green beans, stuffing and foil baked apples. The apples were tasty but not good enough to justify their weight in the future.

Our next day started cloudy and warm. Louisa's clear waters and high pine-studded banks lost a lot of their appeal in the flat, gray light. The first portage to Star began on an attractive beach but quickly changed character to a narrow, overgrown path with a lot of rocky footing. Quickly we crossed small Star Lake and somehow took a portage into the small pond and creek next to rather than into Arp Lake. Based on the wear of the portage trail this happens frequently. This trail ended on a quaking bog so we rapidly loaded the canoes while slowly sinking. After a few minutes the small creek ended with a pullover portage into Arp, where we made a quick check of the map and compass and got back underway.

Arp Lake has another bog on its north end which is home to an impressive collection of pitcher plants. The bog has a canoe trail cut through it, and the water was barely deep enough for us to glide

through. When we reached the portage to Fauquier we found a Nalgene bottle full of water. Amazingly we had found another one here two years before!

Fauquier is another big, clear lake and features a few nice campsites. We paddled across quickly and on the next portage we began to feel the fatigue from all these unrehearsed exertions. The 72-rod portage to Dumas demanded a lot of concentration, with poor footing and a number of treacherous, narrow walkways above a nearly dry creekbed. This portage felt a lot longer than its recognized measurement. We ate an early lunch on a rock point on Dumas Lake.

Lunch re-energized everyone and the rest of the day was a breeze. The hill between Fauquier and Dumas functions as a "height of land" and once across it, everything flows north along McEwen Creek. From here to Glacier Lake there are a number of short portages and lakes with light current, which feel like wider, deeper spots on the creek.

We skipped the portage and pulled through the creek on the north end of Edge Lake. This area features the most impressive stand of poison ivy I have seen in Quetico. We have fished most of the lakes along here and done very well for smallmouth bass, but with the warmth and fatigue of this day everyone wanted to get to Glacier and take a relaxing swim.

We chose the middle campsite on Glacier. Fisher and McKenzie maps both incorrectly label it as an island site. It is actually on the mainland east of the island in a tall stand of red pines. The site has two adequate tent spots that served us well in the past. We used this campsite for two nights, so I set up an aluminum foil oven built using our cooking grill as a frame. By tilting a detached burner stove and homemade heat shield toward the oven I am able to maintain a temperature of 350 and

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bake just like at home. Our meal of jambalaya was supplemented with cornbread, and in the morning it was fresh-baked biscuits and gravy, a real backwoods treat.

Our plan for the day was to fish on Glacier in the morning, have lunch and then bushwhack into the large unnamed lake north of there to try the fishing. During the morning it was warm with a strong wind out of the south. The weather had the bass schooled up, so when someone in the canoe would catch one, the others in the canoe would cast into the area and hook up also. At lunch a decision was made. Why hope for good fishing when we had already found it?

The rest of the afternoon all of us fished except for Jim who stayed in camp to read. Fishing with three in a canoe was a lot of fun for Kevin, Steve and I because we covered the water better and caught more fish as we breezed around the lake. On a day like this it was fun to share the fishing with more than just one friend. It allowed us to catch an unprecedented "quadruple" on small-mouth bass. All three of us had fish on when Kevin boated his in the bow and accidentally dropped it. As he reached under his seat for the bass, his lure fell back in the lake and as soon as it hit the water another bass grabbed it. This was wilderness fishing at its finest!

When we got back to camp Jim hadn't been quite as fortunate. One of the large pine trees over camp cracked in the gusty wind and bent toward one of our tents before Jim moved it. This caused some friction because there was no good alternate tent spot. Fortunately, modern camp mattresses smooth over a lot of rocks, roots and in this case, hard feelings about tent locations.

I fully expected the strong southerly wind to blow up storms overnight, but the morning arrived clear and calm. We were underway early and on the first portage out of Glacier, we came across a

really large snapping turtle walking down the trail. He quickly dove into the rocky, fast-moving creek nearby.

We hoped to see moose in the long marshy section of McEwen Creek before we got to McEwen Lake but the creek held only a brood of goldeneye ducks.

Paddling the length of McEwen in calm conditions was a real treat, as we were really able to get a rhythm going. It probably looks awkward with three people paddling a canoe, but if the bowman sets a good tempo and the "Duffman" stays with him, the canoe glides along beautifully. In the stern I was able to control our direction by simply timing my strokes to those of the paddlers on the other side. By taking a long stroke and keeping my paddle in the water last, I was able to allow them to push a few degrees the other way. This beautiful propulsion by teamwork is something kayakers and hikers really miss out on. All too soon we were interrupted by the long portage out of McEwen into Kenny.

The portage took us a long time, as the steep hill at the beginning had a number of deadfalls that slowed our progress and caused us to leave a pack there. I had gone ahead because the top of this hill offered a great view of the lake the last time we were there, and I wanted to take pictures of everyone portaging the hill with the lake in the background.

The breathtaking view was made possible by the big fire of 1995, but by 2005 the trees had grown up enough that my scenic backdrop was obscured by young birches. This was personally disappointing because I spent several months envisioning the perfect dramatic portaging photograph only to find myself standing in a thicket trying to figure out what to do.

By the time we finished the portage the sky clouded over and the wind was now blowing lightly out of the northwest. Naturally we

were about to turn northwest. We ate lunch on a burned-over campsite with one remaining tree before paddling over to check out Canyon Falls. The wind was gathering strength, but we decided it would be foolish to paddle all this way and ignore a powerful cataract like Canyon because it was half a mile the wrong way.

We had planned to make it to McKenzie Bay of Kawnipi Lake that day because that is approximately where the 1995 burn extends, so we had to grit our teeth and fight the still strengthening wind. Amid slate gray skies and whitecapped waters we turned off the main channel at about 4 p.m. Usually the best campsites in a destination area like this are snapped up for days at a time, so we were gambling by expecting to find a good spot this late in the day.

Entering the bay we experienced a mini-roller coaster of emotions. Instantly we were disappointed to see one of the best sites straight ahead of us was taken. But there was hope as we paddled down the eastern bank to the closest camp. We saw two bald eagles in a dead tree. Surely they wouldn't be sitting near an occupied campsite.

Slowly, we paddled closer and saw they were not our majestic national symbol, but turkey buzzards. As we got close enough to see the point of the campsite we realized the birds were watching over a number of walleye carcasses. This was very encouraging because no one camps amidst fish remains, do they? The occupants of the site must have heard our conversation because they appeared just as we were about to land.

Luckily they were not campers but had simply stopped over to clean fish and were about to get back to traveling. While we waited for them to load canoes and clear the campsite's landing a cold rain began to fall and the wind quit blowing. We were elated to be unloading at a premium campsite

late in the day and to get all our gear under cover before the rain dampened everything. From land this campsite is very impressive, it features a sweeping panoramic view from the rocky point and a wilderness style picnic table built from pine and cedar logs.

For dinner we set the oven up again, which was a lot harder than I anticipated because of wrinkly foil and rain. Dinner featured both tortilla and pita pizzas. I prefer the crispy thin crust style of the tortilla, but the pitas went a lot further towards filling our hungry bellies. With the rain stealing the oven's heat we just melted the cheese and warmed the sauce rather than letting everything get brown and crispy. This aluminum foil oven is functional, but I'm researching some easier methods for future trips.

Around 8 p.m. the rain stopped so Wedge and I headed back out on the lake to fish. The sky that night provided us with some extraordinary treats. As the rain drifted away to our east there was an unbelievable double rainbow. When the sun got low in the west all the moisture in the air gave the atmosphere an eerie red glow. Everything cooled dramatically and after dark we enjoyed our first warming campfire of the trip. From the point of our campsite we were able to see the illumination of orange campfires from the other three campsites in the bay.

I awoke sometime in the middle of the night because I was cold, and as I lay there trying to fall back to sleep a new but familiar sound filled the woods. The wind was blowing hard and the waves were slapping the rocky canoe landing behind the tents. In the morning the wind still howled from the north, so we decided on another layover day to be spent relaxing and drying out. It was quite cool but very sunny. By early afternoon the campsite's firewood supply was well stocked, and the walleye of Kawnipi were calling us for dinner. Despite the

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weather we trolled Shad-Raps, and as we headed out to the main channel of the lake we quickly found a school of hungry walleye to fill the stringer.

After dinner we built a fire that took advantage of the remaining breeze to blow the smoke back towards the woods of the campsite and keep the mosquitoes at bay. We played cards on the table until it was too dark and then moved out onto the rocky point to watch the stars appear. After a while everyone lay down on the rocks and watched the Milky Way come into full bloom,

I see stars all the time but rarely take time to look at them like this anymore. Lying on some of the oldest rocks on the planet and staring at so many stars I was struck by the ephemeral nature of human life. How many people had done the same thing on this spot? Who were they? Ojibway Indians? Explorers? Voyageurs? Modern day canoe travelers?

Eventually, as the wind and wood smoke abated, the mosquitoes began to rediscover us but no one stirred, unwilling to give up the awesome sight. Finally the mood was broken when Paul asked, "Do you think somewhere out there is a planet where giant mosquitoes get pestered by tiny people?"

The next morning was cold and calm so we got underway as quickly and early as possible. Apparently a lot of other canoe trippers had the same idea, as we merged onto the Hunter Island Highway of Kawnipi we could see three other crews. Rather unusual for 8 in the morning, I thought, but it was to be an unusually populated day. We paddled northwest along Kawnipi and took in the view in the narrows that our outfitter labeled "The Canyon."

It was a beautiful morning. This was hardly the quiet land we were used to enjoying. We shared the portage into Shelley with a crew and waited for a different one to

clear the east landing of the Have a Smoke Portage.

It was now approaching lunch time and Keats Lake was where we had intended to camp. The weather had changed again to gusty winds and dark skies. We were lucky a nice campsite just past the narrows of the lake was available. That afternoon the wind blew as hard as it had up to that point in the trip, so we just napped and read. At one point I was almost blown out of my hammock.

At dinner we decided against doubling back to Kawnipi and the Kahshahpiwi chain as originally planned. Armed with the knowledge we had gained at our outfitter, we decided to get away from the "crowds" and head through some little-used lakes which contained some portages that were described as a "Pain in the Butt." That night the wind finally relented so Wedge and I went out to fish and scout the first portage.

We had two problems on this excursion. First, I hooked a pike so big I couldn't grab it behind the head like I usually do. Not really a problem, but I did break her off before getting a photo because I almost fell into the lake trying to step out onto the bank to beach this leviathan. Second, we had not brought our map, and the portage proved difficult to find.

Eventually we located the portage. We had missed it on the first pass because we thought it was a dry creek coming down into the lake. An easy mistake because it basically is a dry creek that doubles as a portage. This first part is quite steep, and you have to step from rock to rock while ducking and squeezing through the narrow vegetation tunnel. The hill climbs uninterrupted for approximately 200 yards before "leveling off" into just rolling hills with a nice dirt trail. The portage is quite long; by the time Wedge and I saw Baird Lake it was getting dark. As we trotted back quickly

in the low light, I felt like a wolf gliding silently through the bush.

In the morning we day tripped up to see Chatterton Falls. It was definitely worth the effort as these falls and trailing rapids are quite impressive as they rush along their quarter-mile length. Our Fisher map labeled the portage incorrectly on the north side of the falls. Three of us explored the falls from this side, following trails made by moose or other navigators. The other three paddled across to the impressive campsite on the south side of the falls and visited with the campers there before checking out the falls.

Lunch back on Keats emptied one of the food packs so we strapped it onto the back of the full food pack for a humorous tractor-trailer look. We also combined the personal packs down to two, making it so that we had four packs and two canoes—perfect for six people to portage. The portage to Baird actually felt easier and shorter by walking at a slow steady pace rather than hurrying along.

The rest of the afternoon we leisurely paddled through Baird, Metacryst and Cutty. A brilliant cloudless day with light wind made this a leisurely paddle, and we were quite glad to have found solitude again. These lakes primarily had low banks and looked as if they would be full of fish. Our next trip will definitely be set up to loop through these three lakes. We camped on Cutty, a small campsite that barely held two tents, but the construction of the fire ring is the smartest I have seen in Quetico. There was a perfectly placed log bench beside it and the fire ring rocks were stacked up high enough and tight enough so you can only build a small well-controlled fire. What really set it apart, in my mind, is that the top rocks were also large enough and flat enough for us to cook on our stoves there. It was just like having a cooking table.



The fellowship of friends—real paddling partners through thick and thin—is among the most precious of wilderness values. (Darky Lake)

After dinner we searched for fish and had a hard time finding any. Finally at the other end of the lake, we caught our first few, and Steve boated a trip best 27-inch walleye. It was also the most humorous catch of the trip as the fish wriggled free from Steve and dropped onto the floor of the canoe. Steve tried to grab it but couldn't as the fish angrily snapped at him. Wedge and I laughing at Steve probably didn't help things, but eventually he got the fish back into the lake.

The next morning was cold, very foggy and our small thermometer read 38°. After some coffee and hot chocolate, we paddled and portaged back into the Kahshahpiwi chain at Sark Lake. The first portage is quite an eye opener with three significant climbs and descents. The rest of the day's trip was enjoyable with

our only mishap coming between Sark and Keefer. Our Fisher map proved incorrect again as the portage showed on the east side of the creek while it was really on the west.

Of course there is a landing on the incorrect side because of others wrongly landing there and a decent trail exists for about 50 yards. After that 50 yards I found myself tangled in a maze of cedar trees and eventually managed to totally wedge the canoe into the forest. I left it and doubled back quickly to let the others know to try the other side. Once I was back in the woods I muscled the canoe down to the creek, crossed and followed the easy trail to its outlet.

We landed at our favorite Kahshahpiwi campsite just after noon and had lunch. The view from this elevated site is outstanding and has comfortable pine

benches around the fire ring. It was another lazy afternoon. The most ambitious thing anyone did was swim when the sun popped out for a while in the afternoon.

The next day was a real Quetico treat, a lot of portaging, no people and no hurry. By now we had found our rhythm with the paddles and on the portages. We portaged first into Trant Lake. Just as we reached the portage, it began to thunder and a steady rain fell the entire time we crossed this mile long portage. By the time we reached the other side, the storm had passed on to our east. During this portage we faced our biggest crisis of the trip. About three quarters of the way across I broke the yoke on my canoe. The Alumacrafts we were using feature a reversible seat/portage yoke, and when I pulled down on the metal about 12 inches in front of my face

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the yoke bent. Being careful, I made it the rest of the way across the portage but while unloading the canoe the yoke snapped and fell into four pieces.

So we paddled to a great campsite, checking out Trant's pictographs along the way and set out to fix the yoke. Using Jim's skills as a metallurgical engineer, not to mention the skills every male possesses with duct tape, we fashioned a surprisingly sturdy internal splint from an everyday butter knife from the kitchen gear. We were overly cautious with this canoe the rest of the trip; rather than snatch it up as usual, we had one person lift the bow while the canoe portager walked in underneath. We reversed the process to unload. This worked well and the yoke never wiggled or showed any weakness the rest of the trip.

The chain of small lakes between Trant and Silence are

another area I hope to revisit. I have fished the two furthest east and did quite well but this trip we simply passed right on through. These portages clearly don't see much traffic, are very rocky and require a lot of attention to foot placement. The lakes themselves appeared rocky with lots of chuck rock boulder containing millions of hiding places for crawfish and the fish that feed on them. The larger lakes to the north of the chain we were on—Hurlburt, Payne and William—show enough promise so we will probably also try to explore those during a future trip.

Emerging onto Agnes after lunch we were faced with a stiff southerly breeze. We battled it and settled on the campsite on the long point on the southern end of the large northern basin of Agnes. This was hardly our first choice, but we were tired and had no

campsites marked until the Louisa Falls area. Five more miles of pounding through the waves wasn't something we wanted to do, especially with a campsite that nice available.

That night Wedge and I went fishing near the islands to the east of our campsite. The day, like so many others in Quetico, had calmed into a beautiful, peaceful evening and there was a lot of wildlife about. We paddled under a bald eagle, near an otter and fished while a pair of loons boldly swam within 25 feet of us. We discovered two small campsites we didn't know existed, and a small trickle of a waterfall coming into Agnes. We caught some smallmouth and two small wall-eye, but it was an evening when catching fish was only a bonus on the rest of the experience.

Sometime in the middle of the night, I woke up to the sound of

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thunder. Everyone was out of the tents a little after 6 a.m. when the storm finally made its way overhead. We nervously returned to the tents to finish our breakfast and pack up personal gear. After a soaking 30 minutes, we were able to break camp and get ready to paddle for home.

The skies remained a menacing gray and thunder rumbled off to our east, but we chose to load up and hoped the storms were over. Just before we got into the canoes a fierce wind blew out of the west. It had to be at least 50 mph; in less than a minute the huge expanse of Agnes to our north was whipped into a seething cauldron of roaring whitecapped waves. Standing there bewildered by the strength of the wind, I began to doubt we would make it out of Quetico that day. If it continued like this we could safely hug the western shore of Agnes, but Sunday Lake would be an imposing task and Bayley

Bay would have been impossible. Thankfully, in less than five minutes it stopped.

When the wind quit we jumped into the canoes and paddled for all we were worth. Motivated by the cold beer, steaks and ice cream that awaited us in Ely and fearful of the return of overpowering wind, we made it to Louisa Falls in an hour. A lot of people deplore wearing a watch in the wilderness. I wear mine mostly to have a feel for what we are capable of so I can route future trips. I don't think I'll plan on covering over five miles in an hour in the future though.

When we got to the falls the skies were clearing and the wind was light and friendly. The only memorable event the rest of the day was noticing the orange pine trees in southwest Sunday Lake, where the fire had burned the week before. We finished the trip the way we often do, eating a leisurely lunch standing waist

deep in Bayley Bay after finishing the Beach Portage from Burke. From there only a short hop remains before our towboat pickup at Prairie Portage.

One of the things I like most about Quetico is the endless possibility of circuitous routes. With a little imagination, you can cover enough familiar territory to visit old favorite spots, but still head out to discover new treasures. For us, the seldom-used lakes in the interior of the park will always have the strongest draw. I have already been standing in front of the map trying to weave a route that touches all of these attractive new destinations in Quetico. □

THE BOUNDARY WATERS JOURNAL **Route Finder**

Fisher: F 10, 18, 25, 26
McKenzie: Mk 9, 26, 27, 36, 37