

wilderness adventure



□ by Stephen Erickson

Lost On The Frost

Well, you have to admit it sounded like a good idea: canoe five creeks as part of a sixty mile loop through the heart of the Boundary Waters in early August. I would have unequaled opportunity to see up-close the exquisite water lily, the stately moose and busy beaver that inhabit these areas. And solitude; how many people would do the fifty portages listed on the map plus the inevitable pull overs required by unmarked beaver dams? Yes, that was it! I would start on the Phoebe, then paddle through the Louse, Frost, Cherokee and Ada before returning to my starting point at Sawbill.

Like all careful canoers, I thought of potential problems I might encounter. For example: a trip with so much portaging might take a week, and I had but three days. No problem; just paddle faster. You don't get wind bound on a river. What if water levels were low? I would need to inquire at the local outfitters and have a bail out plan. Who would go with me? Did I mention solitude? To me, solitude means solo, and that was that. And what if I got lost? Give me a break. Who can get lost on a river? But I would leave an itinerary with my wife, just in case.

Finally the appointed day arrived, and so did I at Sawbill Outfitters near the southeast corner of the Boundary Waters. I had checked my gear and was ready to travel ultra light and ultra fast. I will refer to my "canoe," but what I really mean is a semi-decked solo 15-foot kayak with a hand-removable portage bar. This would allow me to keep my gear in a single pack while making frequent portages easier.

Sawbill Outfitters was a great

experience. This is a well-maintained outpost in the north woods with the canoer in mind. They are well equipped and well staffed with helpful, friendly folk who know the Boundary Waters. I was delighted to find an employee who had canoed the Phoebe and Louse legs of my trip the week before and found the water depths low but adequate. I slept that night in the back of my van to facilitate an early escape in the morning.

The long day of early August meant my 6 a.m. departure was in full daylight. The light chill in the air was sure to evaporate quickly with the clear sky. I tried to be especially quiet so as not to wake slumbering guests.

My canoe skimmed silently across Sawbill and Alton. I quickly got the rhythm of my craft. I worked out my portaging kinks as I single portaged the 140 and 285 rodders that began my trip. The miles flew by; so did the memories.

I remembered how my wife and I had frolicked in the rapids between Grace and Phoebe so many years ago. I remembered how it took a whole day, or even two, to get the kids into Phoebe. Now I was sliding across the north end of Phoebe, and it was only 9:30. I briefly encouraged a camper who had a hankering to go solo as I passed by their site. But I had other things on my mind, for now my trip was to begin in earnest.

Canoeing with the Creeks

The Phoebe River flows into the northwest corner of Phoebe Lake. The river is rather wide and shallow with low banks covered

by tall grasses and scrubby bushes. It leads northwest into Knight Lake, then Hazel and Polly before turning north toward Koma and the south arm of Malberg. It was now about noon, and I stopped at a vacant campsite to eat some lunch and make an energy inventory.

The day had gone really well with continued clear skies and a light wind. Apart from two easy, if unexpected, pull throughs due to low water, there had been no surprises. No solitude either. There were plenty of other canoers and occupied campsites. After 18 miles and 15 portages, did I have the energy to get another seven miles to my planned campsite on Trail Lake? Good conditioning means good canoeing. I paddled north on Malberg, looking for the entrance to the Louse River.

Lousy Times Ahead

The west wind was picking up and blowing hot gusts as I searched for the none-too-obvious portage into the Louse. I was relieved to find the short portage bore evidence of use. I had been concerned this less-traveled area might have invisible portages.

As I descended the bank to the Louse, the wind ceased, the sun disappeared and cool shade greeted me. The waters were black and still, dotted with beautiful white water lilies, hinting the bottom was closer than the surface suggested. Steep granite walls lined the waterway. The Louse River was ill-named. I paddled due east toward Fern Lake, noting the water lilies becoming more profuse and interspersed with water grass.

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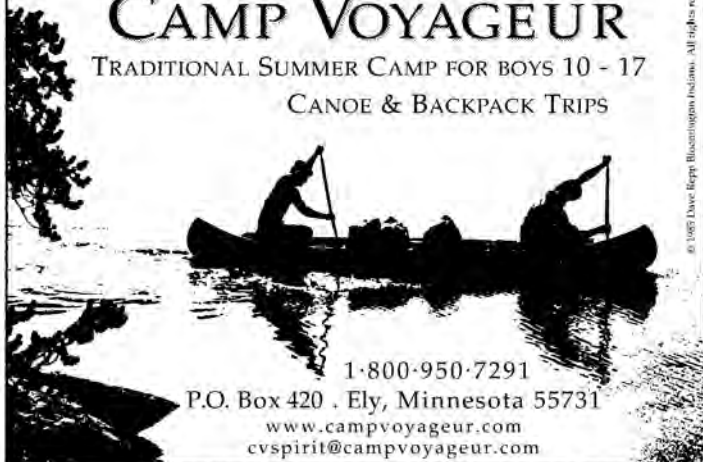
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Past Fern I lost my glide. The channel was choked with water grass, grabbing my canoe. The small bay marking the entrance to Boze Lake was particularly challenging. Paddling was more like shoveling wet vegetation. The Louse River east of Boze only got worse. It was interrupted by frequent portages, suggesting even in the best of times it was shallow. I was making much better time on the portages. Four hours later, I slogged into Trail Lake. The Louse River was well named.

Trail Lake was an isolate gem. The water looked drinkable. Ultra light means no water filter. I recharged after my efforts. There were two campsites, neither over subscribed. I favored the close one on a rocky ledge, but the absence of a bear-rope tree put me off.

The farther site boasted several trees, one of which was a rare humming tree. On closer inspection, I noticed it was not really the tree humming, but rather innumerable insects. They paid me no heed, and we got along just fine. With the humming tree as my alarm clock, I was up at first light and on the trail again by 6 a.m. I noted no hint of chill to the air, not a good sign, since I still had to finish the Louse, make a long portage and paddle most of the Frost.

The Louse had not rehydrated over night. I dragged my canoe through thick muck to the first portage which was quite nice by comparison. It led to some real open water, thanks to a well-placed beaver dam. I could actually paddle!

My joy was short-lived. The waterway ended abruptly at a heap of boulders. This was supposed to signal a portage, but the sheer rock walls on either side said "no way." I looked around for a hidden portage but to no avail. It's bad enough to think of having to turn around, but to back track the Louse? "No way!" I studied my map. Where would I put a portage if it were up to me? And there it was! Mismarked on my map, but there.

Canoeing got progressively better. I cranked through Bug, Dent, Chaser and into Mesaba, another gem. Six miles, six portages, and it was already 10 o'clock. I stopped at a campsite for refueling and rethinking. Mesaba was my bail out point. I could head directly south and return to Sawbill, or I could push on. As luck would have it, I had canoed the Frost a few years earlier. It was a good canoeing river, and I would make good time. Northward it would be! If only I had known...

It was 105 rods into Hub. I filled my water bottle for the longest portage of the trip, 300 rods to the Frost River. Relatively wide, smooth and slightly downhill, it was a thing of beauty. Until the fresh "crawl through."

Let me explain. A crawl through is a conifer's answer to a porcupine. It occurs when a dead pine falls across the portage. There it lies, trunk about waist high, with spiky branches prickling in every direction, just daring you to cross. The inexperienced voyageur laboriously kicks a hole in the topside

branches and tries to straddle the sharp stubs at great peril. My technique is to set down the canoe, put my pack in it and push them through. With a great snapping of branches, a tunnel is easily formed and the evening firewood is in the canoe! I merely "crawl through" after them.

There is one small problem with this technique. When replacing the canoe on your shoulders, you are pelted with sticks, dry needles and moss. So it was in camouflage I arrived at Fente Lake, my entrance to the Frost.

Lost on the Frost

I stared incredulously at the site that greeted me. My full-bodied friend was terminally ill! All that remained were the bones. The river was essentially dry! "It will get better upstream," I lied to myself. Stubbornly, I launched my canoe into a channel of plants. Laboriously I shoveled my way to the chute that spews into upper Fente. I remember with delight my foolish plunge through the chute a few years ago. Today there was no flume; barely a trickle. I noted a single sock stuck to a rock at the bottom. I mused, had it come off voluntarily... or involuntarily?

Out of Afton, things went from bad to worse. I ran aground. One mighty stroke and... well, nothing happened. I just sat there. Okay, I was still wearing my crawl through vegetation, so what was a little more? I stepped carefully out of my canoe to push. I began sinking into the goo. By mid-thigh, I had gone deep enough and slithered back into the canoe. The banks were boggy and sank under my weight. There would be no pull throughs or push throughs here. Fortunately I had strokes to deal with this. I call them the "bush beater" and the "grass beater."

The bush beater is best done with a 9-foot kayak paddle. It is reserved for situations where there is no water in the river but bushes on the bank. One simply places one's paddle in front of a hapless bush and strokes hard. The canoe is likely to move before the bush.

The grass beater is similar, but for closer quarters. One puts down one's paddle, leans way forward, grabs whatever happens to be near and pulls—hard! Similarly, the canoe moves. Thus it was, with bush beaters, grass grabbers and paddling where possible I moved slowly upstream. The sun shone hot. The hours crawled by. The miles crawled by. The bugs crawled on me.

It was in this decrepit state that I made my first of two identical discoveries. Pictographs! Seriously. The ooze gave way to two stretches of cobblestoned river bottom upon which were strange signs painted in shades of red, green and white. I had never heard of pictographs on the Frost, or anywhere but on sheer rock walls. If I got out of this alive, what an exciting scientific find this would be!

My concern for my safety was becoming progressively well founded. Although I could not begin to estimate how far I had come due to the many bends in the river and my slow progress, it seemed like the first



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portage was long overdue. To add to my concern, the Frost River in this section goes due east. My compass indicated I was headed straight north! I searched my map to see what small tributary could have lured me off course. But to no avail. Water levels picked up a bit, and there was no going back. I went, well... forward.

Until the river of rock! There it stretched before me. All rugged rock. All up hill. All slimy. There would be no climbing this leg breaker. Surely there must be a portage. I searched both sides. None! I was not exploring. I was lost on the Frost! Panic came. And left. Clearly, it was time for a plan.

I thought of two. I could sit tight and hope that when I didn't return home on time my dear wife would call the Forest Service. That would take days. My fresh water was about out, and the thought of the night life in this swamp was, well, not appealing. I could also

turn around and run the gauntlet in reverse, if my strength would hold, back to Mesaba and short cut out. That plan wasn't appealing either.

Well, you know what they say, "When the going gets tough..." As I stood there, surveying my surroundings, I noticed the faintest of paths through the tall dried grass. I mused, what sort of animal might have made this path? Deer, moose, wolf? Then I thought, perhaps it might not have had four legs, but two. And if so, was this path made rationally... or irrationally by a demented and dehydrated soul, wandering aimlessly in the wild; as I might be a few days hence?

Let me be serious for a moment. From many seasons of canoeing, I know strange things happen when you are alone in the wilderness. I believe all soloists know this, although it is hard to talk about. Let me just say: there are myster-

ies that can be explained and there are mysteries that can only be lived. Probably this was the former, an animal trail, leading nowhere. I could follow it. But if I couldn't find my way back to my gear... it is one thing to be lost with full equipment. It is quite another to be lost without food or shelter.

But just maybe this was the latter, a trail of trust. Whether to follow it was my choice. Well, I had come for adventure, and adventure it would be. With my ever present whistle around my neck and my compass with signaling mirror in hand, I pushed into that slight part in the grass. It lead away from the rock river and inland. I couldn't see my feet for the vegetation. I stumbled through potholes. What if I found a demented traveler?

The trail led 20 yards to a river bank with an unmistakable well-worn portage that I had... missed



After two rough days of pulling over beaver dams, open water is a beautiful thing to the solo paddler. (Lake Two)

when paddling. It was not the portage for which I had been searching. That one took off from the other side of the river. This was a portage to *somewhere*, but where? For sure somewhere was better than nowhere.

I returned for my gear. I noticed the trail cut across a small peninsula, so I paddled back to the portage. It appeared to run parallel to the river of rock, but at a distance. I started portaging, glancing at my watch and compass. Straight northeast, uphill and five minutes long, or about 80 rods. I scanned my map. The truth hit me like a flash flood.

I was still on the Frost, about one and a half miles further than I thought, hence the north-pointing compass. I had missed no less than four portages. Portages are hard to find when the river is dry. And the pictographs? What a dunce I was! In better times they had been rapids "painted" by

canoe bottoms. Yes, and I had performed the unlikely and un-recommended feat of running them both upstream!

So I was found! I was at the outflow of Pencil Lake. But found is not done. Pencil, Chaser, Octopus and more Frost River lay between me and my desired campsite on Frost Lake. After 11 hours, 20 miles and 23 portages, I limped into Frost Lake. The only people I had seen all day were sitting on my preferred campsite! No matter. I dumped my gear on a rock to dry and took my canoe to one of the fine sand beaches that grace this lake. There, with handfuls of wet sand the canoe came clean and so did I.

Cherokee and Ada

The day dawned without me. Without me conscious, I should say. I slept in a little but was still on the water by 7 a.m., feeling remarkably good given my exertions of the previous day. Chero-

kee River bound, I paddled through Frost Lake, then Unload, Gordon and Cherokee Lake. The Cherokee River restored my faith in river canoeing. Apart from one big beaver dam pull over, it was smooth paddling. I passed two groups of canoers on Skoop and headed for Ada Lake and River. There in the north arm, the going got a lot tougher.

I landed at Sawbill at 11 o'clock. The trip had ended on an up beat after 60 miles and 50 portages in 2 1/2 days, some mysteries solved, another lived and about all the adventure a 58-year-old body could handle! □

