



# the **BOUNDARY WATERS JOURNAL**

**FALL 2023**

The Magazine of America's Favorite Wilderness Area

THE BOUNDARY WATERS JOURNAL

FALL 2023



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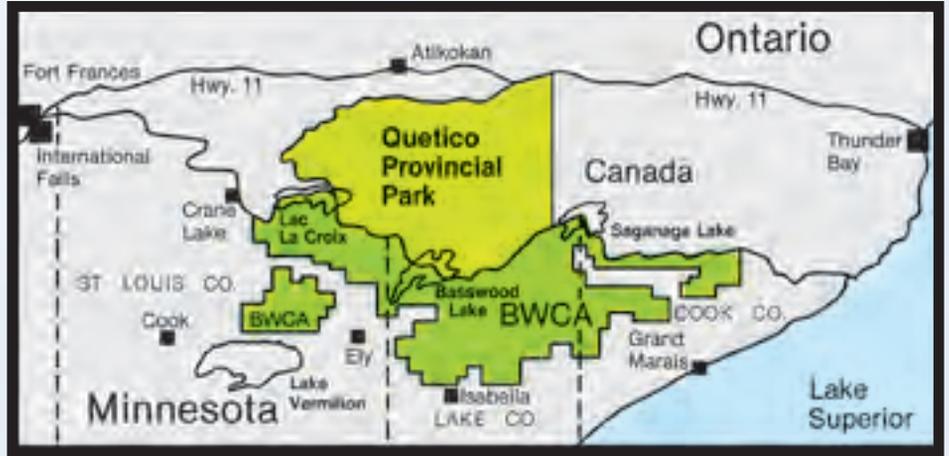
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COVER PHOTO: Fall Colors—Sandpit Lake  
By John Korzeniowski.

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# autumn adventures



by Jack Cook

## Frost River Challenge

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Our annual fall Boundary Waters trip was planned to explore a series of small lakes south of Lac La Croix. Heavy snows the winter of 2021-2022 and ample rain all but guaranteed that this entire route should be navigable. However, as summer wore on, another route beckoned, one we had tried and failed twice: the Frost River.

This river is located in the remote heart of the Boundary Waters. It is moose and wolf country and sees very few visitors. It is a challenging route and should be attempted only when water levels are high. That was our mistake in the past. We tried this journey in very dry years. Remote, wild, and challenging have been the alluring calls drawing us to this mysterious region.

As the summer progressed, the rainfall continued. Then, in August, a brief dry spell put the Frost River trip in jeopardy. However, in September, heavy rain hit the Sawbill area. An email to Sawbill Canoe Outfitters confirmed that the route should be canoeable. The only concern now was mud. We decided that it was now or never—let's tackle the Frost!

We rise early for our scenic two-hour ride to Sawbill entry point #38 from our home in Ely. We pause at an overlook on the Sawbill Trail for a peek at the colors. The trees are just beginning to turn on this late September day. The warm autumn temperatures we're enjoying have delayed the usual kaleidoscope of colors we've seen from this vantage point in the past. The trees are swaying from a stiff wind out of the north, which is ushering in much cooler temperatures.

We receive last minute route tips from the always helpful Sawbill Outfitters. They mention that because of the high water, we may be able to paddle up Skoop Creek and bypass the portage. We also talk with a couple who have just returned from the wilderness. They tell us to be prepared for mud!

By mid-morning, we are bundled up and heading north on Sawbill Lake. We paddle along the western shore of the lake, which lessens the impact of the stiff northwest wind. Very few paddlers are out on this blustery day.

We pause behind an island for a breather before continuing northeast to the Ada Creek portage. We meet a family of four returning from Cherokee Lake. They report that the portage to Skoop Lake is extremely muddy and that Skoop Creek is too shallow to run.

Continuing on, we have to hunker down as we cross an area where there is no relief from the wind. After this portion, we once again hit calmer water in the shelter of Sawbill's northeastern bay. Then we encounter another family. They echo the same dire message, beware of the Skoop Creek area!

Our seventy-eight-rod portage to Ada Creek is a good warmup for the day. Other than a few muddy spots, the portage is easy and relatively flat. We pause for lunch at the end of our second carry and continue up scenic Ada Creek.

As we near the end of Ada Creek, we are very vigilant. This is the area where many

years ago we missed the portage and bushwacked through a marsh all the way to Ada Lake! This time the portage is easy to spot. It is a gigantic mud pit potholed with the footprints of previous travelers.

We find a dry area and unload our gear. We then continue on, trying as best we can to step on rocks until we hit higher ground. We meet another couple who are heading back to Sawbill. When we ask about the muddy portage to Skoop Lake, they reply that we should be able to paddle up the creek and avoid the portage. We continue on the seventy-six-rod carry mulling over the conflicting reports we have heard.

We paddle across Ada Lake and into the north bay where Skoop Creek lies. The creek looks very narrow and shallow. We continue on. Now we're committed because the banks are lined with thick brush with little chance of breaking through to the portage that lies somewhere to our west. We breathe easier when the creek broadens and gets deeper. Finally, we can go no further. We unload our canoe and carry our gear through a small stream that leads to Skoop Lake. We are so glad we listened to that last couple we met!

We cross Skoop Lake and find the 180-rod portage that will take us to Cherokee Creek. The hilly trail crosses the Laurentian Divide and is very muddy. After our second carry, we are feeling worn and are happy to be paddling on this beautiful waterway.

We paddle in silence through the black water past tall spires

*The route into Frost River is not without challenges- like the muddy portage into Ada Creek.*





GARY FIEDLER

*Paddle quietly and keep your eyes peeled up ahead, rutting moose are active all day long in late-September/early-October. (Saganaga Lake)*

of spruce and high cliffs. In the lowlands, tamaracks abound. We can only imagine how beautiful they will be in a couple of weeks when flaming gold.

We half-carry and half-slide our loaded canoe over a massive beaver dam. We're sure this will be the first of many such obstacles on this adventure. Soon thereafter, we near Cherokee Lake.

Leaving the sheltered creek, we once again encounter the stiff northerly breeze. We follow the lake's western shore and find that the first two camps are occupied. Thankfully, the third is open.

Our new home sits high above Cherokee Lake. From the fire grate area, we have a fantastic view of the southern portion of the lake. There are a couple of tent spots in the open, however, the cold wind drives us to the shelter of a

grove of trees.

After our tent is up and we change out of muddy clothes, we enjoy a wonderful lasagna dinner. In our tent, while sipping hot chocolate, we smell something very sweet. We surmise that the scent is from maple syrup, which a previous camper spilled, and it is very near our tent. Hopefully, there aren't any bears in the vicinity!

We retire early, and just as we doze off, we are awakened by the honking of a flock of geese flying over our camp. Later, we brave the cold and venture out. We are rewarded with a magnificent view of the stars, and to the north, a mysterious green cloud bank that must be the northern lights!

We awaken to a windy, cold morning. We are thankful that we didn't have a visit from a hungry bear wondering where we hid the maple syrup! The weather changed from drizzle

to sun to a few snowflakes!

Cherokee Lake is very choppy. We are able to avoid the larger waves by paddling along the northwest shore. Low, dark clouds race overhead on this gloomy morning. Our last stretch is into the cold, stiff wind. Finally, we reach the short portage to Gordon Lake.

On Gordon, we surprise a family of mergansers, who are resting in the sheltered bay. While paddling on, we are reminded of how beautiful this lake is and of our visit here many years ago.

In September 2005, on our first failed attempt of the Frost River route, we stayed on this little lake for two nights. We encountered a bull moose very near our camp, and though we never saw him, we did hear him grunting and crashing through the woods. Later that day, we day tripped to Frost Lake and walked the portage



that led to the Frost River. The river resembled a marsh with a narrow stream, which would have proved very difficult to traverse.

Now, on Gordon Lake, we head north into the all-familiar wind. We hear the call of a loon and soon see an adult and its young very near our canoe. We pause and watch the immature loon dive and surface with a minnow in its beak.

We paddle on past ancient pines and through a narrow corridor. We see a familiar majestic cliff and head west, remembering that our portage lies in this bay.

As we unload our canoe to begin the 140-rod portage to Unload Lake, the sun breaks through the clouds. We find the portage path is just like all the others we have encountered so far: very muddy and wet! We also find it beautiful, with large boulders and mature pines and cedars.

After eating lunch on Unload Lake, we are delighted to find that we can avoid another short portage by lifting and sliding our gear over a beaver dam. Although it is still only midday, we have decided to stay on Frost Lake so we will be well rested for the Frost River.

We travel west using a massive mid-lake boulder for a landmark. The first two campsites are open. However, we are headed for another site. Once past the boulder, we see the site, and it's open! This is where we stayed on our second failed Frost River attempt.

A year after our first try, we gave it another go. That year was even drier than the previous. When we arrived at the Frost River, it was evident that the water levels were even lower than before. Our goal was to camp on Bologna Lake, which is about at the halfway point of the Frost River. For several hours we tried to push, pull,

and paddle our canoe through the muck. Finally, we saw that this was futile and decided to backtrack to Frost Lake. The site we selected had a beautiful sand beach, and we enjoyed wading in the crystal-clear water on an unseasonably warm September day. We smelled smoke in the air, and in the east, saw a plume in the distance. We later learned that this was the Famine Lake fire. We stayed one more relaxing day on this site and headed back, not sure if we would ever attempt the Frost River again.

The camp is just how we remembered, with the beautiful sand beach landing area being the highlight. The kitchen area is set back in the trees but still offers a great view of this stunning lake. We pitch the tent on the soft sand area. One thing we won't be doing, as we did before, is wade in the water. It's chilly!

We spend the rest of the afternoon drying out our gear in the bright sun, which is now out in



Eastern BWCAW EP 47, 48, 49 transport to 43-45, 50-58, 60-66

“We started our BWCA trip at Rockwood. We stayed in the bunk house the night before our trip began. The bunk house and shower were clean. The owners were very pleasant and helpful. The trip itself into BWCA was fantastic. The wilderness area was fantastic and a welcome respite. We highly recommend Rockwood and BWCA.”

– Stephen

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force. We do some exploring and find moose prints in the sandy beach not far from our site. A marsh lies just to our north, so we are hopeful for an encounter with this iconic Northwoods creature!

We turn in early so we will be well-rested for the next part of our journey. The first two days have been very taxing with the wind, mud, and cold. Secretly, I am having some doubts about our route. Have we bitten off more than we should have? The true test begins tomorrow!

We wake to a frosty morning. We slept well, awakened only by a nearby barred owl. The quiet lake is shrouded in fog, which we know will soon burn off with the rising sun. Two honking trumpeter swans fly overhead, as if telling us to get going! We hurriedly pack and are soon on the water.

We paddle south on this picture-perfect day. The wind, which has plagued us so far, has stilled. We find our 130-rod portage, which parallels the Frost River, by the sound of rushing water.

The Frost River area has been described as wild, remote, pristine, and rugged. This trail is a fitting introduction to the wilderness it leads to! The pathway winds through a mysterious forest, carpeted with moss-covered boulders. When the trail isn't muddy, it is rocky. We are wondering what awaits us at its end.

We are thrilled to find a river filled with water. Our spirits are soaring as we launch into it. Two Canada Jays fly overhead, leading us downstream, as if to say, “Follow us!”

We soon arrive where our first portage should be, however with the high water, we are able to paddle through it. We now enter Octopus Lake. We would love to explore this beautiful wilderness gem. However, we follow the southern shore into a bay. Here we again pause to listen for run-

ning water and find our fifteen-rod portage.

After a short break, we continue. We follow the winding river through beaver dams and short but difficult portages around beautiful rapids. The weather is perfect, a cloudless sky and just cool enough to wear a light fleece. The scenery is stunning, varying from secretive marshland to massive boulders and mature pine and spruce.

The river turns toward the north, so we know we are getting nearer to Chase Lake. On the portage to Chase, we discover recent wolf scat. How we would love to hear their howls in this rugged wilderness!

Instead of heading directly to our portage to Bologna Lake, we paddle to the middle of Chase Lake. Here we pause for a few moments to drink in the beauty, solitude, and silence. To our north lies the Hairy Lake Primitive Management Area, and in case the camp on Bologna Lake is occupied, we do have a permit to camp in it.

We find the ten-rod portage to Bologna Lake. It looks like it gets little use. We look for signs of recent activity, and the only prints we see are from moose!

We head southeast on this stunning lake. We find the campsite, and it's empty! While unloading, we see an adult loon with its immature young fishing nearby. We also see bones scattered around the site and wonder what happened.

This camp is wonderful. It lies in the southeast part of the lake, overlooking a quiet bay. It wouldn't accommodate a large group, but it does have two nice tent pads. We choose one in a grove of trees perched above the lake.

After our camp is set up, we spend some time relaxing and basking in the warm sun. We can't believe we have finally made it to this camp. It is a dream come true! Here we are deep in the wilderness, all alone—until we aren't!



GARY HAMER

*Fall is in the air during late-September  
BWCAW trips. (Lower Basswood Falls)*

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experience. By mid-morning, we are ready to resume our adventure!

We paddle back toward our portage. Bright blue skies with a few wispy clouds herald another beautiful day. After our carry, we are once again on Chase Lake. The short portage to Pencil Lake holds more wolf scat. A steep rock slope leading to Pencil is challenging even in these dry conditions.

Pencil Lake is narrow, and like all the other lakes in the heart of Frost River country, beautiful. We glide over lily pads, past large rock formations, and past towering conifers to our next carry.

This overgrown trail winds its way past large pines. A pathway branching from the portage leads to the river. On our way back from our first carry, we follow it and find a spectacular view of the Frost River as it plunges down a series of cascades!

At the end of our carry, the river heads south, is very shallow, and winds its way through marsh grass. We go over several beaver dams and short portages until the Frost turns more westerly. The river starts to widen and transitions from grasses to alders to forest. Sadly, this signals we're near the end, and we try to enjoy our last moments on the Frost.

After we traverse one last portage, we see the river widening. We have one more obstacle in the form of a large beaver dam. At this stage of the game, we feel like we have perfected the art of dam-running. We hit the dam, Deb climbs on top and pulls the canoe to where it balances. I then climb out and we push our craft towards the bottom of the dam. While I hold it steady, Deb climbs back in and I push our canoe back into the water. I then have both hands on the thwart, get one foot in the canoe, push off with the other, and then bring the other foot in and sit down squarely on the seat.

On this the last dam, Deb is

A canoe with a couple who looked older than us paddle up to our camp. Since it is much too late in the day for them to continue to the next campsite on Afton Lake, we invite them to share our site.

We soon learn that Ronald and Connie (not their real names) live on the Gunflint Trail. They, like us, have been doing a fall canoe trip for many years. Their excursion to Frost River started from the Tuscarora area. After they settle in, Connie is watching a pair of mergansers in the bay when she makes an exciting discovery. In the underbrush lie the skeletal remains of a moose! We all wonder how it died and how long ago? Was it killed by wolves? Old age? Starvation? We'll never know.

While eating dinner, we learn more about this very interest-

ing couple. We talk about life on the Gunflint Trail and the Ham Lake Fire. They share their experiences with some of the characters we have read about: Dorothy Molter, Benny Ambrose, Helen Hoover, and others. Before we know it, the sun is starting to set, so we all turn in.

Other than being awakened by the crack of beavers slapping their tails on the quiet lake, we sleep soundly. We are up before the sun. Our guests are eager to get started. After the Frost River, their loop will take them north, and they have an aggressive day planned. We only plan to make it to Afton Lake.

After they leave, we leisurely continue packing. We want to give them a chance to get far ahead of us so we can all enjoy the solitude of this wilderness

looking back as I climb in to sit down. For some reason, I fail to hit the seat squarely, and since Deb has shifted already, the canoe suddenly tilts! Before going over, we both shift our weight back to the other side, which prevents us from a very embarrassing and humbling dunking in the Frost River!

Finally, we're on Afton Lake and looking forward to a relaxing afternoon to revel in our accomplishment. As we draw nearer to the campsite, Deb says, "It looks like a canoe is at the site."

My reply, "I think that's a fallen tree."

As we paddle closer, we see someone moving. Oh no! Our options now are to head to Hub Lake, which means a 340-rod portage, or continue to Whipped Lake. However, one of our maps shows a campsite on Whipped, and the other doesn't.

We have a short ten-rod portage that connects to Fente Lake. This is the path from Hades! It is the toughest short portage we have ever encountered! We ascend a steep cliff, using trees to aid our climb. The descent is just as steep, and we once again use trees for help. With the canoe we both carry and drag it up and over the hill. The Frost River wore us down with body blows, and the Afton/Fente portage delt us the knockout punch! We are whipped and now headed to Whipped Lake.

It is getting late in the afternoon as we paddle across Fente Lake. We are anxious to reach Whipped Lake, but our fatigued bodies can only go so fast. We reach the connecting twenty-rod portage to Whipped, and fortunately it's an easy one.

The campsite is shown somewhere in the narrows area of the lake. We paddle along the western shore until we reach the narrows. No campsite is seen. We travel through the

JACK COOK



*Floatplane remnants that went through the ice in 1946 on Zenith Lake.*

narrows and reach a swampy area. Still nothing. We then turn around to check the eastern shore. In a bay, we see what could be a site. We draw closer and, to our joy, spot the fire grate!

We have low expectations for our new home. Upon inspection, we discover that it is very suitable. The tent pad is level and close to the water. The fire-grate area is in an open space, and we have a great view of the lake. Because of the sparse tree cover in the immediate area, this would be a hot camp in the summer. However, at this time of the year, it suffices nicely.

We hastily set up camp. We enjoy a fine meal, and afterwards, find time to relax a bit. As night settles in, we see an orange crescent moon setting in the west.

During the day, this camp may be unspectacular, however, when the sun goes down, it is remarkable! With a combination of a moonless sky and

being so far from any towns, the stars abound in the heavens! We clearly see the Milky Way and its millions of stars overhead. The low rumble of thunder draws our attention to the east, where distant storms send up flashes of lighting. We are so thankful to be in this Dark Sky Sanctuary and to enjoy this spectacle that few witness.

We're up before the sun so we can get an early start for our return trip. It is a beautiful morning, and we pause to observe some puffy clouds that are floating overhead and are perfectly mirrored in the quiet bay at our feet. By mid-morning we are backtracking to the short portage to Fente Lake.

On Fente we paddle southeast until we round a point. In this bay lies our 340-rod portage to Hub Lake. The trail starts with a steady climb up a large hill. It then levels off and we hit a dried lake bed, which we estimate to be the halfway point. The remaining hike includes crawling

beneath a large tree across the trail and a muddy stretch as we approach the end.

We pause on the shore of Hub Lake for our lunch. Then, on our paddle across, watch an immature loon diving for fish. We find our 105-rod portage to Mesaba Lake. The path is a bit overgrown, but other than that, quite easy. We're making good time, so we briefly debate about staying here on Mesaba or continuing to Zenith Lake. The first camp on Mesaba is empty, and since we have stayed here before, we decide to pull in.

While strolling about the campsite, we see not much has changed in the fifteen years since we last camped here. We are perched on top of a hill with a wonderful view of the northern portion of Mesaba Lake. A tent pad is located on this hill, and in the dried mud, the hoof print of a moose! We choose, however, to pitch our tent in a sheltering stand of pines, just in case it rains.

Since we didn't get a chance to relax after yesterday's grueling journey, we feel that we deserve some time to rest and recuperate a bit. From our previous time spent here, we know just the spot. Just a bit north of our camp, a large dome of rock slopes gently to the lake. We take off our socks and shoes, roll up our pants, and slide our legs into the refreshing lake. This hits the spot!

When I pull my feet back out, I see my leg is covered with leeches! Or, so it seems. In reality there were only two little ones on my ankle, and Deb thinks this is very funny. She is kind enough to pull them off, but that puts an end to our invigorating dip in the lake.

Next, we head back to the top of the hill to read and relax in our camp chairs. We listen to the whisper of the breeze in the pines, the clapping of the waves on the rocks, and the whoosh of a raven flying overhead.

As the shadows lengthen, we finally see the furry engineers who have had such an impact on our trip. Numerous beavers are crisscrossing the placid lake. They look like tiny boats plowing through the water, leaving a rippling wake behind them. What a wonderful afternoon we've enjoyed. We go to bed knowing that tomorrow will be much more challenging!

After a restful night, we are up for an early start. A brief rain shower passes by, and we finish packing inside our tent. We are back on Mesaba Lake and head towards its southeast section for our first portage. We notice that the leaves on the bushes are turning a beautiful mixture of yellows and reds.

The eighty-rod trail leading to Hug Lake is stunning and has several large pines towering overhead. Tiny Hug Lake is next, which dead-ends at a tricky beaver dam portage.

The colors are vibrant on Duck Lake. We remember wishing there was a campsite here the last time we came through. The beauty continues on the ninety-rod portage to Zenith Lake. Here the pathway crosses a sturdy bridge and parallels a babbling stream.

We arrive at Zenith Lake, and just to our south lies the formidable 480-rod Lujenida portage. However, before we tackle this trail, we head along the lake's northeastern shore in search of something. A short distance later, we find it!

According to radio station WTIP, in 1946, a young man arrived in Tofte with a brand-new Piper Cub airplane with the hope of becoming a bush pilot. He was recruited by local trappers, and on Christmas Eve, flew to Zenith Lake to check out a beaver lodge. The plane broke through the thin ice up to its wings. The pilot walked all the way back to Tofte. It took him twenty-four hours to hike the nearly fifty miles in

knee-deep snow!

Later, a group of men went back to Zenith Lake to recover the aircraft. They lifted the plane back up on the ice and started melting the ice off it using a barrel stove and sheets of canvas. They were almost finished when the plane caught fire! They shoveled snow on the engine to salvage it and pitched the frame and wing back in the woods where it now lies before us. We marvel at this wreckage from the past and the fascinating story behind it.

Our side trip over, it is now time for our longest portage. Our hearts start pumping with a tough climb up a hill. The pathway then levels off before a series of low lands and mud. The fall colors are stunning as we walk through a dazzling forest filled with yellows and reds.

At the halfway point, we stop for lunch. While eating, we are surprised to see a man with a pack coming down the trail. His eyes open wide with astonishment to find us sitting on a rock by our canoe eating.

He tells us that he and three friends were grouse hunting on Mesaba Lake, which explains the gunshot we heard yesterday.

We let them get far ahead and continue. The remainder of the carry is just as tough, with slippery rocks, ankle-deep water, and mud. We pass the hunters returning for their second carry, knowing we will probably see each other later this trip. Finally, we reach Lujenida Lake!

We paddle quickly over this little lake. We are hoping that a campsite is open on Kelso Lake. We see a couple picnicking by a large boulder known as the Kelso Stone.

This eight-ton boulder is perched on three smaller rocks and is quite an attraction in the Sawbill area. There are several theories of how it arrived at this spot. The most interesting and intriguing is that it is a dolmen placed here before the time of Christ by ancient explorers!

The picnickers are very pleasant and tell us they are just out for the day. We ask how busy the lakes around Sawbill are, and their reply is that it is very busy. We would love to pause here a bit and ponder the origin of the mysterious Kelso Stone, however, we are more concerned with modern travelers seeking campsites!

We had this same scenario a year ago when we were returning to a popular entry point. Since the weather was warm and no reservations were needed, the lakes were flooded with people.

We enter the meandering Kelso River. Here we encounter a group of four canoes that are playing bumper cars with the river bank. Thankfully, we pass without incident and are now on Kelso Lake.

On Kelso, we are met with a stiff southerly breeze. I am amazed that Deb is paddling so strong! Our hope for an empty site is dashed when we see a large group on the last campsite. We still have Alton Lake, but if all the sites are taken, we will have to head back home.

The ten-rod portage to Alton is a muddy mess. At this point, we aren't too concerned with the mess, because our shoes and pants are filthy! Before entering the lake, we let another couple come ashore. We ask if there are many available campsites on Alton, and the guy is kind enough to show on our map which are open. We hurriedly thank them, for we see the grouse hunters on the portage!

We travel down the western shore and soon find one of the empty camps. As we are unloading, the hunters pass by. I tell them that there are more available just down the lake.

This is a wonderful site! The pebble beach area would be a great place to cool off in hot weather. A stairway leads up from the lake to the tent and fire grate area. Trees and bushes

JACK COOK



*Author Jack Cook and wife, Deb, all smiles after finally conquering the "Frost River Challenge". (Sawbill Lake)*

provide some privacy from the main lake. In all of our travels to the Sawbill area, this is the first time we stayed on Alton Lake, and we are very happy this site is available.

While we set up camp and make dinner, we monitor the activity on the lake. There are numerous parties heading south, and we hope all will have a place to stay this night. This has been our toughest day of our trip, and we are exhausted. We are in the tent before the sun goes down.

Throughout the night, the wind blows. Our concern is that we may be windbound and our food supply is running low. Fortunately, when we wake up, we see that the lake is choppy, but not too bad.

We leisurely pack our gear and head southeast to our final portage. In the middle of Alton Lake, we encounter some challenging whitecapped waves we are able to paddle through.

Nearing the twenty-nine-rod portage to Sawbill Lake, we see that we will be joined by several other canoes heading the same way.

On the portage, we once again meet the grouse hunters. While we queue for our turn to reload, they report they found a great site and enjoyed a fine grouse dinner.

It's a short paddle to our entry point on Sawbill Lake. We pull up to the dock, unload our gear, and give each other a big hug! We did it. It took seventeen years, but we completed the Frost River Loop!

Seldom when expectations are high are they met or exceeded. Our Frost River trip far surpassed all we had hoped for with rugged terrain, isolation, and inspiring beauty. Best of all was the overwhelming sense of accomplishment that we were able to complete one of the more challenging routes in Canoe Country! 📷

# wilderness camaraderie

by Leo Keane

## The Geezer Brigade

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If there is an age at which one is too old to take a wilderness canoe trip, I do not want to hear about it. My friend, Al Peterson, and I, didn't think twice about setting out from Sawbill Landing on the eastern edge of the Boundary Waters this past fall. In June of 1966, just days after graduating high school, we signed on as counselors at Camp Buckskin on Lake McDougal just off Highway 1 near Isabella. Here is where we learned the ropes of canoe tripping and met the man who would be an inspiration for the rest of our lives: Fred McReady.

Fred was an Ely school teacher and coach, but in the off season, he was a summer-time guide in the Boundary Waters who just so happened to pitch in at Camp Buckskin that summer. He must have noticed our interest in canoes. Under Fred's tutelage, Al and I became canoeing instructors for the camp's underprivileged children from throughout Minnesota. It was a most beautiful summer that still glows in memory and was the foundation of my love for the Boundary Waters.

Now, at seventy-four years of age, Al and I are still canoe country partners, setting off from Sawbill Lake. The mountain of Duluth packs beside our seventeen-foot Wenonah Spirit II belies the extent of our trip; not a month long, barely even a week. But it is late September, and like good scouts, we choose to be prepared. Our proposed route seems eminently doable: Sawbill Lake through a chain of ponds and creeks to Cherokee Lake, then portaging into the Temperance River watershed and back to Sawbill

via Burnt and Smoke lakes.

Sawbill Lake's north to south axis creates a wind tunnel for the morning's northerly breeze. Undeterred, we shove off into the teeth of it. Whitecaps mid-lake alert us to dig deep for the irregular far shore, where we gain frequent windbreaks. Here too we enjoy the advantage of viewing canoe country more intimately—a shoreline view of billion-year-old granite and brilliant cedar boughs awash in lapping wavelets. We glide over, peering curiously for lurking northern pike. There is a fascinating world in this microcosm of a northern lake that all too often we bypass as lake-bound paddlers.

Our proposed lunch stop lies on the sunny slope of the last campsite on Sawbill before our first portage. We pull the canoes ashore to evaluate the situation. No doubt the sunshine feels good on our wind-blown faces, and nothing could be better for enjoying our first lunch. The question remains, do we stall here for the day or do we commit to the first portage? If we commit, portages two, three, and four also await, leapfrogging creeks and ponds without a campsite between until we reach Cherokee Lake. The kicker is portage four, 180 rods into Cherokee Creek. Eager as we are to strive deeper into the wilderness, and robust as we might feel after our morning paddle, Al decides it's best to take a nap and give it some thought. I'm all-in with this plan, and I set up my camp chair for quiet time to write a

few journal entries. Al doesn't mince words when he awakens an hour later as the sun spans the zenith. Blinking groggily as if to remind himself where we are, he mutters, "Let's stay here." I couldn't have said it better. What a nice, grassy, and warm campsite.

Next morning there's "frost on the punkin" at Sawbill Camp. And that first portage is but a stone's throw from camp. We hustle breakfast, reassemble packs, and get going, eager to get into the Boundary Waters and test our mettle on the four portages to Cherokee Lake.

Sometimes a portage is but a pleasant walk in the park—like this first one today. Golden birch leaves drape the trail that rolls easily up one gentle knoll and down again through the pines. It's an invigorating eighty rods, a lovely hike, and we are vastly encouraged and glad to be here on this sunny September morning. Life is good. Portages two and three hopscotch around a mucky creek and through swampy ponds, somewhat of a reality check, and by early afternoon we are unloading on the rocks for portage number four, the 180-rodder. This shouldn't be hard, we think to ourselves, we'll be paddling into Cherokee by happy hour.

It turns out 180 rods is actually six times longer than eighty rods, or so it seems. In that longer length, you will experience every terrain feature the Boundary Waters has to offer: heart-pounding escarpments, ankle twisting boulders



*Fall fishing action is notoriously slow but you can't beat the atmosphere. (Lower Basswood Falls)*

and alder swamps, muck up to your boot tops and a tunnel through the brush, the canoe on your shoulders parting the thicket like a plow. Al carries our heaviest pack (the utility) and armfuls of paddles, PFDs, and my fishing rod case. I man the canoe, which doesn't seem like a fair trade, but it's his choice. Plus, I'll get my turn when we hike back for the remainder—that is if this first lap ever ends.

Marching on and on, I begin scanning trailside for a pair of forked trees to jam the bow into as a canoe rest. Often, as is the case here, those forked trees simply won't appear, and so I'm forced to plod along, aching shoulders, sore back, and all. But what's this? It sounds like a bull moose catching up on the trail behind me. It certainly is; a very long-legged moose of a canoe-man pardons himself as he carries his canoe around to my right. "Heading for Cherokee?" he inquires cheerily, "Got a favorite campsite to claim?" "Well, yeah," I reply, ignoring the obvious. "We were thinking this portage might end somewhere, and when we get there, we will gladly take what we can get. And no, we have never been to Cherokee." "Pretty lake," he says, and marches out of sight.

Well, I sure hope so, I'm thinking, as Al and I finally meet at the Cherokee Creek exit then plod all the way back on trip number two for the rest of our packs. Once again through the alder swamp, I hazard a glance horizon-ward for a track on the sun. Not encouraging, I point out to Al. It's going to be a push.

On the other hand, there are few things more lovely than a September sunset, and especially this one now that we've claimed Cherokee Creek, a bright waterway of bulrush and lily pad that is our reward for a day hard fought. In a mile of beautiful paddling, we emerge

into Cherokee Lake.

Our new favorite Cherokee Lake campsite is the first one we find and pull into just as the sun tips the western tree line. The site is concealed by a spine of granite rising from the water like a beached whale. Up on the flats, an enclosure of log seating holds court with the stone fireplace. Much to our pleasure, former campers have assembled a firewood pile big as a beaver lodge—albeit not quite the "beaver wood" we prefer, more like what might be mustered from the surrounding forest. But who's complaining! Not us—thoroughly tired voyageurs, pitching our tents by flashlight and hustling dinner by the flickering light of our campfire. That 180-rod portage about did us in, and the old sleeping bag never felt so good.

Yet another beautiful sunrise! How wonderful to wake with the sun slanting through the jack pines of Cherokee Lake—all the better when accompanied by plaintive song. Wait a minute... it is the lilting voices of women out on the water! I dress and hop aboard the whale's back of our campsite to inspect the scene. Such a grand view, a fleet of canoes aglow in the morning sun, up long before us. They too must be enthralled with the beauty of this morning, and complement with their wilderness song. I alert Al to come up and make an appearance. Not a chance. In fact, he chides me with my old line, "We're burnin' daylight Keansie! Let's pack up!"

Is there anything more sobering than to view a morning campsite with all the gear strewn about? Sometimes I feel like just letting it go, to not pack up, to lollygag all day, to enjoy a layover day, to read and write, swim and lie in the sun, catch a mess o' walleyes. It is seriously tempting—but not today. This morning we are bound for the thrill of the paddle, destined for intriguing

country, the Temperance River.

Actually, we've accomplished the task of packing up so many times, we know it can be done. We just have to get off our duff to do it. It's as simple as having a place and a pack for everything. This is our outfit: Two personal packs—one for each of us, for clothes, rain gear, ditty bag, and sleepwear. And just two more, a utility pack and a food pack. Our packs are the standard issue "Duluth" style and remain the only pack we've ever used. Built expressly for stowing large amounts of gear, they slip well into a canoe and portage... ahem, easily. Additionally, I am never without a day pack that finds a place behind or under my canoe seat, a thwart pack for sunglasses, sun/bug protection, and for my compact camera. The map case with compass lives front and center in the canoe, on top of the packs for frequent orienteering. I round out my gear with a rod case for a St. Croix two-piece spinning rod and a Cabella's tackle bag that carries all the lures I'll ever need for smallmouth and walleyes, lures I've acquired through the advice of expert fishermen in the *Boundary Waters Journal*.

Al, on the other hand, is more frugal. His personal Duluth pack seems half the size of mine, but it carries everything he thinks he'll need—no loose gear floating around camp or canoe, just a minimum of extra clothing in a tidy bundle. Honestly, I don't know how he does it. Maybe it's the Norwegian versus the Irish, the penny-wise versus the spendthrift. He's more efficient, but I leave nothing to chance.

Our utility pack carries a tent for each of us (Al thinks I snore), as well as our cook kit with utensils, a saw and a hatchet, a tarp that comes in handy for multiple uses, and Nemo camp chairs—so much more comfortable than hunched over on a log. Our



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food for a one-week trip fits snugly in our insulated food pack, divided in some haphazard fashion into lunches and dinners. For this trip, Al supplied us with a bear-proof canister to protect our breakfast and “coffee bar.” My impression of this nifty item is that it takes a bear to open the thing; in other words, I find it equally man-proof.

Day two and we’re on the water. Our fellow portager was right, Cherokee Lake is beautiful. Slabs of the Canadian Shield breach the lake in occasional bursts of geology and rise in pine covered islands. The sun shines. The hills glow. It is a splendid morning paddling into Cherokee Lake. Wishing we could paddle clear to the other end and see it all, wishing we could hunker down for a day on some island campsite. Our first portage will drop us into the Temperance River watershed.

My Fisher map clearly places that dotted line portage just around a rocky peninsula, along the south shore, which we find to be very cedar shrouded, concealing any semblance of a portage. We paddle up the shore then all the way back, searching intently for the tell-tale signs of a portage. Nothing. But wait! Under a copse of overhanging cedar boughs, in what looks like a random jumble of boulders, a portage vaguely takes form. We ease in, and Al hops ashore to verify. I casually mention that it looks like the trail actually ascends the steep and rocky bank. Al turns around gazing upwards and says, “Oh yeah, it’s a cliff!” Wonderful, this one’s a killer right from the get-go.

Rock climbing with a canoe is tough, and for this geezer brigade, somewhat dangerous. Same goes for when loaded with a Duluth pack or two.

We’re darn sure we won’t bounce back after a fall, nor will the canoe, so we carefully help one another over the toughest sections. But once we crest the summit (maybe fifty vertical feet) unscathed, it’s a pleasant portage; high, dry, level—and quite long at 140 rods. This one requires the obligatory portage rest. I jam my bow into a convenient forked birch (thank you Fred McCready for teaching us this trick) about halfway along the trail. Here we doff both canoe and packs for a good long rest. Next trip across, Al and I are “double portaging”—a pack on back and another on the front—when I discover another way to rest. Searching for a trailside balsam fir of about eight inches thick and clear of branches at chest height, I plunge my front pack against the tree and lean into it, supporting my pack and load against the tree, never having to shed the pack.

I always wonder about the historical derivations of the Boundary Waters' lake names. Some are self-evident: Crooked or Basswood. Others lend themselves to imagination, such as Snub Lake, which we bypass this morning along our cliff portage. I'm wondering if the name relates to how the trail snubs Snub Lake, skirting it by a good hundred yards as if to imply the lake is hardly significant enough to visit or bother noticing. Yet the faint blue glimmer through a maze of golden birches is a charming sight on this September morning, and for that brief vision, I appreciate little Snub Lake.

Our next stop along this portage is Sitka Lake, a name that conjures images of tall timber and cold streams. Yet when we emerge at the Temperance River and our first encounter with this watershed, we are quite surprised. The river is but a trickle of a creek splashing among basketball size boulders—clearly evidence that we have arrived at the headwaters of the Temperance River. Downstream, we know the river's appellation is historically significant, and curious, while up here in the headwaters, Al and I can relate in that our own supply of happy hour beverage is alarmingly diminished.

Now on North Temperance Lake, it's obvious just how slow we are going. We've covered two portages, one lake, and it's already time to find camp. Perhaps we lingered on lovely Cherokee too long and now we're paying the price. Due to the sun's angle, we decide on the first of the three designated campsites North Temperance offers. This campsite features an impossible landing, but by now the die is cast—it's too late to explore for something better. The campsite itself sits a hundred feet above the landing and slopes inconveniently lakeward. Her tent sites are likewise sloped

and humped with rocks and roots. The surrounding forest is stripped of firewood of any kind, and with our tents pitched and camp made, it's far too late to paddle out for a better supply. The view... well, there isn't one. North Temperance Lake is obscured by a dank forest. If there is a benefit to be found in this campsite, it's that we are all about getting an early start on day four the next morning.

South Temperance Lake doesn't disappoint. It's a quick portage from North Temperance, and we arrive just in time to rejuvenate our spirits. The sun is bright on low hills, and a late season loon calls. As we paddle toward the longest portage of our voyage, I make a mental note that this would be another lake to revisit, to linger for a day or two, to fish around several inviting islands. Which reminds me, I haven't yet pulled out my fishing rod or opened the tackle bag. We've diligently hauled the gear across every portage of course, but so far, it's just extra baggage. On the other hand, I would not be in canoe country without it, as we always expect to have time for fishing. Hope springs eternal.

Speaking of realizations, Al and I just discussed how we are spending more time portaging than paddling. As we approach our 240-rod portage out of South Temperance, I pronounce, "Al, I can paddle till the cows come home, but these portages are taking the wind out of my sails." Well, not quite, but we shall keep that in mind next trip.

As for now, this is just another portage—one foot in front of the other, stop for a quick rest, slog on. One thing a long portage does offer is time to think. After all, there is nothing else to do but watch your foot placement and day dream. There will be plenty of time next trip; days to layover, to

laze upon warm granite, to fish, swim, maybe journal the day away or start a story like this one. Most importantly, there must be a next trip. For now we realize that life doesn't last forever. And then, along this slog of a trail, it dawns on me: We could prolong our days in canoe country simply by hiring a guide. A guide not to do the work for us, for that is part of the joy, but to simply help with the fundamentals: setting up camp, cooking and cleaning, a strong back for the big Duluth pack—in short, someone to share the load. Halfway down the trail, at our canoe rest and lying on a grassy patch, I broach the subject to Al. Surprisingly, he asserts he's been considering the same thing. And we agree, perhaps "guide" isn't quite the right term, but someone who complements our experience, with a similar mindset—someone who appreciates this wilderness and the myriad enjoyments of canoe travel. They'd have to be eager but thoughtful, love the hard work but able to relax. In other words, someone such as we were fifty years ago.

Unfortunately, today's daydreams won't get us down this 240-rod portage. Our next camp shall be somewhere along the Temperance River, which appears to widen into a long narrow lake. Won't that be nice; more paddling, less portaging. Let's go! "Yeah," Al says, "while we're young."

Speaking of lake names, in one more short portage we enter Weird Lake, a widening of the Temperance River's southward flow. There is nothing noticeably weird about Weird Lake. It seems a perfectly typical low elevation Boundary Waters lake; a bit swampy, enshrouded by white cedars, balsam fir, and towering spruce.

We round a bend at the far end of the lake and spot our campsite. It's already a gloomy late afternoon on Weird Lake, but our camp looks welcoming,



JOHN KORZENIOWSKI

*With beautiful colors, cool temps and no bugs, October brings a whole new perspective to portaging. (Boot Lake)*

if modest. As there is nothing breathtaking about Weird Lake, this campsite fits the mood well with a grassy landing where we slip ashore. A slim slab of granite serves as a terrace for the stone fire place just a few steps from the water's edge. Two level tent pads sit discreetly back from the central kitchen area. We quickly determine that tonight this campsite is just what we need.

Morning of our fifth day arrives with warm October sun, just enough warmth to take the plunge into Weird's tannin water, scrub down, and plunge right back out. Atop our granite shelf, I revel in radiance of earth and sun while Al boils a pot for coffee. And we're off.

Beavers patrolled past camp last night, and this morning we quickly arrive at their dam where Weird Lake and the Temperance River slide into her ever-widening chain of Jack and then Kelly lakes. Finally we have a long paddle ahead, interrupted only with one short portage and one long; a mere 230 rods into Burnt Lake. We must be getting in shape. It never fails. Just as we near the ends of our journeys, the portages become routine as we adapt to this vigorous life.

The long passage through Jack and Kelly lakes is the essence of canoe country paddling. Around every bend or back in quiet bays we expect a moose to raise her head, dripping with lily pads. The noiseless forest rolls by like an unfolding scroll. Aspens smolder, promising October colors. In one secluded bend of the river, we encounter a pair of trumpeter swans. They remain calm in our presence as I capture the image—startling whiteness in their serene realm. The north country is all the more full of wonder with the return of these magnificent birds, the only wildlife daringly displaying such grandeur.

Unlike many other birds up here dressed in somber tones of gray and brown, the trumpeter swan parades in unabashed elegance.

We are eager to reach the last camp of our trip and hopeful that it will be perfect, a five-star camp to grace the end of our Boundary Waters journey. Hustling across the 230 rods to our Burnt Lake destination, we almost forget the pain in our knees. My canoe bounces atop my shoulders while I contemplate all this trip has meant to me. Foremost, I am proud that we have succeeded. Our weather has been benevolent. The sun shone on our portage trails and allowed us to pass the time in dreams and fantasies. The worries of our well-being by family going about their lives in the city were for nothing. Two geezers in the wilderness proved the lessons of their canoe country years held true. With map and compass we traversed as purposely as the passing birds. We set up and broke camp as if by routine, knowing well the tools of the trade. We ate like voyageurs, albeit without the walleye shore lunch I promised Al. Of course, we reminisced, all the way back to the summer at Camp Buckskin and that first revelation of the Boundary Waters. And here, in this land of lakes and forest, we still feel at home.

Shoving off from the portage into Burnt Lake, we find the water color interesting. As opposed to typical canoe country clear or tannin-stained lakes, Burnt is green, green as a dollar bill. It's puzzling. We consider an algae bloom, but these are usually a surface blemish. On Burnt the color is infused throughout the water column, at least as deep as we can see—the depth of our paddle blades. Considering the name of this and the adjoining lakes, Smoke and Flame, we speculate it

might relate to past forest fires. Research may be in order.

Well, so much for our orienteering prowess. We find the red dot of our Fisher map campsite set within a puzzle of islands, points, and peninsulas. Tall white pines indicate several likely sites, but close inspection of each reveals an understory of tangled brush. We paddle around like lost ducklings, and with nightfall closing in, we are anxious to make camp. On the far shore, the incessant shriek of a Cooper's hawk sounds jeeringly to our ears. In one last attempt before moving on to the next red dot, we round a likely peninsula. This one too is overshadowed by white pines, but as we drift close, a gentle rise and clearing come into focus. Then we spy a fireplace and blackened grate. Certainly we can't be too selective, but just the same, Al scrambles ashore to inspect—after all it is the last camp of our trip, and we're hoping for the best. He returns with good news, "Keansie, we lucked out. It's beautiful."

And so it is. We shuttle packs and marvel at this wonderful site. As poet Gary Snyder once said, "Build your house where you would camp." Yes, I would build my house here, or a small cabin, or simply pitch a tent. We are grateful for just that, and we get to work making firewood and the evening meal: chicken and rice, with one last pull from our flask. Ah yes, the life of a voyageur. "It's a rough life, but it's a good one."

Next morning it takes three cups of coffee to motivate me to part with this dreamy campsite. I could linger another day admiring the tall trees, watching the shimmering lake, imagining who has been here before and the mysteries left behind. Every campsite holds stories of the voyageurs who've passed before. This hidden campsite certainly has mysteries we can only imagine.



*Fresh out of high school, Leo and Al worked as counselors at Camp Buckskin near Isabella the summer of 1966. Now at age 74, they are still hitting the canoe trails with a passion for the game.*

Always practical, Al interrupts my reverie with a call to breakfast. I set aside my coffee to admire what I gaze upon in our frying pan. As a true Minnesotan, Al's breakfast supplies included neat packs of "delicious" SPAM. Even more special, this morning Al has tooled our SPAM slabs into the shapes of fish—"For all the walleyes you didn't catch, Keansie," he explains with a wry smile. We get a good laugh while loading on brown sugar to make our SPAM fish breakfast a real Boundary Waters wilderness treat.

Not only practical, Al is also patient, allowing me time to organize my camera for our departure photo, and finally, a record of our Geezer Brigade. For we agree, it has been a wonderful trip. But it has also been a reality check on the dif-

ference age makes in our ability to travel in the wilderness. We no longer single-handedly throw the canoe upon our shoulders then dash across like young voyageurs. These days we might limp along. We study our footfalls. We rest often and make triple crossings. To our credit, we know what we need to take along, how to make camp. On the water, our canoe goes straight, true, and fast enough. Most importantly, we are determined to keep going—that we have more canoe trips in the works for the near future, or as Al says, "While we're young." I suspect that might be what keeps us from growing old.

Crossing Smoke Lake toward our last portage back into Sawbill, we relish the morning sun glowing on our faces and arms. This is the joy of October,

when the warmth of the sun feels like a blessing. Day by day now, the aspens create explosions in the hills. Our loons have gone silent or gone south. Indeed, there is nothing but silence, the prelude to dormancy.

We make our last shore lunch on a grassy outlook near the portage. Across the lake, we watch a campsite in motion. A canoe is loaded, soon crossing toward us and the Sawbill portage. Two young voyageurs in a shiny new Alumacraft canoe paddle by. We are impressed. Unlike the many we often see, these boys paddle in unison. Their canoe goes straight, no wasted veering this way and that with paddles awkwardly timed. And we imagine, this could be us fifty-some years ago—thanks to Fred McReady, who taught us the way of the canoe in this wilderness of lakes and portages. 📷

# wilderness savvy



by Peter Wahlstrom

## Caprice: The Spirit Of The Itinerary

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In his wisdom, Benjamin Franklin told us, “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.” Those who venture into the Boundary Waters would nod in agreement because good planning is often the difference between a glorious experience and a miserable one. For a Boundary Waters trip, careful planning usually begins months in advance and is done with the ultimate purpose of avoiding the worst-case scenario and managing the least-case one. When the time comes to set a loaded canoe onto the first body of water, the best laid plan is prepared for disaster and primed for bliss.

But for all the benefit that it brings, there can be a downside to planning if it goes too far and becomes an end in itself. In a camping rich environment like the Boundary Waters, over planning occurs without even trying because of the urge to subject every facet of the Boundary Waters experience to some kind of rational ordering process. So packs get compartmentalized, meals are allotted, routes are mapped, distances allocated, portages counted, campsites plotted, time parsed, and even downtime gets delegated. Although planning assures a safe and satisfying experience, like any virtuous practice, it can overachieve and underdeliver. Something gets lost when the best laid plan becomes the aim instead of the instrument and fails in a way that perhaps Mr. Franklin did not anticipate.

On a journey through the wilderness, where a cornucopia of wonder awaits, doing everything according to a plan

leaves no room for spontaneity and the random discovery that comes with it. There is value to be found in that kind of unpredictability, and it goes by the name of caprice. It may be the antithesis of a plan, but exercising a bit of caprice will enhance the wonder of it all. Absent a plan for every circumstance, the experience opens wider and unwinds moment to moment, free of expectation and its trailing disappointment. Trying to control nature, which is the essence of planning, matters less, and surrendering to nature, which is the essence of primal living, happens more. With no design on the day, everything is done in thrall to rhythm of nature. What is, is; what will be, will be. Through the simple act of resigning ourselves to the here and now, the virtue of humility advances and brings closer contact with our natural environment. Another layer of artifice melts away, and the spirit of the itinerary shifts weight to the old brain where the dream of wildness still reverberates in us. Our surroundings feel immediate and alive, like an extension of ourselves, and the dream state of the old brain renders a happenstance where, as the poet David Hinton divined, “Who we are is woven into where we are.”

I came to this realization on the second day of a trip into the Quetico. The itinerary of this journey was to concentrate the portaging and paddling in the beginning and end of a

seven-day trip so we could maximize the downtime in between at our destination, Red Pine Lake. This small and secluded body of water had enchanted us on a previous visit, made by way of a much more arduous route, including a nine-hour portage, which is a story for another day. Our return to Red Pine we hoped would be much less of a challenge by approaching it from Jean Lake. On this, the second day of the second attempt at Red Pine, the plan was to start at the end of the Maligne River and finish near Ivy island on the far western end of Jean Lake before sundown. It was a healthy distance to cover in a day, but it would land us close to the first of three short portages into Red Pine that we could attack first thing in the morning. On the third day, we would break camp, make a short paddle from island to mainland, dispense with all three portages, and burst victoriously into Red Pine, where we would set up camp for nearly three full days of unadulterated leisure in primitive solitude.

This was our first experience with the Maligne River, whose name means ‘wicked’ in French. There is another river with the same name in Alberta, which leads me to believe that this name was meant to be more descriptive than honorific, as in a warning to paddlers who intend to navigate it. The Maligne lived up to its name. The cur-

JOHN KORZENIOWSKI



*Having the drive and grit to portage hard will take you a long way in canoe country. But sometimes “pedal to the metal” is not the best mode of operation. (Portage into Fourtown Lake).*



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rent was stiff but manageable until it accelerated into mini rapids not quite tumultuous enough to warrant a portage. There we learned the meaning of Maligne. One canoe flipped, then shortly after another as we tried to punch through one of these stretches. Fortunately, the water was not quite waist-deep, so with some strenuous heaving, we were able to dislodge the canoes from the rocks they were pinned against, recover all the packs, reload on shore, and recommence. But we lost a lot of time in the process.

With the wicked portion behind us, we relaxed and revived ourselves with a late lunch on the southwest end of Sturgeon Lake, where the Maligne begins its descent. We were just over halfway to our goal, and it appeared that the next stage would be more benign, with calm lakes and only short portages to contend with. The map indicated there was still a lot of blue between us and our island destination, but without further mishap, I figured we should arrive with still enough daylight to get camp set up before the sun went down. The plan was still in effect.

We hugged the western shore for lee and whistled across the broadhead of Sturgeon, cruising into a bay that harbored Jean Creek, where we encountered three portages in succession—all of them mercifully short, but a bane to progress nonetheless. The last of those deposited us on the south shore of Rouge Lake, more or less a bulging of the creek that reverts to a narrow channel that guided us into Burntside Lake, the last body of water and final portage before Jean Lake.

The position of the sun indicated still a few hours of daylight to reach our destination on the far end of Jean. Definitely doable, I thought, as long as we kept up a determined pace.

We launched onto Burntside Lake, but not with the same gusto we had previously. There was less chatter between us and less vigor in our strokes; clearly the exertion of this day was taking its toll. We tacked along the western shore until we landed on an isthmus separating Burntside from Jean.

The map showed the portage just to the right of a pimple on the isthmus, but we had no luck finding it. It is always an interesting predicament when the map gets it wrong, which does happen, albeit infrequently. For the most part, I trust the maps, but whenever I'm navigating in the Boundary Waters, I always have that nagging thought in the back of my mind that the map could be wrong when it comes to the exact placement of the portage. This was one such occasion, and it threw another monkey wrench into staying on track. The isthmus separating Burntside and Jean is quite long, and there is no creek or obvious depression where a portage might naturally occur, so we spread out and began the search for an opening in the wall of vegetation. Eventually the cry of "eureka" erupted—turns out the portage was to the left of the pimple. I made the correction on my map, and we got busy unloading the canoes.

Finally on the shore of Jean Lake, we reveled in the light of this long summer day, but it was losing strength. Under a best-case scenario, we'd be setting up camp on Ivy island by now. We still had a lengthy paddle to get to the other end of Jean Lake, but no more portages, so I was confident that we would reach our destination with enough light left to set up camp. I conveyed this assessment encouragingly to the others who greeted my words with collective silence as we pushed off for the last leg of a very long day.

# Crane Lake



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Jean Lake is anvil shaped, having a rectangular base that undergirds a much broader expanse of water above. The two bodies of water are almost entirely separated except for a serpentine linkage between them formed by opposing points of land that create a natural gateway between the upper and lower bodies. While we navigated through that gateway, a vacant campsite on the southern point came into view. It looked inviting, but setting up camp there was not part of the plan, so we would be taking a pass. Or so I thought. Talk from the other canoes indicated interest, and before I had a chance to voice my objection, the other two canoes were pulling in to have a closer look.

As I watched from the stern of my canoe ten feet from shore, the other crafts beached and decamped scouts. It was not long before they came back

with smiles of satisfaction and thumbs pointing heavenward. “Nice site, plenty of tent space, and a sweet hearth,” came the report. Instead of relief, I felt the bile of anger rise in my throat. With that kind of a report, the plan was in jeopardy. There was no way I could persuade the others to get back into the canoes and paddle a few more hours to a destination that is still just a spot on the map. This campsite was tangible, available, and approved. A full day on the move through wild and forbidding terrain had these paddlers ready to sink some roots for a night. Fatigue had set in. Staying here was a no-brainer as far as the others were concerned, so I bit my tongue, swallowed my bile, and went along with the unceremonious overthrow of the plan, but I wasn’t happy about it.

Throughout the process of

setting up tents, harvesting wood and water, cooking supper, and eating it, I barely said a word to my companions. I couldn’t speak because my mind was burdened by the intrusive thought that we deviated from the plan and should be camping further up the line. This site that we just happened upon felt ill-fated to me. I couldn’t enjoy the same satisfaction the others felt at having a sweet home for the night. A gloom came over me, so I decided to get away from the others, as I was in no mood for their jovial banter around the fire. I grabbed a seat cushion and sought out the exposed tip of the long and gently sloping granite point projecting into the umbilical cord connecting the two bodies of Jean. Except for the faint glow of the fire back in camp and the occasional bursts of laugh-





*Sooner or later, the Canoeing Gods are going to conspire against your best laid plans. Will you know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em? The perfect Five-Star camp can be the reward. (Lower Basswood Falls)*

ter that rose above its crackle and pop, I felt deeply isolated on this moonless night. The darkness enveloped me as I lay on my back with my head on the seat cushion and fixed my gaze on the countless stars shimmering in the void. Most conspicuous of all was the Big Dipper constellation, Ursa Major—the Great Bear—symbol of the north, floating gaudily overhead in brightly twinkling suspended animation. Its ladle was right side up, guiding my eye to Polaris, the North Star, unwavering center of my world.

My mood softened. In such an unsettling funk, the sight of such illustrious eminences in space and time reminded me of my smallness and reoriented my restless soul. Feeling a part of the vastness around me, I let go of what was pestering me and dozed off. Eventually the bedrock beneath caused me to stir. When I opened my eyes, the night sky had taken on a mesmerizing feature. Aurora borealis—the dawn of the north—had sprung loose from its celestial moorings. Animated streaks of cosmic light were billowing like an ethereal shapeshifting scrim that spanned the breadth of the northern sky. This had to be shared.

I hollered for the others to come out to the point. They arrived exclaiming their astonishment at what was unfolding in the night sky. Each one lowered himself to the ground until there were six adults laying on their backs on an exposed spit of Canadian shield struck dumb by the luminous dance of celestial light. Over time the longitudinal light reduced to a wide ocean of vibrant green luminescence that was spilling into the ladle of the Big Dipper. It looked as if the Big Dipper was scooping up a ladle full of quivering cosmic rays. We watched in slack-jawed amaze-

ment as this magnificent light show played itself out before eventually fading. As we stood up, supreme gratitude for how this day ended welled up in us, me included. On this note of mystic bliss, we finally retired to our tents having emptied all the life out of this grand and glorious day.

The next morning, we got an early start, paddled the remainder of Jean, and after some tough sledding on the portages, landed on Red Pine with plenty of daylight to spare. Once we settled into a nice point at the west end of Red Pine, I looked around at camp and felt a little foolish for my behavior the night before. We arrived at our destination pretty much as planned, just not as early as planned, but getting here a few hours later really didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. We didn't have to race the sun, endure any additional hardships, or take any unnecessary risks to get here. The aim of relaxing for a couple days on Red Pine was still in play. In the end, nothing had substantively changed, other than my fixation on planning, which softened into an approach more attuned to circumstance. Flexibility proved its worth, not just because it averted something unpleasant, like exhaustion or bad weather, but because it brought something pleasant, like the enchantment of a fortuitously situated campsite. Had we not pulled unexpectedly into that site on Jean, we would have missed one of the most sublime displays of natural wonder that life can bestow. As we discovered paddling by, the campsite on Ivy did not afford a view of the northern sky. I reconsidered my attitude toward planning. Don't abandon the plan completely, but loosen it to allow for a deeper participation in nature. Under a less rigid regimen, my experience

of the Boundary Waters has become richer by far because it now includes those happy accidents that fall outside of the plan and accentuate the bliss.

Since the trip to Red Pine, I have deemphasized route planning to allow for the allure of caprice and the unexpected delights it brings. The general idea is an unambitious route—not too far, not too fast, so there is room for adjustment on the fly. This means erring on the side of a shorter route to facilitate deviating from the plan, such as it may be, for reasons that are fanciful rather than compulsory, like the demands of rough weather. Caprice is a change in the plan without a change in the weather. All that is necessary to the itinerary are the book ends of entry and exit, which are hard deadlines. What happens in between is a story that will write itself—an entry point on one day followed by an exit point on another day with an ad hoc line connecting them, following inspiration along the way. This laid-back approach leads me to study the maps differently now. Instead of fixating on a particular route, I survey all the options that the line between entry and exit may present. I like to keep the journey unscripted, the specifics yet to be determined, open to possibility.

Leaving a wider margin to each day allows for caprice to flourish. I have the wherewithal to make choices based on a whim, not on how far we have to get or what conditions we have to heed. It's no longer about how much territory I claim. It's about how much the territory claims me. In this mode of acquiescence, progress becomes more of a flow-state and less of a push, more in synch with nature's rhythm instead of overriding it, more

about commingling with the land instead of just occupying it. Finding this state and reveling in it is how I define accomplishment nowadays.

Most often it's a campsite that spurs an impromptu decision to head for shore. The splendor of a majestic campsite in the Boundary Waters is nothing less than a peak of existence—the slice of paradise we can all feast on like royalty but with the simplest of means. I want more of that in my life so if the opportunity to inhabit such a sublime space presents itself, a sudden turn will happen. A sandy beach campsite has that kind of siren pull, which is why they are almost always inhabited whenever I pass by. But when I spot one that is vacant, I surrender to the temptation of strolling barefoot in the warm sand of a wilderness idyll.

Another particularly tempting gem is found on Lake Wisini, which is like a smaller version of Jean Lake, with two horizontal bodies of water linked by a narrow pass. If you ever come through this pass, you will undoubtedly notice the slab-on-slab structure of exposed rock on the west facing shore, worn smooth over eons, on top of which rests an exquisite campsite with a spectacular view of water in two directions and a lowland forest in between. We came into that pass early in the day after a two-day respite on Kekekabic in a campsite that was like a penthouse suite. There were no canoes resting on the bottom ledge. Even though we had made little progress in our goal to reach Thomas on this day, we decided to inspect. The campsite was vacant. We scratched the plan, let caprice seize the day, and what came to pass was yet another peak of existence.

In the Boundary Waters, planning makes for a rewarding journey, but it may not be the



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most rewarding journey—one that feeds on a deeper, more sensuous connection with nature that comes from a slow flow rather than regimentation. Deemphasizing the plan, especially when it comes to the itinerary, and slipping into the happy playground of caprice creates a prime opportunity for that connection and elevates the experience beyond the ordinary, or, in the case of the Boundary Waters, beyond the extraordinary. It is a very exalted space to occupy—the most harmonic of convergences—in this one life we have to live. All it takes is a willingness to relinquish the urge to control our circumstances and realize that sometimes it is better to make interesting choices and discover the joy in them.

It took many years of journeying in the Boundary Waters for me to understand the value of an idea that doesn't fare well

in civilization, where order is the coin of the realm and planning profits handsomely from it. But wilderness is not reducible to order and thus not really subject to any plan. There is something more fluid and formless in the heart of true wilderness waiting to be discovered by pliable, free-flowing sojourners. As I move through civilization, my private act of rebellion is to let more caprice in, which makes me less apt to control my surroundings and more willing to let slip the accidental side of life where unpredictable outcomes are not only fruitful but sometimes truly incandescent. On the unintentional path of caprice, the unsought pearls keep coming, and I begin to see more clearly a hidden pearl of wisdom learned from listening to wilderness—that plans are just illusions anyway. 📷

# living on the edge



by Stuart Osthoff

## Grand Slam Spring/Summer 2023

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Michele and I have always broken our life down into two segments: B.C. (Before Children) and A.D. (After Dogs). Most can identify with childhood, high school, college, getting married, and all the delights and dilemmas of having a family of your own. Few can appreciate all that it takes to own and operate a sled dog racing kennel at the highest level of the sport for twenty-five years while juggling family and day job responsibilities. Consistently winning the biggest races in our sport for over two decades took uncompromising commitment, sacrifice, blood, sweat, and tears. It was a lifestyle for us, not a hobby. I poured my heart and soul into mushing, and when I was done, I went straight back to my hunting and fishing roots. I now find great pleasure in roaming the uplands with my two pointers, Sage and Jack.

Michele must have a special gene addicting her to competing with animals because she jumped right from sled dog racing into showing saddlebred horses. Ely is sled dog country, not horse country, so this meant driving twice a month to Centre Pointe Equestrian Center in Delano, Minnesota. That 512-mile round trip marked a thirty-year odyssey that burned through five vehicles putting three kids through the Centre Pointe riding program. Undaunted, against all odds, Michele was determined to make this happen, and she did, but not without her willing accomplice in this crazy endeavor, Todd Perkins.

As the owner and trainer at Centre Pointe, Todd became a

wonderful friend and mentor to our kids and hundreds of others. Horse-showing taught our kids about commitment, competition, and to never ever give up. In our daughter, Taryn's, case, she found her true passion in showing horses, a priceless gift to treasure for the rest of her life. It is a beautiful thing to see Michele and Taryn sharing their passion for this game.

Over the years, Todd became a part of the Osthoff family. We considered him one of our own. He joined our family most years for a BWCAW canoe trip, and I took him into Thomas Lake on a couple of winter trout trips. Todd loved to fish, but with his busy summer horse show schedule, we were limited to the dog days of August and periphery routes. I always told Todd, "Someday, I am going to take you on a REAL Quetico fishing trip."

For the past fifteen Februarys, Michele, Todd, and several other horse show friends have taken a vacation to Roatan, Honduras. They both love escaping the long Minnesota winters, the beach life, all the people they have come to know down there, and of course, the world class reef diving. Todd even talked about maybe retiring down there someday. It was his favorite place. On the trip this year, Michele, Todd, and friend Rob were diving down about fifty feet when Todd signaled the dive master he needed to go up. He checked his air, which was fine and they started up. Michele and Rob followed, pausing at twenty

feet for the mandatory three minutes to decompress. But the dive master rushed Todd straight to the surface because it turns out he was having a heart attack. The dive master is a CPR trainer, but his best efforts were not enough. There was nothing anyone could do. Todd was only fifty-four and seemingly in good shape. The tragedy turned Michele's vacation into a nightmare, and the shock and loss swept through the horse community, our circle of friends, and our family. I'll never get to take Todd on that Quetico fishing trip, but to me, his legacy will always be creating a magical place where little girls can still go to chase big dreams.

Come April, I was more than ready to escape another interminable winter and the pall hanging over our life. Every April, I turkey hunt Minnesota, South Dakota, and Nebraska. Someday, I plan to tack on another three or four states to this spring tradition, but for now this trifecta will have to do. I shot my limit of four beautiful gobblers on my little tour this year, all pure spot and stalk exhilaration—no calling, decoys, or pop-up blinds. Just raw hunting drama and challenge, as good as it gets for outdoor fun.

The historical average ice out on Blueberry Lake near our place just south of Ely is April 18. It was May 3 this year, two weeks late, making for five long and tough winters in a row. It was hard on our deer, and I couldn't resist feeding a dozen of them from Christmas till May. As far as I could tell



*My May GS2 trip targets shallow cruising lake trout but the new Klos Lipless Crankbaits have allowed us to routinely rack up big numbers of lakers on all our trips right through July. (Suzanette Lake- 28" laker on the Klos LCB).*

from my daily walks through our woodlands with the dogs, the wolves only got four in the immediate area. I am always amazed just how tough and savvy Ely-area whitetails really are. Burntside Lake ice went out on May 11, and Basswood opened just a couple days before the fishing opener. The deep snowpack swelled the border lakes, but we didn't get the accompanying heavy rains like last May that caused the record levels of flooding.

What follows here is a detailed account of the five Quetico trips I guided in May, June, and July, plus my Sutton River brook trout trip. It is all here—the good, the bad and the ugly. I have worked hard for the last thirty-seven years to build your trust in these pages of *BWJ*, so once again, I'm simply telling it like it is. Besides, with much of this, you can't even make it up.

TRIP #1 — 5/20–5/27.

CRANE LAKE ENTRY, TOW WITH ZUPS TO BLACK ROBE PORTAGE-MCAREE, IRON, CROOKED, ARGO, DARKY, BALLARD, WICKSTEED, ROLAND, JOSEY, ELK, CROOKED, LAC LA CROIX

After a long three-year hiatus from COVID, flooding, and fires, the Canada Immigration station on Sand Point Lake is back in operation, so we are towing with Zups out of Crane Lake like in the good old days. We get dropped at Black Robe, and the season gets underway with a muddy hike. With eight guys, four canoes, fifteen packs plus miscellaneous gear, that's three-plus laps for everyone, but it goes well. Looks like a pretty good crew. We pass a couple other canoes on McAree and stroke on down to the camp below Rebecca Falls. This was one of my favorite five-stars in all of Quetico until the 2021 fires ripped through it. Some grass and other plants are taking hold, so it does not have the same scorched look as last year. I would say it has

recovered to the three-and-a-half-star level, and with the amazing walleye hole just a cast away, it really deserves an even higher rating. From 3:30 to 6:30 p.m., the gang nets a total of sixty-five walleyes from the edges of the raging current. Most go fourteen to eighteen inches and hit on jigs, soft plastics, and GULP. I fillet our possession limit of sixteen fish and put them on ice in the YETI. Rebecca Falls is one of the few places I can tolerate jig fishing for a few hours. The action is that good. I even land four pike and a twenty-one-inch heavy smallmouth on the jigs. We enjoy a chicken fajita feast and get to know each other better, but not around the campfire, as there is a fire ban. The sun sets on a nearly perfect opening day of the 2023 GS2 season. A good omen, perhaps.

5/21 It's sunny, calm, and seventy as we break camp with the three portages into Argo being the order of the day. My trusty sidekick, John Fedorchak, and I paddle hard up through the flow to reach the portage landing on the east side of Rebecca, but I decide it is not worth the risk for the others. I have them unload back along a makeshift extension trail, and we sherpa from there. It's a solid eight-hour work day hauling our heavy load into Argo, so we all breathe a sigh of relief to find the mid-lake five-star camp open, designating it as home for the foreseeable. After settling in, we enjoy our all-you-can-eat walleye fry with good conversation. Only one other canoe is seen on the lake. Forecast is for eighty degrees the next two days, so hotter than usual, but maybe it will jumpstart the smallmouth action on the surrounding smaller lakes. Everybody readies their rods for the trout assault tomorrow and hits the sack, visions of three-footers swimming through our dreams.

5/22- It is indeed a hot day

for May as we all work the Klos Lipless Crank Baits (LCBs) till lunchtime. My preferred method with the Klos is to drift with a moderate wind, which allows the bait to cover water both vertically and horizontally. We don't have that going for us on this dead-calm day, but the group still manages to catch thirteen lakers in the morning, though they all run small. John and I work over Big Trout Alley, netting six trout but no monsters. We have taken lakers up to forty inches in this magical spot, including a thirty-seven-inch last May, but landing big trout on light tackle from a canoe is a big challenge. When you finally pull it off, you will know why it is canoe country's greatest angling thrill.

For the afternoon, John and I paddle up to the Siobahn River outlet pond and land thirty-one smallmouth, most going fourteen to sixteen inches, although John does boat one hefty twenty incher on the Vibrax #5. Dave and Matt catch twenty-five smallies of their own over on the north end of Roland that average about fifteen inches. The unseasonably warm weather does indeed seem to be accelerating the bass spawn activity after the late spring start.

5/23 John and the Salkas brothers are game for a day trip to Elk, so we get after it, single-tripping the four portages in two hours. The trails have all been cleared post-2021 fires, but we do detour around a few new blowdowns. No fire worries today. It starts raining on the long portage into Cone and continues till mid-day. I notice both deer and moose tracks on the trail. It's so cool to know they are able to survive out in this rugged wilderness of rock with six-months of hard winter.

Most days, for reasons not always explainable, a given angler will have the hot hand and ride it to bragging rights around the campfire that night. Over the course of a ten-day trip, my



*My trusted wingman, John Fedorchak, got our GS2 bass season off to an early start with this beautiful pre-spawn 21 3/4" on the Vibrax #5 gold. (Elk Lake)*

hope as the guide is that everyone enjoys their own big day and evening in the limelight. On this day, a peculiar pattern takes hold. John starts things us off with a chunky sixteen-inch largemouth bass. Ninety-eight percent of the bass caught in Elk are smallmouth. I quickly follow suit with a sixteen-inch largemouth. Then John nails a good thirty-five-inch pike on the Vibrax. Then a thirty-six-inch pike falls to my Vibrax. Next John catches a heavy twenty-inch smallmouth. Then I best him by an inch with a twenty-one-inch brute. But not to be outdone, John hauls in a pot-bellied 21 ¾-inch female trophy smallmouth. We each finish the bass session with nine fish, all on the Vibrax #5. After lunch at the one and only camp left on Elk, we switch to trout, and I catch a beautiful twenty-six-incher on the Klos. Then John promptly reels in a carbon copy. How close is that for an even split of the action for the day? The brothers enjoy a solid nine-fish day of Elk lakera, all twenty-four to twenty-six-inch heavy-girth specimens. Back near camp on Argo, Kelly lands a twenty-six-inch trout on the Klos, which turns out to be the biggest of the trip on the lake the old maps label "Trout Lake." We huddle under the tarp in a cold steady rain and wolf down a steaming chicken alfredo and pasta dinner. With the low dipping to forty, the goose down bag will feel good tonight.

5/24 The cold rain still hangs over camp, so we vote to stay on Argo instead of moving on to Darky. I figure we can execute good daytrip attacks from here to Darky, Wicksteed, Ballard, and Josey over the next couple of days. This early in the season, the midday hours are best for smallmouth anyway, so there is no real need to camp on the fish like later into the summer. During breaks in the rain, a few of us venture

out and scratch up another half-dozen Argo lakera, but where are the big ones?

5/25 All four canoes are bound for Darky after breakfast, two into Wicksteed, one into Ballard, and I take Matt into Josey. Where "Wales" spills into Darky, we boat twelve nice smallmouth (all sixteen to eighteen inches) then two more up where the Darky River runs in from Brent. We portage into Josey proper and start casting at eleven a.m. Windy but sunny, the action is slow along the north shore (usually good bass water). We get a few here and there and continue our thorough plunking of the shoreline cover in a clockwise direction. Around one p.m., it is like a switch is thrown. I can clearly feel the sun heating up the shallows, pulling more bass into our shoreline strike zone by the minute. Matt tallies thirty-seven smallmouth, and I release another thirty, everything is on the Vibrax #5. Even the sixteen-inchers in here are stout, blocky fish. Most impressive of all, and not the norm in Josey, is that twenty-five of the sixty-seven are over eighteen inches, with my 20 ½-inch taking top honors. We both lose a couple at the gunwale that look to go over twenty, but of course close doesn't count on the scoreboard. Counting the bass we got out on Wales, that's eighty-one for our boat on the day plus ten annoying pike. Two trumpeter swans follow us around Josey all day, probably glad to see us leave. I share the story with Matt about the May afternoon I spent on Josey and watched a deer and moose play together in the east end shallows for half an hour.

The others did fair today: thirty smallmouth on Wicksteed and twenty largemouth on Ballard. The bass are just getting started here in the warmer northern bays. We meet four guys from Nebraska on the Darky Portage who say they

just saw my fishing podcast for Friends of the Boundary Waters on YouTube. I don't even know what a podcast or YouTube is, so I just shrug and say, "Did it help you catch anything?" and they share with excitement that it did. That's cool.

5/26 It's moving day. We are well rested after spending five nights based on Argo, so we knock off the four laps on the 160-rodder back to Crooked in a respectable three hours. We claim the hilly island four-star camp on the east side of Sunday Bay and fan out fishing by 1:30. I take Dave Peterson over to the northwest corner of Sunday and start around clockwise. (Remember- if right-handed, you can cast further and more accurately with less daylong fatigue plus set the hook better by working clockwise versus backhanding everything going counterclockwise). It is breezy, and we move zero bass out on the main lake. Only when we drift into the very northern extremes of the bays, where the sun angle and winds piling surface waters combine for a warmer microclimate, do we hit paydirt. Dave has fun with eight smallmouths, including a 19 ¾-inch, two pike, and a twenty-three-inch walleye (jig and yellow GULP twister tail grub). The walleye is a bit beyond my usual max of twenty-one inches for an eater, but I stringer this one to take home as a treat for Michele. (We still have plenty of ice in the YETI). I close out the trip with a quality bass run myself: fifteen fish with seven nineteens and a twenty, all on the Vibrax gold #5. The hot spot is where the Roland Lakes chain dumps in. These Crooked Lake smallmouth are as heavy, dark, and beautiful as any you will find in canoe country.

We gather round the propane stove in lieu of a campfire and devour a homemade spaghetti feast as our last supper. Given that ice out was two weeks late again, we consider ourselves fortunate to have gotten this run

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of unseasonable eighty-degree days and the subsequent rapid warm up of the waters. I bill this first trip the last week of May as a trout trip with a decent chance for some pre-spawn bass action. In 2022, we spent days of this trip sawing our way through the portages from McAree to Wicksteed, Darcy, and Argo. Combined with the late spring last year, we got some big trout and the Rebecca walleyes, but the bass was a bust. This trip, we finish with thirty-two lake trout, thirty-five pike, sixty-six walleyes, twenty-two largemouth bass, and a solid 271 smallmouth (nine over twenty inches, with two twenty-ones and John's 21¾ leading the way). Going on seventy-six, John has done more GS2 trips with me than anyone (fifteen so far), so it is always sweet to see the ol' man show the rest of us how to get it done.

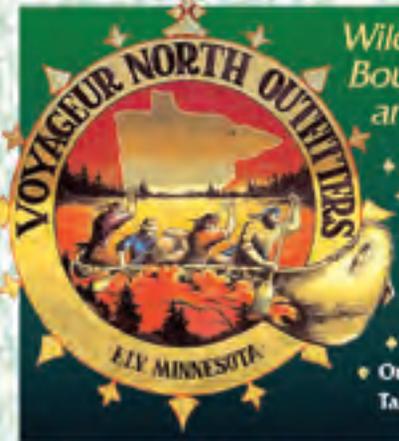
TRIP #2 — 6/2–6/11. TOW

WITH ZUPS FROM CRANE LAKE TO LAC LA CROIX THEN TRUCK UP TO BEAVERHOUSE ENTRY. PADDLE INTO QUETICO, CONK, JEAN, BURNTSIDE, ROUGE, STURGEON, LONELY, DRAPER, STU'S, ANTOINE, RAM, MARCH, BENTPINE, TRAIL, LITTLE, PINE, SNOW, YOUR, FAIR, BADWATER, QUETICO, BEAVERHOUSE

6/2 I am often asked, "What is your favorite canoe trip, route, or lake?" My answer is always, "Wherever the big smallmouth are smashing Whopper Ploppers!" There are a good fifty backcountry Quetico lakes that have blessed me with elite topwater trophy bronzeback action. Wherever the red-eyed warriors are doing battle on the surface, that is where I want to be. It matters little to me how many monster bass swim throughout the depths of any given lake. If they are down twenty

feet, they might as well be on the moon. When I scheme out a trip for early June, yes, I game plan the route through proven big bass waters, but this is not enough to produce consistent succession for my clients. The key is being on a given big bass lake when they are in the shallow water zone, actively hitting the Whopper Plopper on top or, worst-case scenario, the Vibrax at a depth of one to six feet. Let me put it another way: For me to experience my favorite trip/route/lake, TIMING IS EVERYTHING. I used to love Wicksteed Lake for big bass. I have been too early or too late the last five times I have taken the time to target it, so right now, it is not among my favorites. If my timing clicks the next couple trips through there, Wicksteed will climb back into my good graces. When I markup maps for *BWJ* readers through the *BWJ* T.R.I.P.S. program, all I can do is mark where I have consistently caught big bass from

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are that this crew can paddle and portage with the best of them. How sweet would it be if they could fish with the best of them?

We pull into the chosen camp I discovered last year, and it is roomy enough for the big Clam screenhouse and the four four-man tents. After settling into our little village, we down a chicken fajita dinner in the friendly confines of the screenhouse as a thunderstorm rolls down the lake, cooling things off a bit for sleeping. I have been burning the midnight oil between Trips 1 and 2 getting the Summer Issue of *BWJ* ready for the printer, so I crash early while the others get to know each other as a full moon rises to the south.

6/3 Up and at 'em early, J-stroking down the length of Quetico, through Conk and pulling into the big flat-rock five-star on the peninsula going into Jean Lake proper. The tents go up with precision, and the rods come out of the cases with eager anticipation—make that excessive salivating. These guys are pumped.

I take Tim along the sandy south shore spawning grounds to get a read on where we are at in the breeding cycle. With polarized glasses, we spot well over thirty nests, all with mature eighteen to twenty-inch smallmouth standing guard. We net fifteen bass apiece. Tim's include a twenty, two 20 1/2s, and a 21 1/4. I get three that tape twenty inches on the button, so that is seven over twenty inches in the boat. Twenty of the thirty go over eighteen inches, and all are broad, heavy, beautiful specimens. We fish Whopper Plopper 90s (WP 90) exclusively, but we lose a good thirty fish that jump and spit the barbless hooks. Even these escapees provide plenty of thrills, although a few that pull free just out of reach of the net look well over twenty and elicit some choice words. Just another plus of

mid-May to mid-July. I don't fish Quetico after this, but even in the two-month window that I live out there, I can and often do miss on the timing for peak big bass action. About the only way I know to get the timing right on these fifty Quetico big bass lakes is to be fifty places at once. If you figure out how to do this, I'm all ears.

Five of my seven anglers are first-time GS2ers, so I really have no way to know what is in store for us in the coming ten days. Will has fished with me twice before, is going to the Sutton with me in August, and is an absolute animal on the portages. Not many can out-Sherpa Will, but his son Ben is one of them. Ben is going to the Sutton this year too, so Will has his brother, Hap, along on this trip. Turns out he has the Rhodehamel portaging gene too. Tim is the other who has tripped with me and is a good angler. At seventy-three, he's past his prime portaging but is still a strong paddler. Then we have the trio of Kentucky buddies: Josh, Micah, and Dave. I don't know what they can do with a fishing rod, but they are all mid-forties, young

and strong by my standards of mostly retiree clients. We should have no trouble getting to the fish. It remains to be seen what these guys can do once we get there. Matt is also from Kentucky but traveling solo, younger, strong, and an unknown commodity with the St. Croix.

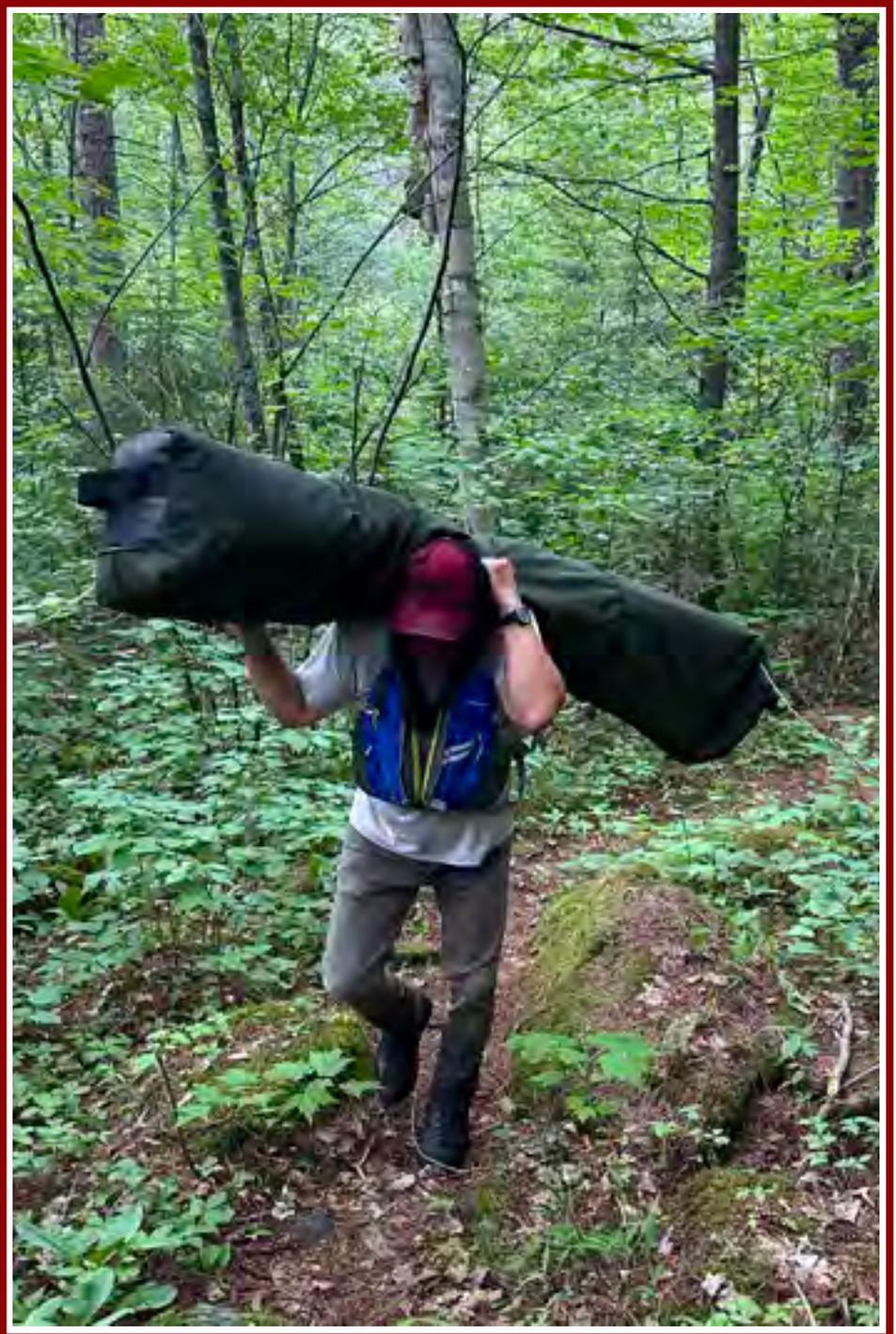
Going over the trolley car portages at Loon Falls/Beatty Portage, we cross paths with some southern boys who have spent the past week at Zup's Lodge pounding the smallmouth all over the Canadian side of La Croix in their big bass boats. They casually mention something about 200 fish per day per boat with the average smallie going eighteen inches. With what I saw on my first trip and what I know from decades of experience, I would say this means we're primed for a big bass bonanza. So much for prognosticating, right now we have to hustle to reach the big five-star camp I know of halfway down Quetico Lake. It is eighty-five in the shade, dead calm, and it's 2:30 by the time we halt for lunch on the portage with the old car going into Quetico Lake. Early indications

wilderness fishing: Nobody is around to hear you curse when the big ones get away.

Come to find out, the bass took a licking elsewhere on Jean Lake today. Matt and Dave fish to the west of camp around Ivy Island, hitting fifty smallies, mostly WP 90s, with lots in the seventeen to eighteen-inch class and three going over twenty inches. Josh and Micah cover the far east end of the lake, racking up ninety-two smallmouths, mostly on the Vibrax or jig/swimbait. Five of their smallmouth tape over twenty inches. Only Will and Hap struggle on the bass along the north side, but they do bring home four walleyes for the cooler to get us started on the makings of our fish fry. The group tally for our first day of fishing comes in at five walleyes, twenty pike, and 177 smallmouths, with fifteen of these over twenty inches. Recall we caught nine smallmouths over twenty inches on the entire first trip. Crooked, Argo, Darcy, Wicksteed, Roland, Josey—they all hold plenty of big bass, so today is a perfect example about **TIMING BEING EVERYTHING**. I am pleased that we are off to a good start, but I still have no inkling of what is to come.

The day is an eighty-five-degree scorcher, so we all take much needed baths to clean up and cool off before pounding down sloppy joes and baked beans. The mosquitos are out in full force, but inside the screenhouse with the Therma-cell going, we relax in comfort in our Helinox chairs and share the fishing tales of the day. Will fell on the Conk portage earlier and sprained his wrist. Looked like he was carrying too much too fast, but there is no reining him in. He said it was hard to cast, so we gotta cut him some slack on his meager bass total for today. We see one other canoe on Jean today and lots of trumpeter swans and loons.

MIKE KLEEMAN



*Even old timers around Ely ranked 2023 as the worst ever for mosquitos. I lugged our big Clam screenhouse all over Quetico again this summer so we could fish till dark, then return to camp to enjoy suppers in peace and comfort. Maximum big fish action, minimum bug torture, that's how we roll. (Darcy Portage to Brent Lake)*

6/4 The bass are calling, so we fan out to answer the call. Josh and Micah decide to explore the no-name lake to the west of Ivy Island. They can't find the portage but access the lake by a creek. The fishing in there turns out to be a bust, but one never knows unless

you forge ahead to test such uncharted waters. They pull back out onto Jean and "salvage" a seventy bass afternoon with three trophies over twenty inches plus four walleyes for the cooler. Dave and Tim Whopper Plop fifteen good smallies, but none break twenty. Will and

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Hap portage over into Albert Lake for a go at the trout. The wind kicks up on them as a stormfront pushes through, but they pick up four trout on the Klos LCB, the best being Hap's twenty-nine-inch beauty. On the way back to camp, they get it going on the smallmouth, thirty-two in the net with one over twenty inches. I spend the day with Matt in Little Jean. That back half (east end) near the Yeh Lake portage is muddy and poor smallmouth habitat, but most of Little Jean is worth hitting. Matt lands forty-five smallmouth with five over twenty inches, including two twenty-ones and a 22 ½ behemoth, all on the WP 90. I struggle to keep the damn pike off my Vibrax (twenty-one in all) but do net twenty smallmouths with three over twenty inches. Back out on Jean proper, Matt puts an exclamation point on a stellar day of Whopper Plopping with a 26 ½-inch walleye. When you're hot, you're hot. Our two-day Jean Lake total finishes at 339 smallmouths (twenty-seven over twenty inches, with four twenty-ones and a 22 ½), 115 pike, thirteen walleyes, four lake trout, and one largemouth. We have matched this on Jean Lake smallmouth before, so I'm pleased but still unaware of what is building on this trip.

6/5 I make a big bacon and cheese omelet with apple fritter toast while we linger in

the screenhouse to see what the weather is going to do. Around ten a.m., the clouds break. We tear down and load the Northstars. We see one canoe on Jean and zero on Burntside. It is tempting to stay on the Burntside five-star and fish it for a day, but my gut tells me the bass should be firing on Sturgeon, so we push on through. Still, it is hard to paddle through Rogue, a gem of a smallmouth lake, without wetting a line.

We take the three short portages on Jean Creek where the loading and unloading takes more time and effort than the actual three laps per trail. I pull in for lunch at the four-star camp as we break out onto Sturgeon. Dave walks up to the firepit area ahead of the rest and runs headlong into a momma moose with her young calf. After a tense standoff, mom decides she better vacate the campsite and heads off into the woods.

The water is high on the big lake but not ridiculously up into the woods like last spring. We pull into the big beach site seven hours after departing Jean. We are now positioned to fish Sturgeon, Lonely, Draper, Stu's, Antoine, and Ram over the next several days. This time of the year, I prefer a run and gun daytrip strategy as opposed to moving camp more often to camp on the fish. Sturgeon has not been kind to me the

past couple go-rounds, so I am anxious to see it produce like in the pre-COVID era. While I am rustling up dinner in the screenhouse, the guys are casting from shore and reel in eight beefy smallmouths, a good sign for sure.

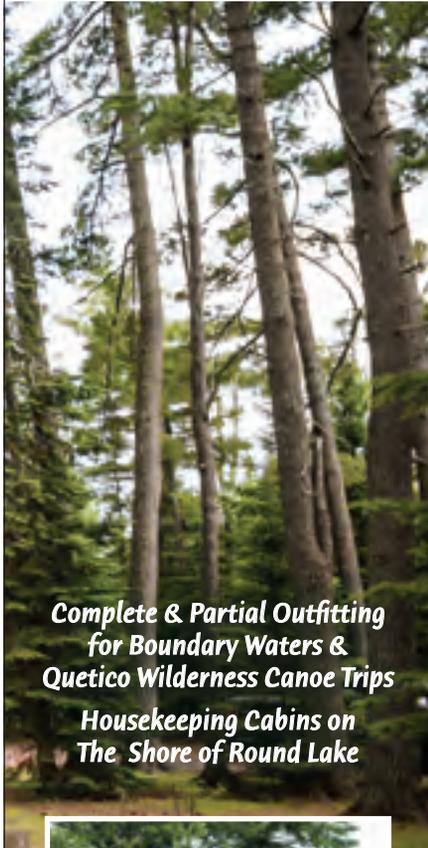
6/6 Unbeknownst to them, I let Josh and Micah head up north to my favorite smallmouth waters on Sturgeon. Dave and I paddle forty-five minutes back to the west so we can work that stretch of north shore back towards camp off the left side of the canoe. It's overcast, breezy, and cooler. Dave proves to be a good angler, having grown up fishing smallmouth on home waters like Table Rock. Today he goes with the white WP 90 and has a nice run of sixteen bass, with five going over twenty inches, the best 20 ¾ inches. I boat fourteen bass with four over twenty inches, my best taping twenty-one, all on the Vibrax #5 yellow. Thirty smallmouths doesn't sound like a lot, but with nine over twenty inches, I'll take that quality over quantity of smaller fish anytime.

Speaking of quality smallmouth, Josh and Micah deploy their arsenal of jigs, swimbaits, and tubes to pull up ninety-four smallmouths from the sweet spot up north, with a dozen breaking the twenty-inch mark. Their ability to go down ten to fifteen feet and exploit big bass that the Whopper and Vibrax



*Our early-June smallmouth trip into Sturgeon shattered all GS2 records with 1212 bass caught/released, 82 of these were 20-22" trophy fish. (Jean Lake- 22"- Whopper Plopper 90)*

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don't reach is paying big dividends with our fish counts. All told, with the other two canoes, our catch for the day is thirty-five walleyes, twenty-seven pike, and 179 smallmouths, with an eye-popping twenty-seven trophies over twenty inches. Four of these go twenty-one inches. It is now starting to dawn on me that these guys know how to fish.

I take a midday bath on the beach, putting on clean clothes, which feels great except the deer flies and mosquitos absolutely kill me before I can retreat to the screenhouse. We run into Jack MacKenzie and his brother who are fifteen days out of Beaverhouse. They hit the bass hot and heavy on Jean Lake too. I ran a story by Jack reviewing his 2022 Quetico trip in the summer issue of *BWJ*. He has his little dog, Sadie, along again, and she seems happy with the Quetico life. They report having seen eight moose so far on their trip.

In the evening, most of our canoes converge on the Wall-eye Straits, and we make short work of putting our possession limit of walleye on the stringers. The beauty of packing ice and frozen food is we can accumulate fillets in the cooler and have our big all-you-can-eat fish fry treat when we are ready instead of having to eat them as they are caught before they spoil.

6/7 Matt and Tim strike off for the Heron Bay area but never really get there as they get into the fish short of their destination. They tally thirty-eight smallmouths (five over twenty inches), eighteen walleyes, and three pike. Micah and Dave circle Scripture Island to catch and release forty-three smallies with three over twenty inches (including a twenty-one) plus twenty-seven walleyes and ten pike.

Will and Hap follow Josh and I across Lonely Lake. They veer off into Draper Lake while we

turn east towards "Stu's Lake." The Rhodehamel boys have a sixty-nine-bass tour around Draper, but the fish run small. Seems they hit the post-spawn lull in there because that lake has big bass.

It is two hours from the Sturgeon beach camp to the top of Lonely where we portage into a beaver meadow. I have had to walk this half-mile stretch in dry years, but like last year, we are able to paddle most of the little creek today then bush-whack through another chunk of woods to an unnamed pond. From there, I had done some alder brush cutting into Stu's Lake last year, so we arrive and break out the rods in a record time of only three hours from camp.

Josh sticks to his jigs and soft plastics while I go fifty-fifty with the Vibrax and WP 90. Josh wins with a hundred bass versus eighty-nine for me, but I smoke him with six bass over twenty inches, including four twenty-ones to his single twenty-one. We do not see a single pike all day, and therein lies my theory as to why this relatively small lake produces so many big bass. There is only enough pike to keep the bass from becoming overpopulated and stunted without preying too heavily on the mid-size fish. Together with a flourishing minnow forage base and no fishing pressure, these smallmouth can grow old and big. On my second trip of 2022 into here in July, I caught and released my first ever twenty-three-inch smallmouth on the Vibrax. Today, in exactly the same spot, I hook into another hog with the WP 90 and have her two-feet from the net when the hook pops. She may have been even bigger than twenty-three. I can only wonder.

6/8 Will, Matt, Micah, and I get going early for a daytrip to Antoine and Ram. It's about ninety minutes of paddling to the 225-rodder that takes us up and over the ridge into the south end of Antoine. Will and

Matt continue on to Ram, while Micah and I hit Antoine. We combine for sixty smallmouths with three over twenty inches, but we work really hard for them, and it is clear we have missed the peak of shallow water action in here for this year. Will and Matt report similar results from Ram with twenty-eight bass in the boat and two over twenty inches. On the way home, we stop at the little current area across from Tubman Creek and Micah slays eight walleyes in short order on a jig/swim bait. He definitely has the touch with that thing. As we wrap things up on Sturgeon, here is the scoresheet for the trip so far: four Lake trout, 175 pike, 116 walleyes, and 976 smallmouths with an incredible seventy-four bass over twenty inches (fourteen of those over twenty-one inches, and a single twenty-two).

6/9 We say our goodbyes to our beach site home and head west. All week I have been struggling with whether to go down the Maligne River as planned or play it safe and call Zups to pick us up at Beaverhouse. I have seen that these guys are solid paddlers, but all the canoes are very heavily-loaded and will be very hard to handle in the current of the Maligne, especially with high water conditions. Going back to Beaverhouse via Bentpine and Badwater will mean a lot more portaging, but these guys are excellent portagers, and that eliminates a lot of stress and worry for me. Also entering into the calculation, I was in Bentpine last July after a fifteen-year hiatus and discovered that this walleye lake has become a good smallmouth lake as well. If we make it safely down the river to Tanner Lake, we may have time for some bass fishing there, which can be good. As we near the west end of Sturgeon, I can't put the call off any longer. I decide to avoid the Maligne and

head for Bentpine.

Triple-portaging, we reach the five-star camp on Bentpine in four and a half hours. Nobody is around, and we are set up and out fishing by 2:30. A thunderstorm with badly needed rain rolls through around five p.m., so Hap and I take refuge at the camp on the north end. While stranded there, I can't help taking a walk around, which brings back a flood of memories. Michele and I brought the kids to this very camp for eight trips when they were growing up. They learned to paddle, portage, camp, and fish here, and I like to think a few more life lessons as well. The walleye fishing never let us down, so we returned year after year. When they were too little to carry full-sized packs, it was a brutal fifteen-hour day for me from the truck at Beaverhouse, making four to five trips over each of the ten portages, including the notorious milelong Badwater mudhole. But I was young and tough and wanted to give the kids the very best that Quetico had to offer. It became our family spot, and for fifteen years it didn't feel right to return without them. Last year, I finally did, and the walleye fishing proved as good as ever, plus the smallmouth had taken hold.

As the rain subsides, I toss my white Vibrax off the same rock ledge where we tied four-year-old, Alec, to a tree lest he fall off into the lake. As if to say welcome back, I catch five walleyes and five smallmouths in ten consecutive casts. Hap and I catch and release forty smallmouths (biggest was nineteen inches) and fifteen walleyes in our five-hour rain-shortened outing. The others, especially Josh and Micah with their jigs/plastics, do even better. The group tally for the half-day comes in at thirty-eight walleyes, forty pike, and 236 smallmouths, with eight of these bass over twenty inches.

They aren't the big-girthed brutes like Jean, Crooked, or even Sturgeon, but they are fighters, and it is amazing to see how they have flourished in my absence. The guys brought eight walleyes back to camp, so I fried them up with what lard and fish mix remained to go with our wild rice hot dish.

Tomorrow is all about paddling and portaging, so we case our rods and take stock of the final numbers. They are staggering. A GS2 bass record for certain: four lake trout, 154 walleyes, 215 pike, and 1,212 smallmouth with an incredible eighty-two trophies measuring over twenty inches. I know some will find these numbers hard to believe, others will find them boastful, still others turned off by the perception that we define the trip by the fish caught. But this is my business. I need hard data to report here so prospective clients know what we have done and what to expect if they book a GS2 trip. We measure and count fish so I have the facts instead of guesswork. A 19 1/2-inch smallmouth IS NOT twenty inches. If it was, then that count of eighty-two bass over twenty inches would be more like 250. Suffice to say, I've guided over 200 week-long Quetico/BWCAW fishing trips and always wondered what could happen if the perfect storm struck. I'm talking the perfect group of paddlers, portagers, anglers, the perfect weather, the perfect timing. This trip is as close as I've ever come to that dream trip, and it is unlikely to ever be matched for trophy smallmouth. Many thanks to Josh, Micah, Dave, Matt, Will, Hap, and Tim for making it happen. You guys were awesome.

6/10 Today my happy anglers pay the piper for all those fish. It turns into a tough twelve-hour travel day complete with three laps for everyone on the eight portages, including the milelong Badwater beast. Trail Creek was



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not canoeable last July, but we are able to sneak through this time, so that is nice. We also don't have to saw our way through the burnt blow-down like last year thanks to the Quetico portage crew's work. The gang is gassed as we fight the wind across West Bay on Quetico and pull into the four-star island site. It's Zup's polish and mac and cheese then early to bed. Tomorrow will be an easy half day out to the truck. These guys will head home with memories of big fish they will take to their grave. I will go home for a couple days, reload, and head right back out here for trip number three. What we did on this trip is history. The next crew only cares about their own eight days, and it is my job to make them the best they can be.

TRIP # 3 — 6/16–6/23. TOW FROM CRANE LAKE TO BOTTLE PORTAGE THEN IRON, CROOKED, GARDNER BAY, LITTLE NEWT, NEWT, BART, CRAIG, ELK, ROBINSON, LITTLE ROBINSON, DART, CECIL, DEER, AND BACK OUT TO BOTTLE.

6/16 The weather continues to be bone dry, and now there is a fire ban in both Quetico and the BWCAW. We are not collecting much beaver-wood this year. Zups tows my group of eight into their lodge where we pick up my four canoes I left here last week, and we are off to Bottle Portage. Here we meet a friendly group of *BWJ* sub-

scribers who thank me for marking up their maps. It helped them find the fish on Wicksteed and Josey. Seems they got into the walleyes on Josey. We have caught a few strays there over the years but nothing worth mentioning, so that was interesting to hear. Then soon after paddling out on Bottle Lake, we run into Kerry Holloway from Missouri. They have spent the past week camped in Friday Bay across from Stu's Island and day tripping out of there. They did well on jigs/soft plastics in Gardner Bay for both walleyes and smallmouth (thirty smallies over twenty inches for the week). Gardner Bay is technically part of Crooked Lake, but it is mostly cut-off from the flowage water that keeps Crooked proper cooler longer. Kerry said the Whopper Plopper was great in Gardner but only fair out on Crooked, which could mean the big lake is coming online for shallow zone bass just in time for our trip. Kerry is a longtime *BWJ* fan and graciously invited me down to his Ozark turkey hunting camp in 2018. He loves bass fishing the Quetico, so it was nice to see him and get his take on the bass activity.

I have Ken, Sean, Nathan, and Mike, father and sons from Ohio, plus Randy and his eighteen-year-old daughter, Ellie, and then Jerrit, who *BWJ* readers now know as the guy who caught the monster thirty-seven-inch lake trout with me last May on Argo. Randy has fished with me before and is a skilled angler, and Ellie competes in high school bass tournaments. Jerrit is top notch too, so we are all good there. The other four, we will have to see.

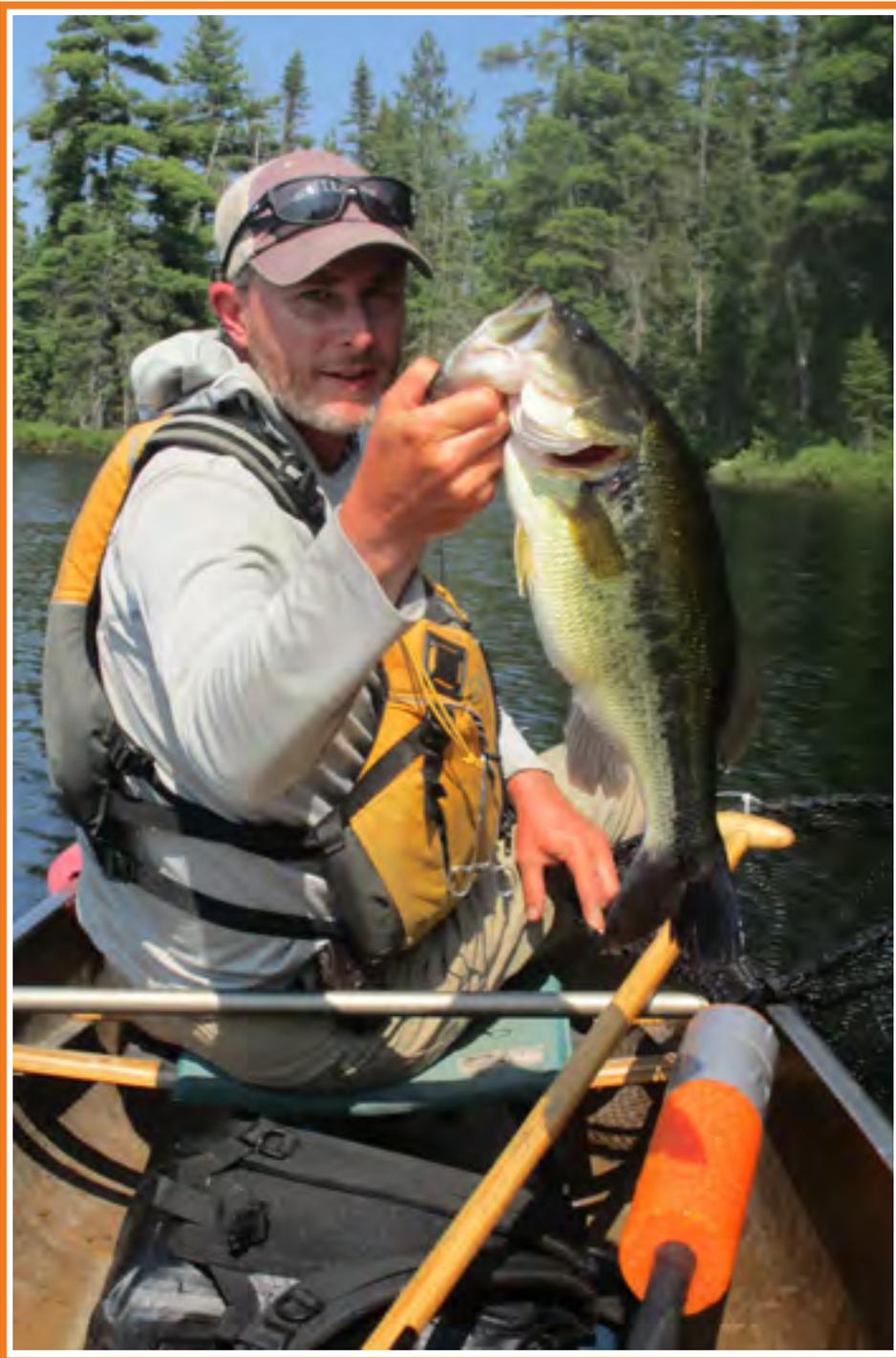
We lunch at Curtain Falls, which has dropped considerably since May 21. Then it is two hours down to the Stu's Island camp. The screenhouse and four tents are a squeeze here, but we make it work, and I dig a communal toilet pit, as the island is too small for everyone to do as they please. While I am cooking supper, Randy beaches a thirty-six-inch pike, five walleyes, and five smallmouths. For at least the last ten years, we have had a resident eagle here on my island every trip, and like clockwork, he appears yet again. We toss him a few little bass, and he swoops down and carries them off, probably back to the nest and young. It is seventy degrees and calm with a heavy haze from the fires burning in western Canada. We will fish out of here tomorrow then move on down to my Wednesday Bay base camp on Sunday. They are calling for eighty-five degrees by Monday. Ugh!

6/17 We are late getting going, but Jerrit and I paddle all the way back to the head of Sunday Bay and work back to the east along the Quetico side so we can cast off the left side of the canoe. We boat thirty-five smallmouths in six hours. A dozen go seventeen to eighteen inches, and we land one nineteen incher. The WP 90 produces for me, and Jerrit fishes tube jigs, which pick up six walleyes as a bonus. Randy and Ellie do about the same as us with one smallie over twenty inches, and

the others catch twenty smallmouths with one over twenty inches as well. Add it up and it equals twenty-five pike, eighteen walleye with four going into the cooler, and a hundred smallmouth with two over twenty inches. Not bad, but not good enough to stick around. We will pull out in the morning.

6/18 Happy Father's Day to all! We do well paddling on down Crooked and set up atop Wednesday Bay on the only Quetico side camp I know of in the vicinity that will hold our party of eight—barely. Not many canoes paddling the border route today, but we are out there fishing by 12:30. The Frey foursome heads into Bart Lake and does pretty well, seventy-two bass (about a fifty-fifty split on between largemouth and smallmouth that average sixteen to eighteen inches, but no twenties). Randy and Ellie work up the west shore of the east channel of Gardner Bay and combine for fifty-five smallies, nineteen inches being the best. Whopper Ploppers and jigs/soft plastics produce the best. Jerrit and I paddle to the top of Gardner Bay where I can't resist hitting a favorite walleye reef first. It is around 4:30, and the walleyes are ready for dinner. We smoke eight walleyes between twenty and twenty-two inches in half an hour, and man are they hard fighting rascals. A Cabela's pre-rigged jig/yellow twister tail I snagged off the discount rack is the hot lure today. We stringer the smallest four (our possession limit), tie them off to a log in the shade, and go bass fishing. I throw the yellow (Sooner) WP 90, and while I only net eleven fish total, four go over twenty: twenty, 20 ½, 21 ¼, 21 ½. All are dark, heavy fish that really tear up the surface. Just classic topwater action, the kind I dream about. Jerrit sticks with the subsurface tube jigs and connects with one

STUART OSTHOFF



*Jerritt Francis and I got into a wild run of big bucket mouths on Cecil Lake one afternoon, two hours of non-stop cast and blast with the Whopper Plopper. (Cecil Lake- 20" largemouth)*

twenty-inch largemouth!

6/19 The Freys want another go at Bart and come out of there with thirty bass this time. It is a windy day, which proves to be an issue for all. Randy and Elle head north with Jerrit and I. I leave Randy and Elle on Little Newt, where they have fun catching fifty-five

largemouth, all fifteen to seventeen inches. Jerrit and I fish Big Newt and combine for forty-four bass. Jerrit takes two twenty-one-inch smallmouth and a 19 ½-inch largemouth while I boat one 20 ½-inch smallie. I lose a bunch of big bass today, as boat control is a constant battle. At least that is the excuse I'm going

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with. The Hoffarths hit the Gardner Bay walleye reef and bring home another four for the cooler. That makes fifteen on ice now, so we can have our fish fry anytime. For the trip, the group is now sitting at 390 bass (ten over twenty inches), forty walleyes, and eighty pike. I cook brats for dinner, but they are not the same without grilling over beaverwood. The green beans with bacon, onion, and brown sugar are a hit though. Saw two swans with two babies today and heard a deer blow us off coming through the current narrows west of camp.

6/20- A daytrip to Elk Lake is on the agenda today, so it's back up Gardner for the third straight day. The two Frey boats hang back and hit the walleye reefs while Randy, Ellie, Jerrit, and I push on over the three portages and into Elk. The park has cut out this burned tangle since last year, so things go pretty smoothly.

I take Ellie with me to see firsthand what this whiz-kid can do with her baitcasting outfit. The wind makes for tough sledding with her WP 90, but she sticks with it and lands some decent bass. I go with the Vibrax and net twenty-five fish, but I have to catch two to get to twenty inches because they are all ten-inch dinks. I skull through Lunker Bay, noting that the bass beds are vacant and there are half-inch smallmouth fry all over in the shallows. We have arrived at the dreaded

post-spawn lull. **TIMING IS EVERYTHING.**

We meet Randy and Jerrit for lunch at the last remaining unburned camp on Elk and learn they fared better along the eastern shore, with forty smallies, several going eighteen inches and one twenty-inch largemouth. Big bass are not in the cards on Elk Lake today, so we rig up the Klos trout lures and head out into a twenty-five-mile-per-hour gale. Jerrit quickly boats a twenty-four-inch laker, drops the Klos back down, and bang, another hit. This one digs deep for over ten minutes before slowly coming to the boat. I can see it is a big trout for this little lake, over thirty inches easy, maybe thirty-two. Unfortunately, we will never know for sure.

I got all new nets this year because I didn't like the way the hooks tangled in the mesh of the old ones. The ones I'd been using have longer handles, bigger hoops, and best of all, they float. My new nets are easier to get the treble hooks out of, but they have shorter handles and smaller hoops. They don't come with floatation, but I taped that kiddie swim tube foam to them so they float now. So back to this big trout we have on the line... We drift the Klos LCBs with the canoe broadside to the wind so the fish is on the upwind side of the canoe, right where I want him. (You never want to land a big fish on the downwind side of the canoe as it is too likely he will get underneath and get off or even break the rod.) Lakers are known for thrashing and rolling in the line when they come to the surface, but this one behaves himself, so I slide the net under him and figure it is a done deal. But with only half his body within the perimeter of the hoop, the Klos treble hook snags the netting, and I have a dilemma. I can't get the rest of the body into the too small net, and I can't withdraw the net and take a new swipe at him. I am stuck in no-man's land, and it is not a good feeling. You would think the guide would know how to net a fish. Eventually, I snap out of my state of suspended animation and realize I just gotta try to swing the whole works over the gunwale with the fish hanging precariously to the OUTSIDE of the net. He has to go ten or twelve pounds, and you guessed it, the hooks pull free and he falls back into the crystal waters of Elk Lake. I am stunned, then weak, then sick to my stomach. I feel so bad for Jerrit. What a hack. I can't believe how badly I just botched this whole deal. Jerrit is a good sport about it and consoles me with, "Hey, at least you didn't do that on my thirty-seven-incher last year."

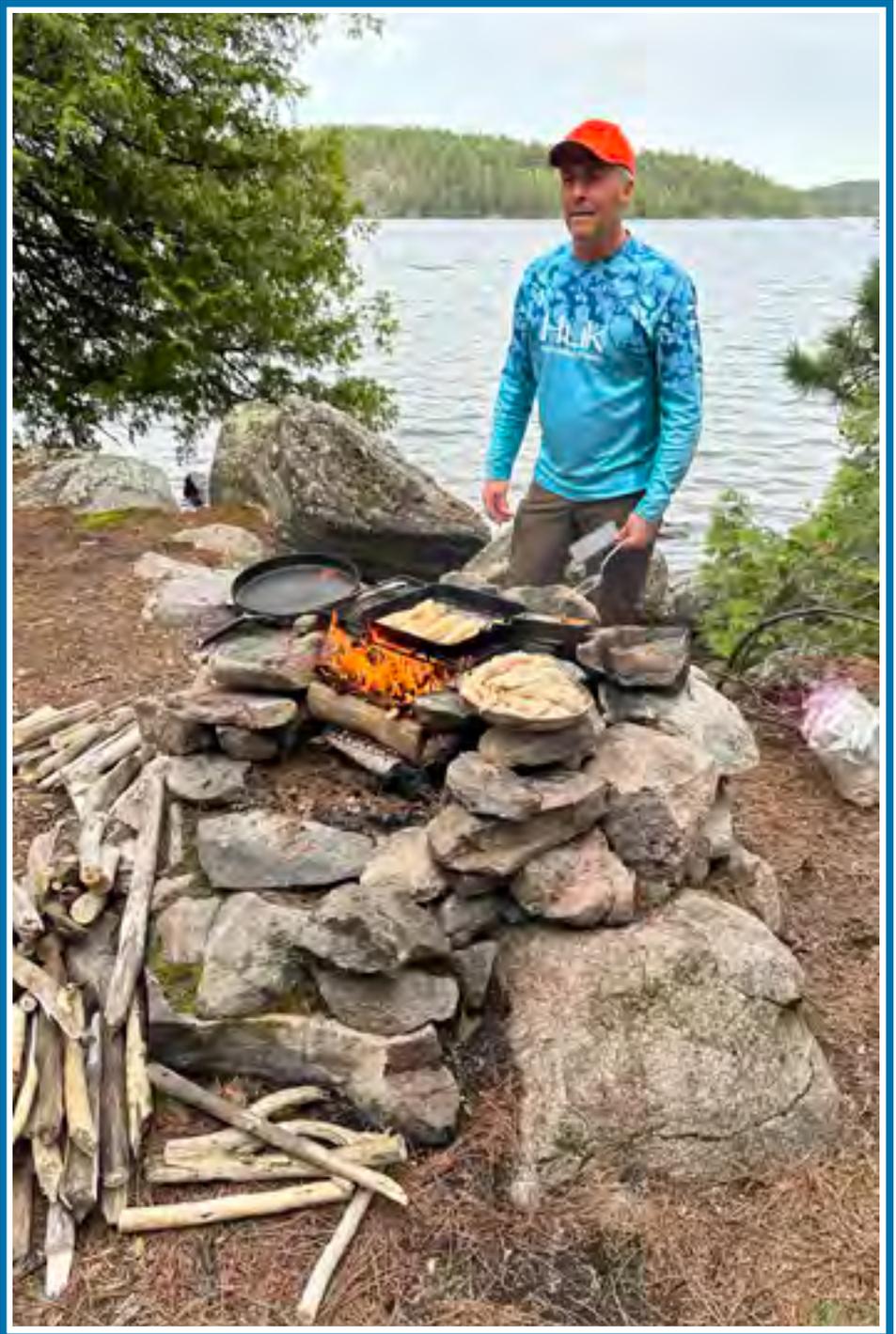
Just minutes later, Jerrit hooks into another trout, another chunky twenty-four-incher, which I cleanly net. This time rather than slide the net along the underside of the fish where the hooks can snag the netting, I swing it with enough momentum to keep the mesh fully extended and out of the way of the hooks as the fish becomes completely enclosed in the netting. See, it's not that hard.

I paddle over to a big reef jutting out from the west shoreline and soon Kloss up my own twenty-four-incher. By the time Jerrit nets and releases this trout, we have blown well past where I hooked him, so I paddle back up there, rudder the canoe broadside to the gale, and drop the Kloss overboard. WHAM. This trout is definitely a bigger specimen, so I tell Jerrit, "You're going to knock him off the hooks with the net just to get even with me." You guessed it, the same thing happens, the hooks snag on the netting before the critical mass of this big trout is within the confines of the hoop, leaving him dangling precariously yet again. Only this time I react much quicker and yell, "Haul the works overboard." He does, and this twenty-eight-inch fish beauty obliges us with a photo. The moral of the story is I gotta use a bigger net on trips where we are targeting trout and walleye over thirty inches. My new nets are fine for bass, but they require the perfect scooping motion with zero margin for error on big trout and walleye.

Back at camp it is fish fry night, and everyone stuffs down all the sweet fillets they can eat. It got hot today, but the breeze saved our butts. Cooking fish is always a hot, greasy affair, so after the dishes are done, I get a much-needed bath and change of clothes. I am ready to do battle again tomorrow, maybe redeem myself.

6/21 All four canoes paddle on down past Table Rock and portage the 127-rodder into Robinson Lake. The Freys remain here and pick up their first ever lake trout (on the Kloss, all twenty-three to twenty-four inches). Randy and Ellie veer off into Little Robinson, where I am sure they will have a big day. But they boat only twenty smallies, the biggest goes eighteen inches. This lake is a smallmouth gem, so must have been late in here

DAVE PETERSON



*Dave Lucke mans the spatula for our all you can eat Friday Fish Fry. My rule of one walleye meal/trip means we really savor this special treat. (Argo Lake)*

too. They cut through Craig Lake on the way back home and actually do better, forty fish with one going twenty inches. Jerrit and I continue on through Robinson, portaging through Dart and Cecil to Deer Lake where we break out the Kloss trout lures. We ply the trout hole I had luck in years

ago, and finally I latch into a heavy twenty-seven-incher. There are no netting issues with this one, but sadly, despite my best efforts, I can't revive him. I even try massaging his stomach, which seems to help, but he still keeps rolling over. Then, out of nowhere, an eagle swoops down and puts an end to the matter. I

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feel bad about killing this beautiful fish, but it's the first in many years. We move a few smallmouth in Deer, but nothing big, and we move on back to Cecil where I have caught big largemouth in the past.

Over the next two hours, both Jerrit and I have an absolute blast with the bass, some smallmouth up to nineteen inches, but mostly hard-slugging bucket mouths that average eighteen inches. By the time the dust settles and we gotta head for home, we each boat thirty quality fish, with Jerrit scoring two largemouth over twenty inches on the tube jig and me boating two largemouth taping 19 ¾ inches with my WP. Until today, I rated Newt Lake as the best big largemouth lake in Quetico, but not anymore. I will be back next year for sure. It is a 2 ¼ hour trip from Cecil back to our Wednesday Bay camp. On the way, I ponder the angling possibilities of camping on Robinson, and they are looking hard to resist.

6/22 We pull stakes and move on back to the same hilly island camp in Sunday Bay that was our last night's camp on trip one. Storms are threatening, so we all fish close to camp. Randy and I pick up a few bass but nothing big. The others do the same. The final tally comes in at eleven lake trout, forty-five walleyes, ninety pike, and 575 bass, with fourteen bass over twenty inches, including five twenty-ones. Three of these were largemouth. Not bad for the third

week of June during the dreaded post-spawn lull. I have decided to move this route to my fifth and final Quetico trip in 2024, as I believe we can get better big bass and walleye action by keying in on the evening bite in mid-July. More on this later. All in all, the numbers pale in comparison to trip two, but the gang had a good time, caught some nice fish, and gave it their best.

TRIP # 4 — 6/28–7/7. TOW TO BOTTLE PORTAGE, THEN IRON, CROOKED, ARGO, DARKY, BRENT, CONMEE, SUZANETTE, WILLIAM, DARKY, WICKSTEED, GRATTON, MCAREE.

6/28 There are seven of us on this trip. Mike Kleeman and Dave Lucke have done several GS2 trips, and I know Scott from partnering on a 2022 Colorado elk hunt. The other three are the Tabors: Dave, his son, Adam, and ten-year old grandson, Ames. The odd number necessitates basically fitting all the gear and food for eight into three canoes instead of four. The three-man twenty-one-foot Bell Northshore helps, but our overall outfit still maxes out all three boats. Ames is serious about fishing on this trip, so he has to have a true third seat to operate from. It is not ideal. I always say canoes are made for two, not one or three, but we vow to make it work.

We hit a little rain going through Curtain Falls, but then it holds off until we reach the island five-star on Argo. On the way through Sunday Bay, I stop to get the rope and carabiner for the water filter bag I left hanging in a tree at our last camp last trip. There is a group of three hammock campers set up there, and they are not thrilled about relinquishing my lost and found item. They are not thrilled to be disturbed period. I skip the chit chat and get out of there. We would not see another soul for the next nine days. It's fajitas in the greenhouse on a cool and very buggy night.

6/29 No playing with the Argo trout this trip. We are off bright and early for Darky River and the long portage into Brent. After a brief break at the pictographs, we tackle the longest portage of the trip. It is very buggy, and we are blasted by lightning and thunder, but little rain falls until that last section from the pond to Brent, where we get soaked. Adam is strong as an ox and carries both the twenty-one-foot canoe and the heaviest of the two YETIs for the entire trip. I feel guilty about it but a whole lot less achy at the end of each day. I wish I could bring Adam along on every trip. I notice the first blueberries ripening along the trail.

We settle in for the night on the four-star peninsula site, and I get busy with the brat and green bean supper, as the bugs were so terrible on the portage, we skipped lunch. A three-quarters moon rises above a flock of five loons all singing up a storm off camp. Sadly, we see the only loon chicks of the whole summer here. The high water and bug overload seems to have impacted the



*Three generations of Tabor-- Dave, Adam and Ames, were gifted with a near perfect wilderness walleye fishing trip. We should all be so lucky. (Conmee Lake)*

hatch. It is cool, comfortable to sit out until about nine p.m. when the bugs drive us into the tents. It is tough to paddle through Argo, Darky, and Brent without taking the rods out of the case, but this trip is big walleyes or bust, so we gotta stay focused on that goal.

6/30 I can't believe June is over already. I plan and prepare all winter for these trips, and then they just flash by. I guess that means we are having fun out here. We break out onto the main basin of Conmee by noon, and I breathe a huge sigh of relief, the one and only site big enough for our crew is unoccupied. The 2021 fires just devastated nearly all of Conmee Lake, including the best campsites we have used over the years. This one is a squeeze for our outfit, and the landing is a rocky hazard, but the fish don't care, and if they cooper-

ate, we won't either.

Our three canoes head down to the Honey Hole at 6:30. If you take all the trophy twenty-eight to thirty-one-inch walleyes my friends, family, clients, and I have caught and released over the past forty-five years in Quetico, ninety-nine percent of those have been netted from this one football-field-sized patch of ordinary looking water. (Though people I trust report catching thirty-inch Conmee walleyes in many other places on the lake.) I have taken big walleyes here from mid-June to mid-July, so we are in the middle of that window today. But when I talk about timing being everything with big Quetico fish, I don't mean just the date. For this unique lunker walleye spot, the time of day is critical as well. Even in the live bait era when catching huge walleyes here was

absolute fantasy fishing, it had to be sunset to dark. We tried mornings and afternoons—nothing. So what this all boils down to is that on this ten-day trip, triple-lapping all the portages as we do with our comfortable outfit, you spend 2 1/2 days getting here and 2 1/2 days getting home, which leaves five days of actual fishing and four nights to fish the Honey Hole. Figuring three prime time hours of fishing per evening, if the weather doesn't blow you out at all, that's a max of twelve hours of trophy walleye time for a ten-day trip.

Trust me, I have sliced and diced this sacred walleye opportunity every which way you can, every in and out access, different dates, people, tackle, and tactics. It all comes down to will the big girls come in shallow to feed when the sun hits the treetops? If they come

into the ten to fifteen feet deep target zone, they will be in feeding mode, and most any jig/soft plastic/GULP bait or crankbait will catch them. I talk with a lot of hardcore canoe country walleye anglers and many others who fly into the best Ontario outpost camps. Nobody has ever spoken of a lake where you can consistently catch thirty-inch walleyes like Conmee. If you read the old journals and stories about Quetico, even a hundred years ago, Conmee had a reputation as a big walleye producer. It is a dark water, relatively shallow lake (twenty to thirty feet in most places) that is packed with baitfish and forage. While it has some spotty smallmouth and largemouth fishing, one would not come here for that. It does hold bigger pike, which must play a role in why the lake sustains so many top-end older walleyes. The standing joke in our Conmee walleye camps is we come all the way in here to catch walleyes and we can't even catch a meal—the problem being most are too big to kill and eat.

No account of chasing big walleyes on Conmee can be shared without addressing the elephant in the room. Conmee is a 1,200-acre lake. This priceless fishery can easily be ruined by just a few fish hog parties. Thank God it is in the very middle of Quetico and demands serious sweat equity with paddle and pack to reach. This deters the bulk of the riff-raff, but still, enough are ready, willing, and able to come here for a crack at thirty-inch walleyes. A strict catch and release approach should be mandatory for all. By sharing this special angling opportunity available here, at the very least, I expect all *BWJ* readers to spare no efforts to return all Conmee walleyes over twenty-two inches to the water. Killing them does not come even close to being as rewarding as releasing them to

thrill another angler someday—maybe even you.

So here is the deal the way I see it: Don't come to Conmee if you want to see beautiful scenery—it is a lunar-like landscape. Don't come to Conmee for the wilderness camping—there is not a single good campsite left on the lake. Don't come to Conmee if you want to eat walleyes. There are hundreds of Quetico and BWCAW lakes with better scenery, campsites, and numbers of eater-size walleyes. Conmee is a very special trophy walleye lake—let's keep it that way by treating these big fish with the special care they deserve. I am trusting you all to leave no trace of your visit to Conmee—including and especially no trace on the walleyes over twenty-two inches. Finally, I make my one trip to Conmee each year and have settled on fishing it those first four days in July. If at all possible, plan your trip any other time of the season so we can both fish it the way we want. If in doubt about overlapping with my four days on Conmee, email or call me and we can discuss things further. Chances are we can minimize any possible conflicts up there.

Time to have at it. Scott is in my bow, and on the very first cast of 2023 into the Honey Hole, he nails a twenty-three-inch walleye on a jig and Mimic Minnow. Soon thereafter he picks up a couple more slightly smaller fish. I get four straight pike to start things off, all on jigs with the Berkley Power Bait four-inch paddle tail minnow in yellow. I think each is going to be a heavy walleye, but no—all stinky, slimy, toothy snakes. Nine p.m. rolls around, and I have yet to catch a walleye, so I figure, what the heck, can't hurt to switch to the Rapala BX Swimmer. I discovered the BX on a Kawnipi trip in 2019. I was able to smoke a lot of twenty to twenty-four-inch walleyes up there by cast-

ing the BX instead of trolling, which I despise. The BX runs about twelve feet deep on the retrieve. On the very first cast with the blue BX, a 28 ½-inch heavy walleye pounces on it. I am on the board. A few minutes later, I net another twenty-eight with the BX stuck in her craw. They prove to be my only two walleyes of the night, but not a bad average.

One of my main goals on this trip is to see Mike get his first thirty-inch Quetico walleye. Mike lives in Illinois but somehow has developed fishing skills that few I have ever guided can match. He regularly out-fishes me on big smallmouth, which doesn't happen very often. Tonight, he boats three walleyes on #9 Shad Raps: a twenty-two, twenty-three, and twenty-five. Adam lands a twenty-one and twenty-two then has a big one on. I get a good look at it—probably a 30, but Ames tangles the BX Swimmer treble on the outside of the hoop, and the big girl falls back into the lake when they try to hoist the mess aboard. Been there done that, so close yet so far. A rough night for young Ames, as besides losing dad's lifetime best walleye, he loses his best spinning outfit overboard. But he stays engaged and keeps on plugging away with his little Zebco spincast rig. So on the night we land eleven walleyes. I fillet the three smallest and put them on ice. A few bass are around on this calm, cool night as well, and more pike than I can ever recall. We don't need that.

We enjoy our chicken alfredo in the screenhouse, and it's midnight by the time the dishes are done and camp secured. The Honey Hole did not live up to its billing tonight, but we have three more at-bats in this game. I like our odds of driving in some runs.

7/1- We all load up for a daytrip over to Suzanette Lake. First up is lake trout, so seven

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Klos LCBs are soon deployed. Over the next three hours, we boat twelve lakers in all. Most go twenty-five inches with three topping twenty-seven. All are heavy, thick, powerful fish, and all are returned to the deep water. We don't seem to move as many trout with the Klos in dead calm water. A stiff breeze to move the canoe along and cover both the water column and the length of a given reef is ideal. For some, this is their first ever lake trout, so that is always a good day.

We lunch on a little mid-lake camp, then I man the stern of the three-seater Bell with Adam and Ames. I sense it is time to get the kid some steady action, something more than walleye and trout typically deliver. So we head to the no-name lake one portage to the west between Suzanette and Brent. Last time in here, the largemouth bass jumped all over our Vibrax spinners.

We are pleased to see that the portage crews have been through the burn rubble, even leaving orange tape to mark the portage landings. It doesn't look like there has been any boots over this trail this year. We tour the lake in three hours and boat forty-five largemouth, mostly on the Vibrax. Ames lands ten of his own, including the largest of the lot, a 16 ½. Even with his backup Zebco, he casts pretty well, sets the hook with authority, and plays them to the net. Seems he genuinely loves being out here fishing, and despite the rain, wind, bugs, mud, and other challenges, he takes it all in stride without complaint. I tell the kid I have decided to name this lake "Ames Lake" and secretly ask the fishing gods to send something big his way on this trip.

The other two canoes hit the Honey Hole and catch only five walleyes on the night. Dave L. and Scott take twenty-fives on the BX while Mike nails a twenty-eight and that first Con-

mee thirty on the Shad Rap. I wish I had been there to see it. Still only three walleyes in the cooler. Gotta do something about that soon.

7/2 We remain on the home waters today, fanning out in search of eater walleyes and whatever else wants to bite. It is a hot, clear day with a light breeze. Mike and I head east towards the Suzanette portage where he connects with a twenty-one-inch walleye and a thirty-eight-inch pike. Ames catches a seventeen-inch smallmouth, and dad brings back a pair of twenty-inch walleyes for the cooler. That's six on ice now, halfway to dinner.

The third night in the Honey Hole proves to be the charm. Dave L. and Scott boat two twenty-sixes and a twenty-seven. Grandpa Dave graciously commits to command and control of the Tabor boat and does a great job of it, as Adam lands three walleyes, the biggest a twenty-seven-inch. The kid lights up the night with his smile: five big walleyes on the little Zebco, including a massive girthed 29 ½. Try as I might, I just could not stretch the tape to 30. I am so happy for him and whisper a thanks to the fishing gods. Soon Ames is trash talking big fish with the best of us, so it is time to put the kid in his place.

Mike and I bring nine walleyes into our boat, nothing to write home about on many a Quetico evening. But get this, Mike Shad Raps a twenty-eight and two twenty-nines, and I Shad Dancer a twenty-eight and two 30 ½s. Some are white and black, others white and gold, and a couple what we call "Blue Walleyes." All are absolute beasts, thick heavy bodies all the way from head to tail. I am the first to acknowledge that many twenty-inch walleyes don't fight like a twenty-inch smallmouth, but these trophy walleyes in Conmee are powerful and a lot of fun to battle into the net.

Somewhere during the night's big walleye rally, Ames catches a thirty-three-inch pike, and I get a thirty-four-incher, giving me a one-inch edge over the kid on both walleye and pike on the night. I get a lot of mileage out of those two inches, razzing him back at camp. He takes it like a man. So I shared my personal stash of jelly beans with him.

7/3 We enjoy a leisurely brunch of bacon, eggs, and toast, and it turns into more of a camp day than anything. We decide to indulge in our walleye fry early, get cleaned up, and head down for the final night in the Honey Hole. Everyone has at least one twenty-eight-inch walleye except Grandpa Dave (he has been manning the oars every night), so I order him into my bow and get after it. He jigs up a twenty-inch walleye to get us going, and then I rip off three straight brutes on the Fire Tiger #7 Rapala Shad Dancer—a twenty-seven, twenty-eight, and 29 ½. Why can't one of you bite Dave's jig?

About ten years ago, the Vibrax Gold #5 became my go-to Quetico smallmouth lure. I discovered the magic of the Vibrax on the Sutton River brook trout, and it didn't miss a beat coming onto the Quetico scene. Then about five years ago, the Whopper Plopper completely took over as my one and only topwater bass lure and remains the most fun presentation for canoe country fishing. Then in 2022, the Klos Lipless Crankbaits blew away all other lake trout tackle and allowed me to ditch the trolling of spoons with my rod under my leg in favor of vertically jigging. WOW—what a difference it has made in our GS2 lake trout fishing. In 2019, I first used the Rapala BX swimmer on Kawnipi and found it to be a better casting option for walleyes than the old standby Shad Rap. And the BX produced well on this trip too. But the real revelation during this trip to the Conmee Honey Hole is the new Rapala Shad Dancer. They bill it as a cross between the Shad

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Rap and their Tail Dancer. It gets down just a bit deeper than the BX Swimmer, twelve to fourteen feet, and it casts better than either the Shad Rap or BX. Suffice to say, it bagged the most walleyes over twenty-eight inches of any lure in our four nights here. I believe it is a new lure this year. At least I never saw it till now, but you can bet I will have a slew of them in my pack next season.

Meanwhile, Dave L. is guiding Adam and Ames in the three-man boat, and they net six walleyes, including a twenty-eight-incher a piece. Mike and Scott land three trophies of their own, a twenty-eight each, and Mike tapes his second thirty of the trip. Sweet.

So back to my boat. Six of us have each caught a twenty-eight-inch-plus walleye on this spectacular night. Only Dave Tabor has yet to catch a trophy walleye tonight or any night on this trip. It is 9:30, and we are down to the last half-hour. Dave has been struggling, snagging his jigs all night, so I say, "Swing that thing back here." I clip off his jig, tie on a Shad Dancer, and tell him to throw it off the point. Wham. Dave has led a lot of canoe trips up here in his day, but it feels mighty good to scoop up his lifetime best twenty-nine-inch walleye as the clock runs out on our Conmee stay. You couldn't script it any better than that.

I would have to go back and check my records, but I am pretty sure this was our best big walleye trip to the Honey Hole since the live bait era ended in 2008. We finish with fifty walleyes

in the Honey Hole: twenty-four of these fish are over twenty-seven inches. The breakdown is five twenty-sevens, ten twenty-eights, five twenty-nines, and four over thirty inches. This is a very special place, and it has gifted us with memories that will last forever. I hope Ames can return with his grandson someday and experience the magic once again.

7/4 We had our fireworks last night. Today is moving day, but just one portage over into William Lake. It is cloudy with some drizzle as we land at the west end five-star site with the big stone fireplace, table, and chairs. Thankfully, this classic Quetico camp escaped the burn and is as comfortable as ever. Dave L. and I work the north shore to the east for bass. We combine for forty smallies on the Vibrax with half a dozen going eighteen to nineteen inches, so pretty decent. Then I spot a conspicuous reef mid-lake east of camp. It looks like a spot that bigger bass might hang out during the day—close to deeper water and all. So we pepper around it with the Vibrax and bang, bang, bang, we smoke eight nice smallmouth, eleven walleyes, and fifteen pike. The Tabors hang closer to camp but still move fifteen smallmouths, two pike, and a nineteen-inch walleye. Mike and Scott do the best with twenty-five bass (including a 19 1/2), eight pike, and three walleyes (a twenty-seven-inch—that Mike, he can catch fish out of your bathtub).

The others enjoy watching a pair of trumpeter swans with three young all night. We stuff down a big spaghetti dinner and hit the sack. Gotta cover some ground tomorrow.

7/5 Triple portaging, it's four hours from William to Darky. All the trails are okay, and the William Creek route is still a good way to come or go to Conmee. Scott and I are in the lead as we reach the last portage into Darky and glide alongside a doe drinking along the shore—evidence that these northern whitetails are as tough and savvy as anything on earth. We set up on the north end five-star on Darky, and I take Scott into Josey for a last fling at the smallmouth. We Vibrax forty total, most fourteen to sixteen inches with eight eighteens and one nineteen. Smaller than my May trip in here, but not bad for a July afternoon. Out on Darky, Mike and Dave L. boat twenty bass with five going nineteen inches. Darky is a sleeper for big bass. The Tabors try for trout down by the pictographs but get blanked.

7/6 We get going early and lunch on Gratton before tackling Goat Hill. At the landing, we shuttle the gear to the base of the steep hill where Scott volunteers to shuttle everything to the top while the rest of us make our full three laps. I try to keep track of who is doing what on the portages (you would be surprised at the issues I have dodged by doing so over the years). Anyway, we load up on Pond and go on to McAree to camp on the five-star island our last night. Just off camp, we run into



*A very special place, with priceless top-end walleyes. If you go here, do so with reverence. (Conmee Lake- 30 1/2"- Rapala Shad Dancer #7)*



two canoes out fishing. These are the first people we have seen since day one, nine days ago. It doesn't get any better than that.

So we unload and start our well-rehearsed camp setup routine. Only one problem: no tent pack. Seems it got left where we landed the canoes on Goat Hill instead of getting shuttled to the top with the rest. It wasn't really Scott's fault, but he volunteers to paddle back with me to retrieve it. We are back in two hours, but now it is a little too late to launch a serious fishing attack. Or maybe we are just so spoiled we figure no way can we match what we have done on this trip. We lounge away the evening in camp and savor the past nine days. Nobody wants it to end, but tomorrow we catch the tow for home.

I know I just described trip two as the closest I can recall to having the perfect clients, weather, timing, and fishing on a GS2 trip. But here, just a few weeks later, I am blessed with another group of guys and week of fishing that is as near perfect as one can hope for. Mike and Dave L. are always a pleasure to have, and they understand the drill: Go hard into the backcountry and fish till you drop. But Scott and the Tabors are new to my routine and pretty much have to take it on faith that I know what I am doing out here. Scott is as soft-spoken and low maintenance as they come. I knew this from the elk hunt, which ended with no bull for him, but I am hoping he will give it

another try some year. Here, he caught some of his lifetime best bass, walleye, and lake trout, so I feel good about that.

Grandpa Dave Tabor—I can't even begin to articulate what he quietly brought to the trip besides a wonderful son and grandson. Dave was so attuned to my campsite chore routine that he was often two steps ahead of me. He felt obligated to help with everything from making the morning coffee to washing the midnight dishes. I couldn't even pull the stakes out on my tent without Dave lending a hand. Just the nicest man I have had the pleasure to get to know in a long time. I am so glad he was able to share this amazing trip with Adam and Ames. To say I am envious is the understatement of all time. Thanks so much for all the help around camp, Dave. It was a real treat for me. You are a class act.

I was never as strong as Adam, but I have carried that twenty-one-foot Bell and those eighty-pound YETIs over countless miles of rough portage trails, so I know exactly what he spared me on this trip. Adam is an intense angler, and it showed when that big one got away at the gunwale. But I like that. I would much rather have passionate anglers who give all they have than the laid-back type who act like not catching much is no big deal until the trip is over, and only then they complain about the fishing. Why not do something about it when out on the water? Maybe the best compliment I can give Adam is he must be a hell of a father to turn out the kid.

I told Dave that if he ever wanted to get rid of his grandson that I would take him. This is not the time and place to elaborate, but I don't like what I see for the future of this country and the priorities of its young people. Ames gives me hope that all is not lost. He could have sat and duffed in the middle for the whole ten days, but he put the wood to it every stroke of the way. He made his three trips on every portage carrying whatever he could. And he endured the good, the bad, and the ugly as well as any adult I have ever guided. Yes, he caught some big fish on this trip, but more important, he took home some life lessons that the next generation dearly needs. Great job, Ames. I am proud of the way you carried your own weight like a man on this trip. You have a tremendous future ahead of you. And thanks for being such a good sport about letting me catch a walleye that was one inch bigger than yours.

TRIP # 5 — 7/12–7/21. MOOSE LAKE CHAIN TO PRAIRIE PORTAGE, THEN BAYLEY BAY, BURKE, NORTH BAY, SOUTH, WEST, JEFF, EAST, AGNES, BIRD, ANUBIS, KAWNIPI, AND BACK

With COVID largely shutting down Prairie Portage for the past three summers, I am looking forward to finally getting back up to Kawnipi. Thanks to Tim King sharing his lifetime of knowledge

of Kawnipi with me shortly before his death, we had a great trip with lots of nice walleyes in 2019. I had some outstanding anglers on that last trip, but I am hoping for a repeat.

The week before, one guy has to cancel, so my buddy John Fedorchak, who spends his summers in Ely, bails me out at the eleventh hour and fills that spot. John was on that 2019 trip to Kawnipi, so he knows what to expect. Except these last two years his shoulder has bothered him, so he knows this will come with a dose of pain, and I know I will have to paddle up and back on the right side, as it is easier for him on the left. But at seventy-five, John is a tough old bird, and he never complains about anything. He knows if he does his best, I will take good care of him. He loves to fish, and that is what matters most to me. We make a good team.

7/12 Our fleet of four canoes makes Prairie Portage in two hours, checks through the Ranger, and settles into the big five-star camp in North Bay near Lost Bay. The others have eight-day conservation fishing licenses that start tomorrow, so John and I tour Lost Bay by ourselves. I have hit big bass paydirt in here, but it has been a while, yet it doesn't take long to establish not much has changed. We only have two hours, as we don't want to keep dinner waiting on us. From 7:00-7:30, we don't do squat. But as soon as the sun angle gets low to the treetops, the bass turn on. John Whopper Plops fourteen really nice bass, including a nineteen and a 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>. Unfortunately, we forget the net back at camp and are quickly reminded of why it is so important. John has two more big fish on that look over twenty inches, but they get off at the gunwale while I am trying to dislodge the trebles. I land six bass, with one going 20 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>. It is a great start to the

STUART OSTHOFF



*– If there was a weakness in our 2023 GS2 performance it was on the big pike front. Mike Kleeman boated this decent 38-incher on a Rapala Shad Rap #9. (Conmee Lake)*

trip for John. I almost feel like we should stay here tomorrow and exploit this big bass bite, but I sold this trip as hitting the Kawnipi Walleye Factory, and that is where we need to head tomorrow. The fire ban is finally off, but I cook the chicken fajitas in the screenhouse on the stove, and the group turns

in. They did well with the paddling and portaging today. But can they fish?

7/13 We break camp at 7:30 and commence a tough slog through South, West, Jeff, and East Lakes with three or four laps per person over each of the six portages. None are particularly long, but nearly all the

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GS2 Client, Jerrit Francis, with his May/2022 trophy lake trout, taken on a Klos Boy's LCB. (37" length/23" girth, Argo Lake).

landings are poor and can only take one canoe at a time. I remember coming through Jeff Lake to North Bay years ago as a nondescript route with just one canoe and light outfit. I discover it is an SOB during low water in July. Jeff Creek, between West and Jeff, is barely deep enough to float our heavily-loaded Northstar 18-9s. We make it, but I would not want to be here a month from now. My whole strategy here was to hit the fishing in North Bay and avoid the two long portages from Sunday to Agnes when we have our maximum load of food and gear. Further complicating things is the fact that there are very few big camps on the lower half of Agnes, and what camps there are will often be filled. Seems I usually end up pushing my crew to the absolute limit the very first day out if I go the Sunday/Agnes route because we are forced to paddle north till dark to find a camp. I have tried the S-Chain route as well, but there is so much loading and unloading that it is not a good option for my heavy load style. Too late now, it is what it is, and we push out onto Agnes for lunch near the portage to Silence Lake. The good news is we are already over halfway up the big lake, and the crew has voted to stay on northern Agnes the next two nights so we can make a serious assault on the lake trout up there. First, we need a decent campsite.

I have some old intel marked on my map, and I stop to check three or four sites. They are indeed sites and okay for one or two tents, but we have five (counting the screenhouse). I finally inspect an island site not far from the channel leading to Bird Lake and deem it worthy. I consider the top priority in setting up camp the placement of the screenhouse, as this is where we eat, socialize, and relax. I set up my table and two-burner propane stove in there and lay my tarp and tablecloth down to keep the pot, pans, utensils, and other food prep materials out of the dirt. Then we form a circle around the perimeter with our Helinox chairs, and we are all set. Meanwhile, each pair of tentmates finds a suitable tent pad, lays out their bedding, and organizes their personal gear for the duration of the stay. It is a straightforward process until it isn't.

Tonight, there are three obvious good tent sites after the screenhouse goes up, and we have four tents. Jeff announces he has a hammock that he wants to sleep in, so that leaves Brian and friend Mark C. in one tent, Scott and fourteen-year-old grandson, Hayden, in tent two, John and I in tent three, and Mark H. alone in tent four. I routinely take the worst tent spot in camp for my tent, just part of the cost of doing business out here, but this time it strikes me as unreasonable to make John suffer needlessly, so I tell Mark H. he can take the leftover smaller fourth tent spot since he is alone and requires less of a footprint. I say it because I am in charge of the overall logistics

and looking out for the welfare of everyone on the trip. Well, Mark H. takes vehement offense to my claiming that last choice tent pad, and a pissing contest ensues. I don't really give a rip where I sleep, but it is also not fair that John gets the short end of the straw trip after trip. Of course, John has too much class to ever grouse about it—not Mark H. Finally, in shock that he is making such a big deal out of it, I start setting my tent up on the reject spot and diffuse the matter. But I won't forget it.

7/14 I cook up a hot eggs, sausage, and apple fritter toast breakfast. We rig up eight rods with the Klos LCB trout lures. Two canoes head south of camp, John and I head west, and Scott and Hayden paddle north. Over the next four hours, the group tallies thirty lake trout. Most go twenty-two or twenty-three inches, with John taping the longest at twenty-five. That's two outings in a row that John has out-fished me. Must be losing my touch.

After dinner, Brian and Mark C. and Jeff and Mark H. head back out to the same chunk of water south of camp for more trout. They catch and release another eighteen lakers before dark with Mark C. taking top honors with a twenty-six-inch fish. That's forty-eight lake trout today. Unheard of. See why I claim the Klos LCB has completely changed the way I fish canoe country lake trout? You gotta fish it to believe it. Just amazing.

John and I try the small-mouth back into the channel leading to Bird Lake but find only small fish in the shallow zone. Same for the Crawfords. I did find a super-nice five-star island camp not far from ours. Too bad I didn't find it yesterday. It has room for ten tents. Next time. Live and learn. We do see a couple groups of Scouts out of the base on Moose Lake today, but they

rarely fish, so it was still like having the place to ourselves.

7/15 We move up to Kawnipi through Bird and Anubis to the multi-level five-star island camp, strategically located in Mckenzie Bay. There is sufficient room for the screenhouse and four tents, so World War III is averted. We get squared away and out fishing for the evening prime time. It is a twenty-minute paddle up to a narrows with a bit of current north of camp where I had my best action on twenty to twenty-four-inch walleyes in 2019 and the legend of the BX Swimmer was born. We shall forever after refer to it as the BX Hole. I take John with me because the Crawfords and Brian/Mark C. are natural pairings, and I am in no mood to fish with Mark H. yet.

Well, I'll be damned if John doesn't out-fish me again. Throwing a jig with a Power Bait four-inch blue/white paddle tail minnow, John Boy smokes ten beautiful walleyes in short order. Most are perfect eighteen to twenty-one-inch eaters, but we let them all go, as there is plenty of time to accumulate a walleye meal in the YETI for later in the week. I break out the Shad Dancer that was so hot for me on Conmee and cast up three walleyes, a 21 ¾-inch pig of a smallmouth, and six pike—but not before two other pike make off with my brand new and limited supply of Shad Dancers. One I reel right up to the gunwale but can't get the right angle to scoop him into the too small net. He looked to go forty inches. Did I ever mention how I hate pike?

The other three canoes combine for a grand total of one walleye. Not sure what to make of that news, but I notice they are all ears about where we got into them. I grill brats on beaverwood and make the green beans with bacon, onion, and brown sugar. It is nice to have

a campfire for the first time this year.

7/16 It is raining and windy at daybreak, so most of us sleep in and wait things out. Turns out Mark H. and Jeff sneak up to the BX hole in spite of the weather and rack up twenty-four nice walleyes in less than two hours. (Jig and Power Bait four-inch paddle tail minnows—same as John got them on). I am not thrilled Mark went up there without consulting with me, but I bite my tongue and let it slide. We are here to fish, and I can't fault them for braving the weather and getting out there after it. Still, Kawnipi is a VERY BIG LAKE. Over a bacon and cheese omelet with cranberry almond bread in the toasty screenhouse, Mark shares a detailed review of the morning's action and concludes with, and I quote, "I'm a great fisherman." I glance around to six mouths agape, shocked expressions. Some say wilderness canoe tripping builds character. I say it reveals it.

I make it clear to EVERYONE that we will be taking turns up at the BX Hole for the foreseeable. Around 1:00, Brian and Mark C. take their turn up there and tie into twenty-five more walleyes on jigs with white twister tails. That's sixty-two walleyes out of here in the last twenty-four hours. Can't do that in many other places in mid-July.

John and Scott follow Hayden and I west past the bay leading to Murdoch. We start our walleye hunts there. Hayden struggles with pike breakoffs, but I eventually get him on track, and he boats a few walleyes, bass, and pike. He is not a polished angler at fourteen, but he has the genuine interest, so the rest will come eventually. I pick up six walleyes on the Shad Dancer and discover I can drift or troll it effectively when too windy to cast. I can tell by the pulsating rod tip when the Shad Dancer action is moving just right down

fourteen feet or so. I even pick up a fat nineteen-inch small-mouth trolling the Shad Dancer for walleyes.

John and Scott fight through the wind and rain to net five walleyes and a twenty-inch smallie on the Whopper Plopper. The four of us make it back to camp around nine p.m., and I see to dinner. Mark H. and Jeff are just back from the Kawa Bay narrows, a well-known walleye current that has produced for me several times. But it seems the self-proclaimed “great fisherman” could not buy a walleye up there today. What a shame. When he hears about how Brian and Mark C. slayed the walleyes in the BX Hole again today, he talks about going up there tomorrow. I abruptly cut that notion off with, “Tomorrow is the Crawfords’ turn in the BX.”

Speaking of Brian and Mark C., where are they? Turns out they went to bed without waiting up for supper. The rule in my camps is we all eat breakfast and supper together. If you don’t come when I call out “Ready,” you go without. Apparently, they were not too hungry tonight, and I notice the rest of the ravenous crew has no trouble pounding down their share of the spaghetti feast. I do pack a hearty lunch for each canoe when daytripping afar from camp so everyone can stay on the fish all day as dictated by the action. This typically leads to guys not getting back to camp until late evening. I am fine with this because after the first week of June, the final hours of the day are prime time for big fish, and I want them out there. It is not always fun cooking and doing dishes late into the night, but fishing trumps all on these trips, so I accept this as a necessary evil.

7/17 John and I head into Murdoch with Brian and Mark C., intent on putting our walleye meal on ice today. The

others are under orders to bring in their own possession limits for the cooler. John and I boat eight walleyes on the four-inch paddle tails and jig, and Brian and Mark C. do the same off to our left a bit. We meet for lunch, and I fillet the eight we have on the stringers for our possession limit—all perfect eighteen to twenty-inch eaters. Back at camp, Scott has his two on the stringer as well (Scott and Hayden boated eleven walleyes at the BX Hole today, but Hayden is fishing off grandpa’s license, so he can’t keep any of his own fish). This gives us ten in the cooler, so all we need is four more from Mark H. and Jeff to do our fish fry tonight as planned. But lo and behold, the “great fisherman” returns empty handed, so it’s Wisconsin chili tonight. We will have to get those last four walleyes tomorrow and have fish then.

A couple other highlights of the day are worth mentioning. I get a trophy twenty-one-inch smallmouth casting the Shad Dancer for walleyes. I love the multi-species production of this lure, except for all the pike it attracts. Then on the way back out of Murdoch, I spot a velvet-racked bull moose feeding in the water lilies. I skulk quietly into within thirty yards while John captures it all on video from the bow. Except the video doesn’t turn out, so the live image will have to do.

7/18 The four-day cold front that has plagued our fishing efforts finally breaks as the day warms and the sun appears in the afternoon. Everyone has had a crack at the BX, and I want Hayden to have another good day, so I agree to let Mark H. take him back up there. They enjoy a thirty-walleye morning and return with the four we need for dinner. Good thing Mark H. had two swings at my can’t miss BX Honey Hole, otherwise we would have been left wondering how

a great fisherman could spend a week on the Walleye Factory and not catch any.

Jeff and I push north towards the very top of McKenzie Bay with Brian and Mark C. in tow. We spot a cow moose in a shallow bay and count fifteen trumpeter swans enroute. We split up with Jeff and I taking a dozen walleyes in the proven upper narrows, including ten for me on the now trusty Shad Dancer. They are not big fish—mostly eighteen inches, and as I see it, Kawnipi has too many walleyes. They have big heads, relatively thin bodies, and we never have seen a trophy walleye here in a lot of angling hours. But they are fun to catch and have done wonders to build my confidence in the Shad Dancer as my new go-to walleye lure. I just love the fact that I can out-fish the jiggers for walleye, especially BIG walleyes, by casting a big crankbait. It is so much more fun than the jiggling snagfest.

Brian and Mark C. strike out at the spot I suggested, but just a hundred yards away they hit paydirt with eighteen walleyes of their own. Hats off to them for finding their own little honey hole, something the Great Fisherman has struggled with this week. They also pick a quart of plump, juicy blueberries to go with our French toast tomorrow morning.

Jeff and I switch to bass mode up top near the portage to McKenzie Lake and move twenty-something smallmouth that average sixteen inches. I net an 18 ½ and a nineteen on the WP 90, and Jeff boats his first twenty-incher on the Vibrax.

Back near camp, John and Scott land four walleyes along with some bass and pike. Their highlight is the twenty-four-inch walleye—the best of the trip—that John snares with a Whopper Plopper. It never hurts to be lucky.

7/20 It is moving day today. We hit the water at seven a.m.






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and knock off the portages in and out of Anubis and Bird in great fashion. I halt for an early lunch atop Agnes, and we put the wood to it for the long haul down this Quetico classic. With all the wind, fire, and insect plagues over the past couple decades, much of the Quetico forest is not as scenic as it was. Somehow, Agnes has escaped the ravages of this trifecta for the most part, and I am inspired by its rugged cliffs and towering pines. For pure scenic beauty, I would rate it at the top of Quetico canoe routes.

We pass by Louisa Falls in the late afternoon. Lots of canoes around and no open campsites. My decision now is to either squeeze onto the island site on Meadows Lake or do both the portages into Sunday Lake and camp there. Scott votes for the latter, and that's what I wanted to hear, so Sunday Lake it is. I have

been through Sunday a zillion times but never camped there. I get lucky and find a big site hidden in the pines not far off the big portage. The gang has performed admirably today, a solid twelve hours on the trail, leaving us an easy day to the truck tomorrow.

The trip concludes with 175 walleyes, 125 pike, seventy-five smallmouth, and forty-eight lake trout. Six smallmouth go over twenty inches, but we tape no trophies of the other three species. The nasty cold front made it comfortable for people out there but definitely put the damper on the fish. These numbers are subpar for Kawnipi, but I know one thing for sure: We would not have caught this many walleyes anywhere else this week.

And so ends my Quetico summer. Another season is in the books. Many people ask me how I can live out of a pack and tent all summer, every

summer. Many clients finish my trips physically whipped and can't fathom how I can turn right around and head back out week after week. This note from Matt Benn, who went on the first trip this year, answers that question better than I can:

Howdy Stu: I hope all your summer trips were as great as our trip in May. Thank you so much for putting together a flawless trip. The fishing was phenomenal and I really appreciated all the fishing guidance. I've enclosed a check for the tip. I apologize that I didn't get it to you sooner, I totally forgot to bring a check or cash along on the trip. I just wanted to show my gratitude for all the hard work you did for us. I definitely want to do another trip next year. Do you have spots open for the topwater bass trip? Thank you again for such a great trip. I constantly find myself day dreaming about it and can't wait to go back. Tell Michele thank

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you for all the great food on the trip. I've never eaten so well in the backcountry. Matt

That right there, clients who appreciate the priceless gift of Quetico wilderness fishing, is why I do this. Everybody sells something. I sell a love of the wild, and I produce trips that most could not ever have on their own.

Someday, I'm going to "write the book" about how to be the perfect client for fishing or hunting guides, but for now, Matt will do nicely as the prototype. I won't lie, it hurts when I bust my butt to leave no stone unturned to make these trips the best they can be and guys go home disappointed. Not many do, but even a few is bothersome. The thing about my GS2 trips is that my clients know from my writing in *BWJ* what my style of Quetico tripping and fishing is all about. They know what to expect: paddle hard, portage harder, and fish till you drop. But I do not get to pre-select who signs up. I am hoping they know what my trips are all about and they pan out the way they hoped. They usually do, but I don't bat 1000.

I look back on my Quetico season with pride, especially what we pulled off on the Sturgeon and Conmee trips. They were as good as it gets on every level. But the best guides are able to grind out a good trip when the fishing gods conspire against you. That is when I earn my money,

and that is what I did on the other three trips. I'm convinced that above all else, it is my super competitive drive that fuels my energy and effort to give a hundred percent for my clients, day in, day out, trip after trip. It is not simply about a love for fishing. I love hunting deer, elk, pheasants, grouse, and turkey a lot more than any kind of fishing. Hunting is a far more intense engagement with nature than fishing. But come what may, I'll be back out there on the trail of big fish once again, and I plan on having another winning season. (I am now booking trips for the 2024 season. See my GS2 ad on Page 67 for details).

TRIP # 6 — 7/27–8/3. DRIVE TO HEARST, ONTARIO FOR THREE HOUR FLOAT PLANE FLIGHT TO HAWLEY LAKE, THE HEADWATERS OF THE SUTTON RIVER

By the end of July, I don't feel good about booking Quetico or BWCAW fishing trips. August is the dog days of summer. The big trout and pike go deep. Big bass often only come in shallow for a few hours a day, and that's pretty much true for big walleyes too. May, June, and up until mid-July are just so much better. I ran into a fellow Ely fishing guide in Zup's store after getting home from this Sutton River trip and mentioned I was now in decompression mode as I was done guiding anglers for the season. He looked at me in stunned amazement and said, "Already?" His MO is to daytrip to Basswood and other Ely area lakes with a motorboat and sophisticated fish finding electronics, live bait, coolers of ice-cold pop, and the promise of a hot shower at the end of the day. His clients are happy if they go home with a few fish to eat. If they get skunked, he is rid of them in a matter of hours and onto someone else the next day. He doesn't have to worry about paddling into the wind, portaging through the mud and bugs, sleeping on the rocks, and going ten days without that shower. But I get the last laugh because I get to put my clients on the very best backcountry big fish water in canoe country. He has to fish what I consider "paddle over water." Come August, I head north to where the fishing is just getting good.

I went through a very detailed review of what my Sutton River brook trout trips are all about in the Fall 2022 issue of *BWJ*, so here I will just share the noteworthy aspects of this year's trip.

7/27 We lose a half-day hanging out at the motel in Hearst waiting for the weather to clear. At noon, we get the call the planes are ready, and we are off. This will be my fifteenth group that I have guided down the world's greatest brook trout river. I still love it because doing battle with big, bold, beautiful, and powerful brook trout is a fishing thrill like no other. It never gets old. Onboard this round is Will Rhodehamel and son, Ben, who rank near the top of my all-time best GS2 trip portagers. Will just went on the Sturgeon

Lake trip this June, so he gets a double dose of my trash-talking about who is catching the most and biggest fish. Vince, Dan, and Steve are *BWJ* subscribers I have just met, but from talking with them, they seem well prepared and on the same page about how I will conduct the trip.

We land at the Cree camp on Hawley Lake, where we get into our waders, string a rod, and load the three big Royalex canoes. Kevlar is no good here. You need the more forgiving plastic-type hulls while boulder bouncing all the way down to Hudson Bay. The rapids are all Class 1, and with no portaging, this is not a physically demanding trip compared to my Quetico trips.

By the time Albert, the camp operator, tows our string of canoes single file ten miles down to the first set of rapids, we only have a couple hours of daylight to fish before setting up camp. But it's enough for everyone to get a tease of what these fish feel like on the end of a light rod. We boat eighteen brookies total with Vince the high man. I Vibrax a twenty-four-inch beauty, which is literally a one in a thousand trophy on the Sutton. Vince handles the photography, but we later learn his camera is no good.

7/28 The fishing action on the Sutton resembles a Bell Curve, typically building to a peak in the mid-section of the river then gradually tapering back down. Day one is just an introduction to things. Day seven is a paddle day down to Hudson Bay through dead water, and day eight we fly back home. This means we have five full days to whack and stack the big brookies, starting today. We are facing low water conditions this year, just the opposite of the record high water levels last year. The advantages of low, clear water are we can often spot pods of trout making their way upstream, pull the

WILL RHODEHAMEL



*"The World's Greatest Brook Trout River" winds its way north for 90 miles through the Hudson Bay Lowlands to James Bay.*

canoe over, and cast to them. Such "sight fishing" adds a lot of intrigue to the trip, as those who keep a sharp eye out hunting the trout can be richly rewarded. Additionally, low water affords much greater wading opportunities on the river bend gravel bars, and once you get your feet planted

between the slippery boulders, you don't feel like the current is going to sweep you away. But perhaps the biggest dividend of these low water conditions is that through polarized glasses, you can spot the darker, deeper veins of water and exploit that accordingly. Last year with the water swirling up into the

willows, sight fishing was not possible, wading opportunity was much more limited, and we just had to try to cover a lot more water to find the fish. They still hit when the Vibrax came near, but a lot more casts came up empty. Here we can target the sweet spots, and that is exactly what we do. Well, at least most of us.

It is my job to control the pace with which we fish our way down the river, and trust me, it ain't easy. Think herding cats. The goal is to thoroughly cover the fish-holding water over the next five days. The way we do it is the front canoe paddles or fishes their way along until they reach a run or pool that looks good. They pull the canoe over, get out, and get after'em. When the second and third canoes come onto this lead canoe, they continue on, leapfrogging to the front so that everyone who stops is doing so at unfished water. That original lead canoe can stop before they retake the lead, but I discourage this unless they spot fish and they hit immediately. High water like last year pushes us along too fast, which after losing two days in Hearst waiting to fly was not an issue because we needed to push harder than normal. But it is a balancing act because we don't have time to fish every single pocket of deeper water either on this trip. It always takes a couple days for the guys to recognize the primo water and budget their time and efforts accordingly. I do my best to shorten that learning curve.

We started this trip with a total group catch on the previous fourteen trips of 22,601 Sutton River brook trout. The rough math comes out to an average of 1600 trout/trip. My personal catch is 4,856 for an average of 350 per trip. So I only need 144 to go over 5,000 lifetime Sutton brookies. I figured I'd probably hit that mark by day four. All these numbers don't mean much until you appreci-

ate the fact that they include thousands of twenty to twenty-four-inch trophy class brook trout—the same fish that most Midwest anglers chase for a lifetime and never land a single sixteen-incher. Everything is relative in fishing, but essentially with brook trout. There is the Sutton and everywhere else.

We get things going in earnest today, finishing with 155 brookies. Five of us catch and release twenty-two to twenty-three-inch hook-jawed bronze beauties with what we call “shoulders” or heavy girth. As I cook dinner in the screen-house, there is a noticeable difference in the mood of the crew. This trip is a major financial commitment and sacrifice for most, a bucket-list fishing adventure for sure. Today, they have come, and they have slayed the dragon. There is a sense of relief that they have realized their goal of catching truly monster brook trout, but more than that, they are now among the select few who understand why I call it the Sutton River Magic.

Day three we up the ante to 203 trout, and Vince supplements his Vibrax catch with a few on the fly rod with the mouse pattern. You can see he is especially proud of these fish on the fly, but he keeps saying, “I just love catching fish, spinning or fly.” I am fishing a tail-out run just upstream from what I call the Camp 22 hole when Will and Ben float by. (Camp 22 earned that name my first trip down the Sutton when we camped there and I caught twenty-two brook trout over twenty inches in twenty-two casts). Will had heard me talk of this hole, so I hollered out, “That's Camp 22 on the next corner—pull over.” They do, and they team up for sixty big trout, their best stop of the trip. Meanwhile, after they pass, I hook into a real bruiser of a buck brookie and have to chase him downstream. No way am I

going to get him back up against that current through all the rocks. When I finally scoop up my twenty-three-inch prize, the net bounces off a moose shed in the water. I never would have found it had fate not put that trophy trout on my line at that precise spot. I pack it home and plan to have the taxidermist who mounted my first two-foot Sutton brook trout affix the fish to the moose antler. I have another big brookie mounted on a caribou antler I found up here.

I begin day four needing only twenty-two fish to hit the 5,000 milestone, but this day will not be remembered for that. This is the day I crack the Whopper Plopper code for Sutton River brook trout. Steve is the only exclusive fly fisherman in our group, and he has been struggling to catch fish the past three days. We have heard his stories of fly fishing the world over: Alaska, British Columbia, Montana, Kamchatka, Patagonia, New Zealand, etc. From what I have seen, he looks to be a solid fly caster, so I'm wondering what's going on. I put him in my canoe today to try to jump-start his hookups.

Over and over, we pull the canoe ashore and wade out into the holy grail of brook trout fishing. It's a beautiful sunny day with trout rising, so I tell Steve to put on one of the gorgeous Dahlberg Divers he bought from Great Lakes Fly Shop in Duluth. I show Steve where to cast and head down to lesser water to throw my Vibrax. The thing about Sutton brookies is they are aggressive, hard-hitting fish. If I make even two casts that move no fish, I'm outta there. In fact, I often walk and cast simultaneously, covering maximum water in minimum time. These five days of fishing on the Sutton fly by. You gotta make the most of it.

On nearly every stop, I catch and release five to ten big brookies then wade back up to the main hole and ask, “How you doing?” Invariably the reply is,



*This 15th trip put me over the 5000 milestone for Sutton River brook trout and I can tell you that every big, bold, bronze beauty is still a thrill. (23-inch male, Vibrax #5 gold)*

STUART OSTHOFF

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“Pretty slow, I tried several different patterns.” Or “had three strikes” or “had two on but they got off” or “had one on but he broke my leader” or “I finally landed one or two little ones.” I have seen good fly fishermen throwing the Dahlberg hold their own with the Vibrax on bright afternoons like this, so the mystery rolls on.

I actually get so caught up in trying to get Steve into some fish that number 5,000 comes and goes without my even noticing. I hope it was a good one. After lunch, I figure with perfect topwater conditions, now is the time to break out the Whopper Plopper (WP). For the first ten years I fished the Sutton, it was my understanding that the rules here were barbless, single hook. So I always had my anglers cut off the factory treble on the Vibrax and install a single hook. The record will show we caught plenty of brookies with this one lone hook, but eventually, I learned that the actual

regulation did allow for one treble hook. In the case of the Whopper Plopper, it had two trebles, so one had to go. Everyone told me to retain the rear treble, as the trout will strike from behind. Before COVID, I experimented with this, and the Sutton brookies absolutely body-slammed the WP 90, but I hooked less than one in ten. It was almost as if I was fishing a lure with no hooks at all. Then last year when I got back up here to resume my topwater quest, the high-water and rain every day conspired against topwater action. So today I start throwing the WP 90 with the single treble on the back, and it is the same old story. Lots of big trout blow-ups, next to zero solid hook-ups. It is so cool to see these big trout swirl shark-like a few feet behind the churning Whopper and then explode over it in a fit of rage. But missing them all is getting old.

I help set up the tents, grab my rod, and wade downstream

to let the others have the primo hole in camp. In desperation, with nothing to lose, I move the treble forward to the mid-section of the Whopper. Besides the raw drama of topwater action, what I love about the WP is you can throw them a long ways. With just a flick of the wrist, forty yards is easy, fifty if you load the rod, wind up, and put your shoulder into it. Just like with Quetico bass, the long-distance strikes here are both the most fun and challenging to bring all the way into the net. But I digress. So I crank off a fifty-yarder into mid-river, and a big trout smokes it instantly. And he is ON! As in rock solid, clearing the water by three feet, and still holding fast. Finally! In my next twenty casts, I get eighteen strikes on the yellow WP 90 with the lone treble on the belly, and I land fifteen of them. Probably the most beautiful fifteen Sutton River brook trout I have caught in the last 5,000. I have cracked the code, and it is a whole new level of

BEN RHODEHAMEL



*Cracking the Whopper  
Plopper code on 20'+ Sutton  
River brook trout was as much  
fishing fun as I have ever had.*

fishing fun. Look out trout, the Whopper is now armed and dangerous.

The group tallies 228 on the day, which proves to be our high of the trip. Everyone releases between forty and sixty big trout today, except Steve. He insists on pounding a miniscule patch of water until he rifles through his entire fly box, trying to “match the hatch.” I implore him to stick with the Dahlberg and MOVE, MOVE, MOVE to stay on fish, but what do I know? I have guided many elite fly fishermen down the Sutton, who, like Steve, have fished the world’s most hallowed trout waters. Save but a couple, they rank the “shock and awe” of the Sutton near the top of their stream trout thrills. That said, in a perfect world, I would just as soon have everyone throwing the Vibrax (or now the Whopper Plopper). Flyrodders are not big on fishing from the canoe, so they blow past a lot of fish looking for those classic pools they can wade. If I had all fly fishermen on this trip, we would catch way less fish, and our pace would be too fast from targeting only flyfishing water. I have nothing against these guys. I enjoy watching the good ones fish Quetico bass in the bow of my canoe. I get it about the method or style of fishing being important to fly anglers. This is why I choose to bow hunt elk instead of rifle. But when guys use the “higher level of skill and challenge” of fly fishing as an excuse to cover their dismal performance, well, I’m onto them. I guess that’s where fly fishing’s snob reputation comes from.

Day five is another solid one with 195 on the scoresheet. Nothing too noteworthy on the fishing, just another day in brook trout paradise. The excitement comes at day’s end. We don’t get done with lunch until 3:30 today, so I say to everyone, “I will let you go a little longer today. Whoever is in the lead at

eight p.m., take the first good campsite.” Everyone hears me, and Dan and Steve stay to fish the lunch hole as the other two canoes go on down the river. I spent hundreds of dollars on aerial photos of the entire ninety miles of Sutton River back when I started, but with few distinctive landmarks along the way, we never really knew where we were on the photos or paper maps, so that’s all pretty useless. Then of course GPS and In Reach came along, and you can now clearly track your exact location on your phone screen linked to the In Reach. Will has this setup on this trip, and I admit to taking an occasional look at it. But just like carrying a GPS when big game hunting in the mountains or deep into the BWCAW forest, I found myself looking at the damn screen as much as I did scanning for actual game. I don’t want the distraction of the technology, even though when you really need it, it is comforting to have. I probably need to find a happy medium in there somewhere.

Anyway, as it so happens, Ben and I, followed closely by Will and Vince, come onto about a ten-mile stretch of river that is slow, dead water and not worth fishing. We take a token cast here and there, but basically keep paddling for a steady two or three hours. At 7:30, I pull over to check Will’s phone and see that we are about half an hour paddle from what I call the Aspen Grove camp, which is only two miles from where the Sutton’s largest tributary, the Aquatuk River, dumps in. So now I know where I will pull in and make camp at eight. We paddle on down, set up the greenhouse, the three sleeping tents, and attend to the other camp chores. Nine p.m. rolls around, and still no sign of the third canoe. We have the two YETIs of fresh food and the propane, but Dan and Steve have the stove and dried food.

There is no possibility of making a wood fire here, and besides, we have no pasta for Michele’s homemade spaghetti sauce even if we had the lousy stove. Ten p.m. rolls around, and I break out summer sausage and cheese with no crackers for dinner. I am not too happy about it, but it’s not the end of the world. Eleven p.m. rolls around. Still no Dan and Steve. It is now pretty dark, so I put a bright LED lantern out on the beach, and we all go to bed. Of course, I don’t get much sleep wondering about some of the worst-case scenarios that could have befallen our missing comrades. Nothing more we can do tonight. We will stay put in the morning to see if they catch up to us. If that doesn’t work, I will take Ben, our strongest paddler, and we will hack our way back upstream into the considerable current as far as we can looking for them.

Day six dawns sunny and with relief as our missing persons appear around the upstream bend. Seems they bivouacked with the mosquitos just out of sight of our cozy camp. Close but no cigar. I listen to their tale, but it all comes down to not paying attention to what was going on. I don’t say much other than, “Let’s get going. We have a great stretch of fishing today.” And we do. 183 fish, with the highlight being Will, Vince, and I all getting ten to twenty fish on the Whopper. I have a new fraternity of Brook Trout Whopper Ploppers. My last fish of the day, at what I call Fish Camp, where we always have our fish fry, is a gorgeous heavy-weight twenty-three-inch-er on the Whopper. Tomorrow is a travel day. We will pick up a few more trout (final group total: 1026), but this last topwater trophy will occupy my brook trout dreams until I can return. And you can bet my tackle box will have a dozen Whopper Ploppers with the treble mounted dead center and ready to rock. My 2024 Sutton River trip is going to be a sweet sixteen. 📷

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22" Jean Lake — Smallmouth

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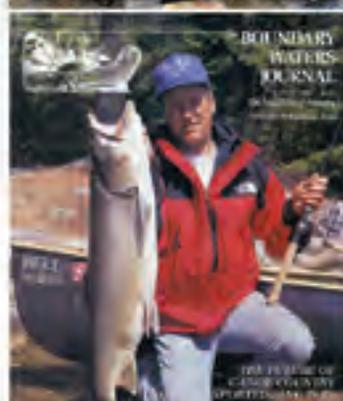
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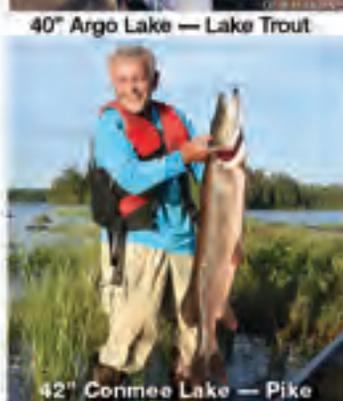
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The Magazine of America's Favorite Wilderness Area

# canoe country profiles



by Rob Kesselring

## An Uncommon Life

*Editor's Note: Over the past 37 years, nobody has contributed more articles to BWJ than Rob Kesselring. I've been waiting a long time for him to write this story, HIS STORY. Here it is, in his own words....*

July 3, 2023. Perched atop an Jesker high above Nonacho Lake, Northwest Territories, Canada, I write this entry. The wind is howling out of the northeast, ruffling my tent's fly. Below in a protected bay, my seventeen-foot Nova Craft Prospector canoe is securely moored to a Jackpine. Just a few days ago, I came off an eight-day expedition on the Taltson River and up an unnamed, unexplored creek that, to my knowledge, has only been paddled once before, and that was by me.

How the heck did I get here? As far as I can recollect, this is my thirty-third far north canoe trip and my countless run down rivers worldwide. While trying to balance a passion for wilderness with my city and family life, I have somehow squeezed in 111 canoe trips in my beloved Boundary Waters. Expeditions, adventure travel, and a desire for an astonishing life do not happen by accident, nor without challenge, nor without hardship and heart-breaking choices.

"You wanted a real life, and that is an expensive thing, it costs." - Arthur Miller.

At Canoecopia, I always run over my allotted time. Trying to be respectful of the next speaker, as I frantically disconnect my computer and put away my notes scattered on the podium, members from the audience often interrupt me to ask, "How



ROB KESSELRING

*Rob Kesselring, Far North Canoeing Guide Extraordinaire, at home in his beloved BWCAW.*

did you pull off such a life?"

It's a question I have heard for years. During my career as a speaker for high school kids, my answer was easy. "I am old. I've had a lifetime of opportunities to walk on the wild side. You are young; you hopefully have several decades ahead of you to do all that I have done and more. If I could, I would change places with you in an instant. Oh, the places you might go, the dreams you could live out! But it starts today. Where are you going this summer? What goals do you have?" What I didn't add and should have is "it takes guts to sprint down the untraveled path, and the older you get, the more cluttered that trail becomes. Life ends soon enough, don't wait too long to begin it."

For my peers, the answer is different. Readers, before you jump in my canoe, please be careful what you envy, what you want, and how much you are willing to pay. An uncommon life is not for everyone. I am reminded of neighborhood backyard barbecue parties near the home I shared with a wife, five daughters, and a dog for many years. At these events, my eyes sometimes glazed over listening to long-winded stories from my neighbors. I remember one guy who elaborated on an encounter with a raccoon in his garage. I was jolted out of my stupor when another neighbor asked, "Hey Rob, ever had a close call with a raccoon?" That question ties up my tongue. Do I share about the bull elephant on the south Serengeti that at five a.m. woke me when his tusk made a zing on my tentpole eighteen inches from my head? Or maybe the time I was caught between two horny moose in the BWCAW and played a life-threatening game of tree dodging. Or perhaps the grizzly bear on the Kugurok River in Arctic Alaska that I fended off with my toothbrush while I stood nude,

knee-deep in the river.

Here's what happens when I share one of those stories. Blank looks, and then a friendly neighbor interjects recounting a recent trip to the vet with one of his dogs. My favorite comment of all time happened when I shared a newspaper clipping detailing my best friend being killed and eaten by a bear in the Northwest Territories. My brother-in-law remarked, "Maybe all the BS you've been spouting for years is actually true."

Those neighbors are my friends. I do not mean to disparage them. In many ways, I admire them. They seem to have peace while I anguish about what lies around the next bend in the river of my life. They have navigated life in the lee of the wind, making compromises and fitting in while I left marriages and quit jobs to live a life on my terms. But when surrounded by them, I sometimes feel awkward, as catatonic and trapped as a camel looking outward from a zoo cage, yearning for the empty horizons of the Saudi desert. Sometimes I would really like to fit in with the mainstream and share my maladies and listen to how best to kill dandelions. But not really. Instead, my entire life is a sandwiching of adventures and responsibilities. I sold my house a decade ago, bought a van, and endured another divorce. That move was overdue, but I do not regret my years of suburban living. I managed to squeeze in enough trips between enough of my daughters' soccer games, ski meets, and dance recitals. My only regrets are limited not by the compromises I made to balance earning a living and escaping to the wilderness but by the exciting opportunities I let slip by because sometimes, and for no good reason, I was reluctant to add another spicy slice to the sandwich. More commonly, I did not let those

opportunities slip by. I seized the moment. Once, my wife kindly wanted to throw me a big fiftieth birthday bash, but I chose to spend that allotment of family finances on a two-week Arctic canoe expedition. Maybe a selfish choice, but not a regret; it was an incredible trip.

Seven of my best trips were coming-of-age adventures with each of my daughters and life transitional trips with two of my nieces. Their mother may argue they were expensive vacations, but the girls would agree that they were life-changing, arduous rites of passage. Heaven would be reliving each of those trips.

I am alive, most inspired, most at ease when surrounded by old bush pilots or around a campfire with veteran canoeists, and maybe even more so when energized amid a harrowing rapid while shouting back and forth with my bow paddler, searching for that clean line. Last week when my group of paddlers ended our wilderness canoe trip and waited for a float plane back to civilization, one of the crew said, "I am bored; I want to get back on the river." Exactly, and that is why after putting the crew on a DeHavilland Single Otter to Yellowknife, I hung back for another week of exploring.

I have enough money. I could have made much more money in my life, speaking at paddling shows, leading teacher in-services, or writing articles, but whenever I have had to choose between tripping and working? You know my choice. Of course, when possible, I did both. In my last career as a wilderness guide, I could perk (play while I worked).

There is a reason "birds of a feather flock together." When the day is done, or when you are exhausted from going and going, talking with kindred spirits is soothing. Kindred spirits are more common than



ROB KESSELRING

*Have paddle, will travel, that's Rob. When most of us spend the winter dreaming of paddling, Rob heads to wherever he can make it happen. (Lower Canyons of Rio Grande River)*

you imagine, but you must seek them out. These are the badass adventurers you want to bounce around outlandish ideas with. Your backyard barbecue buddies are less supportive and unlikely to say, "Go for it."

I am humbled and inspired by many of my acquaintances whose adventures exceed mine, but talking with these men and women is not a competition. It is camaraderie and an acceptance that we have all chased our dreams, and that is enough. Seeking out friendships with more accomplished explorers and adventurers helped blaze my trail. I recommend it.

I had an excellent career for eight years as a school administrator. It was a year-round contract, but in July, I would take three groups of high school students on weeklong canoe trips in the BWCAW. I

loved those trips. The students gained skills, self-esteem, and trust in me. The result of that trust meant they felt safe to warn me when they heard of something dangerous coming down on campus. Our staff could then intervene and create what my superintendent called nonevents. Unfortunately, with a change in administration, it was decided by the new mucky-mucks that I should sit behind my desk, even in July. I quit that job as fast as a trout can jump. Desk work was never on my goals list. If you want a real life, you gotta know when to hold em and know when to fold em.

It is my father who inspired me to set and reach goals. Not by his life, but rather by his death. Dad fought in World War II as an intelligence officer. He followed the Allied advance in Europe, gleaning informa-

tion from German scientists to hasten the Allied victory in both Europe and Asia. Ever since he chugged back home on a Liberty ship, one of his dreams was to take my mom to Europe and revisit some of his European travels. That never happened. He died from a sudden heart attack a few days after his fiftieth birthday. He left his family in grief, and his dreams were buried with him in the grave.

Back then, I was a confused fifteen-year-old, and I figured I had thirty-five years to live. I was afraid to postpone my gratification. Risking seemed safer. The uncertainty of a future perplexed and haunted me. Years later, that angst was put to music by Hall of Fame rockstar Jackson Browne, "When I was sixteen...I couldn't tell you what the hell those brakes were for, I was just trying to hear my



*Nobody has more experience than Rob, leading trips down Alaska's incredible Noatak River. Trip logistics alone are daunting but Rob thrives on exploring big, wild country.*

song.”

Finding my song brought uncommon structure to my life. My Scoutmaster, an Australian immigrant with a Digger hat, encouraged me not to seek merit badges but to instead chart my own course by making a goals list. “A goals list is your route map, but you must also find the courage to jump from one goal to the next as if you are crossing a whitewater creek leaping from one dry stone to the next.”

I don't like asking for or giving advice. Both seem condescending. As a teacher, I didn't even like asking students questions that I knew the answer to. But in response to those who wish to lead a life in the wilds, make a goals list. This is different from a bucket list. A goals list is your life's map; a bucket list is for leisure time pursuits. One of my goals was to venture

into the wilderness, build a log cabin, run a trapline, and spend the year without contact with civilization. I made that goal happen by convincing a woman who could swing an axe better than me, cook over a fire with aplomb, and keep the bed warm and fun at night to join me. We did it. The ruins of that cabin from forty-eight years ago are only two miles from where I pen these lines. We had no visa, no hunting license, no permit. We just did it. With Calvin Rutstrum's book in one hand and a Swede saw in the other, we did it. It was a complete success. Of course, it was not without hardship. Brilliance is not necessary for success; courage and persistence are. In March, we spent two days chiseling through seven feet of ice with a three-foot crowbar to ice fish for trout, only to find

we had chosen a spot above a reef and could set our line only a few feet between ice and lake bottom. We ate bark from trees in April, and in May, tern eggs. I lost thirty pounds. It helped that we had no sat phone or contact with the outside world. When tapping out is not an option, you find a way. With the proceeds from the furs, we spent the next twelve months bumming around Asia and backpacking in New Zealand.

A small disclaimer, furs alone would not have paid for that year of travel, but I did inherit \$20,000 that year. My two sisters received the same sum. One used it for a downpayment on her first house, the other on a sailboat. I concede those were wise investments. I put half of mine into a stack of twenty-dollar traveler's checks and headed for Tibet without regret.

More recently, one item on



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my goals list was to paddle Hunters Island in the Boundary Waters. When *BWJ* publisher Stu Osthoff invited me to co-guide a trip on that astonishing loop, I said, “Yes.” Those that have seen us debate our different tripping styles at Canoecopia know we are polar opposites. And truthfully, on the Hunters Island trip, there was a moment we almost faced off. (Editor’s note: I considered our disagreement over where to camp that final day of the Hunters Island trip a silly, petty thing, certainly not worth fighting over, and we soon put it behind us). But here’s the thing, it was a great trip. You can live next door to somebody for twenty years and be cordial friends, but travel in the wilderness together with someone for ten days, and you are bonded for life. Stu and I are now close friends. I still

believe Stu is a little crazy, but I have the most profound respect for him, and frankly, at our most recent Canoecopia debates, I often find my tongue in my cheek.

Many people mention to me their desire to join up on one of Stu’s Grand Slam fishing trips. But too often they are talking “next year.” Putting off for tomorrow becomes habit forming until it becomes a whimsical memory of something that might have been. I do not like catch-and-release fishing, but if I did, I would have joined Stu on his Sutton River brook trout trip years ago. Or, more likely, I would have done a self-guided trip up there. Here is a guide’s secret. From the Zambezi to the Noatak, you can save fifty-percent by cutting out the guide and self-guiding. Of course, when guideless and the polar bear comes for you or the puff adder hisses, you might second guess those savings.

“When your heart is in your dreams, no request is too extreme.” - Jiminy Cricket.

Dancing under a full moon on the roof of an outfitter’s shop on New Year’s Eve in Futaleufu, Chile, I convinced a guide to take me and my partner down a portion of the fabled Fu that was closed to rafting because of almost a month of constant rain and dangerously high water. We broke the rules, and it was another of my scrapes with death and an unforgettable run with no regrets.

Back to advice, several years ago, I was sitting at the Cooke Custom Sewing booth at Canoecopia trying to sell three-day October bushcraft trips in the BWCAW with myself and the legend, Dan Cooke. Dan loves solo boats, so constrained by the ridiculous four canoe limit, we could only bring two clients. We were charging a few hundred dollars, but it seemed as if I was selling cemetery plots. People would plop down

and ask questions but usually felt the cost prohibitive. I was too kind to interject to those wilderness wannabes that the \$500 dry-suit in their shopping bag will likely be sold unused at their garage sale in five years. Here is my third piece of advice, which took me many years to learn. Never buy gear instead of investing money on wilderness trips or paddling instruction. I travel the Boundary Waters with two extraordinary ultralight canoes—a Savage River Deep Creek and a Northstar Polaris. But if saving up for a top-end canoe would mean forgoing my annual Boundary Waters journeys, I would be in the stern of a thirty-year-old Alumacraft and having just as much fun. When you must choose between spending money on gear or paying for a float plane charter to a truly pristine river, choose the charter.

I am blessed with five daughters, and I have unwavering love for all of them, but some have chosen at one time or another not to speak with me. That is heart-wrenching. I have been divorced twice from extraordinary women and savored long intimate partnerships with a few more. My sister recently celebrated her fiftieth anniversary. I admire that accomplishment, but that is not the way I roll. I still have warm feelings for all of the women I have loved. (I am not sure they feel the same way about me, and I only share these personal disclosures because leading an outrageous life in some of the wildest corners of the world is risky and involves choices people that love you may not understand, resulting in consequences that can be brutal). Trust me, going on a weeklong solo winter trip in the Boundary Waters will often result in your spouse sitting by the phone hoping not to hear of the recovery of your frozen corpse. That fear can wear on anyone’s patience. There are many



*Rob admonishing his team to carry their weight on the portage. (Tanzania)*

frozen bodies of skilled adventurers on the slopes of Mount Everest. Dreaming big does not make you immune from avalanches, malaria, trigger-happy drug runners, vipers, and grizzly bears. I can speak from experience with all five of those hazards. Just because you are willing to throw caution to the wind does not mean your family and friends will understand. Professional mountain climbers, river guides, and arctic explorers are often on expeditions far from home for long spans of time and reap high divorce rates. A life on the edge is not quite like the old Daniel Boone television show.

Still, for me and those who share an unquenchable thirst for adventure, wild opportunities are out there. Looking north or east from where I sit right now is untracked wilderness for 1,000 miles, and even to the west or south, the near-

est roads are 200 miles distant. Priceless adventure is open to anyone with little more than a canoe, a paddle, and a frying pan.

Readers of the *BWJ* know the thrill of canoeing and camping in the BWCAW and Quetico. Combined, it is larger than any roadless wilderness area in the contiguous United States, and for eight months of the year, it's one of the wildest. Although often lacking the special protections of the Boundary Waters, vast tracts of wild lands in Africa, South America, Australia, and elsewhere around the globe beckon adventurers and are accessible to anyone with the guts to match their dreams. Armchair experts may believe they were born too late, that they missed their chance, and they are wrong. You need not board a jumbo jet to seek adventure overseas. Signing up for a dogsled trip into Quetico

this January could be a peak experience. If the fee for a guided dogsled trip seems out of reach, strap on snowshoes and pull a toboggan deep into the BWCAW. The squeak of snow, the howl of wolves, and the crack of wood splitting beneath your axe... unforgettable adventure.

Maine Guide, Scott Oeth once commented on a Facebook post I made at the Leadville 100, "Of course, you are there, you are like Forrest Gump, you are ALWAYS there!" I took it as a compliment, and it does seem like I have the good luck or bad luck to always be in the center of the action—my hand in the mouth of the tiger. I make no apologies for that. I plan to travel to the tropics again this winter and spend a couple of months skiing in Colorado. The rent in Aspen is atrocious, but the mountains beckon; I will find a way. You can too. 📷



by Joe Friedrichs

## Gone To The Wolves

Jordan Grider's skull is still out there.

At least whatever is left of it. The wolves took the rest.

His skull sits somewhere on the edge of Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. This is a wilderness destination. It's canoe country. There are many hundreds of campsites decorating the landscape. Families come here every summer. They paddle. They swim. They hike. This is not a place one expects to find a human skull lying on the forest floor. Grider's is out there. And there are others.

Grider traveled more than 1,400 miles from New Mexico to Minnesota in October 2018 to get to the BWCAW. He died alone in the wilderness a few days later. Authorities believe his death was an accident. A mistake swinging an axe is one theory officials will reference. An accidental firing of his handgun is another. Accident or not, when law enforcement found Grider's final campsite, blood and chaos stood out above everything else. His final moments on earth were not peaceful.

Grider's skull is likely still out there because of the simple fact that it's never been found. As authorities searched the area of his final campsite, some of Grider's bones were discovered. Most were not. Wildlife officials believe animals carried away, chewed on, and perhaps ate most of the bones. These animals range from large carnivores like bears and wolves to small rodents such as mice. If not an animal, perhaps the skeletal remains of his head simply sank into the gluey earth. The forest floor is soft

near the beaver pond where the young man from New Mexico made his last camp. After a number of extensive searches, only a dozen of Grider's bones were found. Nearby, about thirty yards from the spot where law enforcement officials found his bones, they found Grider's hammock and sleeping bag hanging between two living poplar trees. Both the hammock and the sleeping bag were covered in blood. The hammock hung not far from the Sioux Hustler Trail, a hiking path that meanders across the BWCAW. Grider was twenty-nine years old when he died.

I traveled to New Mexico the week after Thanksgiving in 2021 to learn what brought Grider from the arid desert to the far reaches of northeastern Minnesota. My journey brought me to Moriarty, New Mexico, Grider's hometown. Moriarty is a peculiar town about an hour east of Albuquerque. The community proudly brands itself as being "The Crossroads of Opportunity." The label, conjured by the local supporters of economic growth in the region, recognizes the many highways and interstates crisscrossing near town, including the iconic Route 66. The town's population hovers near 2,000 souls, many of them deeply religious and poor. According to city officials, Moriarty was named for an Iowa family who settled in the area in autumn 1887. Michael Moriarty, for whom the town is named, brought his family to New Mexico to "avoid the cold winters" of the

Midwest, according to a summary shared inside the town's community center.

Minnesota – known for its long, brutal winters – might as well be the North Pole by comparison. Northwest winds ripping south from Canada are a near constant across the Boundary Waters each winter. Heavy snow piles on top of ice, and the ground locks with a deep freeze. When he left New Mexico and headed north, Grider knew little of the cold that was waiting for him. He'd never felt forty-below, let alone made an attempt to camp and live in such extreme conditions.

"We wanted him to wait until spring," Jordan's mother, Rebecca, told me before I arrived in New Mexico in December 2021. "We didn't like the idea of a winter in the woods in Minnesota. Nobody did, other than Jordan."

The Grider home in Moriarty has a blue metal roof atop the structure's stucco walls. White trim hangs snug around the windows and the front door. Scrubby pine and one-seeded junipers dot the front yard. Feces from dozens of chickens and the turkeys cover the dry earth inside a fenced perimeter. A human-made pond the size of a kiddie pool holds water in December, though it's started to ice over at night as winter settles over the high desert. An empty lot across the street resembles something out of the old West. It's as though

*When timber wolves were put on the Endangered Species List 50 years ago, canoe country was their last stand in the lower 48 states. Today, their population in MN has expanded/stabilized at around 3500 and migrated to establish viable populations in WI and MI. Probably no other animal fires up the imagination and controversy quite like the wolf.*



Doc Holiday might suddenly come riding up on horseback and nobody would say much about it.

Jordan was the third born among the six Grider boys. The others are Joey, Jonathan, Jesse, Joshua, and James. Rebecca, his mother, was eighteen when Jordan entered the world. Age is a unique and complex consideration in the Grider household. Rebecca was 13 when she met her future husband, Jason. At the time they met, Jason was twenty-three. A year later, they were married. “We could only get married in Utah or Texas,” Rebecca told me. Her mother drove them to Lubbock and gave her blessing. By the age of fourteen, Rebecca was married and pregnant. She never finished high school.

All of the Grider boys were homeschooled, something Jordan resented and never made peace with, his mother said. He was athletic and curious but never learned to read or write beyond an elementary-grade level. Grider was dyslexic, something that was not diagnosed until he was twelve. The learning disability was so intense that public health officials in New Mexico were essentially baffled at its severity, Rebecca said. Over time, Grider’s learning disability and lack of education manifested in unruly engagement with the world. The Mayo Clinic reports that when left untreated, dyslexia may lead to low self-esteem, behavioral problems, anxiety, aggression, and withdrawal from friends and family. For most of his life, and all of his adult life, Grider suffered from many of these symptoms. His trouble with the law and a tendency to slip into the dark shadows of society, or abandon it altogether, were only illustrations of the turmoil that spun a web daily in his mind.

Talking about Jordan’s death with his parents was challeng-

ing, as Jason broke down to tears multiple times throughout the course of the gray December afternoon while we spoke. “It’s not easy losing a child,” he choked out through his tears. As Jason wept in front of me that afternoon in his kitchen, his son’s bones lay dormant in a cardboard box in a nearby room. Aside from the memories and the stories his parents shared with me, that was all that was left of Jordan Grider, a dozen bones in a box.

Before Grider arrived to Ely and the Boundary Waters, he’d never been to Minnesota. The only reference he had to the Boundary Waters came from the campfire he shared years before with others along the Appalachian Trail. Somebody told him it was as remote a place as one could hope to find in America, even more secluded than the strange backwoods of Kentucky. Before coming to Minnesota, Appalachia and the rolling hills of eastern Kentucky were home for Grider from 2012 to 2017. It was here that he took to camping—indeed, living—in the woods near the small town of Manchester, Kentucky.

Located near the massive Daniel Boone National Forest, Clay County and nearby communities, including Manchester, London, and East Bernstadt, served as Jordan’s hub for the bulk of his twenties. He essentially lived out of his truck when he arrived in Kentucky in 2012, though he kept his hammock hanging in the nearby woods, within eyesight of his vehicle. Jordan chose to be homeless during this period, his mother said. He liked the nomadic lifestyle and being free from the burdens of rent, landlords, and utility bills arriving in the mail.

Much like Superior National Forest in Minnesota where the Boundary Waters is located, Daniel Boone National Forest

is renowned for its natural beauty. Hardwood trees decorate the rugged landscape, and a series of reservoirs and flowing rivers sneak between steep sandstone ridges. Despite the beauty of the woods and waters encompassing the region, poverty, religion, and corporations are dominant themes in many people’s lives who call the area home. In a 2014 article, *The New York Times* described Clay County as being one of the poorest and worst places to live in the nation.

It was here, in Clay County, where Jordan Grider kept his camp. The same hammock authorities found soaked in blood in the Boundary Waters hung between two trees for about four of the five years Grider lived in Kentucky. The trees stood on land owned by a Mennonite farmer named Durrell Rudolph. “Jordan was a nice kid. He didn’t ask for much or do anything that gave us a reason to be worried about him living here,” Durrell told me in 2022 when I traveled to Kentucky.

I met Durrell in pretty much the same way Jordan Grider did: I just showed up. My friend and co-host of the WTIP Boundary Waters Podcast, Matthew Baxley, and I traveled to Kentucky in August 2022 to learn more about where Grider spent years camping and isolating in the woods. Durrell and his family are Mennonites. For his part, Durrell is all-in on the traditional look and lifestyle of the religious sect. The day I met him, he wore black rubber boots, black denim pants held up by black suspenders, and a white long sleeve collared shirt that had vertical translucent stripes on it. The shirt and pants were filthy. Atop his head sat a clean, yellow straw hat. We talked at length about Grider. “I heard of his

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passing,” Durrell said of Grider’s death. “It was so sad.”

Durrell’s voice is thick with a southern accent and the unique drawl of someone who has clearly spent a lot of time on a farm. The easy assumption could be that Durrell is a hick living in the woods of Appalachia. The reality is that his kindness and generosity supersede the stereotypes. He welcomed Matthew and I onto his land in the same way he welcomed Grider: without judgement. “It’s a slower way of life here for me and my family than maybe most people care for, but we do work for it, for everything we have. We feel quite blessed. Really, this is a pretty good place.”

The patch of land where Grider made his camp in Kentucky is similar in many ways to the makeshift campsite he chose near the Sioux Hustler Trail on the edge of the Bound-

ary Waters. The site in Kentucky was tucked away, surrounded by thick timber and brush, and generally speaking, not a place most people would want to spend a lot of time. The shallow Goose Creek trickles nearby the spot where Grider kept his hammock. On the day I was there, beef cattle owned by Durrell stood lazily in the shade on the other side of the creek, no more than twenty yards from Grider’s former camp. “Jordan would bathe down there in the creek,” Durrell said. Empty bottles, tires, and other rubbish were scattered across the forest floor, possibly remnants of Grider’s camp, or a combination of litter being tossed from the nearby road.

Similar to New Mexico, southeastern Kentucky does not have anything that comes close to a Minnesota winter. The average temperature in

winter is above freezing in Clay County, though it does snow on occasion. When it does snow, it typically melts away entirely within forty-eight hours. Nonetheless, about two years into his stay on the property near Goose Creek, Grider set about constructing a makeshift shelter to supplement his hammock and tarp sleeping quarters. The structure was rough, a tin roof and plywood walls, all of it held up by scrap two-by-fours from various construction projects the Mennonites had completed. Grider cut a hole in the roof of the structure, which was no larger than a small shed. He installed a barrel stove inside and essentially created a small warming hut that could double as a sauna. “He would call it a bathhouse,” Durrell said. Eventually, however, a dead tree fell on the small

building and destroyed it. Not long after, Grider departed the Bluegrass state.

Late October, when Grider first arrived to Minnesota, is a time of transition across Superior National Forest. Indeed, many things are changing across this massive swath of federal land during autumn. Tamarack trees are turning gold before their needles drop to the forest floor. Loons are restless, preparing to fly south before all this water becomes frozen. Even with the best gear money can buy, from canvas wall tents with wood stoves to sleeping bags rated to twenty-below, spending a winter in the BWCAW requires dedicated planning, investment, and resources. Grider didn't have the best gear money could buy. In fact, he had terrible gear. Basically, he had a hammock and an old sleeping bag. He didn't have much of a plan, either. He had some bags of rice, a few bags of dried beans, and some basic knowledge of survival. More importantly, he was entirely unfamiliar with the landscape. The area where he chose to camp would have offered little in the way of sustainability and harvest. There were no fish in the little beaver pond near his camp, and even if there were, once the pond froze, he'd have no means to find them. He did not have an auger to drill through the ice. Once winter arrived, it's possible, likely even, that Grider would have packed up and gone home. He died before the cold had a chance to grip his intentions and squeeze them out. Though he wanted to spend the entire winter in the BWCAW, he presumably died just a few days after he arrived.

Despite the uncertainty of exactly how he died, most people—from law enforcement to Grider's family members—agree he was eaten by wolves. Wolves, on occasion, will go

beyond chewing or crushing the bones of whatever it is they are eating. Wolves will, in fact, eat bones. They do so for calcium and other minerals. Ribs are a favorite, along with other small bones. While talking over a cup of coffee one afternoon, Seth Moore, a wildlife biologist who works near the BWCAW, tells me everything I'd ever need to know about the feeding habits of wolves. Moore is the director of biology and environment for the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa in northeastern Minnesota. He said that wolves typically eat almost everything of whatever it is they're consuming. They love deer and young moose, but anything with flesh and blood will suffice. "They'll eat skin. They'll eat hair. They'll chew through the bones. You can find teeth and hooves in wolf scat," Moore explained.

Moore has spent more than a decade studying wolves on the edge of the Boundary Waters and Lake Superior, including a massive undertaking with the federal government to transfer wolves from the Minnesota mainland to Isle Royale National Park. In terms of a missing human skull in the Boundary Waters, Moore said wolves have an amazing ability to carry things long distances. "We've had wolves prey on moose, for example. Sometimes they'll grab the collar, not biological material at all, and they'll just carry the collar for a mile and drop it. Luckily, our collars have GPS units, so we can find them. But it's not associated with the moose carcass at all. They'll do the same thing with pelvises. They'll do the same thing with heads. You know, sometimes we'll find moose heads very far away from where the rest of the bones in the carcass was. For a human skull, I suspect they probably just hauled it off."

When they're recovering dead bodies from the Boundary Waters, particularly in a situation like Jordan Grider's where he was in the woods for months before his remains were discovered, search and rescue squads understand they might not find the body in one place. As for the skull, Rick Slatten, the captain of the St. Louis County Rescue Squad, said he was not the least bit confused when his team and other agencies found some of Grider's bones but not his skull. "It's fairly common not to find the skull in a case like this. It's frequently taken by scavengers—let's put it that way," Slatten said.

Slatten is an expert on finding missing people. He is the longtime director of St. Louis County Sheriff's Rescue Squad, based in Duluth, Minnesota. The rescue squad, the largest and most advanced of those covering the Boundary Waters region, consists of ninety-five highly-trained volunteers from northeastern Minnesota. These are people who are interested in helping canoeists and others who get into bad situations in the woods or on the water. A dominating figure, Slatten has a deep voice, broad shoulders, and a thick Minnesotan accent. Despite decades on the job and his best years long behind him, Slatten is not the type of guy you want to mess with. His hands are weathered from the sun and frequent exposure to cold wind and water. The muscles in his shoulders lift his clothing in uneven sections across the horizon of his profile, his shape still reflecting the hard work he engages with on a daily basis. In addition to being the captain of the largest search and rescue squad that works in the BWCAW, Slatten travels



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the country educating people—mostly other search and rescue organizations and law enforcement agencies—on how it works finding humans in the woods, regardless of whether that person is dead or alive.

When it comes to dead people, they tend to rot rather quickly. Slatten tells me this somewhat abruptly, changing the subject from what we've been discussing: a wolf carrying Grider's detached head through the forest. In terms of science, the decaying of a human typically starts within five minutes after the person dies. When this process starts, Slatten says, "scent from human remains, detectable by dogs, begins to appear within minutes of death." Slatten is prone to talk about graphic imagery and death in the way most people might mention the weather. Blood, rotting flesh, pain, all of this is the world Slatten might enter on any given day. Decades of experience in the field have desensitized him to what most people gingerly discuss. We're all going to die, Slatten understands, it's just a matter of how messy it will be and what steps it will take to move the body to the coroner's office.

Slatten and I spent close to an hour one cold afternoon in December 2021 talking about Grider's death. It was the fifth time I'd reached out to Slatten seeking information about people who have died, been injured, or went missing in the Boundary Waters region. As usual, he was forthcoming and brutally honest. Basically, Slatten says, the Grider case was simply a search operation where the team went in looking for human remains. The word "rescue" was not part of the operation. The team brought human remains detection dogs (commonly referred to as cadaver dogs) to assist with the mission, and there's nothing unique or extraordinary about

the situation from a tactical standpoint, Slatten explains. When I ask him about all the attention Grider's death garnered on the internet, on various Boundary Waters blogs and discussions forums, Slatten essentially shrugs his shoulders.

Pressing harder, I tell him that many of the commenters in these online threads mention the wolves. Any media coverage about Grider's death also made sure to mention the wolves, typically in the headline. My own line of questioning, we both observe, focuses on when and how the pack of wolves in the Boundary Waters came to eat Jordan Grider. Forget everything about the wolves in this case, Slatten says. The biggest threat to somebody on their trip to the Boundary Waters is the person themselves. I ask him to repeat the statement.

"The biggest threat to somebody on their trip to the wilderness is themselves," he says. "The wolf stuff, that's just a lot of Hollywood media. The big bad wolf, all that. I can't recall any search or rescue situations, in my experience, where predators have been involved, at least not while the person was still alive. You know, the wolves didn't do it. The bears didn't do it. The Windigo didn't do it. When we have calls from the Boundary Waters, it usually comes back to either simple forces of nature or choices the individual made while they were out there."

As I spoke with people about Jordan Grider—from casual canoeists who recreate in the Boundary Waters to law enforcement and emergency responders in Grand Marais and Duluth—various comparisons were often made to one specific individual. This person's name is Chris McCandless. Made famous by author Jon Krakauer in his book *Into the Wild* and a subsequent Sean

Penn film by the same name, McCandless inspired an ideology built upon breaking free from society and roaming the United States with reckless abandon. Traveling under the name "Alexander Supertramp," McCandless gave up his worldly possessions not long after graduating from a college in Georgia in 1990. Though he was raised in a wealthy family on the eastern seaboard, McCandless wrote in his journal extensively about what he viewed were the falsehoods of the American dream. In the McCandless narrative, money is bad, possessions are traps, humans are meant to be free spirits, and so on. After roaming the country for about two years, McCandless eventually hitchhiked his way to Alaska. The notion of going north appealed to McCandless. After making it to Alaska, he found his way to a secluded, though fairly accessible patch of wilderness near the Sushana River. There, he took shelter in an abandoned bus. Though the exact details of his death remain uncertain, it appears McCandless died of starvation and possibly poisoning after consuming toxic plants he found growing near the bus. His dead body was found decomposing in the bus by moose hunters.

The obvious parallels in their stories are the fact both McCandless and Grider were men in their twenties who took issue with the status quo. They wore beards and enjoyed being nomads. Their journeys were largely about themselves, certainly not about protecting the environment or some type of championing for the earth. They each had issues with their fathers and wanted to break from the confinements of capitalism. There are many thousands like them, young men who

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## *Trip Options*

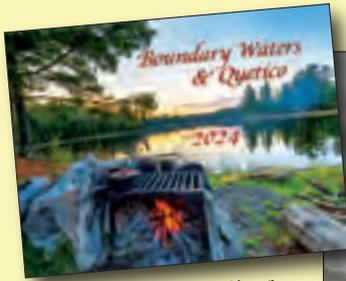
- Fly-in, paddle-out canoe trips
  - Fly-in outpost cabins
- Paddle-in cabin on Batchewaung Lake  
(the only cabin in Quetico Park)



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think capitalism is the root of all woes plaguing society. After grumbling through the cycle, most people of a similar mindset settle for doing things like baking bread in a wood-fired oven and selling it at a small farmer's market. Others keep at it. Some, like McCandless and Grider, die in the woods, and their stories end up on a bookshelf. Regardless of how infamous they are, the lives and subsequent deaths of both young men does not impress Slatten, the chiseled woodsman from the St. Louis County Rescue Squad.

"Chris McCandless, I mean, he had a movie made about him, but he was an idiot," Slatten told me in December 2021. "He went in thoroughly unprepared. And 'Mr. Blue Bird on my shoulder,' the Walt Disney approach to nature, you know, all that crap. The thing is, nature can be very giving, and it can be very taking away. Nature is the ultimate creator. And it's the ultimate destroyer. And, yeah, this Walt Disney approach that I can go in and find harmony with the universe, it's just hogwash."

Slatten says that no matter how Grider died, be it an accident with his axe, or the gun, or while shaving with a sharp knife, when he arrived the Boundary Waters, he was not equipped to spend a winter in northern

Minnesota. "Grider was unprepared for what he was getting himself into. When you think about it, it's not much different from McCandless and the bus. Grider, he's on an old forest road. If the Forest Service hadn't dynamited the bridge, you could drive on it today. The Feds designated this a wilderness, but I'm telling you, this thing was a freeway back in the logging days. And he's not that far in the woods. I mean, as the crow flies, he less than a mile from a pretty main road. He's 4,500 feet in the woods from the Echo Trail. And that's not very remote when it comes to the Boundary Waters and this huge area we cover." Similarly, McCandless and the bus he found were not far from an accessible road. Convinced high water trapped him from crossing the Teklanika River when he wanted to leave the wilderness, in reality McCandless was a short distance from a steel cable that stretched across the river that included a bucket and pulley system that would have ushered him to safety.

I first met Slatten on his turf, inside the St. Louis Rescue Squad headquarters off Highway 53 on the outskirts of Duluth. For this conversation, the one about Grider's death and his missing skull, I was in Grand Marais. Slatten told me that cell phone reception remains spotty across most of the BWCAW, though it is increasing. However, if someone suffers a serious injury in the Boundary Waters, death is a necessary talking point for search and rescue squads to consider. How long before this person dies? That's something Slatten and others involved with search and rescue operations in and around the BWCAW have to think about each time a distress call comes in.

After a brief hiatus—and at my prompting, to be fair—Slatten and I are once again talking about Grider's skull. Slatten says the head of a dead animal—in this case, a dead human—is easily detached, and it offers a food source for predators. The head is something that can be taken and moved to another location and then fed upon. Some of this we've already discussed, but Slatten talks about it as though we just discovered this fact. He's enthusiastic about the science, about the truth of the natural world. I listen patiently and attentively as he tells me that a wolf could easily have carried Grider's head a significant distance away from the spot where his bones were later discovered. That's why the skull is likely to never be found.

That's why Grider's skull is now a part of the Boundary Waters.

Note: This story is included in the forthcoming book by Joe Friedrichs titled *Last Entry Point: Stories of Danger and Death in the Boundary Waters*. The book is being published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press. It is scheduled for release in May 2024. 📖

# *bwcaw hunting*



by Rollie Johnson

## Hunting For That Needle In A Haystack

The BWCAW Mudro Lake access parking lot is empty, only adding to my sense of isolation. The air is still, and temps hover in the low forties, bringing a crispness that quickens my pace and sharpens my senses. The thick scent of pine and moist poplar leaves fills my lungs with clean air. It is a good day to be alive and back in the Northwoods.

I am here for a solo trip combining two of my favorite skill sets: wilderness canoeing and bowhunting whitetails with my homemade longbow. This short excursion is an epic long shot at best. I have packed my best positive attitude, but a large dose of realism rides aboard the canoe as well. To find a legit big buck in this sea of unbroken forest and then maneuver within longbow range is pushing probability. Anyone with half a brain would take the Vegas odds in favor of the buck. Suffice to say, the theme of this trip quickly becomes searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

The BWCAW is a magical and massive designated wilderness, most famous for its thousands of lakes and connecting portages, offering a canoe camping experience like no other. With its adjoining Canadian sister wilderness, Quetico Provincial Park, one can really shake the stress of modern civilized life here.

The vast majority of people traveling the BWCAW visit May through September. Many come to fish for world-class smallmouth, northern, walleye, and lake trout. For thirty-plus years, I have led dozens of



ROLLIE JOHNSON

*Continued on page 92*

*Author, Rollie Johnson, with his homemade canoe and longbow, takes in the lay of the land and his prospects for this BWCAW deer hunt. (Fourtown Lake)*

# Voyageur Trading Post

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Consistently enjoying great wilderness canoe trips demands three things: savvy trip planning, strong wilderness skills/knowledge/judgement and third- you need the right wilderness gear. All our great BWJ stories deliver expert advice, inspiration and passion for transcending the ordinary canoe trip. And for the past 34 years, the BWJ Voyageur Trading Post, has outfitted thousands with the very best in high performance wilderness canoe tripping gear. If you're serious about this wilderness canoe tripping game, get started right here assembling your own top notch outfit. I depend on the products featured here for all my Grand Slam Guide Service trips. When you live out of a canoe pack all summer, every summer, you learn what gear delivers rock-solid backcountry performance. The wilderness gear offered here is the best of the best. Invest in proven BWJ gear because the rewards of the BWCAW/Quetico wilderness experience are absolutely, priceless. And one last thing- most of our BWJ wilderness gear is made right here on the edge of the Boundary Waters or by other small businesses in MN and WI. Today, more than ever, we all thank you very much for your support.

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Locked and loaded with BWJ gear for another day in canoe country. Sturgeon Lake, Quetico.

## **BWJ CANOE PACK**

Envelope style canoe packs of heavy, stiff, waterlogged canvas and leather are history. At BWJ, we believe ALL canoe packs should be lightweight, super-tough, and loaded with high-performance features. All three models of our full-sized canoe packs- the BWJ Ultimate, BWJ Extra- Wide Ultimate and the BWJ Insulated Food Pack, come standard with: 1000 Denier coated Cordura nylon w/deep sidewall designs, double thickness bottoms, foam padded back panels, 3 1/2"-wide/articulated shoulder straps, sternum strap to reduce load sway, 4" wide padded hip belt and nylon lifting loop handles on sides & top. The BWJ Ultimate Packs have a 9" extendable top/turtleneck to expand carrying capacity as needed and prevent any spillage of gear. A drawstring and double/triple front straps/buckles cinch and stabilize the entire load.



**BWJ ULTIMATE**



**BWJ ULTIMATE  
EXTRA WIDE**



**BWJ INSULATED  
FOOD PACK**

# THE BWJ ULTIMATE CANOE PACK



**BWJ Ultimate Canoe Pack:** THE do-it-all workhorse canoe pack, great for personal gear, equipment or food. Capacity-to-spare for all your personal gear for 10-day plus trips, portages like a dream and tough enough to last most a lifetime. Canoe country portages are demanding and hazardous. Portage like the pros with the BWJ Ultimate. Specs: 19"W x 26"H (34"w/top extended) x 12"D. 6500 cu in capacity. Color: Green. **\$319**

# BWJ ULTIMATE EXTRA WIDE CANOE PACK



**BWJ Ultimate Extra Wide Canoe Pack:** This is the old #4 canoe pack in a super-sized modern version. Includes all the high performance features listed above in a Magnum portage pack. Designed for lightweight, bulky items like sleeping bags/pads/pillows/clothing. Great for couples who want to combine all their personal gear for two into one large pack or families combining all the kids bags/pads/clothes etc. Specs: 27"W x 26"H (36" w/top extended) x 8"D. 8200 cu in capacity. Color: Green or Blue. **\$319**



# BWJ INSULATED FOOD PACK SYSTEM

Your group can enjoy fresh and frozen foods all week long in the BWCAW/Quetico with the BWJ Insulated Food Pack System. No more freeze dried food that is full of preservatives and woefully short on portion size, energy and taste. Insert the BWJ Poly Food Box inside the BWJ Insulated Food Pack and place a one-gallon jug of ice in the bottom. Pack in frozen homemade meals, meat and fresh produce. Real food in a wilderness setting is a special treat that is well worth the extra weight. Over one thousand discriminating canoe parties have converted to the BWJ Insulated Food Pack System and all proclaim the same thing, "We will never go back to freeze dried on our canoe trips again". With reasonable care, you can expect six days of cooling from this system with temps in the seventies. The BWJ Poly Box and Food Pack keeps fresh foods cold, dry, crush proof and safe from mice/squirrels.



I use two BWJ Insulated Food Packs for all my Grand Slam Guide Service trips. At left, the "Fridge Pack" holds a one-gallon jug of frozen water and fresh milk, juice, eggs, butter, cheese, fruits and veggies. At right, the "Freezer Pack" holds a similar one-gallon jug of ice and homemade pre-cooked entrees frozen in Ziplocks like spaghetti meat sauce, beef fajitas, chicken alfredo, beef and broccoli, wild rice hot dish, pot roast, soups, chili plus frozen steaks, burgers, brats, deli meats, bacon etc. My clients all rave about the food on my canoe trips. You can enjoy real food in canoe country too.



**BWJ Insulated Food Pack:** Custom designed cooler pack to fit the BWJ Poly Food Box and removable foam liner for maximum ice retention. Carries heavy loads comfortably and safely. Zippered top for quick, easy access to food contents. Specs: 21"W x 24"H x 12"D. 4800 cu in capacity. Color: Reflective Olive Green. **\$310**

**BWJ Poly Food Box:** Super-tough roto-molded food box keeps food contents dry from rain and bilge water. Works great for both dry and frozen food supplies. Fits into the BWJ Insulated Food Pack, BWJ Ultimate Pack and most other #3 style canoe packs. Fitted lid is tightly secured by shock cords. These poly boxes are still going strong after twenty years of hard use on my Grand Slam Guide Service trips. Specs: 16"W x 22"H x 11"D 3800 cu in capacity. Color: Gray. **\$110**

**BWJ Removable Insulating Foam Liner:** Half-inch thick closed-cell foam, wraps completely around the inside of the BWJ Poly Food Box with separate pieces to fit over the bottom and top. Creates a double-insulation layer when combined with the BWJ Insulated Food Pack to maximize the effective cooling time for fresh foods. Easily removable for cleaning between trips. **\$37**

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BOX**



**BWJ GUIDE PACK**

**BWJ Guide Pack:**  
The perfect oversized daypack to keep all those essential items readily accessible while paddling, portaging and fishing. No more digging into the larger canoe packs every time you need raingear, camera, bug dope, sunscreen, drink bottle, snacks etc. Three large zippered pockets to keep everything organized. Popular to wear while portaging canoes. Specs: 12"W x 18"H x 8"D. 1750 cu in capacity. Color: Green or Blue. **\$139**



**BWJ WANDERER DAY PACK**

**BWJ Wanderer Day Pack**  
A taller/leaner day pack than our BWJ Guide Pack, the Wanderer features a single zippered pocket in the hood (7"D x 12"W x 19"H) and mesh exterior pouches for easy access to water bottles. Articulated shoulder straps, sternum strap, hip belt and fully-padded back panel. Room for all your vital "on the trail" gear. A perfect match for portaging with the canoe. Specs: 12"W x 19"H x 7"D; 1750 cu in capacity. Color: Olive or Red. **\$150**



**BWJ STANDARD PACKS**

**#3.5**

**#4**

**BWJ Standard #3.5 Pack:** Performs well for personal gear, equipment or food, and fits BWJ Poly Food Box Specs: 22"W x 26"H x 6"D- flat; 3450 cu capacity. Color: Green or Blue **\$160**

**BWJ Standard #4 Pack:** Personal gear for two; sleeping bags, pads, pillows, clothes, towels, jackets, camp shoes. Specs: 26"W x 28" H x 7"D gusset; 5124 cu capacity. Color: Green or Blue **\$185**



**BWJ Magnum Guide Pack:** A larger version of our super-popular BWJ Guide Pack, the Magnum combines on the trail gear for two people. Holds all my personal gear plus fishing tackle and group lunch on day trips. I live out of this pack. Super-versatile design; four zippered pockets, padded waist belt, sternum strap. Perfect to portage with the canoe. Specs: 13.5"w x 22"h x 6.5" gusset; 44 liters, 2700 cu in capacity. Color: Green and silver. **\$229**

# BWJ CANOE CAMPING GEAR

## BWJ ULTRALIGHT CAMP TARP



**BWJ Ultralight Camp Tarp:** When an all-day soaker settles over canoe country, a well-hung camp tarp can save the day. 1.9 oz. Silicone Coated material is super-light and compact yet has twice the tear strength of regular nylon tarps. Other features: nylon taped edges, pack cloth reinforcement in center with loops to secure center pole, nylon loops every 24 inches (no grommets to rip out) and comes with 80' of polyester tie-out cord. Specs: 10' x 12' is perfect for groups of four. Green. 2 lbs. 5 oz. **\$162**



**BWJ Canoe Pack Liners:** Super-tough, oversized poly bags allow multiple rollovers to waterproof all your canoe pack gear from rain and bilge water. I outfit these same heavy-duty 6 mil liners for all my Grand Slam Guide

Service trips. They last for many trips and keep our stuff bone dry. A must have for every canoe trip.

**Standard Canoe Pack Liner** (left): Fits BWJ Regular Ultimate Pack and most others (28" x 48") **\$5**

**Extra-Wide Canoe Pack Liner** (right): Fits BWJ Extra-Wide Pack & most #4's (22"W x 58"H x 16"D) **\$6**



**BWJ Nylon Canoe Pack Liner:** A tougher, more permanent solution than easily torn garbage bags for protecting the gear in your pack. Made from coated pack cloth with drawstring closure. Not as

waterproof as the BWJ Poly Canoe Pack Liners (left), but more supple/durable. Handy for hauling pack contents into the tent and leaving the wet, dirty pack outside. 28" x 36"- fits BWJ Ultimate or extra-wide Ultimate Packs. Green. **\$30**



**BWJ Tarp Bag:** When you have to break camp before that tarp can dry out, our waterproof pack cloth tarp bag with drawstring/cordlock closure keeps other gear next to the tarp dry. Fits 10' x 12' BWJ camp tarp. Green. **\$20**



**BWJ Cook Kit Bag:** Waterproof pack cloth bag with drawstring/cordlock closure- 12" x 15"- fits 4-6

person sized cook kits. Keep your cook kit organized and campfire soot from soiling the inside of your pack and other gear. Green. **\$17**

## BWJ Compression Sacks:

Savvy wilderness campers wouldn't dream of packing for a trip without our space-saving compression sacks, reducing volume 40%. Unique hood system uses compression pull straps and Fastex buckles to squeeze out all the air. All sizes are waterproof coated Denier nylon. A real BWJ customer favorite.

Small: 8" x 18", 900 cu in. For clothes or lightweight down bags. Blue **\$32.00**

Medium: 9" x 19", 1200 cu in. Fits goose down or summer weight bags. Red **\$38.00**

Large: 10" x 21", 1850 cu in. Fits most 3-season synthetic bags. Green **\$44.00**

Extra Large: 11" x 23", 2150 cu in. Fits most 3-season synthetic bags. Black **50.00**



**BWJ Deluxe Bear Pack System:** Bear research experts and veteran paddlers consider hanging food packs a must, and this system is the best way to do it. Suspend up to 250 lbs of food packs, utilizing pulleys and handles for a 2:1 mechanical advantage. High quality solid braid nylon rope 5/16", single & double pulleys, and wooden handles. **\$75.00**



**BWJ Speed Pack Hanger:** Heavy-duty nylon rope with stainless steel center ring and strong brass snaps, quickly simplifies bear pack hanging and minimizes stress on pack. I leave one on all my packs for instantly lashing packs around a thwart/yoke when the wind picks up. **\$16.95**



**BWJ Utensil Rollup:** Organizes silverware for eight plus cooking utensils. Just tie around a tree near the campfire for

easy access to clean forks/knives/spoons/spatulas etc. Coated nylon pack cloth with reinforcement patches to prevent puncture from sharp utensils. Green. **\$28**



**BWJ Cast Aluminum Fry Pan:** More canoe country walleye fries have been cooked/served/savored with the original BWJ Fry Pan than anything else by far. High-grade cast aluminum absorbs campfire heat evenly for unmatched uniform cooking, just like the old cast iron pans, but with half the weight. At 12" x 12" x 2" deep, you'll fry up serious quantities of fish, potatoes, bacon and more. Great for pancakes too. Sturdy, positive grip metal handle is included (Also available separately-\$15). Pan seasons itself with every use, delivering a lifetime of special wilderness meals/memories. 3 1/2 lbs. **\$75**

**BWJ Fry Pan Cover:** Heavy-duty Cordura nylon cover with flap protects pack and other gear from campfire soot. 13" x 20" fits BWJ Cast Aluminum Fry Pan. Green **\$21**

# BWJ CANOE CAMPING GEAR

**BWJ Ultimate Camp Saw:** Trust me on this one, I have tested just about every camp saw on the market and my search, is over. I rely on the Boreal 21 for all my larger firewood cutting. It rips through 3-6" thick pine and beaverwood like a champ. The 18" blade swings out and locks down with a pivoting action, all in one motion. The unique design has zero loose parts to lose or assemble and the locking mechanism has such tight tolerances, the blade is held super-taut preventing all twisting and binding while sawing. All my Grand Slam Guide Service clients love this saw so much, I rarely get to use it. 17 oz. **\$82.00**



**BWJ Turbo Cut Camp Saw:** This incredible 7" saw with wicked-sharp teeth, is designed to cut on the pull of each stroke. Cleanly cuts through smaller 3 inch thick firewood without grabbing like the larger toothed Boreal 21 saw. I take both on all my GS2 trips- the Boreal 21 for bucking up larger diameter wood and the Turbo for de-limbing branches and chunking up kindling. Always wear leather gloves when sawing with either of these super-sharp saws. Together, canoe country firewood is no longer such an ordeal. Includes storage/carrying sheath. 9 oz. **\$58**



**BWJ/KLOS BOYS TACKLE KIT:** The Klos Lipless Crankbait (LCB) produced phenomenal canoe country lake trout action in 2022-23. The Klos LCB is THE ONE AND ONLY LURE YOU NEED TO PACK/FISH FOR BWCAW/QUETICO LAKE TROUT. Super-easy to fish on standard walleye outfit- just drop to bottom and vertically jig as the canoe drifts with wind across trout holes. A total game changer, like nothing else. Kit includes 3 LCB's in only the best big trout profiles/

weights/colors plus spinner blades/feathers/flash. Custom built/hand-painted in MN by BWCAW trout experts, Tom & Terry Klos. **BWJ EXCLUSIVE. \$75**



**BWJ Camp Axe:** Every savvy canoe camper knows split wood ignites and burns hotter. I always quarter-up those 4" thick pine and beaverwood foot-long lengths with this lightweight but high performance camp axe. The 14" Lexan handle is nearly indestructible and the 2 3/4" x 4 3/4" steel blade is perfect for splitting cooking fire caliber wood. Includes nylon sheath. 1 1/2 lbs. **\$55**

## BWJ CANOEING ACCESSORIES



**BWJ Deluxe Yoke Pads:** After your canoe/paddle/lifejacket, the most important piece of equipment on any wilderness canoe trip is the carrying yoke. Our yoke pads are super-plush and comfortable with 3" thick closed cell foam to cushion shoulders over the longest, roughest portage trails. Replace

your old worn out model with the very best there is. Attaches to straight or curved yoke bars with adjustable aluminum plates to fit any shoulder width. No drilling required. Colors: Green, Brown. **\$130**

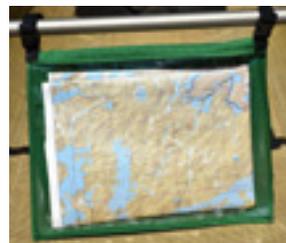


**Bending Branches Expedition Plus Paddle:** My one and only paddle for 200+ trips over the past 30 years, the only one I outfit all my clients with and the only one we sell. We are talking wilderness canoe tripping here, command and control of that canoe with the J-stroke is the single most important wilderness skill to master. The BB Expedition Plus features a long straight shaft with 20" long/8" wide blade and T-grip for trip after trip, rock-solid performance. Made from select basswood, maple and butternut, the Expedition Plus is lightweight, tough and beautiful. Blade and lower-shaft, reinforced with wraparound Rockguard protection. The BB Expedition Plus has gifted me with

priceless wilderness adventure for three decades, never once letting me down. Can your paddle say that? About 28 oz. Sizes: 52, 54, 56, 58, 60. (Most adult men should order a 58 or 60") **\$285.95**



**BWJ Canoe Seat Pad:** One inch-thick cushy seat pad takes the sting out of "canoe butt" on those long paddles across big water. Buckles/cinches tight so pad stays put while paddling/portaging. Fits any bench-style canoe seat- bow or stern. Specs: 10" x 14" x 1" thick. Green. **\$30**



**BWJ Map Case:** The secret to staying found in the labyrinth of canoe country waterways is always keeping that map right in front of you and properly oriented. Fastex buckles clip our 12" x 15" nylon case with heavy vinyl viewing window to a thwart or pack for continuous viewing and secure it from blowing/falling overboard. **\$30**

**BWJ Canoe Seat Pack:** Handy, pack hangs under the canoe seat, keeping essential gear within reach but out of any bilge water. Buckles up snug to seat for portaging. Zippered main compartment with Velcro closure map pocket. 11"W x 19"L x 5"D. 600 cu in capacity. Green. **\$44**



**BWJ Canoe Anchor Bag:** Super-heavy duty nylon mesh bag, won't shred even after repeated grinding of your enclosed anchor rock with lake bottom boulders. Double loops secure anchor rope and prevent rocks from spilling out, a much better solution than tying directly to a rock. 16" x 16" Black **\$19**



**BWJ Fishing Rod Case:** Born from years of frustration with other big name rod cases failing the demands of canoe country fishing, our rod case protects your valuable rods while paddling/portaging. Sturdy nylon covered tube has full interior lining and foam-padded ends. Zippered top has nylon security loop to lash into canoe. One-piece rods are the rage today but they are bad news in the BWCAW/Quetico. The 4" diameter/48" long, BWJ rod case holds up to four-6-7' two-piece rods. **\$60**

# CANOE COUNTRY MAPS



**BWJ Lure Wrap:** Quickly covers nasty treble hooks on extra rigged rods in the canoe or in camp. When moving camp, rods should be transported in the BWJ rod case. For day trips our lure wraps keep rods ready to go without tangling of hooks. Heavy-duty nylon with Velcro closure wraps tightly around rod/line/lure. Green, Black. **\$9**



**BWJ Wrap Straps:** Versatile stretch/Velcro utility straps are perfect for keeping the mated halves of your rods together inside the BWJ Rod Case. Also great for quickly bundling paddles and fishing nets on the portages. Pack of 8: two 12" and six 8" **\$15**



**Fry Pan Bread:** Enjoy hot, delicious bread at your campsite with only 5 minutes of frying. With five different varieties, they can add terrific flavor to any meal. Basic breads come in: Onion, Garlic, Dill, Italian, or Plain. **\$7.25**

**Specialty Dessert Fry Pan Bread:** Delicious fry bread with an extra kick of flavor to satisfy your sweet tooth,

making for a great snack or dessert.

Breads come in: Cinnamon or Caramel. **\$9**

**Fry Pan Bread Blueberry Scones:** With real dried blueberries, these make a great anytime treat. **\$8**

**Fry Pan Biscuits and Gravy:** Baking powder biscuits and homestyle gravy packed with sausage flavor bits make for a great, easy breakfast. **\$7**

**Creamy Fish Chowder:** Fish chowder is a delicious alternative to traditional fillet frying. With all the ingredients in one handy package, it's really easy to whip up a great meal in 15 minutes. **\$7**



**GS2 Logo Hats:** Highest quality structured ball cap featuring the logo of Stu's GS2 guide service. Durable cotton front with cool polyester mesh back and Velcro adjustment. No plastic junk mesh or straps. Blue and Black **\$24.95**



**Boundary Waters Soap:** Handmade from scratch at our Ely homestead by BWJ Publisher, Michele Osthoff. Natural, healthy ingredients, doesn't dry out skin like alcohol-based hand sanitizers. 15 varieties-details on website. 4.5oz **\$ 5/bar**



**Canoe Country Art-"Jackpine" Bob Cary Sketchbook Prints:** Created specifically for the Boundary Waters Journal by a canoe country legend, these prints are sure to add a bit of wilderness to your home, cabin or office. Prints are 11" x 17" and come on heavy semi-gloss paper suitable for framing. Please see our website for thumbnails of all prints. Print subjects include: black bear, lake trout, ruffed

grouse, moose, pine marten, smallmouth, snowshoe hare, walleye, timber wolf, whitetail deer, wood duck, and mountain lion. **Single Print \$8, Four Prints \$25 Set of 12 Prints \$75**

**Mckenzie Maps:** With the largest scale of 2"= 1 mile and more BWCAW lakes with depth contour lines, Mckenzie's are the favorite maps of serious backcountry anglers. Superior detail includes hill shading and pinpointing of smaller islands and bays not shown on smaller scale maps. Mckenzie maps feature 5000 Meter UTM grids for GPS use. Easy to read black text on tan land and blue water, 20' BWCAW contour interval lines and 50' Quetico contours. Super-durable 20" x 30" sheets of waterproof plastic paper that even floats. Specify map number when ordering. **\$9.45 each**

## BWCAW

1. Pine, Greenwood, Mountain
2. East Bearskin, Clearwater, Alder
3. Ball Club, Winchell, Poplar
4. Gunflint, Loon, North
5. Magnetic, Gunflint, Northern Light
6. Saganaga, Sea Gull
- 6A. Saganaga/Saganagons
7. Little Saganaga, Tuscarora, Sea Gull
8. Knife, Kekekabic, Thomas
9. Basswood, Snowbank, Sunday
10. Basswood, Crooked, Sarah
- 10A. Basswood Lake

Depth Contour Map (\$12.45)

11. Jackfish, Beartrap, Thursday
12. Moose River, Stuart
13. Lac La Croix
113. Lac La Croix

Depth Contour Map (\$12.45)

14. Loon, Wilkins, Little Indian Sioux
15. Trout
16. Burntside, Cummings
17. Fall, Pipestone
18. Lake One, Bald Eagle
19. Isabella, Insula
20. Alton, Perent
21. Sawbill, Brule, Pipe

## QUETICO

25. Saganagons, Mack
26. This Man, Cache
27. Agnes, Kahshapiwi
28. Brent, Poobah, Conmee
29. Argo, Minn, William
30. Red Pine, Badwater, Snow
31. Lac La Croix, Wolseley, Namakan R
32. Thompson, David, Namakan R
33. Beaverhouse, Whalen, Factor
34. Quetico, Cirrus, McCauley
35. Sturgeon, Burntside, Jean
36. Keefer, Williams, Camel
37. Kawnipi
38. Powell, Obadinaw R, Wawiag R
41. Tilly, Windigoostigwan
42. McKenzie, Cache, Buckingham
43. Russel, Olifaunt, Maligne R
44. Soho, Kasakokwog, Oriana
45. Pickerel, Batchewaung, Nym
46. Pickerel, Eva, Baptism

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## BWCAW

- F-1 W Vermilion, Trout, Lost
- F-4 One-Four, Bald Eagle, Insula
- F-5 Perent Kawishiwi, Sawbill
- F-6 Brule and Pike
- F-7 S Gunflint Tr, 2 Island, Devil Track
- F-8 Vermilion, Vermilion R, Trout
- F-9 Cummings, Big Moose, Fourtown
- F-10 Basswood, Fall, Moose
- F-11 Snowbank, Knife, Kekekabic
- F-12 Little Sag, Tuscarora, Temperance
- F-13 Gunflint, Bearskin
- F-14 Clearwater, Greenwood, Fowl
- F-15 Crane, Echo, Loon
- F-16 Loon, Lac La Croix, Nina Moose

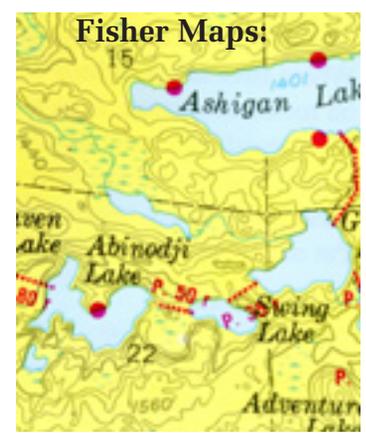
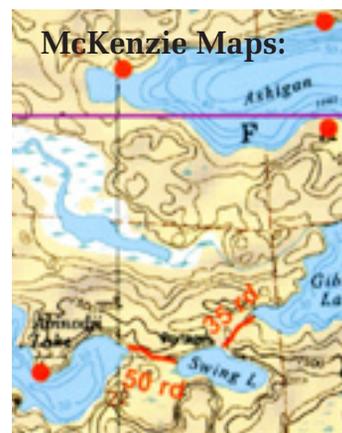
## QUETICO

- F-17 Crooked, Darky, Sarah
- F-18 Kahshapiwi, Agnes, Man Chain
- F-19 Saganaga, Seagull
- F-22 Sandpoint, Namakan
- F-23 Lac La Croix N
- F-24 Sturgeon, Poobah, Maligne
- F-25 Kawnipi, Russell
- F-26 McKenzie, Powell
- F-28 Beaverhouse, Cirrus, Quetico
- F-29 Jean, Batchewaung, W Pickerel
- F-30 E Pickerel, French, Cache

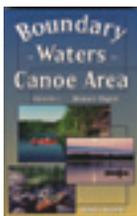
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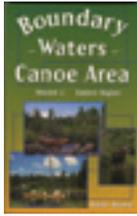
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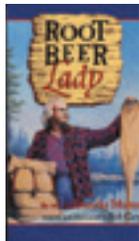
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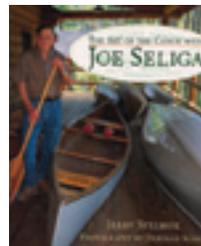
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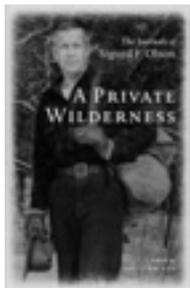
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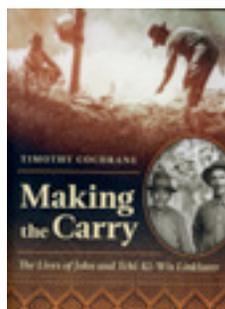
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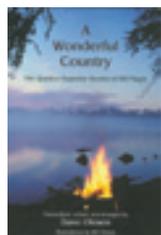
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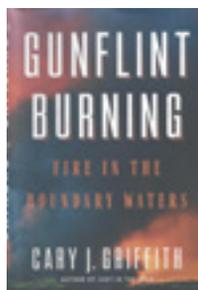
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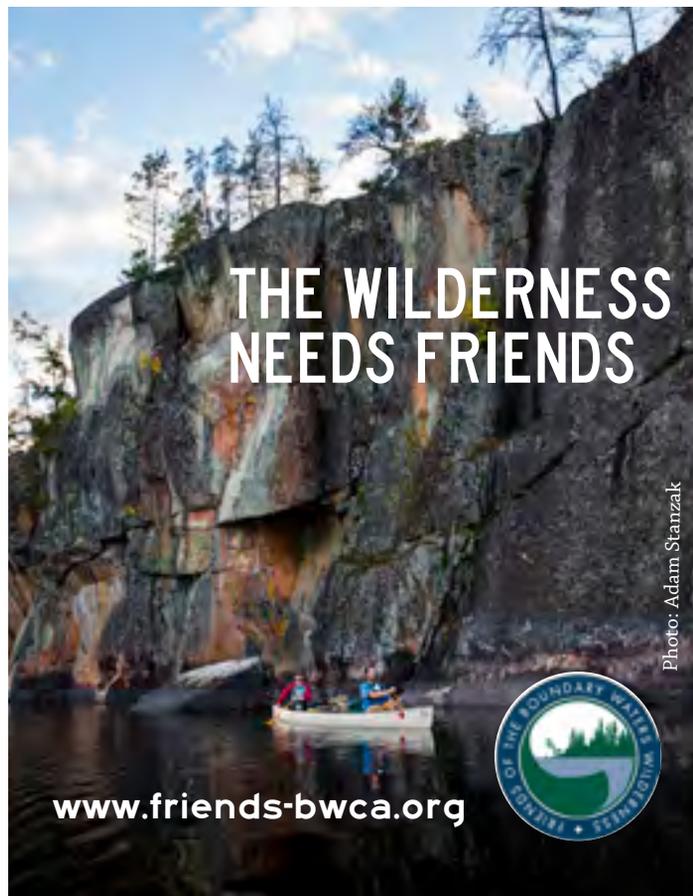


Photo: Adam Stanzak

*Continued from page 83*

church group winter trips—hauling sleds, snowshoeing, and building snow caves for sleeping. This little solo bow hunt labels me one of the “fringe” crazies, but the potential for adventure lures me on.

Complicating this hunt is the timing. Hoping to catch these wilderness bucks during the rut when most vulnerable means pushing the envelope of fall right up against winter. So here I am paddling icy cold lakes in early November. I hope to sneak in and out and beat the imminent freeze-up. This not-so-small concern has me apprehensive.

Normally when going alone, I use my faithful fifteen-foot homemade cedar strip solo canoe. Nicknamed “the Rocket,” it is narrow and fast, but those same attributes make it a bit tippy. Knowing the potential for disaster from dumping in cold water conditions, I opt for my homemade seventeen-foot tandem Chestnut Prospector. This workhorse of the north is heavier, deeper, and wider to haul big loads. Sitting in the bow seat and facing backwards makes a stable, comfortable, and efficient paddling platform, especially with my double-bladed kayak paddle.

The short portage from the parking lot to the stream gets my heart pumping and warms me from the inside out.

I’m able to get both the canoe and personal pack in one haul. Then I return for climbing stand, bow, and hunting pack. On most BWCAW solos, I’m a one-trip portager. But with all the additional hunting paraphernalia and cold weather gear, I settle on double-portaging. It is a gorgeous, crisp fall morning, so I just enjoy the walk. The portage is flat, wide, and easy, and the floor is speckled with bright yellow aspen leaves. It appears that I have this little corner of the wilderness all to myself—just the way I like it.

Paddling quietly through the narrow stream, I soon enter Mudro Lake proper. The absolute stillness of the day makes for mirror-like conditions on the water. The pine and spruce-covered rocky shoreline are a perfectly matched parallel reflection on the water’s surface. The bow of my canoe quietly slices the mirror, and only the dip of my paddle can be heard. To speak would seem sacrilege. Paddling my canoe with its amber, honey, and mahogany colors brings a deep satisfaction. I wonder if the cedar is grateful for returning to the land from which it was born.

One of the many benefits of going solo is the silence. When there is silence from modern technology, one can begin to hear one’s own thoughts more clearly. Issues and concerns bubble-up from within because there’s no cell phone to divert your attention and distract you from what is really important. You are forced to face yourself

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Photo by Brian Knutson

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and deal with what is going on internally. And then, if you are a person of faith, our Creator has time and space to speak into your soul.

Normally with my cedar strip canoes, I'm a wet-foot portager, meaning I jump out at portage landings to spare the wooden boat from Canadian Shield blows. I just wear good wool socks and high-top, uninsulated leather boots like Irish Setters. But with water and air temps near freezing, this will not be an option. I struggle between my insulated hiking boots or just wearing my 2000-gram insulated rubber tree stand hunting boots. The rubber hunting boots offer very little ankle support, so I choose the hikers. Now I must be much warier on portage approaches and take-offs. It becomes a tricky balancing act of rock hopping and canoe lifting on slippery surfaces.

The thirty, 140, and ten-rod portages go off without a hitch, but the steep rocky ramp that descends into Fourtown proves a bit dicey. Moisture and steep rocks make for iffy portaging. It feels good to have those slippery treks behind me. Nothing but glassy paddling from now on. I wonder where the nearest human is? The nearest wolf pack? The nearest moose? The needle in a haystack?

Soon a large beaver silently glides out in front of me. With only his head and back exposed, the V shape of his wake forms a perfect arrow pointing me in the proper direction towards Fourtown Lake. Grateful for the companionship, I give thanks for the personal escort. After a long swim, he slaps his tail, exploding the water's surface, shattering the stillness of the morning, and bids me adieu. I am alone now, truly alone. And this vast expanse of spruce, rock, and water threatens to swallow me whole.

Choosing a camp on the eastern shore of Fourtown, I set up

my hammock with a large tarp for protection from the wind. The nearby fireplace will make things cozy and provide both heat and light for supper and reading during the long and dark nights. Looking around, I feel a deep sense of satisfaction and contentment with my new temporary home. Like a kid building a fort in the woods, I take great delight in creating a comfy space to live for the next five days.

I spend the next couple of days roaming the deep woods and open hillsides behind camp. The vastness of the forest is a bit overwhelming compared to the small woodlots I bow hunt along the Red River near my Fargo home. Finding a good buck in this massive tangle of spruce, swamp, and rocky terrain seems impossible. This is well beyond the proverbial needle in a haystack.

What becomes fascinating for me is just simply exploring the topography on foot. Gently undulating rocky ridgelines, spruce bogs, poplar stands, and pine forests all meld quietly together in this Northwoods tapestry of Canadian Shield terrain. Most who travel the BWCAW only scratch the surface by sticking to the water, rarely straying fifty yards into the woods at camp. But there is a whole new and fascinating world behind the scenes of the center-stage lakes. This is where the harsh reality of life plays out. Life and death, birth and survival, feast and famine. I feel like I am learning about this landscape for the first time. The intimacy and connectivity to the land increase with each aimless hour.

Behind my campsite is an expansive and semi-open scrub-oak hillside. I'm hoping the deer will be keying on leftover acorns. In my first forays, I wander to get a lay of the land, hoping to find a cluster of buck scrapes or a rub line to sit over with my climbing stand.



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I eventually bump some deer, find some encouraging buck sign, and even find a beautiful antler shed from a monster buck just a stone's throw from camp. It's a thick main beam with five strong tines. Man, would I love to get a crack at this bruiser! A bit of mossy green hints that it was dropped maybe two years ago, definitive proof that these secretive ghosts of the forest are actually out here in the haystack. But they are capitalizing on their home court advantage. I am a foreign invader, and they know it.

On an open ridgeline a half mile from camp, I eventually find a grouping of large, well-used scrapes underneath an oak tree cluster. Conveniently located nearby is a one-foot-diameter aspen tree, perfect for my climbing stand. I trim a few branches and settle in for a long sit in my stand. I wish for a potential surprise visit from a moose or wolf, or possibly

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a wandering black bear caught up in the hyperphagia eating frenzy of pre-hibernation. This is a major appeal of any Boundary Waters hunt, the potential for encountering one of these other apex creatures of the hinterland. Just to be present where these wild creatures roam is stimulating and fascinating. To see one would put me over the top.

The afternoon sit is clear and warm, but a bust as far as animals go. The hike back to camp in the growing dark makes me anxious about finding my way. Hunting deep in this massive wilderness can be unnerving. My compass and GPS are comforting and dear friends in the vast wilderness night.

With full darkness settled in by 5:30 p.m., the nights are long. Soon I have a roaring fire that warms me both physically and psychologically, providing a crackling conversation to keep me company. Within minutes, my Pocket Rocket stove is hissing blue flames below a delicious double-dose of Dinty Moore Beef Stew. Good warmth and light reflect off my canoe and tarp. Life is good. All is well as I stoke up the fire after supper, sip a little Yukon Jack, and enjoy a medieval novel of swords, knights, and bloody battles. It feels good to be alone in the silence and solitude of the great north.

Before turning in, I step outside my campsite and look skyward to enjoy a magically clear night and a sky filled with the Milky Way. My trip has already returned dividends well worth the price of admission.

I climb into my cozy cocoon down sleeping bag slung from the hammock and fade off into the bliss of fatigue that only outdoor adventures can provide.

Mornings are a whole other ball game on a wilderness hunt! It is no fun whatsoever to leave the comfort and warmth of a cozy sleeping bag to awake in the darkness, put on cold clothes and cold boots, and prepare for the day. The one blessing is the warmth of the coffee and the taste of a good breakfast—or maybe let's just say breakfast. And a cold one at that.

Leaving my campsite in the predawn, I stumble my way under headlamp back towards my tree stand. This does not prove to be a graceful journey. I am sure I alerted every living creature in a two-mile radius, walking with the subtlety of a bull moose in a china shop. So much for quiet, stealthy hunting. I eventually arrive at my stand as the day breaks, climbing into my lofty perch ready for another long sit. I try rattling antlers and lots of calling and grunting. My only visitors are a few loud crows and a couple of Canadian Jays looking for a handout. Mid-morning, I decide to warm up by hiking and exploring new terrain.

The walk warms me from the inside out, and

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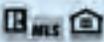
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I peel off layers. I wander and poke and prod and simply cherish the freedom of movement and exploration. This incredible wilderness offers so much more than meets the eye from the seat of a canoe. These walks of discovery humble me. I arrogantly believed I had a master's degree in the Boundary Waters, but now feel transported back to kindergarten. Each of these little forays deeper into the bush teach me about the landscape and how all parts of the wilderness interconnect. There is so much more to this sacred wilderness than lakes, portages, and campsites.

My afternoon hunt proves noteworthy. Before sunset, I hear the proverbial sticks breaking behind and to my right. Sure enough, from the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of a mid-sized buck working his way in to scent-check the scrapes. He is obscured by several small spruce that give me a limited view. I peg him as a 3½-year ten-pointer. He's no monster, but I'll take him if he provides an opportunity. He dillies and dallies for a minute, eyeballing the scrape, moving his head left and right, up and down to catch the wind. When he looks away, I slowly inch my body around and quietly place three fingers under the arrow on the string of my longbow. I'm locked and loaded. The buck, perhaps from some sixth sense instilled through the eons, pivots, evaporating back into the jack pines. I breathe again, my heart racing, giving thanks for the close encounter. At least I found some action.

Day three turns cold and blustery. Strong winds from the northeast bring chilly, intermittent snow showers that spit and swirl all day long. From the perch of my tree stand, the landscape takes on a mysterious, ethereal quality as snow gusts dance across pines, caus-

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ing the naked birch to wave to the whim and whirl of the wind.

And with the darkened slate-gray of the sky and the ghostly wind and snow, so too goes my mood. As the day progresses, I become more agitated listening to my anxious imaginations. What if I get snowed in? What if the ice freezes overnight? What if I tip over trying to break through the ice? What if I can't make it out? What if? I am always amazed by the effect weather has on my mood.

After a restless night of little sleep, I rise early, having already made the decision to end my hunt early and escape. I hastily pack, paddle, and portage my way out under dark, gray, oppressive skies. To my later surprise, as the morning wears on, the sun comes out, temps rise into the fifties and stay there the rest of the

week. Driving home, I chastise myself for giving in to what ifs. I contemplate the many blessings and potential bucks I may have now missed out on. Once again, I realize a great truth: The many things we fear so rarely come to pass.

I entered the Boundary Waters with hopes of capturing that classic photo: paddling out with a big buck draped over the gunwale. As per many of my wilderness hunts, I returned home with no tangible rewards. As consolation, I have earned a better understanding of the wilderness beyond the water. I feel gifted by several days of solitude and serenity, gifts I can share amongst family, friends, and coworkers. I remember all of this and conclude I have whittled that haystack down a fair bit. That dream buck has to be in there somewhere. 📷

# canoe country challenges



by Mike Farmer

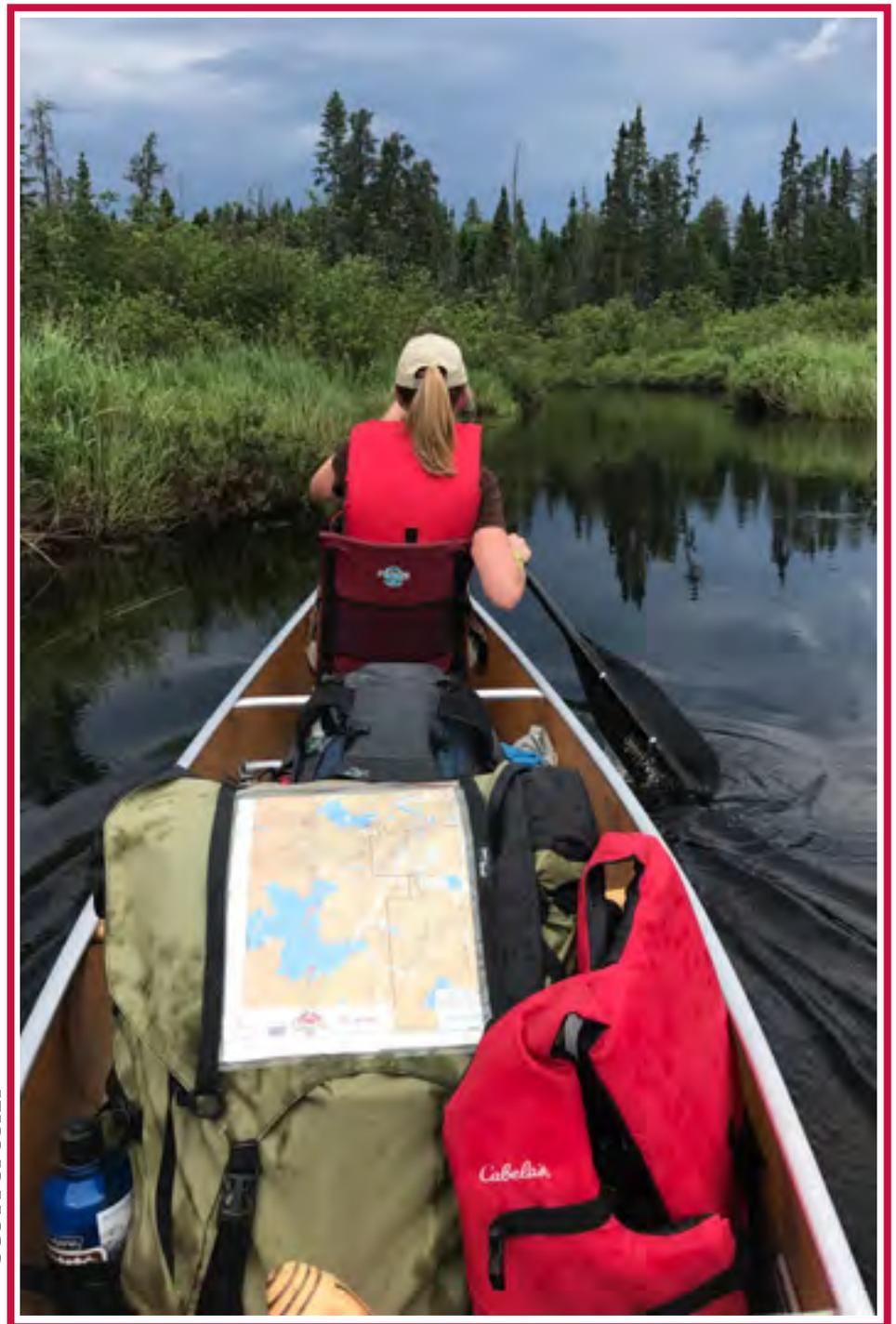
## Iron Will

It seemed simple enough. All my friend Kevin and I had to do was head north on the Nina Moose River, cross a couple of lakes, then manage a long portage into Iron Lake. There we would rendezvous with four other friends who would have the campsite all set up and a hot meal waiting.

We met up the day before our adventure was to start at the local motel with our friends, Jack Willey, Jim George, Frank Willey, and Scott Kass, to finalize our gear and review the maps. They had elected to fly in and do a short portage to the campsite on Iron. Since they were staying a full week, their gear load was ample, and I quickly understood why they wanted to take a more direct route. Kevin and I planned just three nights out, so we were traveling light and knew we could do all portages in one trip.

The butterflies in my stomach began as Kevin and I drove up to Ely from Minneapolis. Neither of us were strangers to the Boundary Waters. We had both been on multiple trips with our friend Jack, and we always had good adventures and the stories afterwards. The problem was that Kevin and I had always been “passengers.” We had enthusiastically let Jack be responsible for navigation and all the decision making in the wilderness. Admittedly, Kevin and I usually wanted only to get a great workout paddling and portaging while leaving the details to Jack. Now, we were faced with finding our own way and being responsible for one another’s wellbeing.

As we reviewed the maps that evening, my trepidation was somewhat abated. The route looked easy. It appeared that if you essentially kept hugging the easterly shorelines, you couldn’t



SCOTT SPOSKA

*Keeping that map right in front of you at all times is the best way to stay found out there. But sometimes, even that is not enough. (Hog Creek)*

screw up. Additionally, our pals had recently paddled this same route and were able to give us compass bearings for a majority of the portages. According to their estimates, we should arrive around two p.m. with a 7:30 a.m. start. I slept well that night, feeling confident that we would manage.

The next morning began with a big breakfast and the well wishes of our fellow adventurers. We kidded them that the hot meal we were expecting better be ready upon our arrival. Then we were off to entry point sixteen and the Nina Moose.

Full of nervous energy, we began our journey with the current pushing us north. As we passed other paddlers who were ending their trips, we began to relax and get into the rhythm that only comes as you leave civilization behind.

Reaching Nina Moose Lake, I shot the twenty-four-degree bearing, picked a landmark, and away we went, our confidence growing with each stroke. Twenty minutes later, there was the entry into the Upper Nina Moose, just like our friends had told us and the map plainly showed. Now we were cooking, we thought. We were right on schedule. There was really nothing to this!

Switching off at each portage between canoe and packs, we kidded each other about who was going to take the canoe over the final portage of the day, a 320-rod monster that would dump us into Iron Lake. Of course, my calculations were telling me that it would be my turn at that point, and I began trying to figure out how I could trick Kevin into thinking it was his turn!

As we approached Lake Agnes, we got caught up on what was going on in our lives. This for me is one of the best parts of these adventures. If you are already friends, as Kevin and I are, this is the chance to talk about everything and anything. You get to communicate without



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interruption, share confidences, concerns, and as corny as it sounds, hopes and dreams.

The great Agnes was upon us! I shot the bearing as we sat at the opening of the river. Seeing the point of an island in the distance, we headed out into the big lake as the wind began to whip the water into a small chop. I put the compass away and concentrated on keeping us on course to the island point. It was plain on the map that if we just hugged the right shoreline after that point, the next portage should be right where it was supposed to be. The wind started to really blow, and the chop got worse. Paddling hard, we reached the point of the island and began to bear right. Slowly, the shoreline started to look different than what I'd envisioned looking at the map. Instead of looking at my compass, I trusted the look of the map, and our prior "stay to the right" thought process. Needless to say, we were now screwed up. We stopped to reassess and determined that we should still stay "right" and everything would be fine.

Twenty minutes went by with no sign of the portage. This crossing was estimated to only take us thirty to forty minutes. We had now been on Agnes for ninety. The wind picked up, and it began to rain. The lake had a serious chop, and I was concerned. I had to aggressively paddle and steer us to

avoid getting sideways in waves. I felt us beginning to tip on more than one occasion. Battling the wind and waves in the rain and wondering how we could have got lost so quickly began to bathe me in a nervous sweat. I felt responsible for Kevin's safety. I had been to the Boundary Waters more than he had. I had taken on the role of navigator, and that meant I should be able to solve this, and I was struggling to keep the panic and fear out of my voice. After a particularly violent wave, I told Kevin to head for the campsite ahead so we could take a break and figure this out.

We had made a complete circle on Agnes! Standing at the campsite in the pouring rain, I fished out my compass to see if it would start speaking to me. Directionally, it defied logic, as it was telling us to head absolutely opposite of the way we both felt we should go. We agreed to give it a try and if unable to find our way out, we would camp for the night and try again the next day. Neither of us wanted to admit defeat.

The compass didn't lie. The portage was right where the bearing said it would be. A valuable lesson had been learned. Fortunately, the only payment for this lesson was two hours on Agnes instead of thirty minutes. Our spirits immediately soared, and we began to chuckle that we would not tell anyone about this part of our trip!

Onto the Boulder River we went. Paddling hard to try and

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recover some of the time lost, we took another wrong turn smack into a beaver dammed tributary. It didn't look like it opened after the dam, so we turned around and quickly understood our error as we followed the sweep of the river towards Boulder Bay.

Rounding a point on Boulder Bay, we turned northeasterly with what looked like a straight shot to the next portage. Even after the Agnes experience, I neglected to shoot a bearing from the point. We just plowed ahead and headed to where we thought it should be based on the look of the map. Thirty minutes later, we were still looking.

Frustration again began to mount. Here we go again. Where is the damn portage? Over our shoulder we spotted an occupied campsite. Fifteen minutes later, we pulled up next to a family with two beautiful little girls who looked like they were having the time of their lives. An older gentleman came out as we asked where the heck the portage was to Lac La Croix. He informed us that it was directly back from

where we had come, but that the water levels were so high, it was next to impossible to see! Great! Back we went, slowly paddling the shoreline. Nothing. Were we blind?

Then Kevin shouted, "I think I see it, right over there!" "Where?" I said, "I don't see a darned thing."

Sure enough, there was a path completely underwater. We paddled all but maybe twenty feet of this seventy-five-rod portage, and finally, another leg behind us, we were one long portage away from Iron and our friends.

We were now long overdue to our rendezvous. I knew Jack, Jim, Frank, and Scott would be worried. I imagined them sitting on Agnes at the portage we were supposed to come out of waiting to guide us the rest of the way. We were at least three hours past when we should have been pulling up to the campsite on Iron.

Thankfully, we had no trouble locating the entry into the long portage to Iron. We knew from Jack and Jim that there was a huge beaver dam that inter-

rupted this portage about a third of the way through. Jim had given us a 120-degree bearing to shoot that should direct us to the entry of the continuation of this monster portage. We were really whipped at this point. Neither of us had eaten since breakfast. Nerves had completely sapped my appetite. That we hadn't hydrated ourselves properly also played a big part in the way we felt too. We were definitely running on fumes. In addition, the famed Northwoods mosquitoes began to introduce themselves.

Jim's bearing was dead on. The final leg! As we approached the entry, there hung a red bandana on a tree. Could that be a message from our friends? Sure enough, along with the red bandana, I saw a piece of birch bark neatly folded and stuck in a crack of the tree. Unfolding the bark, I read a cryptic note scratched into the soft bark... turn left after portage—J. Yes! I grabbed the bandana, and away we went. This was an energy boost no sports drink or candy bar could ever deliver. We were going to win! Our perseverance would pay off. I began to get hungry—a very good sign.

The mosquitoes feasted on us as we maneuvered over the trail. We were almost running trying to escape them. We had neglected to bring repellent. Ravaged and bloodied, we spilled onto Iron at last.

What a great feeling! Rounding the point of the small bay, we saw an inhabited campsite dead ahead. Was that the boys? We paddled on, and as we got closer, we saw a couple of figures moving about. Raising our paddles and yelling "helloooooo!" got their attention, and the welcome party began. It was ten hours from when we started, five hours later than when we thought we should be there. Bug bitten, de-hydrated, and famished, we pulled up to the campsite. One hour later, we're eating that promised hot meal and telling our tale.

Lessons learned: Trust your compass, and trust your friends. Don't give up, and don't forget the bug juice! 🐛



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- Crooked Lake
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“If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.”

Loren Eiseley