

Into The BWCA by James Michael from his book, "From A Rustic Cabin"

On Saturday, August 1st, my wife Gerri and I (G & J) met our German friends Gaby and Werner (G & W) at Rockwood Lodge on the Gunflint trail for a four day canoeing excursion in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Besides having beautiful cabins overlooking Poplar Lake, the owners, Mike and Lynn Sherfy are experienced outfitters for BWCA outings. They even have a bunkhouse to give people a staging area before their entry and after their exit from the wilderness. August is crazy- busy around Rockwood, but there was an added dimension of madness for them today, due to at least one broken down toilet needing a "wax ring" and the main truck (used for shuttling people and canoes) overheating and presumably needing a new water pump. Mike threw up his hands after describing his predicament. "What can ya do?", followed by other commentary peppered with the jovial, but acerbic wit that I've come to expect over the years. It's been especially poignant when a boat motor won't start or the main lodge's foundation is sinking into the lake. I asked Mike if he needed my credit card number or a damage deposit in case we die out there. He said resolutely, "if you die, you don't pay" and I thought, "now *that's* Minnesota Nice".

Gerri and I had all our personal gear in two mesh bags plus a fanny pack each. These comingled with G & W's personal gear and the five Duluth packs (each weighing perhaps 60 pounds) containing the two tent systems, sleeping bags, cooking gear and enough dinner food and sweets for a family of eight. No one would starve while waiting for *search and rescue*...

We loaded it all into Mike's remaining pickup truck to which were strapped the two Wenonah II Kevlar canoes, our vessels of passage through our 16 lake route that was separated by "portages". These are rustic (at best) paths where you carry your canoe overhead on a yoke, making your way to the next lake. The canoes are classified as "Ultralight" and made of Kevlar fabric, the same material used in bullet proof vests. Even at 18', 6" long, they only weigh 42 pounds, whereas a comparable 17' aluminum canoe is about 70 pounds. Werner and Gaby had planned this trip from Germany back in January, when permits were first made available through the US Forest Service's website. Our route would be a slight variation from the map shown on Tuskarora Lodge's website as **Route # 2: entry point at Cross Bay River (near Tuskarora Lodge on Cook County Road 47), a no-name lake, Ham Lake, Cross Bay Lake, Rib Lake, Lower George Lake, Karl Lake, Long Island Lake, Muskeg Lake, Kiskadonna Lake, Omega Lake, Winchell Lake, Gaskin Lake, Caribou Lake, Lizz Lake and back to Rockwood Lodge on Poplar Lake.**

There wasn't enough room in the pickup truck for four passengers, so Lynn relinquished the keys to her personal car to Werner and hugged us all goodbye in her own sweet way. They would pick up her car when they found time, later. Within thirty minutes we had zoomed down the Gunflint trail and were fully loaded into the two canoes at Cross Bay entry point. Werner was checking his latest gimmick-- a TomTom GPS watch that could track the trip plus his heart rate. Once home, he would upload it into

Google Earth. During our trip, he would be plugging it into a solar charger after we set up camp each evening.

The weather gurus has predicted and delivered a westerly wind. This tailwind would lend a big hand, pushing us and our load eastward for the next three days. Hallelujah! However, the weatherman's long range prediction, "mostly sunny" had been slowly been reeled in as departure day drew closer. There was now a probability of rain, but we would take what we got!

Once in the water, G & W took the lead in their canoe, which gave me more time to watch a perfect line of pines segue into a boreal swamp. The reflection of a blue sky melded into a water pathway bordered with countless (yellow) Bullhead and (white) Water Lilies. The show had begun. At Rockwood Lodge, Gerri had selected a short bent paddle, designed to give a better power stroke, and I, a long, straight one, the natural rudder, so by default, I ended up in back, steering our canoe the entire trip.

The air was pure and lightly scented with the sweet musk of the north woods. We did a couple short portages in and out of a small lake which gave all parties a chance to see how organized I wasn't. I found myself to be the slow mule in the train, moving maps and personal junk into the nearest Duluth pack, zipping it shut, then open, then shut. Zuuuup- Zuuuup--Zuuuup. The other canoe had already been unloaded and my three partners were silently regarding me. "Well, they can't kill me", I thought: "or... perhaps will they try by dead of night?"

Instead of loading the canoe from the side while the vessel was floating, (which I will take the liberty of calling the "classic" way) , G & W had speeded the process considerably by have the person closest to shore step out onto a rock or possibly dry land, pull the end of the canoe up on land and brace the front end between their legs while the other canoe-mate monkey-crawled over the Duluth packs to the shore end of the canoe. Then came the precision operation of unloading. The glaciers had left plenty of rocks to stand on while hoisting the packs to unload the canoe, but the agility to turn 90 to 180 degrees with a full pack while balancing on stones is an art form that has no equivalent in the world of sport. On some portages, there was just sand without boulders. In those places, I found that we could land parallel to the shore. I could just step out onto terra firma like the king of Denmark. The canoe would be unloaded in less than a minute. In fact, we never took off our hiking boots at a portage during our entire trip.

It being August, there were groups of people coming from the other direction. Whichever group got to the portage first would load or unload their canoes while the other group watched and waited for their turn. When we loaded ours first, some folks would nonchalantly observe that we were maintaining dry feet: then when it was their turn, they would drop their canoe in and load from the side in knee deep water in the classic manner. However, I caught saw some other middle-aged people casting furtive glances our way, weighing the merits of our method. In the next lake, we passed another 60-something guy solo-paddling an Alumacraft canoe that looked to be 17 feet and more than 70 pounds. We passed port to port. Not sacrificing his headway, he gave voice to what had been churning around his head as he passed by, "I can see there's some other people in my age bracket out here" His voice rose after he passed our stern. "Why don't more of us come out to do this?---it isn't that hard!". This

followed by a defiant staccato, “Ha –ha”. I just hope he didn’t have a massive coronary before reaching the parking lot five lakes or so further.... Then I began to think about it a bit. Some part of me was rebelling against being so easily cast into that great holding room of pre-geriatrics. I’ve always figured if I avoided mirrors and recent photos, I could blithely maintain my mental image of myself at 25 years and hold it there--they can’t stop me, can they? Life is funny through: as in the game of golf, there are handicaps you trade for your experience or perhaps your pugnacious longevity. As the years pass, life piles them on until you can’t swing the club any more. Still, I choose to live in denial every time! While I paddled, I counted my handicaps: acid reflux, whiplash, bad left knee, flat left foot and a touch of basal cell carcinoma, most of them souvenirs from some souvenir of youthful indiscretion shortly following some moment of great exuberance. I found each of these handicaps has at least one antidote, such as sleeping on an inflated pillow or simply working out at the gym. Gerri, conversely, has never broken a bone in her body. , She had been carefully building her endurance at the gym in anticipation of the trip. I noticed that she had been only uses 39.5 pounds counterweight when doing pull-ups and did at least two full sets, which I found quite impressive. Maybe she thought her regimen was wise based on her previous BWCA experiences: she had been on several canoe trips, many years back with a gang of friends who called themselves the “traveling band”. Even though she is short, she is strong and always relegated to the portaging crew. Those, were the days before lightweight Kevlar canoes and aluminum canoes were the main option. I was always amazed that she went along on these outings, mostly because she’s from Chicago, where “camping” means staying at The Ramada Inn. One extreme example: during our dating years, I met up with her just after she returned from a BWCA trip with the “traveling band”. She had told me over the phone that the zipper on the tent had failed and mentioned that she didn’t get much sleep due the mosquito’s feasting on her. This didn’t prepare me for what I saw when we met up: her face was puffed up and her eyes were almost completely swollen shut from the bites. I remembering her saying, “it’s no big deal” That’s my gal!!

After a wonderful first day, covering eight lakes and a thwarted search for a campsite with a breezy point of rock to enjoy the evening on, we settled for a site on the westernmost bay of Long Island Lake. It was tree-encumbered and had the pit toilet was a good distance down an enticing showcase trail of boreal forest. However, it was guarded and zealously so by attack squadrons of seasonally diminished, yet mission-minded mosquitos. To approach the throne, I decided I must be cross-dressed in my royal finery from the toes up. My head would be covered with a black mosquito “fascinator” net placed over my courtly, brimmed New Zealand “squishy hat” designed to keep their advances at bay. My kaki robes would be delicately perfumed with the musky scent of deet while I process. The problem, of course in this situation, is that one is eventually obliged to make themselves vulnerable. This is our small contribution back to the ecosystem.

Gerri and Gaby had found an interesting plant growing on the path, which Gerri looked up in a reference book after we exited the BWCA. It was an Indian Pipe, which is ghostly white. It has no chlorophyll and lives off decaying matter. It was also used by native Indians for treatment of eye conditions and as a sedative. I marveled at how delicate it was, but yet could live and perpetuate itself naturally.

After setting up our two tents, and taking a short swim, we decided to eat the brand-name camp dinner and save Sarah’s awesome Trail Center camp food for the 2nd night. Werner and Gaby took care of the

food prep in short order: Gerri and I were on clean-up crew. The fire ring part of the campsite was very scenic even though we choose to forgo the campfire ritual. Werner produced a 1.5 liter bottle of port wine. We all enjoyed the rich flavor and inner warmth it brought, while we began the antics of hanging our food pack between two trees. Werner and I were eager for the Underhanded (sic ☺) Rope Toss Competition that followed. The idea is to toss a small weighted object tied to a coil of narrow nylon rope over the highest available tree limb and whipping the line till the other end slides down to within your grasp. Werner won fair and square. Overhead, the sky was filling with clouds, so we all bade each other a good night's rest and crawled into our separate tents. During the night there was a wind driven rain.

When we woke up, well before 8 a.m. on day number two, it was cloudy but dry. I'm not very sociable at this hour of the morning. Right outside our tent walls I could hear G & W shaking the rain off of their tent and packing it into its stuff sack. Gerri and I had brought all our personal effects that didn't have a food scent into the ample four man tent the previous evening. I looked around sleepily: Gerri had already packed up her sleeping bag and gear to leave me alone trying to get organized. Once more, I was behind the eight ball and was hurriedly packing up stuff up-- Zuuup Zuuuup Zuuup. I was determined to not draw too much attention to my morning incompetence and made an appearance at the camp ring area holding up a weak smile as best I could. I could see that everyone else looked a bit groggy as well, but after coffee kicked in, they were getting chatty---nothin' I could do about it. Gerri was already making our lunch: summer sausage wraps. I tried to stay out of the path of people-with-purpose, while eating my granola and powdered milk (made with water Gerri and I had filtered the previous evening). I must say- the rest of the gang were very patient with my muddling.

We were paddling by 8:15 a.m., swinging southwest down the considerable length of Long Island Lake into the some of the most spectacular wilderness I have ever seen. I even forgot to be ornery! The sun ate through the lower levels of the clouds leaving only the most pure morning cumulous clouds to saunter across a deep blue sky. The gods gave us another day of ten mph following winds that picked up and caressed the water into a small, even chop. The collective waves stirred to energy, at once embodying the black depth beneath them and the royal blue above them. My spirit rejoiced at the endless wilderness at each horizon and of course. I saw giant, round granite boulders, larger than cars, plopped right in the middle of our current lake. Some of them were, no doubt, stripped from their old resting places as far north as Hudson Bay and dropped here perhaps ten thousand years ago by glaciers that were thousands of feet thick. It is easy to spot these "erratics" because are different than most of the rocks and outcrops that surround them. There have been eight glacier movements just in the last 200,000 years, all chipping away at the several flows of volcanic bedrock below, laid down over a billion years ago. Successive glacial eras erase the evidence of the previous ones, so we may never know the whole story: I kind of like it that way. The last glacier movement named the Wisconsin, scoured out the lake beds here in the direction they came from: Northeast towards the Southwest. In this Cenozoic water park, it takes only a small leap of imagination to take yourself back in time: the same landscape the first nomadic Indians tracked the Wooley

Mammoth across the border of ice eons ago, the same land that evolved into a culmination forest , the same ancient trails opened up by the Ojibwe and used by the French Voyageurs.

Gerri and I didn't need to talk a lot, but together we were locked into a nice pace, connected silently with each other through our effort. She set the tempo for the strokes which we did in unison keeping the canoe tracking straight. At the end of each stroke she would pause as second, which would give me a chance to synchronize my stroke, but also momentarily relax my grip on the paddle to my hand wouldn't cramp. Occasionally, I had to correct with a "C" stroke or just finish my stroke with a little "rudder" because the wind seemed to be pushing of the canoe a bit more from the starboard.

My mind took me back to one icy evening last winter when I was logged onto Google earth. I was antsy and half crazy for summer, so I poured a glass of red wine and fantasied on the upcoming canoe trip. After looking at our route, I started rolling the mouse straight north from our approximate location at 90 degrees, 35' or so West and moved the satellite images of the screen in a straight line north, skirting Hudson Bay, going straight north all the way to the pole where all longitudinal lines converge. No signs of civilization-- only vast stretches of earth where, except maybe some harvested timber and minerals, nature rules.

Today, on the eight or so serpentine miles of Long Island Lake I breathed in the pure air and look with awe the endless miles of trees and water that pristine: the waters still teeming with fish. The forest, is home to boreal creatures such as lynx, bobcats, moose, wolves, flying squirrels and ermine, specialized plants and 150 species of birds.

I asked Gerri for a quick mid-lake break for a handful of almonds and some water.

"You havin' fun up there"?

"Oh Yeahhh", she replies with a slight nod of her head- "but I'm not looking forward to that 185 rod portage from Muskeg into Kiskadinna"

"Me ta-neither"

We mutually agreed to insist on lunch, before taking on that intimidating operation and spent a little more effort to catch up to G & W who had made more headway down Long Island Lake. I looked down to the McKenzie Map through the gallon freezer bag that protected it from water on the floor of the canoe. Why was the name "Long Island Lake" beckoning a memory for me? I've never been here. Then the fog of my memory cleared to a conversation with Sally and Greg, friends of friends who had agreed to an interview with me about their harrowing couple of days trapped in this area by what is known as the Famine Lake Wildfire in August of 2006. They were boxed in by fire. By grace and the wisdom that comes from years of wilderness experience, they made their way out. It must have been quite frightening, I thought looking at the seemingly endless wilderness. That's one of the trade-offs you make when you get into the wild.

Soon we had crossed Muskeg Lake, then onto the portage into Kiskadinna Lake, the longest of the trip-- 190 rods-- where we would ascend the steep climb over the Laurentian Divide, the meandering height of

land that stretches from Labrador across most of North America to the Rocky Mountains. All water falling north of the divide drains into Hudson Bay and eventually to the Arctic Ocean. All water draining to the south of it would drain eventually into the Atlantic Ocean. At this height-of-land, the elevation difference between Muskeg and Kiskadanna Lakes is really only about 150' difference in elevation, a pittance compared to the 8000 foot elevation at Triple Peak Divide in Glacier National Park, Montana, the Western end of the Laurentian Divide. But we Minnesotans can vigorously defend our bragging rights against these young, upthrust -of a-whippersnapper mountains which are only 170 million years old: The ground we are standing on is part of the Canadian Shield which includes the northern part of Minnesota, the original continent of the US (2.5 to 4 *billion* years old). The basalt flow is called The Duluth Complex which starts at Duluth and goes the 90 or so miles to the Canadian Border. This the first part of the North American continent to rise above sea level, formed by lava flows. All the continental crust to our east and west has been stitched one to through plate tectonics. At one point in earth's history, this area was part of an ancient mountain range over 39,000 feet high, all worn down by the eons—well ---- just like me. As I chewed on my summer sausage wrap, I contemplated the wonder of this ancient, worn down bedrock. Only a few percent of earth has exposed rock and this rock is some of the oldest on the planet. It exudes a “prehistoric” look: yellow and orange lichen covered outcrops of fantastic shapes look upon the life forms that thrive somehow on its unyielding body.

A mature cedar tree near me is standing on top of a relatively small rock that had had been separated from its nearby basaltic outcrop parent. A web of exposed roots, long wooden fingers grasp the rock for dear life and extend three or four feet across bare rock in each direction before reaching nutrients. On the part of the rock facing the portage trail the root has taken on a flat, triangular shape looking more like a family crest than a root. I'm happy to see that passing people have resisted the temptation to carve it thus far. On this portage, there are many such trees adaptations. Perhaps when the moon is full and no one is looking, they dance with each other on the soft carpet of light green moss that surrounds them.

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It turned out that Gaby and Werner were planning lunch before this portage and it gave us some respite for some laughs. Everybody was in high spirits when we shouldered the canoes and the cartoonishly large Duluth packs moving up the long portage--- a line of north country Sherpas. Gerri and I planned to switch portaging the canoe every 10 minutes. The portage had a steep start, so thinking myself valiant in a limited sort of way, took the canoe first. Most portages are maintained with minimal maintenance. On this one, there were lots of places where the next foothold might be a slippery rock 18" above your last step. All the weight of your body, fanny pack plus the canoe would be lifted on one leg (in a very unnatural stance) so it takes considerably more leg strength to get up to your next step. You need to make a smooth, even lift, not a lunge or the inertia of the canoe above you could cause you to lose your balance. You could trip with the load falling on top of you resulting in a sprained ankle or worse. You want to remember to be leaning forward in case your following leg doesn't make it up. If I were to have a bad dream.... it would be about falling backwards and over the scenic ridge I had been slowly ascending. Search and Rescue wouldn't be retrieving my body in a medivac helicopter: it would require

a grunting gurney crew following the lines of least resistance to bring me back to civilization. These are the kinds of things a 60-something like me contemplates as I make my measured steps. As if only to humor me, coming downhill in the opposite direction came a young and ragtag family, oblivious to the mortal dangers around them. Dad cheerfully led the way with a canoe overhead. A string of kids and mom in flip flops and bathing suits or shorts followed. Bring up the rear was an adolescent boy also in a bathing suit with a (stand-up style) paddle board under his arm! Did I really just see that?

In a few minutes I realized that the portage trail had leveled off and I had done my ten minutes. I gave myself a rest and waited for Gerri to catch up. Did you see that? I started, "I guess that family must have taken a wrong turn at the resort".... and "do you think that kid has been negotiating his paddle board against the wind all day?". She replied, "I heard the mother complaining that she stubbed her toe in her sandals...go figure". Gerri dutifully rolled the canoe over her knee from the back of the canoe, grabbed the thwart bar, hoisted the canoe overhead, lifting it up till she positioned herself under the shoulder pads and moved forward up the trail. I heaved up the Duluth pack she gave me on my back and followed a short distance behind. The trail was relatively straight for a while. I wondered why G & W had talked about this portage being very hard. They usually wouldn't mention this, given their standards. After a few minutes, however things did change in a huge way: Suddenly the ridge we were on began to rise -- nearly straight up, enough so that the back of the canoe was banging on rocks behind Gerri. I got up behind her and asked if I shouldn't take over for a while, but there really wasn't any place to set the canoe down. "I can't do anything-- I'm gonna keep going", came the breathless reply. I was feeling like a chump. We scaled up a huge hump of the Duluth Complex that had resisted everything that nature could throw at it. There was a huge precipice a few steps to our left with a birds-eye view of the Boundary Waters to the northwest of us that become more stunning by the minute. Finally the trail flattened out and I yelled from the back, "why don't I take it from here?"

"Yes, why don't you."

I felt even more guilty when I found out the rest of the trail was a gradual downhill trek. Well, like Mike Sherfy would say, "what can you do?"

Gaby and Werner have a deal: she never has to portage the canoe-- only the Duluth packs-- on their outings. Still, she was wearing neoprene knee braces and not taking any chances. I don't think Werner has had to deal with serious "handicaps" yet, even though he's also a 60-something himself. He's a big burly guy. He picked up their Minnesota II with one hand, tossed it with just the right finesse into the air and caught it overhead while marching forward on the portage. I hadn't him bonk his head using this method, but he did get his bell rung on one portage because he is too damned tall. Although they don't happen enough, these incidents are quite gratifying for we short guys when they do: with the canoe over his head walking forward (at a respectable gait), he didn't see a partially fallen cedar resting on some other trees across the portage forming a natural lintel at about eight feet high. Bong....-da-da-da-da-da-da-daaa. However, I don't think it fazed him. It got me thinking about the Voyageurs, the short, stocky French Canadian farm boys were naturally suited to this job. Werner had been checking his

heart rate on his GPS watch and, I think, also looking for signs of personal demise. With five Duluth packs, there was always an extra trip to get the remaining three packs we left at the beginning of each portage. In BWCA parlance and extra required trip is called “double portaging”.

Both Gaby and Werner were generous, helping with our packs on the double portage. Werner was experimenting with carrying two of the packs at a time. While returning for a 2nd pack I met him at the halfway point of the portage. He was laboring up a particularly steep trail with (what should have been) my pack, plus his. 120 pounds! When the Voyagers did this with two packs they often used a “tumpline” over their head attached to the topmost pack so their spine could take the weight off their shoulders. As I understand it, the first pack was carried with conventional arm straps and then a second pack would be balanced on top. A strap or line from the top pack would extend and over the top of their head and not only gave them a way to balance the 2nd pack, but the back would be slightly bent forward taking the considerable weight (180 pounds of beaver pelts!) off of their shoulders. We’re told they were always moving cheerfully and ever onward, singing a bawdy chanson, smoking a fill of tobacco in their clay pipes at their rest stops. They would relate the distances they covered by how many “pipes” they enjoyed along the way.... Now, why am I so doubtful that this was such a jolly life? Werner was balancing the 2nd pack on top of the one he carried without any tumpline. I carefully restrained any wise-ass comments, but instead protested, “hey that my pack-no need to kill yourself”. He obliged me by flipping the 2nd pack over his head which landed on the ground with a canvas thud and a small mushroom cloud of dust. He said, “it’s no good” and kept moving down the portage trail. I guess probably was coming to grips with his “handicaps”. This is the way guys in our generation deal with it, one foot in Hemmingway’s manly world and the other tentatively in the world of the New Age, sensitive guys, who cry at weddings. In addition, Werner, like myself had been trained as a soldier, not a profession where one readily displays weakness. Women deal with their handicaps so much better and usually won’t refuse help if they need it, to which most other woman would reply “oh dear, I have sometimes have the same problem-- let me help you”. So be it.

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After the portage to Kiskadanna Lake, we knew the rest of the trip was a piece of cake unless the wind turned against us. We grooved down the long, narrow Lake and did a quick portage to Omega Lake where we would take the first good campsite available. Gerri and I parked ourselves on the first island we found on the westernmost part of the lake. It looked pretty nice to us. Gaby wanted the perfect site and apparently remembered one from a previous outing, a site with more rock outcroppings about a mile down the lake. They shot down the lake to see if it was open and were back in 20 minutes to report that the spot we were holding was the best available. I looked at my watch. It was about 2 p.m., which left us a nice long afternoon and evening to lollygag after we set up camp. I thought this island campsite was gorgeous: its stretched no longer than a football field, with small, rugged spruce trees that were tenaciously grasping the rock taking whatever nourishment they could from the thin layer of glacial duff. The spruce couldn’t get a toehold onto the west facing end of the island. It was smooth basalt rock outcropping that tapered down to the water.

The wind was blowing steadily and strong. Standing on the rock felt like being on a great rounded boat prow making its way through across the lake, but never quite getting there—a false sense of motion. This was enhanced by the low rolling altocumulus clouds overhead. I stood there watching them move by, taking in the view across a bay.

Gerri and I erected the tent in half the time it took on the first night, unzipped it and put all of our personal non-food items in it. Even though it was rated as a three person tent, it could easily fit four. I was thinking of taking a nap, but it was too hot inside the nylon walls to be comfortable. Gaby and Werner were already taking their regulation afternoon swim so we joined them instead.

The water in the BWCA never gets warm enough to achieve most folk's comfort zone. In the Brainerd lakes region, closer to the center of Minnesota, it might feel like bath water. Not so here. In the BWCA, there's always the initial trepidation until one builds the gumption to just dive in and get it over with. After fifteen or twenty seconds, the body will accept the challenge. The reward is the sheer animal pleasure of plunging forward in its purity. You'll get cold if you stay more than 10 minutes, but when you do come out of the water, there is a seemingly drug induced sense of well-being and contentment that permeates every cell in your body. I was in and acclimated but Gerri was only hip deep and blessing herself with handfuls of cool water.

I decided to help "Just dive in—it's the only way"

"Noooo....I'm doing just fine, *mister!*"

She finally stooped down, submerged, then came up doing a circular dog paddle, one eye measuring the critical distance from land. It's the cutest thing and I always look forward watching her little swimming ballet. We emerged and all sat on the sun warmed rocks, letting the warm air of the afternoon caress our bodies. Everyone wore the same contented face. I wondered what makes that happen: endorphins or something in the water itself? I call em' "water hormones"—better than drugs. For me, the relaxed feeling can last a good part of the day.

I sat there snacking on some almonds and my mind, without express permission, conjured the deep, roasted flavor of a Bent Paddle Black Ale. "Ok, Ok" I promised myself—"first thing after we get back to "civilization"....

I explored parts of our little island and eventually ended up back on the rocky side looking for the perfect place to read the book I had taken along. I spotted a rock dappled with orange lichen on its north side, but it was already occupied with a local resident. A Red Sided Garter snake that looked like it had been eating well (a 1.5-2 inch wide by about 2 foot long) languished on the warm rock. Its flamboyant coloring, which I would normally associate with a desert environment (alternating beady lines of a creamy beige with alternating black and red squares), looked like a Native American design you might see in a leather shop Santa Fe.... Even though three of us bent over and Werner taking photos, the snake didn't seem mind. It didn't seem inclined to give up its warm rock in the sun to these weekenders, just yet.

A little later, I went into our tent and grabbed a John Grisham novel. When I came out, Gaby was parked on the rock the snake had just been on. She was curled up wearing large reading glasses, enjoying the remaining half of a novel. She has torn off and discarded a section she had previously read to lighten her pack load.

“Where’s our snake?” I asked.

“Oh—he went home, I think”

“Ok to join you?”

“Oh yes, I won’t even charge you!!”

We read silently for a few minutes and then began chatting about books and eventually about my writer’s group. The rock was still radiating a pleasant warmth, though the sun was dropping in the west. The wind hadn’t unabated, but it was the place to be. I was leaning back with my weight on my palms. My right hand held the book down but the pages still seemed to flutter in the wind. While in animated conversation, I realized that I had already turned the book binding into the wind--- so how could the pages be fluttering? I casually glanced over my shoulder to find the flutter was actually our friend, the snake curling over the edge of my right hand. I leapt up to my feet and in a flash of color-in-motion, the snake propelled itself down a crevasse in the rock.

Gaby started laughing: “I’ve never seen you move so fast”.

It was too bad-- after all, it was the snake’s home and it just wanted to join the warm blooded party on the warm rock....

Soon the blue in the sky was losing to the grey. The sun was sinking in the southwest, but the wind didn’t let up, a sign that it wasn’t just from sun-generated updrafts as much as an approaching boundary of hot and cold air. This often means precipitation. What’s happening here? The higher pressure (cooler air) was steadily getting sucked into lower pressure (warmer air). There a simple way in the field to find out if rain is likely, called Buy Ballot’s Law: In the Northern Hemisphere, you put your back to the wind with both arms extended and turn 45 degrees to your right (to compensate for the veering of the wind), the high pressure is on your right and the low on your left. The earth is turning counterclockwise (as viewed over the North Pole) , dragging the atmosphere behind it, coming from our west.

In this case it would mean the low pressure would overtake us and if conditions were right, rain. Given the weatherman had included it in his long range forecast, I was pretty convinced it was neigh.

Gaby and Werner took out the mess kit, boiled water and added it to Sarah’s Trail Center dried Chicken Chili and Couscous. In 15 minutes the portions were served from two common cookpots onto our divided plastic dinner plates. It was excellent and more so when eaten in the fresh air.

Gerri and I did the dishes. Then it was time once again for Werner and I to the hang the food pack which of course was preceded by the Underhanded Rope Toss where any underhanded trick to win is de

rigueur. Most of the trees were either too small or lacked enough horizontal branches. We bushwhacked almost the whole length of the island before finding a good prospect, a tree with several branches missing and little to interfere with our throw. My third toss landed on a branch, but Werner disqualified it for being too low to the ground.

I protested, "Since when are the contestants acting as judges? "This is duplicity! I demand transparency!"

He didn't seem to be listening but, instead concentrated. Then he *underhandedly* and I'll allow, successfully tossed the weight over a higher branch and then let out a war whoop. The food would be safe if only for this reason; most bears within hearing range were probably retreating if only for the sake of peace and quiet.

It was getting chilly. We all donned warmer clothing and met out on the outcrop for a little party. Werner put our four plastic wine glasses inside one of the cookpots, a reliable flat surface. He filled each one with port. We all toasted European style: that is to look each other in the eye with the raised glass before partaking. I wondered why this simple gesture of recognition was generally missing from the American culture. Maybe it was John Wayne's bad example--if he made eye contact at all, it was with steely, resolute eyes. Then, he threw back his head and downed the whole thing at once.

Oh well, our culture is getting better at hugging, anyway. To my thinking, our etiquette on some things, is strange at best. When visiting us on summer vacations, my French nephew used to get big laughs observing the way we use our utensils. In Europe, a right handed person always keeps the fork in the left hand and the knife in the other, usually not setting it down till the plate was clean. We Americans start out with the utensils the same way, but cut up a portion of our food, set down the knife, then move the fork to right hand, eating one handed. I don't know I will live long enough to see if this habit changes...

By some machination , these thoughts led me to bring up the demise of live music in the last 30 years. My day job is booking live bands for social functions such as weddings and company parties. In the mid-eighties, maybe 90% percent of these events booked live bands, now it is about 10% the rest of the jobs go to the dj man. I've even witnessed a prospective groom arguing with his fiancée (in my office) that he wouldn't even go to a concert to hear an artist cover their own big hits because they could never sound as good as the original recording.

"Hey Werner--Gaby---have you noticed the slow death of live music over in Germany?"

"Oh yes"

"How about polka bands---surely not them!!"

"There are live polka bands playing at the Octoberfest.....they are in big tents and hundreds of people but not many dancing—they just get drunk."

I considered, holding out my glass and added, “That reminds me, I’ve hit bottom over here!”

It was the last minutes of dusk. I was standing facing the other three, looking down-island. We all were laughing and talking loudly. Suddenly, I saw a huge dark form with great flat antlers emerge from the spruce trees on our island and leapt into the lake. There was a deep, respectable- sounding splash only 50 yards or so away. I was the only one facing in that direction to see it happen.

“Quick, get the camera—it’s a bull moose!!!”

The camera had been sitting right beside Werner. He was up on his feet and already clicking away. The moose swam more quickly than I would have expected. He soon reached the other shore, but it was bordered by the same slippery rising rock face as the island. It would have been impossible for him to crawl up. He paused and then started swimming along the shore looking for a spot to get out of the water. Only his antlers and the tip of his dark head were out of the water and so looked like tree branches being pulled through the water. There was just enough light to see his powerful high shoulders and hump rising out of the water when he eventually stepped into the forest further up the lake.

I needed to check in with the group: “Did that really just happen?” We stood in the dark talking about it for a few minutes, but beginning slashes of a rain riding on the wind drove us into our tents.

I lay awake in the pitch dark as the tempo and of rain on the nylon walls increased. When the wind gusted there was the splatting, concentrated sound of water like buckshot being short-stopped by the rain fly. I was still strong under the spell of our moose encounter. Every trip on the Gunflint Trail holds some superlative moment and this was the one for this trip.

A bull moose can weigh 1000-1500 pounds and be 5-7 feet at the shoulder. Other than the rutting season, they will usually retreat from a human. This guy could easily have decimated us and the entire camp in a few terrifying moments with his great, palmate antlers. I remembered finding a moose antler in the woods near my cabin. I later hung in our workshop to enjoy its musky scent until it dried out. It weighed 10 pounds and was 33” inches from where it attached to the skull to the furthest tip. The width at the furthest point was 21”.

From the cover of nearby trees, the moose we had seen probably witnessed Werner and I doing the Underhanded Rope Toss.

Except for rutting season, one rarely sees a bull near humans. They tend to go much deeper into the wilderness looking for peace and quiet, the kind they should find on an island, away from wolves: a chance to chew a little aspen and ruminate, but nooooooo—then came those revolting humans--- worse than a flock of crows... to ruin it all.... I could understand the moose’s point of view: he probably uttered a moose profanity as he jumped into the water: “Goddddd—dammmmit”!

It didn’t make me feel any better when I thought of the demise of the moose over the last 10 years in Minnesota. They’re gone from the northwest part of the state now. In the northeast, herd is down from over 8800 in 2006 to just over 3500 in 2014 dropping 20% a year. Some say we will have to go to

Canada in ten years to see them, just like we do to see the wild Caribou, which used to roam our north woods. Yes, sometimes there is a bittersweet message waiting for me in the woods along with the feast of its bounty.

When I awoke, as usual, the last in the group, it was to the sound of more rain on the tent along with a resolute energy from my companions. The footfalls were faster than the previous morning and there was more brevity in the exchanges.

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“No, don’t shake it out, just pack it up wet” a voice said. It was still partially dark in the tent, but my watch said 7:30 a.m.. I reached for my wool undergarments and rain pants.

At breakfast, Werner finished saying what had been hinted at yesterday.

“Today we think we will go back to Rockwood one day early.... we can give you the food packs you can camp one more night if you want.”

Gerri and I had already discussed it yesterday when it started raining and concluded that even through it would be a long day’s paddle, it would be worth it to leave today as a group. We could have a shower and maybe a celebratory dinner at the Trail Center. If Gaby and Werner would have camped a third night as originally planned, after a quick shower, they would have had to drive the approximately 125 miles to Duluth, fly to Chicago, then on to Freiburg. Crazy.

“No---let’s do rest of the paddle today!”, I injected. Werner turned on his TomTom GPS watch and our party of two canoes was soon smoothing out the chop on Omega Lake, headed east. Looking at the shape of the lake on the map, from north to south, I guess there is the suggestion of the Greek Omega (Ω), but if you look at it from east to west, it looks more like a boat anchor which sounds a bit less scholarly. There are narrow and enticing pathways of water surrounded by pine and ancient rock escarpments, radiating from its center to other lakes leading to myriads of others: west going back to Kiskadina, north to Finn, east to Henson and south to the considerable Winchell Lake which would be the perfect destination to set up a base camp for a week. With childlike wonder, one could explore each arm: inhaling the clean scent of pines in the morning mist, sitting on rock dappled by multi-colored lichen. You could look across great bogs and endless grasses bending in the wind.

Another promise to myself; “I’m coming back here to explore in earnest”.

We portaged into the five mile long Winchell Lake. The wind was still steady, but now from the northwest, so we hugged the north shore. I found that the stern of our canoe was getting pushed off course slightly as we moved forward. This was where my longer paddle came in handily, used more as a tiller at the end of my stroke. Using the standard “J” and “C” strokes didn’t matter with the wind doing a good share of the work. I always welcome at least one large lake experience on a BWCA outing and glad we had it. Today, we felt the buffeting of and strength of the wind. It was getting a long fetch without anything to interrupt it from building force. The canoe bobbed slightly up and down.

Occasionally, a larger wave would be rolling under the beam, making a lapping sound. Then the whole canoe would rise up at once and then down in the following trough. Weeeeeeee.

Today's sky was a mix of long, dark clouds and some patches of blue. Gerri turned partially around from her narrow seat in the bow, looking at a system in back of us and commented, "I think we got rain coming". I turned and saw what she was looking at: a group of dark clouds with the space below them in a deep grey wash that looked to be gaining on us. I put on my rain jacket while trying to keep the canoe from broaching in the wind, one of the trade-offs for having a light, flat bottomed boat.

Eventually there were a couple splats of rain, but the system blew harmlessly to our south over the so called, Misquah Hills. I had often looked at that name on the map in my cabin (which now lay about five miles to the north). I had wondered what these hills looked like and imagined they were steep, wide bluffs such as I'd seen on another BWCA jewel, Rose Lake. I turned out to be wrong. They were steep hills, 300 feet higher than the surrounding lake, but mostly covered with pine and just a few bluffs. The effect, looking down the vast lake was like looking at a virtual wall of two distinct shades of green blocking the southern sky. There was the darker green of the older pines and then a quilt patch of delicate green, the kind you see in the forest at springtime. What was that? From a distance it looked like low bushes and scrub, but as we made our way down Winchell Lake, they revealed themselves to be young Balsam and Poplar trees. My map confirmed this to be inside boundary of the 2006 Redeye Lake Fire. The forest was just filling in again. I turned my head and looked to the north shore of Winchell, which was strangely flat by comparison, wondering what fiery geological tale lie behind it all.

We crossed Winchell in about two hours and portaged into Gaskin. The next three lakes, Horseshoe, Caribou and Lizz were small by comparison. At least twice I saw a storm behind us. I would put on my rain jacket, just to get a few sidelong splats. Handily, the rain always veered to our south.

Soon, we were launching onto the north shore of Poplar Lake, whose crossing would mark the end of our journey. When we arrived at Rockwood Lodge, Mike, Lynn and their dog were there to greet us, but their faces wore a puzzled expression.

Mike exclaimed, "We didn't expect to see *you* so soon!" and waited for the story. He had good reason for his curiosity: the Route we took (called Route # 2 on Tuscarora Lodge's website) is 4-7 days. We had done it in 2.5 days.

Werner gave him the quick synopsis while we unloaded their outfitting gear which included a half-full food pack. I looked at the map. We had traveled roughly 12 miles in 7 hours today. This included our double- portages.

Time for a shower and a steak, something we all readily agreed on.

Within the hour we were sitting at the Trail Center in fresh dry clothes. We had driven our separate cars, because we would be parting ways after our celebratory dinner.

After a toast, I was tipping my dream mug of Bent Paddle Black Ale....and it went down soooooo good.

All four of us ordered our food. I asked for salad, Jack Daniels steak, potato, and dessert.

Werner shared an anecdote about some misunderstandings when attempting to order food during one of their first trips to the USA: ““A waitress came up to our table and asked, “soup or salad?”. We thought she said “super salad” and I said “yes, two of those please”. She looked at us very funny and said, “No---soup or salad?”. We still didn’t understand each other but I said once again “yes”, one for me and (pointing at Gaby), one for her.” “

He didn’t need to finish the story-- everyone was laughing hard.

Soon we were standing in the parking lot hugging goodbye and drove off to our separate accommodations.

The next evening Gerri and I were ensconced in our little cabin on the edge of the BWCA and once again enjoying the trappings of civilization: a good white wine and cheese. Gaby and Werner were a now a disappearing dot in the eastern sky, bound for Germany.

Smiling, I shook my head, asking myself, “Did this all really just happen?”