

Adventure In Woodland Caribou Park

Jim Carrier

I pushed off into gusty winds and sheets of rain. Had my paddling party not been standing right there in colorful rain gear at the end of the newly-cut portage path down to Leano Lake, that point of access would have already blended into wilderness. I quickly logged a waypoint on my GPS. Clearly, "the bush" closes quickly in Woodland Caribou Park!

Keen to challenge our skills "beyond the BWCA/Quetico", we re-read Mike Prouty's story, "Woodland Caribou Park" featured in the Spring, 2006, issue of the BWJ and fixed WCP as this year's challenge. While travel to the park added another four hours to our drive north, that same siren call — a haunting melody that drew us through much of Quetico — lured us to new water, wilderness, and adventure.

Following that tune, I contacted Albert Rogalinski of Goldseekers, based in Red Lake, Ontario, to plan a WCP trip. Equally helpful during our trip preparation phase was Doug Gilmore, Park Superintendent. Routing objectives presented to these experts were simple:

1. Solitude — avoid motorized traffic and other signs of civilization
2. Scenery — steer us through distinctive features of the park
3. Fishing — balance lake trout lakes with walleye lakes
4. Routing — preserve flexibility to meet changing group interests.

WCP, an expanse of Canadian Shield and boreal forest much the same size as Quetico, seldom sees more than six hundred paddlers in an entire year. The route recommended for our two paddling parties would circle us clockwise around the southeastern quadrant of the park. It proved to be an excellent choice!

Included in my party of four was my son, Ben, a recent graduate from the University of Minnesota. Ben would soon be headed for an adventure of another sort teaching English to grade school kids in a mountain village in South Korea. I hoped this trip would plant canoe-camping memories to help sustain him so far away from home.

Paddling tandem with Ben was my old buddy, Rich Babuschak "the little kid who lived across the street" when I was a teenager four decades ago. Looking for a Quetico paddling partner five years ago, I remembered he was always fishing. Figuring Rich to be a top "prospect", I located and cold-called this New Jersey biology teacher after three decades of silence. We have been tripping together ever since.

Rounding out our foursome was Dr. Wayne Spence, a professor at North Texas University near Denton, Texas. Wayne serves as co-moderator of the general discussion forum of QuietJourney.com, a popular canoe-camping website. "DentonDoc", as we call him, would paddle solo in a Prism, same as me. Internet acquaintances for years, I looked forward to my first actual trip with Wayne.

Group leader of our second paddling party of five was Darrel Brauer, a frequent contributing editor to the BWJ, and a moderator of QuietJourney's "fishing forum". As

group leaders, we would steer our parties along roughly the same route, "leapfrogging" each others campsite lakes. Why? We were warned the park offered few large campsites and that portage access points would seldom handle more than one canoe at a time. Furthermore, quieter, smaller parties stood a better chance of spotting the elusive woodland caribou, namesake of the park, as well as other wildlife.

So, our canoe trip was born with a cold, wet slap of reality on Leano Lake. With a lifespan of thirteen days, our trip could only improve so we hoped! A strong northeast wind kicked up spray from above and below and sped our three canoes toward the end of the peninsula shielding us from bigger rollers on the open lake. Our respite did not last long. We reached that critical decision point between gusts. There, I made the call to "go for it", downwind, across the larger expanse of Leano Lake.

Rich and Ben paddled a Souris River seventeen-footer which handles rough water quite well. They swept past me towards the southern shore. DentonDoc was out-of-sight behind me somewhere in his Prism, another wind-worthy vessel, but I had no time to worry about him. I was immediately and wholly preoccupied with steering and staying afloat in my own Prism. In my hustle to get started and to "clear the portage" for the others, I had loaded my canoe improperly. Heading bow-heavy downwind, the canoe kept turning right INTO those thirty mile-per-hour gusts, putting me in danger of getting creamed broadside by the large rollers chasing us down the lake! Ten minutes into a trip I had planned for months, I was shouting "Lets Make a Deal" pleas for mercy to Mother Nature. I could only hope that she heard me over her howling wind!

Slowly, I regained my calm and focused. Before long, the outlines of jackpine on the far shoreline began to edge ever nearer through the mists. My Prism remained afloat and long moments of anxiety slowly passed. Catching up to the tandem in calmer waters, I found Rich and Ben searching for our portage, oblivious to my distress. Ben's voice wafted toward me over the breezes. "Hey, Dad! Wasn't that crossing a real blast?!" Waterlogged from the squall and sobered by my humbling experience, I grunted in acknowledgment, silently vowing to pay more attention to properly loading my canoe. Footing on this quarter-mile portage to the stream beyond was slippery but, from my perspective, terra firma of any sort was welcomed relief!

Our two parties, nine people, and five canoes, coagulated in this artery of short portages connecting to Kilburn Lake. After a late morning start with a two hour truck-in and a soggy, challenging initiation paddle, everyone was ready for lunch or an early camp. While Darrel Brauer's group grabbed a bite to eat near the entrance to Kilburn Lake, my own party hustled on through rain and choppy waters to locate a suitable campsite. We feared mid-afternoon winds would grow only stronger. Buffeted by gusty breezes, we zipped around the islands at the north end of the lake, evaluating campsite options. Settling on a winner, we quickly hoisted our "party flag" to waver in the breeze. It featured a large bright pink flamingo. I've found that pink flamingoes work like a charm to signal fellow canoeists in rainy-day moss green canoe country landscapes. Woodland Caribou Park proved no exception. Like moths to the flame, vessels from our "fleet" paddled past, offering greetings as they paddled further south, towards Sydney Lake. Soon afterward, my party's only stray, DentonDoc, found his way home.

Every year I buy some new "toy" for summer wilderness excursions. This year it was the Lean Three Plus Shelter, made by Cooke Custom Sewing. This lean-to style shelter requires no poles and is equipped with mosquito netting. The ample awning, supported by my spare paddle, eliminated my need to bring along a kitchen tarp. While the less spacious Lean Two Plus model might have been better sized for the typically smaller tent pads of Woodland Caribou, any version of the shelter is plenty flexible when used with a separate ground tarp. Despite high winds that afternoon and inconveniently situated rocks and bushes, we deployed the Lean Three Plus just fine. Further west along our route, where soil virtually disappeared, we erected our shelter without the use of tent stakes there being no shortage of rocks anywhere in WCP!

Kilburn Lake contained walleye, lake trout, and northern pike. Few WCP lakes hold smallmouth bass. However, the cold, nasty weather dissuaded us from trying to fool any of them into joining us for dinner. The frozen block of Brunswick Stew, thawing in my blue barrel food pack, served very nicely. DentonDoc camped separately but huddled with Rich, Ben, and me under our protective awning as we took dinner that evening. A little gin in our lemonade took the edge off the damp chilly breeze. We slept soundly, warm and dry, our first night in the park.

It rained overnight and we awoke to dark skies and more wind, wind, wind! I fixed Costa Rican Hazelnut coffee in our French Press while Rich prepared a breakfast of Cache Lake freeze-dried scrambled eggs and hash browns. Eager to wet our lines and test our skills, we walked around our island and managed to fool a few small northernns. Not satisfied, we braved wind and waves, finding safe harbor and fishing on the lee side of several islands. Around 10am, three motorboats arrived, anchoring themselves right in front of our campsite. While disappointing — given our goal of solitude — it was not unexpected. We were warned motorboats might appear in the vicinity of Sydney Lake, at the extreme southeastern corner of the park. These proved to be the only motorized craft — and nearly the only other people — we would see during our entire stay in WCP.

During this dreary layover day, we paddled to a small waterfall where an eagle stood vigil atop the crest of a nearby scraggly jack pine, solemnly appraising our angling efforts. Despite success with walleyes around blustery points, the cold, damp wind wore us down and drove us back to camp. Stiff-legged from a morning of fishing, Bear Creek Cheddar Potato Soup accompanied by peanut butter and jelly tortillas restored our energy and warmed us up. Nevertheless, we all longed for sunshine!

The strong low pressure system held us in its grip, puffing fitful gusts and spitting intermittent showers. Between squalls that afternoon we caught a few larger walleye but decided to lighten the food pack rather than eat fish. Somehow Ben coaxed a warming fire from wet kindling, which was fortunate because the temperature was really dropping. In fact, we were quite concerned about Rich, who possessed only a fleece "insert" for sleeping purposes. We solved his problem by rolling his insert into an extra Tyvek ground tarp we had stowed away.

Day Three was a travel day. On those days I am, admittedly, a bit of a harsh taskmaster. I get folks moving and on the water well in advance of typically stronger afternoon winds. After another rainy night, we packed up our soggy camp before 7:00 am and advanced

southward, through mists and sprinkles, to swing around the southern end of Kilburn Lake.

Three hours and two portages later, we spotted a bright flamingo balloon clear across Upper Kilburn Lake, conspicuously fluttering from a tree branch atop a high bluff. It was Darrel's camp. We exchanged pleasantries and fishing tales, topped off by an account of an incredible 34 inch walleye taken there by Darrel's wife, Dede! Somewhere along the line, I discreetly inquired as to the current disposition of a certain bottle of "stool softener", ritually used by my buddies as part of an annual practical joke. This as yet sealed bottle, discovered on a Quetico campsite, has a long history. Over the years, it has routinely made its way into the packs of unwary paddling party victims. The last time I personally had seen it was at CanoeCopia in Madison, Wisconsin, when I watched it being stuffed into Darrel Brauer's coat pocket. Warned that said bottle was already "on the move", we shoved off without stepping ashore. We had miles to paddle, intending to camp on Paull Lake, yet another six portages and three hours to the northwest.

Through Kilburn Lake, WCP pretty much resembles a good many of the BWCA/Quetico lakes we have traveled they feature familiar Canadian Shield Rock outcroppings, although thicker with jack pine and thinner with birch. Moving northwest en route to Paull Lake the trees seemed shorter and became sparse. Soil virtually disappeared. Rocky cliffs and bluffs were more abundant. My depth finder indicated most lake bottoms reached around 200 feet! Portages seemed shorter than in Quetico and kept very close to the drop-offs and narrow chutes of water connecting lakes. In fact, our next-to-last portage that day was the shallow stream connecting one No Name Lake to another!

As we arrived at Paull Lake, the sun came out!

My tired, wet paddling party was eager to pitch camp and string up clothes lines. We found a suitable site that offered great sun exposure on a quiet bay near the northwest end of the lake. A cooperative Mother Nature is a wonderful thing! Off came nasty portage boots, raincoats, socks, underwear you name it. Just about everything was laid out exposed on rocks, hanging from Lean Three shelter ropes or hooked on branches, to air in the breeze. How quickly our fortunes had changed! As garments dried, naked bodies embraced the warm breeze and a sunny afternoon, venturing into the shallows beside camp to wash off sweat and mud.

Clean and refreshed, we sized up our campsite. It was nice but seldom-used, as evidenced by the saplings growing right out of the fire pit. Heavy green caribou moss coated much of the site, providing soft bedding beneath our shelter. Plentiful deadfalls contributed abundant fuel for our evening campfire. After dinner, we slowly realized the air wasn't moving for a change. A waxing moon loomed large in an absolutely clear evening sky. Peace consumed the park and prospects seemed good for a layover day to enjoy the fishing and, perhaps, our first meal of lake trout. We made merry and tales were told, but we soon settled into a more reflective mood in appreciation of the marvelous change in our weather. Words once posted to the QuietJourney.com website by a fellow calling himself "Akula", seemed to resonate with me. He wrote: "By the light of a simple campfire I can see all the way to Heaven."

The next morning, we cooked up a pile of delicious pancakes. It was a simple joy to wake up without wind or rain, enjoying the quavering melodies of whitethroats, hidden high in the trees. Today we applied our sun screen lotion for the first time!

We launched our canoes and trolled down the lake. Around mid-morning, Darrel, Dede, and their friend, Cheryl, came cruising past us at an impressive speed en route to South Aegean Lake. A couple hours later, Lawrence and Quentin paddled through. They were traveling with Darrel and the ladies but had a separate permit. On this day, however, they decided to camp just across from us. By the end of the day we had fooled enough lake trout to cook with our Cache Lake Creamy Chowder. After dinner, Lawrence and Quentin paddled over to enjoy our campfire. Later that night, after they retired to their nearby camp and Hennessey Hammocks, I filled the silence with a few toots on my "Power Owl Hooter." As he does every year, Quentin bid me "good night" by hooting back, without the benefit of any implement. I freely admit Quentin is more likely to attract an owl to camp than I am .

Travel Days oatmeal days in my camp. As usual, we broke camp early and pushed for Aegean Lake, stopping only to admire a small pictograph on western Paull Lake. Further along, a gorgeous portage path carpeted with Ladyslippers, primroses, bluebells, wood anemone, and numerous other wildflowers led us to a gushing cascade that spilled into South Aegean Lake. Wispy low cloud cover took on pastel hues, contrasting sharply with an increasingly stark and rugged landscape. If you seek variable scenery, Woodland Caribou Park is a great place to go! Each lake has its own unique identity, perhaps due to erratic patterns forest fires have taken over the years. Burn areas, mature growth, early growth, mixed growth ecosystems we saw them all!

Spotting Darrel's pink flamingo fluttering at his rocky South Aegean Lake camp, we stopped to visit but he and the ladies were not at home. I left my calling card a pink feather and a brief note on a Clif Bar wrapper. Cheryl later chided me about leaving only the wrapper! We paddled on and made the simple portage into Aegean Lake.

As pretty as South Aegean Lake was, when the vista of island-strewn Aegean Lake opened up with its high rocky cliffs, it seemed almost enchanted! We set up camp at a five-star site on a southeastern peninsula. Soon, Rich, Ben, and I were exploring the rocky northwestern arm of the lake for an alleged cave, while DentonDoc opted for an afternoon snooze. Trolling slowly northward, I fooled a few nice trout along the way. When the tandem suddenly disappeared into a cliff of pure quartz, I deduced they had found their cave. Upon arrival, they urged me to join them climbing the high white cliff that towered above it.

Now I'm not much of one for heights. That crest was an intimidating sheer drop of a couple hundred feet. When Rich and Ben scampered up its rock face like mountain goats and implored me to join them, pride got the better of my fear. Grasping every available sapling hand-hold with white-knuckle tenacity, my ascent was slow but steady. I carefully avoided glimpsing downward and, somehow, made it to the top. We snapped a few pictures. Truly, the spectacular view almost made it worthwhile "almost" being the operative word. Getting back to my canoe was not going to be a picnic for me, either. Staring off the sheer drop, the prospect of going down the way we had come up was too

much for me. I convinced the guys that the long, gentle slope through the woods to our rear and, incidentally, away from the ledge would provide different scenery.

Alas, this choice nearly proved to be a much bigger mistake.

Though gentler, descending this slope still involved a fair amount of sapling-grabbing and ledge-hopping. About halfway down, all was going fairly well until I ledge-hopped myself into some thick bushes. Just as I plopped to the ground those very same bushes exploded with life! I really never saw what, exactly, leaped out just as I was jumping in; I was simply too close. Ben and Rich, however, got a clear view of its pointed feline ears and tufted grayish-white fur.

I had nearly landed on a fully mature lynx!

Close encounters with wildcats were not the wildlife spotting opportunities I sought!

We spent a wonderful two days on beautiful Aegean Lake at our premier campsite. Located on a rocky peninsula, our site featured easy bathing and marvelous views of both sunrise and sunset. We caught and ate plenty of trout. In the evenings we gathered on the bluff that was our "back porch" for the traditional nightly "Itty-Bitty Fishing Competition" between Rich and I. The contestant with the smallest catch is declared the winner. My deadly small spinner attracted tiny, aggressive perch, assuring me of winning entries night after night!

Darrel's party had forged ahead, deciding to paddle further west, visiting destinations such as Adventure, Haven, and Jigsaw lakes. By way of contrast, my group stayed conservative, preferring layover days every other day. We opted for a shorter, more northerly route that allowed time for fishing, exploring, and more relaxed pursuits. Blessed by fair weather days and cool clear nights, we began to appreciate the distinctive flavor of this unfamiliar canoe country. Bugs seemed fewer and ticks were not present at all in WCP. It was rockier and more rugged than Quetico. Where slash marks weren't possible due to the lack of suitable trees, portage trails were usually marked with Inukshuks, rock cairns denoting "safe passage". As far as solitude goes, we shared this vast wilderness solely with eagles, falcons, gulls, ravens, loons, and various other song birds. Signs of human intervention are few and far between.

En route to our next destination, Wrist Lake, we paddled Aegean creek, acquiring an escort of a large navy of otters. Cruising alongside, they eyeballed us for a hundred yards or so before submerging. Our planned three-portage travel day simplified to a simpler one-portage day as high water permitted floating right through obstructions marked on our maps.

We found Wrist Lake to be one huge remarkably still reflective pool. Our maps and research marked several fine campsites featuring sandy beaches on its northern shore. We found these all ruined by blowdowns. A small island campsite on the northern part of the lake featured vast quantities of Woodland Caribou droppings but, sadly, no actual caribou. DentonDoc fell in love with an island on the east end of the lake, so we called that "home". Despite gathering darkness on the western horizon, we elected to

investigate the portage into Jigsaw Lake, thinking Darrel and his party might be camped there. Suddenly, the mirror-like stillness of Wrist Lake cracked. Gusty wind and rain slapped us back into battle-readiness. Upon approach of the portage, it was evident a major fire had razed the region around Jigsaw Lake. Following Inukshuks, we made it three-quarters of the way across the portage path, then encountered a charred match-stick chaos of blowdowns blocking our progress. Would Darrel and his party fight through it or would they backtrack and lose a day or so? We debated their best course of action as we retreated to our Wrist Lake island campsite.

That next day was a picture-perfect gorgeous sunny Canadian day! My foursome spent it leisurely, sleeping in, enjoying a biscuits-and-gravy brunch, battling feisty lake trout (I'm still moaning over losing a trophy lunker), swimming, sunbathing, reading, and relaxing. Late that afternoon, I jumped into my Prism aiming to do battle, once again, with the-one-that-got-away. The only battle scars earned that day, however, were sported by the five bruised, bloodied, char-faced paddlers who emerged from a war with the Jigsaw Lake portage. Darrel's suffering party arrived "on fumes", straggling onto a nearby island campsite in tattered and torn garments, telling their tales of woe. Apparently, their past couple days were filled with similar portaging trials, hacking and hopping their way through that fire-ravaged section of the park. Neither our outfitter nor park officials had received word yet as to the extent of these issues. It was still early in the season and, after all, Woodland Caribou Park sees very few visitors.

Darrel's team needed the following day as a "recovery day". My party elected to start the swing back eastward and head for Mexican Hat Lake. One easy portage into Amber Lake was followed by a tricky 95 rod muddy, twisty portage. Then, a few beaver dams later, we arrived at the western brim of sombrero-shaped Mexican Hat Lake. It was immediately clear we had entered a more lush ecosystem vegetation right down to the shoreline, more birch trees, and fewer Canadian Shield humpbacks. Also, my party was thrilled to be moving back into waters containing walleye. We could hardly wait to wet a line!

An overcast day yielded to cloud and sun. We established camp mid-lake in a beautiful stand of birch. DentonDoc, Rich and I cleaned out brush and long-decayed log bench seating around the fire pit while my son, Ben, set about improving the structure of the pit itself. After the work was done, we set off on our quest to figure out where the walleye lived! It would be a catch and release day, today. Tomorrow, a layover day, would be "fish fry" day. Trolling the shoreline, we nabbed a few along rocky points. However, except one really nice fish caught by Rich, the fishing was unexceptional until it was time for the nightly Itty-Bitty Fishing Competition. As usual, I took top honors with a tiny perch. However, I took several walleye on my tiny spinner as well!

On a sadder note, the guys started lamenting that evening over our nearly exhausted supply of nightcap beverages. After all, we were approaching the end of our two weeks in the park. I doubt my leadership has ever been appreciated more than when — after allowing them to sob for awhile - I produced a small, phantom flask of vodka from the confines of my clothes pack. It would take us the distance!

The next day was walleye day! It started slow dead slow. Rich and I jumped in the

tandem. After watching a moose cow swim across the bay behind our camp, we headed down to the gorgeous waterfalls near the southeastern end of the lake, figuring it to be a likely spot. No luck! Neither did the great-looking mid-lake reef produce fish. We trolled the shoreline. Again, no luck! Nothing, nothing, nothing! It was late morning and we had been completely skunked!

Around noon, Ben approached in my Prism. He said he had been talking to a couple guys camped down by the waterfall the only other canoeing party we had come across camped in the park. They had been coming to this lake for years. After watching Ben fish the usual spots without luck, they flagged him down and gave him a great tip. They told him of a sand bar running across a certain bay and suggested drifting over it. Rich and I watched Ben paddle to that end of the lake, closely followed by DentonDoc. Stubborn, Rich and I persisted with our failed patterns until we caught up with the two of them.

We paddled much faster when we got close enough to see all the walleye action they were getting!

Thanks to a super pair of guys sharing priceless spot-on knowledge of their wilderness hotspot, our plans for a walleye-fest that evening were soon realized! We caught three or four fish every pass over that sand bar using a wide variety of artificial baits! With only two days on the lake, it was highly unlikely we would EVER have found this fishing hole without their great kindness. We all agreed that, someday, we would pass such kindness forward. We had a fine fish meal in Ben's reconstructed fire pit. The cool breeze rustling in the birch and the sound of waterfalls coming across the lake lulled us into solid sleep that night.

We repaid our debt of kindness sooner than anticipated.

Paddling out of Mexican Hat Lake southward to Jake Lake, by midmorning we came across a flamboyant Chinese-style, pink flamingo whirly-gig, fluttering in a tree and, of course, Darrel's party, which had skipped ahead of us. They had mostly recovered from their trials with burnouts and blowdowns. It is important, here, to know that Darrel and his bunch are mostly walleye fishermen. Their LOVE of walleye explains their subsequent behavior. Thus far, they had been trapped on mostly lake trout lakes. After hearing our tale, they went bug-eyed and immediately day-tripped several hours all the way back to Mexican Hat Lake just for a brief spell in Walleye Heaven! We set up camp across the narrows from their flamingo and didn't see their (happy) faces again until evening. Thank goodness for those long daylight hours of Canadian summer!

Our next-to-last day in Woodland Caribou Park began with an unusual, ill wind and dark clouds coming out of the south. Cracking my whip, we broke camp at 6:11am and watched Darrel rustling up some coffee and waiting around for the ladies to rise. We had seven well-spaced portages between us and Bunny Lake, our last night destination. We got through three of them before all Hell broke loose. Thunder, lightning, wind, and rain it seemed we would finish our trip much as we began it, cold and wet! We found good cover where we needed to and pushed through soaking wet conditions and portages to Bunny Lake. There, we scrambled around a couple less-than-satisfactory campsites before settling on a half-decent site on the north end of the lake. Well-practiced now, we quickly

raised our shelter, got our stove going, and fixed a big pot of broccoli-cheese soup. I didn't even fault the guys all that much for sipping the remains of our cocktail beverages! Only then did we shed our wet clothes for dry ones and get to worrying about all the others. They were still on the water, dealing with the worst of this tempest. An hour or two later, through a curtain of rain squalls, we saw their canoes cruising the distant southern shoreline. Boy, were we relieved!

Canoe Country weather is ever-shifting. Before long, the sky — as viewed through the silicone-coated roof fabric of our shelter — was clearly lightening up. We peeked outside to confirm. Indeed, the clouds were parting for now. In twenty minutes, we enjoyed sunshine, again. Up went the clotheslines, out came the canoes, and, in short order, we were fishing again! Even three of Darrel's beat-up, water-logged party showed up in his eighteen-foot Souris River. While they fooled a few trout right in front of the rocky outcropping that was our campsite, I tangled with a fifteen-pound northern cruising the entrance of a stream across the waters from camp. For the balance of the afternoon, however, a train of huge columns of billowing clouds threatened as they whizzed by. There was a greenish hue to the sky. Sheets of rain could be seen pounding the far side of the lake while we remained dry in intermittent sunshine. At times we were sprayed by a passing shower. Always we felt the suction of wind coming from clear sky to our east, moving west towards the ominous stream of thunderheads, steaming northward, only barely to the west.

Once again, Ben coaxed a roaring fire from wet kindling. We ate a hastily-prepared meal consisting of the remains of various freeze-dried meals. Whenever we felt the rush of cool air and heard the sizzle of raindrops in the blaze, we would hustle over to our shelter. A big blast only threatened and never materialized, however, and we would return with the showers passing, mysteriously drawn back to the rock shelf and the amazing display of atmospheric chaos that was our evening sky. Lightness, darkness, wind, and stillness all struggled for control of the airspace above our camp and squadrons of clouds at different speeds and levels well into the heavens above. It was a spectacular show! Only the next day were we to learn that this weather system generated the first tornado seen in these parts in over thirty years! Two Americans were killed in a vacation cabin in nearby Ear Falls and a third was unaccounted for at the time we exited the park.

Approaching the completion of our paddling circuit the following morning on Leano Lake, I was glad to have notched the location of our access point in my GPS. The small opening was nearly swallowed by the bush; we might have paddled right on by.

Ben and I sat up front beside the outfitters driver, an elderly Chippewa, who would haul us and our belongings the two hours distance to Red Lake, where our vehicles waited. The driver asked polite questions, listened to our tales, and seemed to size us up before sharing a tale of his own. Solemnly, he told us of a group of twenty-one teenagers from an inner-city program out of Ottawa who, earlier in the week, he and tribe elders had been asked to "educate" before they entered Woodland Caribou Park. None of these young visitors, including their instructor, had ever been in the wilderness, paddled a canoe, used a compass, started a fire, or set up a tent. Our driver shook his head in serious doubt, indicating, "these people, they were determined to do things the old way

yikes, even we don't do things the old way!" He recounted how tribal leaders did what they could with the group in the short time allotted, even offering to serve as guides. As the point of their trip was to "experience the wilderness", they preferred to go it alone. The teenagers would forego fishing poles in favor of using snares to supplement their food supply even though they carried no sharp knives. Neither would they carry maps, preferring the discovery method of learning and getting about the park. Furthermore, the highlight of their three weeks would be to shoot rapids along the Bloodvein River in their Kevlar canoes.

Fresh off of our own challenges in the bush, Ben exclaimed, in incredulity, "Wow! So what do you think is going to happen to them?"

The old Chippewa slowly turned his head to us. His eyes creased into a smile as he chuckled, "That bunch? Ha! I don't know! I think maybe they're going to die!"

Whatever your approach, there is plenty of Canoe Country magic and a unique, pristine beauty ready for your own discovery in Woodland Caribou Park. It is, indeed, a path less traveled. With that in mind, we strongly endorse the use of maps.

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