

Nothing But Blue Skies

Jim Carrier

"Yikes!" exclaimed Matunik, loud enough to be heard above the grind of my tires in the gravel parking lot. Such was my paddling partner's reaction to the ramshackle white-washed cinderblock outfitting "headquarters" of Canadian Quetico Outfitters near French Lake.

"One Star building, Five Star service!" I declared. "That's the motto of Canadian Quetico Outfitters." I pointed to a colorful neon letters in the window, encouraging us to 'Paddle the Dream'. "Doug Chapman is all about service!" I added.

Nevertheless, the high school teacher from New Jersey gave the building a wary eye. "Nice wildflowers out front", was about all he ventured to comment.

"Better, yet. It's 'Miller Time' out back! Doug's got a cookout going!"

"Don't you mean 'Molson Time', Jimbo?"

"Ummm– yeah, probably so." I conceded.

I brought my bug-spattered SUV to a halt just outside Doug Chapman's 'office'. A jaunty dark-haired fellow raced out in welcome, wearing thick glasses and a sunbeam smile.

"Jimbo! Your Internet buddies are all here! Grab some plates and help yourselves to what's on the grill!" he said, gesturing out back and greeting each of us with vigorous warm hand shakes.

Six faces, some familiar, some less so, appeared in short order. Introductions were made, where necessary. Existing friendships were rekindled. Beer tabs ~ Molson, indeed - were pulled. Mosquitoes were slapped. Our pre-trip

excitement kept us chattering about routing, fishing, weather, bugs, and probable portage conditions until well after dark.

Supercharged, we were ready for Quetico!

Eventually, Doug waved us "goodnight", promising hot coffee by 4:30am. We camped right behind his "One Star Building".

Early the next morning, Matunik and I enjoyed "Five Star Service", helping ourselves to the steaming pot in Doug's office. While others broke camp, we chatted with the owner of Canadian Quetico Outfitters.

"So, you two are internet buddies?" Doug inquired, as we sipped the morning's first cup.

"Nope", I replied. "We go MUCH further back— neighbors in New Jersey, nearly thirty-five years ago. Matunik was the little-kid-across-street while I was in high school. When I moved away, we lost track of each other. Thirty years later, I remembered he liked to fish and figured he might be a candidate for Quetico. So, I found him and gave him a call."

"Wow! Just like that?!" remarked Doug.

"Yep" answered Matunik. "Back east I fish for fun and teach high school biology for a living. It took about five seconds to decide to go. This is my third "field trip"!"

"The others are Internet friends, then?" Doug asked.

"Pretty much. We've tripped with 'Magic Paddler' and 'Kingfisher' before. They're engineers down near Chicago. So is Quentin, but he is a park newbie. 'Wenonah Rider' manages a business near Hibbing, MN. He and his teenage sons, 'Sca-ish' and 'Evinrude', are active on park-related websites."

"Headed to McKenzie Lake, eh?"

"Maybe. You never know, Doug. With twelve days, why not?"

Reasons "why not" began to emerge half an hour later.

Our shuttle was loaded and ready to leave for Stanton Bay. Just prior to departure, however, the older teenager, Sca-ish, displayed a festering foot wound. He and his brother, Evinrude, were fond of walking around barefoot. A couple days earlier, Sca-ish sliced his foot. The wound had grown ugly overnight and now featured a thin red line extending up the leg.

A first team conference was called to size up the situation. Vague notions of remote McKenzie Lake, gangrene, and Swiss Army knife amputations flitted across our collective mind.

"Safety first!" declared Magic Paddler, who served as my co-leader on this trip. Everyone agreed Sca-ish's wound should be looked over in the Emergency Room in Atikokan. In the background, Doug Chapman nodded, affirming this to be a wise decision.

Hours later, sulking a bit, Sca-ish hobbled along well-laid corduroy descending to Stanton Bay. The doc had handed him plenty of meds and cleared him to go. However, we were advised to hang around Pickerel Lake for a day or so, just in case—.

So much for our planned "jackrabbit start" to Russell Lake! Accordingly, we adjusted our mindset. Thus, under dreary slate-gray skies, we found ourselves lazily trolling a southerly course down big Pickerel Lake. Occasionally, Kingfisher or I would sing out depth finder readings to each other across the water to help us properly adjust our fishing tactics to either lake trout or walleyes.

"With a plan, a busted plan, or no plan at all– a day in the park beats a day anywhere else!", cried Matunik, from the bow of my Souris River.

"Aye, Chief" I responded.

Around Noon, our flotilla bunched together in the middle of Pickerel Lake as if to answer the question, "Ok, where now?"

I knew of a nearby island campsite featuring a nice sandy beach. My brother and I had camped there a couple of years earlier. I suggested it might serve as a great place for the teenager to soak his sore foot, per doctor's orders. When this new plan received group approval, Matunik and I started power-stroking into a rising southwest breeze, hoping to stake "first claim" for our party.

With the fresh breeze came a break in our overcast conditions. Shafts of sunlight penetrated thick cloud cover, spotlighting many of the island gems studding southern Pickerel Lake and putting a shimmer on its waters. Patches of blue promised an afternoon of sunshine. Matunik and I eased up on our speed, enjoying the changing weather. It was becoming a glorious day!

From somewhere in our canoe, a tune ~ a very old tune ~ slowly took hold of us. I honestly don't remember who started humming it first. It was just sort of "out there" and we both found it. Soon we were whistling it. Eventually, we sang the only stanza we could remember– again and again and again.

*"Blue skies
Smiling at me
Nothing but blue skies,
Do I see."*

"Irving Berlin, right?" asked Matunik.

"Danged if I know, Chief."

"I can't remember the rest of it."

"I dunno either. Give it time."

Humming away, we sighted the sandy beach and stroked our Souris River towards the campsite. It was almost empty—.

That's where we first saw The Creature.

"Yo, Jimbo!! Look! Under those trees by the beach!!" cried Matunik in a hoarse raised whisper.

I saw IT alright, sitting on a fallen log. Its sharp-eared face was slightly turned on its torso. The biology teacher twisted around to face me in the stern, still pointing excitedly at the figure.

"Bubo Virginianus!!" he declared.

"Bobo what?!" I responded, perplexed. I wondered if he was looking where I was looking.

"A great horned owl, Jimbo!!"

Yes! That's what I saw! Not a Barred Owl or a Gray Owl— this was a Great Horned Owl! Its head remained cocked ever so slightly to the left, facing us but not moving an iota. This was an incredible wildlife find, right off the bat! The large predator was perhaps 30-40 meters away, sitting right in the middle of the camp. We stealthily glided closer to the beach to get a better look.

Totem-like, it sat on the log, unblinking, unmoving— eyeballing our approach.

Trying not to make a sound, I slowly reached for and retrieved my digital

camera from the pack strapped to our thwart. Deliberately, I aimed and snapped a couple shots as we drifted ever closer. Meanwhile, seated in the bow, Matunik did his level best to elicit a response, expertly cupping his hands together and softly calling, "Hoot ~ hoot ~ hoot!"

Nothing.

"This is spectacular, Jimbo! Did you get that shot?! Did you– ummmmm, ut-oh."

A LONG pause.

"Ummmm–" he continued. "Oh, brother–."

An even longer pause followed. Momentum carried our canoe silently forward until it scoured sand and slid up the beach.

"Yeah– oh, brother", I repeated from the stern, shaking my head in disbelief.

Whacking the side of his head, Matunik half-laughed, half-sighed, "Pretty sad, ain't it?! We're getting OLD, Jimbo!!"

"Blind, anyway" I moaned, nodding. I consoled myself, however. Secretly, I latched onto a notion that MY ancient eyes had detected our mistake first.

"A hunk of wood!" barked Matunik. "A hunk of wood!! Dang it... gotta get my eyes checked!"

Yet another pause. "Ummm, Jimbo... you don't think those other guys heard me, ummm– hooting, do you?"

"I kind of doubt it, Chief– they're pretty far back." Pause. "But hey– I snapped an excellent picture of you attempting to charm that hunk of wood off its roost."

"Very funny-."

We beached our vessel, grabbed our lunch pack, and sat down right beside "Bobo", as I came to refer to him. I patted him on the head. "Nice Bobo", I said, as if to my cocker spaniel, back home.

We continued to stare at our folly while we munched on sausage, crackers, and cheese. The others began to arrive at intervals and set-up their tarps and tents. Before long, the teenagers had a twenty-foot Wenonah out in the middle of our cove. Despite one very sore foot, they jumped overboard, carefree, splashing about, again and again and again.

By then, Matunik and I had abandoned Bobo for a much sunnier spot on the beach. We watched the boys and relaxed.

"So Jimbo- can YOU roll yourself back into an empty floating canoe like those kids?"

"Not lately, Chief", I replied.

We contemplated our graying hair.

We agreed the splashing bode well for our chances of departure the next day. Sca-ish's body and spirit seemed to be mending nicely!

Morning arrived. Soft raindrops pattered soothingly upon the tarp of my Clark's Jungle hammock. Equally tranquilizing waves lapped just a few feet away. Together, they lulled me into further dozing. Since no one in camp was moving, anyway, I totally lacked any incentive to leave my comfortable pea pod. As I swayed gently on my breezy point, my unfocused gaze rested upon distant treetops on Emerald Island. They seemed to hover ~ dreamlike - above low-hanging mists- contributing further to my drowsiness.

Grit scraping harshly under someone's boots on bedrock roused me suddenly from the depths of my stupor. The familiar voice of Magic Paddler followed.

"Mornin', Jimbo."

"Mornin', Magic! How's the boy feelin'?"

"Dead to the world, right now. His dad says they're ready to move on, though."

"Great news! Hey, whadya think about paddlin' south through the B's? I understand beavers have raised havoc over on Deux Rivieres this spring."

"Fine by me. Bud, Bisk, Beg lakes are new for me."

"Let's do'er, then, eh?"

Morning showers abated. Under heavy cloud cover, Matunik and I reached the Bisk dam around Noon. While fishing Smallies in the outflow and waiting on the others, we spotted a huge brown shape ambling along the distant grassy shoreline. While it could only have been a moose, our humbling experience with "Bubo Virginianus" the day before kept us uncertain. Easterly breezes, suggesting rain, pushed us along the northern shoreline. We drifted towards Beg Lake. There, the rest of the group caught up to us— and skies darkened.

"A humdinger of a storm brewin'" observed Quentin, pulling alongside us in his Bell Magic.

"You don't like the weather up here, just wait five minutes— it'll change" Matunik responded, rhetorically, to the newbie. My paddling partner was a blossoming Quetico "veteran".

Five minutes later, conditions had, indeed, deteriorated. We donned our rain gear.

By the time we reached the short portage into Fern Lake, the bottom had dropped out of the clouds, immersing us in a real frog-strangling downpour. Hurriedly, we propped canoes into the crooks of trees, using them as makeshift shelters. A virtual stream flowed over the massive rock outcropping we crouched on. Matunik and I used the interlude to fix peanut butter and jelly tortillas. Meanwhile, fat rapid-fire raindrops from the squall pounded the Kevlar skin of my SR17, fixed over our heads. We had to shout to our comrades ~ just meters away - to be heard above the awful racket. Sheets of waterfall poured on either side of us.

"Hey, Jimbo! Stop at Oliphaunt Lake tonight, OK?" yelled Magic Paddler, barely audible above the din.

I pondered my response. We had gotten a very late start. Already it was mid-afternoon and we had the mile-plus Fern-to-Oliphaunt portage just ahead of us— in monsoon conditions, no less. Russell Lake had been today's goal. We really did not know our group capabilities. Continuing on to Russell Lake might be pushing our luck.

"Sure." I yelled. "We'll claim a site on the north shore."

When the raindrops let up, Matunik and I raced ahead.

We found the portage challenging. Torrential rain induced cascades which almost washed us down the path to Oliphaunt Lake. I suspect that the gorge alongside the trail was picturesque, but conditions seldom allowed us to take our eyes off of our footing.

By the time we reached the far end, the rain had ended. Skies opened up a little, the wind shifted dramatically, and stiff westerly breezes greeted us. Exhausted, Matunik and I eyeballed this new challenge of rising whitecaps and, then, each other.

"Onward!" is all he said.

We propelled our trusty SR17 through spray and blustery wind into bright but setting sunshine. Before long, I heard new verses to a familiar tune rising above the symphony of wind, waves, and 'kerplunks' as our paddles bit into Oliphaunt Lake.

*"Blue birds
Singing a song
Nothing but bluebirds
All day long.*

*Blue days
All of them gone
Nothing but blue skies
From now on."*

"Hey! You remembered some words, eh?" I shouted to the bow.

"A few." Matunik acknowledged. Once again, I sang along.

Half an hour later, we sighted our companions making slow headway in the gusty winds as they gained entrance to our bay. Fortunately, they spotted the bright pink lawn ornament we routinely use to mark our campsites. They altered course for our rocky landing. A very tired, wet, forlorn group of fellow-campers rolled their sodden belongings ashore! Soon after, the first mosquitoes whined in our ears, not quite ready to land. Tents were erected hastily. Supper was also fixed and consumed quickly. Conditions on the long portage had taken a heavy toll on group energy. Before long, hammocks and tents were filled with a chorus of well-deserved snores.

Brisk northerly breezes the next morning ushered in fleece-worthy weather, belying the fact that it was nearly July. As we huddled around, sipping

Kingfisher's delicious coffee, we opted to layover on Oliphaunt for a day to dry out and restore our "batteries."

Hopes of ever reaching McKenzie Lake were fading.

Good fishing sure improved our spirits!

Matunik and I coaxed smallies out of pools below the rapids leading into Pickerel River. Kingfisher, an excellent fisherman, paddled with Mr. Evinrude. The younger teenager seemed to soak up valuable tips, contributing several walleyes to that evening's dinner fare. Wenonah Rider and Sca-ish stayed in camp, cutting wood, performing other chores, and relaxing by our campfire. Magic Paddler and Quentin, each paddling solo, explored quiet coves and - when blustery conditions subsided - they fished.

Windy days surely help you appreciate the benefits of paddling tandem!

After a windblown morning, Matunik and I both enjoyed delightful naps during the cool, overcast early afternoon. Later, at considerable risk of capsizing, we chanced fishing the windy, rocky side of nearby islands and made our own contributions to supper, fooling numerous eating-sized walleyes. We ate well on Oliphaunt Lake!

Temps dipped into the low 40's that night. I stuffed my fleece pullover and other clothing into the large pockets provided underneath my Clark hammock to provide additional "insulation". Kingfisher's hot coffee during our pre-dawn powwow the next morning was much-welcomed and took the edge off of our chill.

Travel south to Russell Lake that morning was about as easy as it gets. Big Sturgeon Lake was blessedly calm. A group of teenage girls performed warm-up calisthenics as we quietly slipped past their campsite. Passage through Sturgeon Narrows was uneventful. It hadn't always been that way for me. I recounted to Matunik the tale of how my brother and I pulled two blue-faced

paddlers out of the spring flood, just after ice-out, eleven years earlier. They had tried to bypass the portage going upstream and suffered bad results. Fortunately for them, we just happened to be going the other way—.

The park can be a moody place. Fortunately, on this sunny morning, its mood was great! By 9:30am, we had already set up camp on a well-used island site on the north end of Russell Lake.

The day was the stuff postcards are made of— puffy white cotton ball clouds floating in a deep blue sky above encircling ridgelines of evergreen. The entire scene was mirrored on the lake's surface, below. We shed our shirts in the cool, invigorating mid-morning air and with spinning rods rigged and ready for action, we eased our canoe off the bedrock slope edging our island home.

Enjoying the sun's rays, Matunik and I explored rocky coves and grassy bays along the northeast shoreline, drifting and occasionally paddling our way down towards picturesque Chatterton Falls. More often than not, we tossed white-skirted spinner-baits to shoreline cover. More often than not, we would spot testy Smallies or pesky Northerns long before they surged through crystal-clear water to charge our baits. Thus, our efforts were rewarded visually as well as by sporting tugs on our line.

"Jimbo, it doesn't get any better than this!" Matunik offered as a benediction for this gorgeous day.

I hummed our tune about "blue skies" by way of an answer. They were surely smiling on Russell Lake!

Through the mosquito netting of my hammock, I watched an extraordinarily bright full moon rise in a cloudless sky that evening. While Matunik's tent was pitched within easy-chatting distance, we didn't say much. We chose to quietly absorb the evening spectacle in the privacy of our own thoughts.

Soon, I drifted off to sleep. Despite temps dipping to 37 degrees, I slept great!

Rather than follow the script of the best-laid plan I conjure up during the preceding winter, most of my Quetico trips seem to define themselves somewhere along the way. A few days of bright sunshine, some good fishing (including a couple 45 inch Northerns), and unusual solitude for the Russell Lake thoroughfare had drained our ambition to tackle the long paddle to and from McKenzie Lake. Sipping Kingfisher's coffee in the pre-dawn of our sixth day, we sized up our group temperament and capabilities. We decided to start circling back to our exit point at French Lake. This "new plan" included a visit to Antoine Lake. Kent Budd's story "Wetasi Laker Magic" (see BWJ, Fall Issue, 1999), describing his encounters with lake trout on Antoine and around Wetasi Island, was on my mind!

Before long, we were hunting for the Sturgeon Narrows portage into Antoine Lake.

As was customary, Matunik and I had broken camp early and were the first to arrive at the purported portage. Try as we might, however, we couldn't locate it. Half an hour later, when Kingfisher and the others arrived, we were still looking. Undaunted, Kingfisher plunged fifty yards into the woods and started moving east to west. He worked his way parallel to where we sat in our canoes, swatting at the swarms of mosquitoes that followed us around as we paddled to and fro, searching for the portage. Occasionally, we'd get a glimpse of a burnt-orange shirt moving methodically above us through the brush. In twenty minutes, shouts from the woods indicated that Kingfisher had stumbled upon the elusive path. Fresh wood shavings along the trail even suggested that portage crews had recently been through. The steep climb to Antoine Lake was blessedly free of debris.

We had Antoine Lake to ourselves. The water level there seemed strangely higher than elsewhere on our travels, a testimony to the work of beavers, I'm

sure. Possessing two park permits, our party decided to split up. Matunik and I shared the smaller mid-lake island site with the two solo paddlers, Magic Paddler and Quentin. Kingfisher, Wenonah Rider and his boys grabbed another fine campsite near the northern neck of the lake, about a mile away.

Before long, the teenagers, Sca-ish and Evinrude, had fashioned a rope swing along the shoreline. From our island site that afternoon, we were able to watch them swing out over the water and plunge into the lake. Ah, the energy of youth!

We camped three nights on Antoine Lake, enjoying the explorations, the fishing, and ~ at least in my case ~ the daily "wildlife lessons" coming from the bow of my canoe. Often, when I stopped humming or singing, the high school biology teacher used the opportunity to "educate me" in the ways of the woods. Matunik's "specialty areas", as I soon learned, were fungi and lichens. In particular, I heard a lot about "*Allocetraria Oakesiana*", commonly known as "ribbon lichen".

Lichens abound in the Quetico/BWCA. They are an organism exhibiting a symbiotic relationship— in this case, a relationship between a fungi and a green algae. Algae survive through photosynthetic reaction. Fungi are decomposers which break down dead or decaying materials such as trees, leaves, etc.. Lichens are slow growers. The decomposer part loves moist, shaded areas. The algae part prefers rock or similar substrates in the sun to optimize photosynthesis. Since algae lack true roots, stems, and leaves, fungi help the lichen attach to places where algae cannot.

As Matunik pointed to the abundance of dark lichens around Antoine Lake, I'm sure I mostly yawned and focused on my fishing— at first. The fishing, by the way, wasn't bad.

Undeterred by my poor attention, he explained, "Lichen can get dark brown or black whenever there's a lack of rain or sunshine, reducing photosynthetic

activity. When this happens, it's the darker fungi that dominates the lichen's color".

"You don't say" I responded, blithely, as I replaced my Mepps Aglia with a Rapala.

I guess I didn't fully appreciate or take real notice of what was going on around us ~ biologically speaking - until after it rained on our second full day on Antoine Lake. Almost overnight, dark shorelines around us had transformed, bursting into vibrant bright green colors!

"You see, Jimbo? Renewed photosynthetic activity has charged the algae with chlorophyll!"

Indeed, I did see! Though I had been focused on fishing ~ and, notoriously unobservant about such things - even I couldn't help but notice this dramatic change.

"Yo, Chief! What's the name of that stuff, again?" I asked.

"Ribbon lichen" was his patient answer.

I'm sure this remarkable effect with ribbon lichen has occurred around me on many trips and I've barely noticed. However, armed with the knowledge of what was really happening, I seemed to see it and appreciate it, perhaps for the first time.

More than ever, I was thankful for the inspiration that had led me to contact my former next door neighbor after a thirty year hiatus!

Our stay on Antoine Lake was full of easy pleasures. We checked out "the cave", found amidst the odd rock formations on the backside of the large island. Nearby, as we rounded a point of land, we watched an otter at play—until it spotted us and submerged. We cleaned a day's catch one afternoon on

a rocky point a couple hundred meters across the lake from our island. Ten minutes later, back at camp, we witnessed a magnificent display of aerial combat over our fish carcasses involving four eagles, numerous herring gulls, and several ravens. The ravens paraded the ground at the edges of the fray, grabbing whatever they could when opportunities permitted. The gulls, on the other hand, seemed intent upon preventing the eagles from landing at all. They dive-bombed and harassed the larger predators as they approached. Only one eagle made it to the ground. Our admiration for herring gulls immediately went up a few notches!

We capped off our wonderful evenings spent on our island with what we dubbed, "The Itty-Bitty Bass Tournament". After dinner, Matunik would routinely take up his light rod and his tiniest lure and challenge me to do the same. Then, we would sit on the rock slope where our canoes were beached, cast our lines, and fish the drop-off, attempting to take the smallest fish. Magic Paddler and Quentin served as official judges.

During our last evening on Antoine Lake, the competition was running about dead-even, according to the officials. We decided that whichever one of us took the smallest fish in ten final casts would be declared "the winner".

"And NO jigging!" asserted Matunik.

"What do you mean 'jigging'?" I answered, innocently.

"I mean that you CANNOT do tonight what you DID do last night to win! Rules state that you must cast and then steadily reel your line in. On your last cast yesterday you jigged the drop off for five full minutes! NO jigging that drop off on the retrieve! You must continue to reel in!!"

"Oh, you're just sore because YOU didn't think of it first!" I retorted. However, the disparaging look on Quentin's and Magic Paddler's faces seemed to indicate I did not enjoy much official support for my questionable

tournament tactics.

Alas, I lost the contest. The four of us sat quietly for a long while after that, enjoying the fading glow in the western sky. The lake was all stillness and reflection. A couple stars had emerged but the first mosquito had yet to hum. A small flask of brandy circulated among us. .

"Hey, Quentin." I barked, irreverently interrupting the silence.

"Yeah?" he responded.

"You're our group newbie— what's your verdict on Quetico?" I inquired.

Quentin smiled and took another sip. The lilting evening song of a white throat sparrow sounded clearly, hauntingly from across the lake. Just as Matunik had answered this question a few years earlier, Quentin also replied, "I'll be back."

We knew he would. His answer came as no surprise to anyone.

That next morning, we four quietly slipped into the mists and paddled away from what we had come to think of as "our island". Ten minutes later, we gathered up our four companions on the north end. Then we headed for the Ram and Sturgeon lake portages, Wetasi Island, and the general direction of our exit from the park. We spotted fresh moose tracks and droppings along both portages. We saw no moose.

We speculated as to whether or not the incredible swarms of mosquitoes had lifted them away.

Arriving at Deux Rivieres, we discovered the beavers had wrecked it almost as bad as had been rumored. Matunik and I laboriously "poled" our way through the muck. Twin Lakes greeted us with a puff of refreshing wind, and the clouds overhead began to disperse as afternoon approached.

Right on cue, from the bow, I heard the humming of that now familiar Irving Berlin tune. Once again, I hummed right along. A couple more full days of park time and the promise of more adventure lay ahead of us. Our prospects were good!

As Quetico smiled, nothing but blue sky did we see.

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