

SEE YOU IN SEPTEMBER

Jim Carrier

In the springtime - of the season and of our lives - I strapped my nine-foot Gregg Noll surfboard to the top of my "Datsun" truck and headed to the Cape Hatteras National Seashore along the Outer Banks of North Carolina... a place of incredible natural beauty. It was my favorite place in the universe in those days. There, fumbling around learning to surf, I met, courted, and eventually won the hand of my wife, Nancy. Now, over thirty-five years later, in more autumnal times, I hoped to reintroduce Nancy to the Quetico... my current favorite place in the universe. She had been away for over thirteen years.

A week in September seemed the perfect choice for my purpose. The promise of few bugs, solitude, warm water, sandy beaches, cool nights, crackling campfires, rich sleep, much relaxation, and our choice of prime campsites cinched my decision.

We would access the park via the series of small lakes beginning at Lerome Lake, just south of Canadian Highway 11. We hoped to camp At Sue Falls, a lightly used park entry point. Also, in nearly thirty trips to the park, this would be my first time on the east end of gorgeous Cirrus Lake. At our leisure, we would attack the hump of a portage into Kasakokwog Lake, where we would spend a few days. From there, the last leg of our trip we would take us east through McAlpine and into Batchewaung and Nym lakes, where our vehicle would await us and where we would exit the park.

The sign we found hanging in the office of Doug Chapman, owner and operator of Canadian Quetico Outfitters, seemed fitting for our adventure: "Paddle the Dream". The day's forecast, however, augured something more like a nightmare, however... "Blustery winds, showers followed by clearing skies and steeply-diving night-time temps around the freezing mark." The prospect of getting soaked, then chilled on Nancy's long-awaited return to the wilderness had me concerned. I certainly appreciated Doug's good humor and encouraging remarks ("You'll enjoy a nice tail wind!" and "You guys will make your own warm weather!") as he trucked us over to Lerome Lake from the Nym Lake parking lot. Doug is a fount of enthusiasm, information, and service for all trips I take originating on the north side of the park... and just the guy I needed to help make this particular trip a success!

So, we waved goodbye to Doug from a gravel beach and Nancy - at long last - reclaimed her spot in my bow as I wet-footed it and shoved us off into Lerome Lake. Like riding a bicycle after a long layoff, she quickly found her balance and paddling rhythm despite her layoff. This was reassuring as Nancy had not exactly exuded cheerfulness and confidence on the drive up to Canada. For instance, she had inquired, "So, if something should happen to you in the wilderness, exactly what am I supposed to do?" My response was simply, "Your best bet would be to light three signal fires and/or to put three articles of bright clothing out in a clearing or on the beach. Three of anything generally signals there is 'trouble'." Her retort was that I had been watching too much of "Survivor Man" on TV and that I should expect to receive a SPOT Messenger or satellite phone for Christmas this year!

Despite those initial disconcerting thoughts, Nancy intrepidly paddled onward and, clad in her rain gear and boots, battled every new gust and every spurt of wet sprinkles sent by the low-hanging grey clouds sailing past us. Her confidence grew as we surfed the mid-sized rollers which propelled us southward. Wind-assisted paddling quickly ate up the first two of the five small lakes that lay between us and the official border of the park at Sue Falls. We were delighted to discover the portage marked on Fisher Maps as 134 rods leading from Jackfish Lake into Bewag Lake was actually more like 34 rods. It deposited us onto the serpentine creek that weaved its way through the grassy

marshland. I suspect portage length accuracy on the map might be geared for worst-case scenario dry seasons.

After about five hours of paddling and portaging we had completed the last and, unfortunately, accurately marked 175 rod portage connecting Sue and Cirrus lakes, dropping us into the basin of Sue Falls. Thankfully, this path was mostly downhill... a good thing since I was reconciled to triple-portaging. In addition to heavier cold weather clothing, I was packing whatever camping luxuries I thought might be useful in smoothing Nancy's transition back into wilderness camping. Extra food, cooking equipment, camp chairs, four standard closed cell foam sleeping pads for just the two of us, a full CCS Lean Three shelter in addition to our small tent (insurance against inclement weather)... it didn't matter. We weren't going to be moving camp that often and a primary goal was comfort and relaxation!

We had the basin entirely to ourselves. While we eyeballed the two "point" campsites which "guarded" the entrance to Cirrus Lake proper, my buddy "PJ" from Quietjourney.com had warned me that blowdowns resulting from serious straight-line winds a few years back had made the sites virtually unusable. Rather, we grabbed a nice site on the east side of the bay and quickly erected our tent and lean-to kitchen shelter as weather conditions were problematic and the temperature was dropping fast. Once settled, Nancy began to thaw the "frozen block" of Brunswick Stew we would have as our first night's meal. The expectation of a cold night provided enough excuse for me to serve blackberry brandy cocktails as we watched our stew simmer.

Stew, spirits, and a blazing campfire warmed our souls as stiff breezes rippled the fabric of both our tent and our lean-to shelter. So comforted was I by these amenities – and, perhaps, buoyed by macho memories of yesteryear - I shed my clothes and proclaimed my intention of keeping up my summer camp tradition of "bathing every day." Nancy's raised eyebrows indicated that she didn't think much of my "tradition" as I waded offshore. Shaking her head, she reminded me it was no longer summer and those clearing skies meant temperatures would plummet in a hurry!

Well, my swim was not a long one. Certainly I did not inform Nancy that the water was actually quite warm (compared to the air!). Rather, after my dip, I suggested that – if she was so concerned about my well-being - we should act quickly to raise my core body temperature by jumping into our sleeping bag and calling it an evening. It was only about 8:00pm.

I may be nuts but I am not stupid!

So, in the comfort of our small tent with our four sleeping pads beneath us, we eventually faded to sleep to the music of Mother Nature: breezes sighing in the trees, rushing waters cascading down nearby Sue Falls, and serenading loons, whose haunting melodies wavered in the wind.

I crawled out of our snug shelter at around 6:00am and got coffee going quickly using my JetBoil stove and French Press. Then I fixed a batch of powdered eggs, remnants from earlier canoe trips with "the guys." You see, the guys hate powdered eggs. Personally, I can take them or leave them but figured this to be my best opportunity to consume my excess inventory. Nancy was unlikely to beef much about a meal she didn't have to fix herself... especially if my coffee was any good. While heating water, I grabbed my spinning rod and cast a white curly-tail through the morning mists to where bass were rising for surface minnows. I didn't have much luck but Nancy did eat my eggs with little comment. We sipped our delicious coffee that chilly morning and delighted in watching the rising sun chase mists off of the lake and back into the high crevices of the forest-carpeted rim of the basin, particularly where Cirrus Creek tumbles down through it.

We planned this to be a layover day and intended to take full advantage of promised good weather. After cleaning our dishes, we untied and flipped over my Souris River tandem, eager to enjoy a fine day of fishing and exploration! We didn't have much luck in the basin, though we did lose a beetle-spin to a really nice northern pike. So, we decided to take the short portage over to Soho Lake. There, I tied on one of my favorite lake trout lures and started trolling it down the center of the lake. Surprisingly, only a couple of nice-sized, deep-running smallmouth took me up on my offering. Nevertheless, we found the cool morning and bright sunshine invigorating and reward enough for our troubles. After a couple of hours, we stopped at a fine campsite on the southern shore that my internet friend PJ had alerted me to. It featured a small sandy beach, an excellent central view of the lake, and some decent flat tent pads. There, we snacked on summer sausage and cheddar cheese with mustard on crackers. I considered trying to persuade Nancy to take an additional hop over to little Smudge Lake – reportedly a good walleye lake – but, in the interest of not pushing a good thing too far, opted to head back to Cirrus Lake.

After re-crossing the portage, we trolled the short distance to the “pinch point” into the basin without much success. As angling proved to be only marginally productive, we opted to take our first real peek at Sue Falls. The portage we had taken the day before to enter the basin does not take you along that beautiful waterfall. However, it was easily approached and accessed from the west side Cirrus Creek via a ferny path through a forest that was approaching peak fall colors. It was well worth the short walk! The waterfall is actually a series of drops over a giant staircase of blackened Canadian bedrock. It was quite an impressive sight and, as the water level was low, the ledges were dry enough for me to scramble to the top of each. There, of course, I simply had to audition my very best Tarzan yell for Nancy's benefit, way down below.

There is a most assuredly a dynamic about “couples” wilderness trips that simply makes you feel like a kid again. You show off for your partner. You play. You have a good time. Nancy was down there shaking her head, again... but she was having a good time, too.

“Chicken a La King” – another “guys’ trip” freeze-dried leftover - was supper that evening. It had been a beautiful fall weather day; as much as I would have preferred to put fish filets on the menu, I think any old food would have tasted just fine!

I was up and about by 5:30am, fixing coffee, and watching the Sue Falls morning mist machine spill its outputs into its surrounding basin. This was to be a “travel day”, albeit a rather short one. On most travel days I like to hit the water early and an oatmeal breakfast is quick and easy. Besides, I was anxious to get over the big hump of a portage into Kasakokwog Lake and get camp set up. There would be a distinct possibility of crossing paths with “Ranger,” another good internet friend of mine who had travelled from Colorado to this region of Quetico this very week. Thus far, we had seen absolutely no one on our trek. We packed up our dew-laden equipment, paddled the short distance over to the big-hump portage, and began the long overland haul.

The portage runs about half a mile and is mostly uphill. As I was triple-portaging a multitude of luxuries, I was thankful to find the portage fairly dry. About midway across we met a slightly older Toronto couple headed in the opposite direction with their gear. By mutual, silent acclamation, we used the occasion as a good excuse to set gear down and exchange a few pleasantries and swap stories about places we've been as well as places we hoped to visit. As it turned out, the fellow was familiar with a Boundary Waters Journal story of mine, published in the Winter 2009 issue entitled, “Adventure in Woodland Caribou Park” and indicated his intention to take his wife up to that lovely boreal park some year soon. The couple tipped us off about a nice island campsite on Kasakokwog

Lake. Apparently it afforded a great view of a fledgling eagle in a nest on a nearby island which squawked incessantly to its parents for food. It was apparently still struggling with the notion of taking its inaugural flight. If we camped there, maybe we would get lucky enough to witness that event.

We bid farewell to our newfound friends and continued trudging up the portage path. I was proud that Nancy carried her load without complaint. She had worked hard in the gym over the past couple of years to lose weight and get back into shape. She had clearly succeeded!

Skies were clear and the day was warming considerably. Hauling all that gear up to beautiful Kasakokwog Lake was quite a sweaty affair, so the fresh breezes of the open lake were most welcome! It felt good to be "back in the saddle" of our canoe again. We thought it wise to circle around the center of the lake, scouting the primary campsites for the presence of my internet buddy. Dan "Ranger" would be travelling with his dog, Penny, and his wife, Sarah. Alas, Nancy and I discovered we had the entirety of "Big Kas" to ourselves that late fall morning.

So, we nabbed the aforementioned island campsite with its great "canoe harbor," its wonderfully flat "kitchen rocks," and its fantastic – albeit probably only temporary - view of the fledgling eagle on the nearby island. We spread dewy gear out on the plentiful sundrenched rock. It would dry quickly in the marvelous sunshine and afternoon breezes. I bathed and then washed sweaty clothes at mid-island in my collapsible bucket. It was wonderful to be outside enjoying summer-time weather this time of year. Also, just as advertised, the fledgling eagle peered at us over the edge of its nest from across the narrow channel of water, hollering its young head off. It was a quite loud and clearly not very happy eagle. We watched its parents repeatedly swoop in with morsels and then head out again as we munched on our peanut butter and jelly tortillas. The Toronto couple was right; it was most entertaining.

By early afternoon I was eager to test my luck fishing again. Nancy indicated her preference for bathing, sunbathing, and just lolling around camp. That was ok by me. I hoisted a couple of fair-sized rocks into the bow of my SR17 and, determined to reverse my rather so-so, so-far fishing performance, set about securing supper.

Nevertheless, current conditions seemed primetime for having some sport with smallmouth bass. So, I circled the islands slowly, casting to typical structure. Alas, typical structure in the fall is not necessarily the typical structure I fish in the spring and summer with the guys. I had no luck. Thus I decided to try my hand with the lake trout and moved to deeper water, doing wider circles and switching over to proven spoons. Nothing, again. The afternoon wore on. I could see Nancy bustling about our campsite, getting it organized. Me? I was not nearly as productive, drifting around the lee side of the islands shirtless, in shorts, and quickly earning a springtime tan in late September. Nevertheless, it was a gorgeous day, I was enjoying it immensely, and I almost didn't care that I wasn't catching any fish. Almost... I say. My macho "man as provider" self-image was clearly in jeopardy and beginning to gnaw at me. So, as the afternoon waned, I decided to cross windswept water to reach an island near the southern shore. Almost immediately, on the backside of that island I picked up a couple northerns and a small walleye. Theorizing that maybe some "eating-size" brethren would be hanging out in the deeper waters on the windy side of the island, I paddled out in order to drift back with the wind, trolling white curly-tails on silver beetle spins. Bingo! Forget the guys' trip leftovers! It would be sliced potatoes, onions, and walleye filets for supper tonight!

That evening and most of the week, for that matter, turned out to be far warmer than originally predicted. We experienced virtually no mosquitoes and only a few nagging "canoe flies" on the

warmest of days which, for the most part, were kept at bay by variable breezes. It was almost perfect weather: days full of sunshine and cool nights that made for great sleeping.

After a great night of sleep we enjoyed delicious pancakes with apple sauce for breakfast. The plan was to layover on Kasakokwog for a couple more days. As today's main objective was to improve Nancy's luck with the fishing, we got right to it. After only an hour or so, however, we observed a canoe with three figures headed in our direction from the east. As the silhouette of the middle figure appeared to be canine in nature, we presumed this must be Dan, his wife Sarah, and his bird dog, Penny. We paddled so as to cross their path.

I knew Penny to be a park veteran as Dan ("Ranger") had written of her often in his Quietjourney.com trip reports. As we pulled alongside of their canoe, it appeared that Penny, in her eagerness to greet us, was about to mutiny and "jump ship," so to speak. Dan calmed her down and thus we averted a disaster at sea. While we enjoy park solitude, it did seem especially nice to rendezvous with friends out in the wilderness. It turned out to be Sarah's very first visit to Quetico. As they are a very young couple and as her first visit featured some of the most spectacular weather I've ever encountered up north, I'm guessing they have many more trips in their future.

We bid goodbye to our friends who were headed west and had many miles yet to cover this day. Despite missing a big pike and having her line snap as she brought an equally large lake trout to the edge of the canoe, Nancy kept her spirits up as we fished the morning away. That afternoon I picked up a couple lake trout for our supper, which we enjoyed that evening with our Cache Lake lemon pie dessert. After that satisfying meal, we kicked back and read our paperbacks almost until the stars came out... which they did in abundance.

The next morning we fished the east end of big Kasakokwog. Temperatures would reach 31 degrees centigrade this sunny September day. Also, Nancy's fishing fortunes changed in a big way. For a period of several hours she couldn't keep the bass and pike off of her line! On the way back to camp we located a fabulous sandy beach in a southern cove, just east of our islands. We waded out almost one hundred meters without going over our heads. We spotted moose tracks in the sand over near where a beaver dam blocked up a stream. Refreshed by the swim and lunch, we continued trolling and capped off a great day of fishing fortunes over at "walleye island" where we had great success.

Kasakokwog's east/west orientation makes for romantic sunrises and sunsets. We were enjoying just such a sunset when we noticed a flurry of activity at our shoreline near the channel separating our two islands. The fledgling eagle had left the nest and was feasting on the carcass of one of our walleyes! Eventually fluttered back with it in his talons to the rocky shoreline of his own island, where his parents joined him. We wondered if he was going to make it up to the nest with his prize. As it turned out, early the next morning he was back up in his perch, squawking away, as usual.

The following day was a travel day and, therefore, oat meal was in order for breakfast. We broke camp by 7:00am and made swift progress across glassy water into the rising sun.

We left the big water and began a misty – almost magical – silent passage along McAlpine Creek. The meandering waterway was veiled on either side by a multitude of huge, intricately-spun spider webs... all covered in dewdrops which glistened in the rising sun. Where the stream broadened into pools there were large patches of lily pads of bright variegated colors. It felt like fairy-land.

After negotiating a couple of beaver dam pullovers, we crossed the short portage into a calm McAlpine Lake. We leisurely paddled the north shore where we hoped to spot the pictograph. We

reluctantly gave up on that quest as we came upon the large rusted metal spool which my buddy Ranger had indicated would mark the long "Garden Walk" portage to the channel of water leading into Batchewaung Bay. Ranger had even been kind enough to put his saw to use clearing some recent blowdown from that scenic pathway.

Afternoon conditions were breezy and full of sunshine. We grabbed an elevated pinch point campsite just above Little Batchewaung Bay that would put us within an easy morning paddle of the Nym exit point parking lot. Being so much closer to the perimeter of the park, this campsite as well as the others we had come across that day seemed a bit overused. As we were on a popular thoroughfare, we saw a few paddling parties pass by and knew our time in the wilderness was coming to an end. We also sorely missed those convenient flat kitchen rocks of our favored Kasakokwog island campsite. No matter... we enjoyed the great view and marvelous weather on this, our last afternoon in the park, almost as much as we had earlier in the week. That evening, over brandy cocktails, we even talked of doing a month-long canoe trip sometime early in our retirement... still several years off. Clearly, Nancy was having a good time!

We were up and out by 7:00am the next morning and heading north towards Nym. Two beaver dam pullovers later we entered Batchewaung Lake proper. It was dead calm so we cut directly across to the portage into Nym. Midway across that "highway" we met two couples from Michigan who were also headed out of the park. We all agreed that this had been an exceptional Quetico weather week. On our return trip back across the portage path, we met "Barry," who had recently left his job as a newspaper editor out west. As he was just beginning his solo trip and heading in the opposite direction into the park, he had graciously hauled our last load across the portage for us! The same thing happened to us after we crossed Nym Lake and headed up to the parking lot. Two women, just heading in, grabbed our remaining packs on their "return trip" to the parking lot, saving us a loop.

Such selfless behavior on the part of complete strangers got me to thinking that maybe my avowed preference for "solitude" might be just a bit overrated. Sharing wilderness treasure with considerate folks is seldom a problem.

Nancy and I experienced a glorious week in Quetico. I rather expect she will want to go back next September... and maybe, some future September when we can share it with grandchildren.

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