

Of Spruce Bogs And Caribou Moss

Jim Carrier

What was I thinking?!

That thought crossed my mind more than once while paddling, portaging, and bushwhacking Woodland Caribou Park's rugged and remote "Irvine Lake Region".

Savoring a "quest" element in our paddling getaway, my frequent paddling companion, Darrel Brauer, and I chose to follow in the footsteps of Martin Kehoe who, for the past decade, has worked with park officials to resurrect old canoe routes, recover historical artifacts, and uncover ancient pictographs. As trip planner and promoter, I exercise my "license to embellish" when recruiting party members. Thus I suggested to Darrel some legendary walleye holes had also been rediscovered. The walleyes of Irvine Lake – legendary or not – would figure among our targeted highlights on this, our second trip into WCP.

Joining us on our challenging route would be Matt Cambronne. After reading the BWJ account of our past exploits (see winter 2009 issue, "Adventure in Woodland Caribou Park"), Matt hoped to enlist for some future trip. Darrel and I weren't really seeking "recruits". However, as if applying for a job, Matt enthusiastically highlighted his experience (several BWCA trips), his excellent physical conditioning (marathon competitor), and his youth (under age 30 – a quarter of a century our junior). Matt aced the interview and won the bow spot in my Souris River tandem with his closing pitch: "I'll be your portage monkey if you guys (read "old farts") take me along!"

Darrel would paddle solo in his Wenonah Prism.

WCP is located only five hours north of the border but receives less than six hundred visitors each season. Walleye and lake trout are abundant. Once

past a few fish camps on larger lakes, the hand of man virtually vanishes. Irvine Lake is situated midway between the Bloodvein and Gammon rivers. From our entry at Lund Lake, our “plan” was to paddle through Knox and Murdock lakes to a chain of narrow lakes known as the “Murdock/Royd corridor.” Paddling clockwise via creeks and gem-like nameless lakes, we would loop around Irvine Lake, and eventually drop down into it from the north. We expected several short “bushwhacks” since portage clearing was not yet completed by the park service. This loop ranges from two to four miles distance from Irvine Lake in most places – as the raven flies.

While not ravens, Darrel and Matt do resemble Energizer Bunnies-on-steroids; they “keep going and going” despite obstacles. So it was that I embarked from Lund Lake in the breezes of late afternoon on a very challenging canoe route with two aggressive paddling partners determined to conquer a remote wilderness.

The very first portage dumped us right onto a quaking bog.

Welcome to Canoe Country, boys!

Quaking bogs are like walking on a flimsy waterbed. They are particularly unsettling hauling heavy packs. Inquiring portaging minds want to know: How thick and strong is the vegetative matter under my feet? How deep is the water below? If I drop through, will I rebound to the surface and pop back up through the same hole? Or, will I frantically flail around underwater - pack on my back - desperately seeking oxygen pockets?

Discreetly, I eyeballed our “rookie” Matt to detect signs of regret, trepidation, or outright fear. I found none. Confidence in my new paddling partner grew! Figuring others had passed without incident before us, we pushed on. The balance of the 500 meter portage consisted of solid ground.

We secured a buggy-looking campsite not far from the 1500 meter portage

into Knox Lake. That challenge was best tackled on fresh legs in the morning! We retired to solo shelters to escape the onslaught of blood-suckers.

Or so I thought.

Now I dearly love sleeping in my Clark Jungle Hammock. Unlike at home, I often sleep straight through the night. However, that night I violated the cardinal rule of hammock sleeping: always double-check your bug net. Mosquitoes insidiously and relentlessly follow carbon dioxide trails to their source, eventually detecting small unzipped openings. For the ground-based tent dweller, “mosquito encroachment” is merely an inconvenience. Crawl around, chase them down, and smear their bloody carcasses to the wall; simple. Lying prone in a pea-pod style hammock shelter, it becomes quite another experience!

In the dead of night you awaken to a bloody revelation. Your headlamp illuminates the swarm. Sensing human alertness, skeeters drift down to your feet just outside effective slapping range, emitting their evil high-pitched whine, daring you to nod off. At this point your choices are not good. At most, you undulate and wiggle in a sorry attempt to drive the offenders toward clapping hands. Though tedious and inefficient, this method is your best bet. The alternative – unzipping your shelter, swinging out and stumbling into the darkness, shaking your hammock free of (most) mosquitoes, and then hurriedly jumping back in and zipping up again - is a pure crapshoot depending on the bug situation outside. You may end up where you started – cussing and kicking in your bag, urging the bloodsuckers within the strike zone.

When hammock-tenting, always double-check your bug net zipper!

I nursed bug bites and fixed oatmeal the next morning while Darrel got the coffee perking. An hour or so later, young Matt sadly discovered he had

joined two early birds!

The dreaded monster portage's bite was in its first quarter-mile of boot-sucking, knee-deep mud. Darrel and Matt move rather more sprightly than I do, each weighing in fifty-plus pounds lighter. Did I mention that Matt hadn't reached age thirty yet? Have I observed there is not an ounce of fat on Darrel's frame? Ugh! The Knox Lake quagmire served me quite a dose of reality! Certain words of Darrel's – uttered way back in International Falls – haunted me from this point forward during our trip: "You idiot! You'll regret every unnecessary ounce you stick into those 70+ pound packs!" Slowly, I staggered forward, boots making loud, popping, suction noises as they lifted from thick goop. I kicked away useless "floating" corduroy in disgust. Yikes! How much energy-draining slop would we encounter on this trip!?!

A thunderstorm brewed overhead as I returned for my second load. I wondered whether Matt – ahead of me - would grab the food barrel or the canoe. The barrel was heavy but, carrying it, you could at least try to find a side of the trail where something solid might exist under your boots. Carrying the canoe however, forced you pretty much down the center of the pig sty due to tree branches. Which nasty load would young Matt leave for me?

The character of my new paddling partner came shining through in that dark moment when I spied the young Swede dragging my Souris River with the food barrel in it through the slop!! I couldn't believe it! Think Humphrey Bogart and The African Queen! Using the canoe to displace weight across the top of the mud was pretty smart for a rookie. Together we toted the load. When we reached solid ground, the skies let loose. Cold rain washed badges of mud and sweat from our bodies.

At the far end of the portage Matt and I propped our canoe on a tree branch for shelter and sat out the thunderstorm on a log. We donned rain gear then treated ourselves to yummy, well-earned Clif Bars which we enjoyed despite

their disconcerting resemblance to the large pile of fur-laden wolf scat lying right beside us. Heavy sheets of rain lashed big Knox Lake while we waited out the storm.

When severe weather abated, we paddled Knox and Murdock lakes through off-and-on showers. By mid-evening we spotted flat terrain sporting a gorgeous carpet of thick, spongy green caribou moss and a decent landing for our canoes. We cleared it out and called it “home.” In a moment of wilderness grace, skies cleared and out poured beautiful sunshine! Though it was late, we broke out fishing gear and fooled enough walleyes for fish chowder. Darrel and Matt didn’t need to unroll sleeping pads that night; thick moss beneath their tents provided a luxuriant mattress!

We contemplated travel options over steaming cups of Darrel’s coffee that next morning. Today we would enter the string of lakes girdling Irvine Lake. Keeping to our planned route meant two very long days of paddling. Another somewhat radical and tantalizing option emerged and, of course, my two Energizer Bunny companions hopped right on it!

Their anxious, wild-eyed questions went like this: Why bother circling around the Irvine Lake watershed? Why not “bushwhack” directly into it? It was only a couple miles, right? Cliffs, thick brush and swamps – how bad could they be? One single bushwhack will save us two days of paddling and dozens of portages, right Jimbo?

Give these guys a choice between a highway, a path less travelled, and a path never travelled; guess which option they’ll select every time?? They salivated over the challenge of bushwhacking into Irvine Lake! Reluctantly, I consented to “eyeballing” the bushwhack route when we arrived.

It was a tactical error to allow Darrel to race ahead and scout the front end of the bushwhack route. He reported, “after climbing the steep section (read: substantial cliff coming off the water) and attaining the ridge, we should have

a stroll through the park!" Now there was no question and, of course, Matt eagerly seconded Darrel's motion to press on. I meekly murmured, "But the food pack is virtually full." Finding "wimpiness" repulsive to my self-image, however, I acquiesced. Onward!!!

What was I thinking?!

Possessing compasses and one working GPS unit, we set out to conquer the cliff. The ridge between the lakes would be crossed in successive marches of a couple hundred meters. Like Billy goats, Darrel and Matt scampered up tight switchbacks and slippery rocks, moving bulky canoes and personal packs up and over the top of the ridge. The heavy packs and I came up much more slowly. As I sweated and grunted, Darrel's sagely advice concerning bushwhacking once again percolated up from the deep recesses of my mind: "You idiot! You'll regret every unnecessary ounce you stick into those 70+ pound packs!"

In short, my bushwhack experience en route to Irvine Lake was bad – very, very bad! I work-out hard two hours everyday, year-in, year-out. Nevertheless, I was ill-prepared for this ordeal. I struggled with slippery surfaces, sciatica flare-ups, and getting around innumerable obstacles. I feared breaking an ankle for the seventh time

a major disaster for our whole team. What an energy-buster! Darrel and Matt were kind enough to come back and help me with the heavy packs once in awhile, even after hauling their own considerable loads and canoes up rock faces and through thick brush. They would get far ahead but then wait at staging points. We slugged on through several such marches. I became dimly aware my feet were badly blistered. Branches in tangled black spruce thickets tore at my face and arms, pack straps bit into my shoulders, and thirst was growing; yet all this was merely background noise. Foremost was the necessity of the steady march to reach our destination. There was no turning back!

Then – we lost Darrel.

Darrell had advocated “making one long hop to the water” instead of our plodding mini-marches. He believed our destination was “no more than a quarter-mile away”, despite Matt’s GPS reading showing over a mile to go. Me? I’ve always trusted Darrel’s intuition and still do. It seemed like we had covered a lot of ground. However, I knew there was no reason to mistrust the GPS. I was content with our mini-march strategy. Unfortunately, rapidly dwindling drinking water was becoming a factor. Two hours into the ordeal and we were sweating out far more fluids than we were consuming!

Ultimately, this factor influenced Darrel to plunge off into the wilderness. He simply didn’t come back as expected after another routine 200 meter hop. Half-an-hour later, Matt and I assumed Darrel had pushed on to the lake.

An hour later, we deduced he was unable to find his way back. After all, we had the GPS unit. Darrel must rely on his compass, dead reckoning, and scuff marks in the moss. I yelled and yelled.

Two hours later, still yelling and concerned about dehydration and remaining daylight, we decided to march on. We would leave a note on Darrel’s canoe and hope we would regroup near Irvine Lake.

Just then, Serendipity kicked in.

Darrel suddenly appeared from behind us! Indeed, he had made it all the way to our objective lake... well over a mile away. He lost his way back on the return trail, leaving him no choice but to continue east to the creek where we started and then north along the shoreline to the cliff we had scaled at our starting point. Scuff marks on caribou moss led him back to where we now stood and he carried water!

Going forward, we stuck together!

My personal bushwhacking nightmare continued as we got off the ridge too soon, ending up in a swamp. The Energizer Bunnies light-footed it across the edge of the muck. Trailing behind under the heavy pack, I wandered deep into the bog and found myself reduced to a sobbing mass of human flesh wailing away in the wilderness. In my misery, I sipped flowage and made harmless, half-hearted swats at nasty flies and mosquitoes circling my head, while listening to Darrel and Matt's happy voices wafting across the bog from the lake's edge. So close yet so far! Cussing, I struggled to dislodge my thigh from muck only to lurch forward and stick it back in again. I fixated on the unnecessary items I was hauling - extra tackle, extra clothing, surplus food, and even a (useless) radio. Once again, Darrel's words haunted me, "You idiot! You'll regret every unnecessary ounce.!"

What was I thinking?!

In retrospect, I give myself kudos for perseverance. Matt and Darrell fared better. Seven hours after commencing our "stroll through the park", we emerged from the bush and loaded our canoes. We shoved off into bright afternoon sunshine and welcomed westerly breezes which refreshed sweat and bog-soaked bodies. It was an uplifting moment I will never forget!

The watercourse became a mile-long winding stream, laden thick with green reeds bowing to the wind. Rounding a bend, we surprised a browsing moose who ambled back into the bush. Soon the stream deposited us at our destination Irvine Lake. It was the Fourth of July and we had plenty to celebrate!!

We claimed a rocky, terraced hillside campsite on the west shore featuring a nice flat landing for our canoes. A sapling grew through the ancient fire ring. Tents were pitched on thick beds of caribou moss. Mature stands of spruce and aspen provided excellent hammock shelter options. Large piles of moose droppings added to the ambiance. I sorely needed a layover day to doctor

the blood blisters that covered my toes and the balls of my feet. This campsite was made to order! After settling down, we broke out adult beverages and toasted our accomplishment, our good fortune and our nation's birthday!

As for the "legendary walleyes" of Irvine Lake, I will say this. That next morning, at around 5am, I made one cast and landed an exemplary specimen which was promptly carried on the end of my stringer to Darrel's tent. There it thrashed about, spraying Darrel through the mosquito mesh. What better for a "wilderness alarm clock"? So we fished, swam, rested, sunbathed, and relaxed – wonderful tonic for aching bodies. Solitude? Wind sighing in black spruce, wailing loons, croaking ravens, the song of the whitethroats and our own laughter – that was it. We lost a few fishing lures, enjoyed a great shore lunch, acquired suntans and played around!

Did I mention that one of the frivolous "extras" I packed was a canoe sail?

Having insisted upon hauling this luxury item to Irvine Lake, I simply had to play around with it. Thus far in our travels, prevailing winds had been in our face, rendering our sail useless. Now was the chance to pop open our flaming bright pink WindPaddle sail. So we surfed, sailed and enjoyed breezy sunshine on a glorious lake!

Reversing our original planned route, we exited Irvine Lake the next day at the north end via what Martin Kehoe has called "The Slot Portage." This unique portage runs down the middle of a burbling stream which flows 50 meters or so through a major cleft in a high vertical rock face. Rays of sunshine filtered through early morning mists illuminating the chasm in a soft glow, elevating our sloppy march to a "parade of reverence" through this remarkable wilderness cathedral. Our passage was a real canoe country blessing.

Our travel south along the lakes west of Irvine Lake was highlighted by a

detour to the waterfall dumping into Larus Creek. The portage to the basin was choked with downfalls. Leaving our packs topside, we threaded empty canoes through the carnage. It was tough but well worth the effort. Casting beetle spins into plunging waters and surrounding eddies quickly secured that night's walleye feast!

Continuing south, stiff winds funneling through high cliff walls hit us head-on, making paddling difficult. Despite sore feet, I preferred hiking through the forest. Our passage through a well-spaced, mature, black spruce forest was cushioned by thick spongy green caribou moss. My nemesis – the boot-sucking mud – was nowhere to be found in these rolling hills. Where portages were missing, scrambles through the bush were short and productive. My body was becoming better-accustomed to the rhythms of wilderness travel. I began to notice and appreciate the myriad of tiny colorful budding plants, wild roses and orchids. Many were unfamiliar to me and I actually regretted not packing one more discretionary item – a book entitled, *Plants of the Western Boreal Forest & Aspen Parkland*.

After setting up camp on Split Rock Lake, Matt and Darrel climbed a massive rock face where they discovered large rocks overturned by bears in search of bug larvae. Darrel would later spot two bears walking ridges on similar missions.

The next morning I allowed the smell of scrambled eggs with bacon bits from Cache Lake Foods to roust the two tent dwellers, still fast asleep. We would leave the scenic string of lakes feeding Larus Creek and head south for Royd Lake today. When the portage work is completed by park personnel, this "Irvine Lake Loop" will be a wonderful addition to the established canoe trails offered in Woodland Caribou Park. I would dearly miss the solitude and the deep wilderness feeling enjoyed on the necklace of jewel-like lakes encircling remote Irvine Lake.

Royd Lake was island-studded and gorgeous! By mid-day we claimed a

peninsula campsite on the southern wall of the lake. Finally I could wet my line for lake trout! Once settled, Matt and I jumped back into the tandem to try our luck. Buffeted by heavy breezes, we paddled through the chop towards a huge dome of rock. There, in deep water, trolling a Reef Runner lure, Matt soon landed his first-ever lake trout, a healthy and darkly-hued prime example of *Salvelinus namaycush*, which we named "dinner".

We spent two layover days on Royd Lake. I spent the first day fishing every nook and cranny of Royd Lake in Darrel's Prism. Periodic trains of dark puffy clouds sailed across the bright blue sky, quickly dumping their contents and moving on. Darrel and Matt grabbed my Souris River and did a fifteen-portage "day-trip" through Kennedy, Donald, Hammerhead, and Gammon lakes before looping back to our Royd Lake campsite. Did I mention that those guys just keep going and going? We dined on lake trout that evening, with Cache Lake Foods lemon pie for dessert.

On our second layover day Matt and I visited the high rock walls of Constellation Lake while Darrel investigated the possibility of approaching our Lund Lake exit via the series of remote small lakes to the east. Back in camp that evening, we listened to Darrel's troubling "bushwhack report" and wisely decided to exit Royd Lake via the Gammon River to our south.

High hopes of finally deploying our flaming pink WindPaddle sail on Gammon Lake were dashed when there was no wind at all the next morning. Darrel was far behind us, having to retrieve a forgotten but necessary hip belt for his pack. Matt and I amused ourselves at a weedy reef at the far end of the lake catching walleyes in a small bay. Two hours too late for our purposes, the strong westerly-wind kicked-up. Along with it came Darrel and a couple of thunderstorms. We portaged around the waterfalls and set up camp just south of the Gammon River, spreading out wet clothes to dry while enjoying the last walleye meal of our trip.

Both finding and paddling the Gammon River were challenging. Its mouth

was a narrow opening in the weed bed, nearly invisible until you are right on top of it. Forging ahead in the stream proved difficult against its very heavy current. Extremely tight “S” curves made negotiating the fast weed and hummock-lined stream an endless series of forward lurches. We paddled and pried our way through four or five miles on this serpentine route! Progress was slowed further when alder branches began to crisscross and choke our route, seemingly blocking passage. We literally pulled ourselves by hand, going under, over and through the vegetative tangle. Leather gloves came in handy! After what seemed an eternity, we reached a clearing and our portage.

Relatively quick passage through a few no-name lakes and across long moss-carpeted portage trails put us at Prairie Lake. We found this body of water unique in Woodland Caribou Park and aptly named. It featured a sea of sparse bright green grass across its length and breadth, contrasting vividly with the variegated colors of the ever-changing sky. Our restful afternoon was followed by a chilly night and spectacular starry sky.

Despite serving up more of the mucky slop that I really hate, the next morning’s long portages quickly gained elevation and became moss-carpeted pathways. A steaming mass of fresh bear feces on the portage between North Prairie and Indian House lakes reminded us we were not alone. At the far end we found a beach with a beautiful vista of island-strewn Indian House Lake, rimmed with rocky cliffs and nicely-spaced stands of aspen and spruce. The morning was hot, so we shed clothes and celebrated our arrival with a refreshing swim.

We selected a wonderful island campsite on the east end for our last full day in the park. With no clouds, little humidity, and time on our hands, it was a perfect day! We sunned ourselves on the flat rock, enjoying our island, the fine weather, and the good company we kept. We reminisced over the trials, tribulations and accomplishments we had shared. Then we savored the very last of our adult beverages listening to the pop and spit of fish fillets in

peanut oil.

Darrel lay out on the rock, looking a bit like a sun god in his repose. I supposed we all felt a little godlike, contemplative, and in charge of our moment that afternoon. What was I thinking when I planned this trip? Most folks coming off a North Country challenge can probably relate. A dose of wilderness adventure shared with friends is oxygen for our souls

and one deep breath may have to last us an entire year. Long after dead skin peels off weathered hands and the bite of pack straps into shoulders is forgotten, we'll remember the challenges as well as the countless kindnesses of partners during wilderness trials. We'll re-live these fleeting moments a thousand times before we truly breathe again – and mostly with a smile on our faces.

Our party never saw another canoe on the water during twelve days of travel. If you seek adventure, solitude and pristine wilderness, accept the challenge of Woodland Caribou Park.

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