

Winter Camping Trip – Fall Lake – One Mile Island

Al Freeland, March 2009

You have heard of the immigrant book called "Bring Warm Clothes", well I could just as well have written a camping book entitled, "Bring Cold Clothes". It would have written about winter camping in Ely on March 14th and 15th 2009 – why? Because it was not only warm, but by the time the trip was over, and we had driven back home to Northfield, Minnesota, it was about 60 degrees!!!

We did have a fun adventure on that trip, so I thought I would pass on the story to those who may want to duplicate a quick weekend trip in the beautiful BWCA. The 'us' in this story is my friend Harlow Splichal (who actually saved my life on this same lake a couple of years ago when I fell through the ice), his 11 year old daughter Emily, and his granddaughter Wendy – also 11 – don't ask me how that happened – it is way too complicated!!!

We left at 7 am from my house in Northfield for a short trip to the BWCA to break Harlow's family into winter camping. Harlow and I have been doing this many years, but not the girls. Over the years we have developed quite a list of winter camping gear. If anyone wants a copy, just e-mail me at alansonja@charter.net, and I will send it you.

We started the trip with an immediate stop at the local Super America (SA) for their super Shockwave Coffee – a new double caffeine blend they just started serving. Also it was the start of a LONG series of potty stops for Emily – how can that girl have so much output with so little input – it defies the laws of physics!! We grabbed breakfast and did a fast drive through Cloquet, Virginia, and then onto 169 into Ely.

About 30 miles out of Ely we saw a car come SREEMING toward us and on by. Harlow soon started shouting HOLY SMOKE!!! As we turned around to see

what happened, we observed the rocket ship car SLAM into the back of a pop up trailer a guy was pulling. The pop up literally POPPED up, fully inflated and shot into the air. We called 911 immediately. We didn't find out the fate of the folks, but pray all was okay.

Oh, by the way, Emily finished her Ghost Horse book on the way. She also was constantly beating up on poor little Wendy – Emily – shame on you! And also, it was 46 degrees in Ely when we arrived!!! What's up with that?

We arrive in Ely and stopped at Zups for food (more later with an interesting story about the Zup family), and on to the bait store where we learned about a local Finnish delicacy – fish head stew. The bait dealer told us about the Turbot (eel pout) that he catches and most people throw away. He gives them to his grandmother who makes local delicacy bait and essentials. Take a look at the recipe:

Kalamojaka: Finnish Fish Chowder

-- pound Northern Pike, Pickerel, Turbot, Eel Pout or similar fish cut into 2-inch pieces

6 cups peeled, cubed potatoes

1 medium onion, diced

2 or 3 stalks of celery, diced

4 carrots, diced

3 12-ounce cans (4 for a richer chowder) evaporated milk

1 stick butter

Salt and pepper to taste

Fish head with eyes

Cook fish in pressure cooker for 20 minutes to soften bones (or bring fish to boiling in a pot of water and simmer until fish flakes easily). Drain fish and reserve liquid. Remove and discard bones from fish and set aside. Add vegetables to reserved liquid and cook until tender. Add fish, evaporated milk, butter, salt and pepper. Simmer slowly for 20 minutes. DO NOT BOIL.

Serve in bowl with a pat of butter on top. SAVOR!

The fish head improves flavor, but non-Finns may not enjoy a soup that stares back!

We first went to Farm Lake, but couldn't find a good camping and/or fishing spot readily available. There was no clear markings, and we could get directions even from the local bar crew – a lot of snowmobiling and drinking going on it appeared.

We next decided to go to Fall Lake off the Fernberg Trail. We turned at the sign taking us to the Superior National Park camping grounds, Stub Lake Trail Road. They have a great parking lot, outbuildings, available toilets, and it looks like a super camping spot for my pop up next year!

We parked free in the parking lot, and loaded up the sleds. We used large plastic, cheap sleds that work fine for this type of trip. We drill holes in the sides to insert the bungee cord hooks to keep everything in place. We also bring up a large belt to which we hook the pull rope from the sleds. It keeps your hands free when pulling the sled. Much more comfortable – believe me. Just as we were getting onto the lake, there were at least 5 dog sled teams coming out from an overnight Yurt camping expedition. They take people back to large, heated canvas tents into the BWCA. They set folks up fishing and skiing, and cook meals and so forth. You can look into this at <http://www.whitewilderness.com/>.

I also took my pop up ice house that doubles as a large sled as well – I end up being the sled dog pulling a full load into the wilderness – MAN I WAS POOPED – I must be getting older now? I did have a little angel come back to help share my load half way – thanks Wendy – HEY – where was Emily???

We set up camp on the ice, just before the camp site on the NE end of One Mile Island on Fall Lake. We officially were in the BWCA – the markers across the Lake announced the boarder for the wilderness. Many snowmobilers were

there, all parking their sleds at the boarder, and then going in on foot for ice fishing. There were a lot of people fishing the first day we were there. We did the 'take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but footprints' philosophy even on the ice – and stressed that with the girls.

We built our fire on a bed of wet birch – acting as a base for the fire for 2 days. This worked very well. It kept the fire from being put out, and minimized the melting into the ice.

We soon learned that you MUST make sure that the camp is at least 8 foot off the dog sled trail. This is just unwritten courtesy. You MUST keep away from the dogs as they mush through or they come over to you; pull the sleds off their course, and pee all over everything.

We spent the day setting up camp, the ice house, drilling holes, snow shoeing, X-Country skiing, fishing, sledding and cooking. It was a glorious day, and the night was even better with a beautiful clear night, star shining like you do not see in southern Minnesota, crackling fire, and smores until we were stuffed.

Met some interesting characters stopped by to chat that first day – here are their stories:

1. A Single field engineer that worked for the forest service – lived in Ely. Helps cleans about 3500 miles of roads in this area. He does what is called 'steaming culverts' – I didn't know about that before. It is when they shoot hot steam into frozen culverts to clear out spring ice so water will run and not wash out the roads in the spring. He told us about Crooked Lake being so fantastic for Walleye fishing – a trip we will certainly take in the future. It appears that fishing on Fall Lake (he lives there practically) was terrible this year for walleye. Usually he gets 100 walleyes a winter, this year only 1, but a lot of perch and crappy.

2. Pete from Tower and a buddy. Interesting guys. Pete said he trapped every lake in the previously called Superior Roadless Area (SRA) with his Dad from the time he was 6 years old. One year while trapping, Pete and his dad saved the Zup brothers (or a father-son?) from sure death. The Zups were lost in the winter, cold, famished and delirious, crawled in Pete's Dad's car and almost suffocated him since he was so small. Often since then, they have still furnished Pete with some homemade venison sausage. The Zups own multiple grocery stores in this area, as well as one of them is a famous artist that make spearfishing decoys for many years. Pete also claimed to have helped make old Jackpine Bob Cary the famous person that he was (<http://www.jackpinebobcary.com/>). Not sure of the whole story, but it sounded very interesting.

We had put up our 4-Man Eureka Timberline tent. I love that tent and have used this variety for many years now -winter and summer a good choice. There were a few upgrades that I tried to send the company – never got a reply back from them? Sleeping was a dream knowing that we were on 3 foot of ice cover on the lake. My intention was to find the proverbial pine tree base with snow cover, scoop out a place to sleep, line it with poly, and sleep for the night. I was so looking forward to that, but there just wasn't enough snow cover for that experiment that evening. Do note that not once did I hear the proverbial ice cracking that I have for many years, making you think you were falling through the ice. The absence of the noise made for a great night sleep.

After a good night sleep - warm in our bags, we all got up early for my famous scrambled eggs/Velveeta Cheese/Spam breakfast. We crawled out for hot cocoa, hot coffee and the eggs. Shortly we saw more dog sled teams coming by camp taking folks out to base camp for the week.

We broke camp and headed back to the car and to Ely. On the way home I took many pictures of everyone by the Ely Greenstone cut through on highway 169 (found in many geology text books). We took a few souvenirs

from that cut through – and am looking at those sample as I write this. I also took some of those rocks and tumbled them in my rock tumbler, making some pretty necklaces for Emily and Wendy. Keep in mind that this Ely Greenstone is considered to be the oldest exposed rock in the world (3.8 billion years old) and people from around the world travel here to study these outcroppings. A real bit of history was viewed that day for the entire group. (http://www.tc.umn.edu/~smith213/new_page_9.htm).

As we drove home we passed by the Moose Lake Agate Center in Moose Lake, Minnesota. On my next trip I want to stop by there to see what they have to offer.

In summary, I have to ask you readers, where can you have that kind of fun for \$121.79 total trip cost for 4 people for the weekend!! No where, plus you have started the next generation in the love of the Boundary Waters! What a mission in life!

I thought I would include some good winter recipes that we have found over the years. These are mostly aluminum foil recipes. You need to wrap these meals with at LEAST 3 layers of heavy duty foil, or else you will get burn through, hot spots, weakened foil, and a ruined meal. All are placed in the fire coals. The fire can be blazing – don't have to 'wait for the fire to die down leaving only coals' – that is stupid. Roaring fire with coals below is just fine, then push these packets deep below the flames into the coals. Pre-make these meals at home, and freeze them.

1. Pineapple strips from a fresh cut pineapple. ½ strips. ¼ cup brown sugar. Wrapped in tin foil.
2. Pre-cooked rice at home. Pour coconut milk over it, and wrap in foil wraps. Make a perfect meal – no muss trying to cook hard rice out in the winter.
3. Chicken breast. This worked great. Chicken breast, pour olive oil over them. Season salt. Mushrooms. Spinach leaves all around. The fire back turn the spinach black or charred – too back. Throw that crap away. The breast

will be cooked perfectly.

4. Hobo dinner. Olive oil, 1.2 lb burgers, thin sliced potatoes and carrots and onions and mushrooms. Season salt.

5. Dozen eggs, ½ lb Velveeta chopped, ½ can of spam chopped, season salt, mixed and frozen in plastic bags, then wrapped in foil when frozen ready to put in the fire – or throw in a pan to cook. Remember that ANY cooking utensils you thoroughly wrap foil all over the outside with multiple wraps of foil. This keeps the pans from turning black with soot.

6. Pita pockets, pepperoni slices, grated cheese, olive oil in and out, and place in foil wraps as well.

I hope you all have as wonderful of a trip as we had, and may you have great companions like I have with Harlow, Wendy and yes – even Emily – we really do love you Emily 

© Al Freeland

<http://www.quietjourney.com/stories/>

